

Putting A Child To Bed – Tom Hawkins

1. Jane stripped the spread from the bed, undoing the careful tucks and folds she'd put there in the morning when she'd remade the bed after the child. With two hands she unfurled a light wool blanket and let it fall across the expanse of the mattress. Then she turned back the top of the sheet.
2. The nine-year-old stood in his pajama bottoms maneuvering a tennis ball with his bare feet as if he were playing soccer. He was a middle-sized child, lean but not especially thin, so moderately proportioned it was hard to tell if he would always be so, or if growth would take some surprising turn, stalling him into a short man or making him tall, or muscular, or in some other way distinct.
3. "Why don't you get in?" Jane said. Without replying, the boy went through a flurry of footwork with the tennis ball that evidently ended with a scoring kick. Then he pulled on his pajama shirt, acknowledging his mother's request. He did the bottom buttons of his shirt, and she did the top two, turning down the collar and smoothing it flat.
4. "Come on," she persisted.
5. The boy jumped and landed sitting up on the pillow, then shoved his feet full length under the covers and lay all the way down, his body still stiff and wide-awake from activity.
6. "Do you want to say prayers?" his mother asked.
7. "Maybe not tonight."
8. "You had your water, right?"
9. He nodded and looked down at where his feet formed two hills under the covers. "What day is it?"
10. "Tuesday, I think."
11. "You didn't ever say about the hamster, when I asked you Saturday."
12. "I don't know yet," she said, then saw his face darken. "They're sort of like rabbits? Or are they like guinea pigs?"
13. "Oh, no," he said holding up his index fingers to show length. "They're very small. Almost as small as mice." She noticed the imaginary hamster grew just a little bit as he held it there for her examination.
14. "Where would we keep it? In a cage?"

15. "In a cage with a wheel for exercise."

16. "I don't know what the landlady would say. There's bound to be an odor."

17. "Oh, no," the boy said. "No odor."

18. "No odor?" She frowned.

19. "Very little odor," he said.

20. "Well, the animal with the cage and a table for the cage—that would be maybe ten or twelve dollars. You don't have that much in your sock, do you?" The boy kept his savings in the toe of a sock which he knotted for safekeeping and stored in his dresser drawer.

21. "No," he said. There was a small rush of anger, tension around the mouth, the hint of a blush, and a swipe with his hand to put his hair out of his eyes. She'd pointed out his weakness and made a baby of him; for this same anger, she'd given up kissing him good night. Her impulse was to cuddle or flatter him, but she drew back and let him fight it out.

22. "Ten or twelve dollars is a lot of money. I'm still not sure about the landlady. We've got to have a place to live, and we can't move every few months. It's too hard on me. I'll think it over. I really will. If I think we can do it, maybe I can get it for your birthday. Is that too long to wait?"

23. She may as well have said no. On his scale of time, what happened in several months was of no importance. At that range, a dental appointment was tolerable. Gradually though, with the wish put out of reach, he balanced his disappointment and came back to himself from his anticipation.

24. "Hamster eat lettuce," he explained.

25. "Oh? What else to they eat?"

26. "Seeds of different kinds. You can't feed them meat or they bite," he said. He checked his mother's face quickly.

27. "But only if you make the mistake and feed them meat."

28. "I wouldn't want to be bitten," Jane said, "not even by a hamster."

29. "A boy at school had two hamsters. They had two litters. They had twelve hamsters, but the mother hamster ate two, so he only has eight little ones and the two big ones."

30. "They sound sort of awful," Jane said.

31. "But we'd just have the one."

32. "Wouldn't it get sort of lonely living alone?"

33. "We'd keep it company."

34. "We'll see. Listen, I've got to do the dishes yet. You

go to sleep. I'm tired. Too much about hamster. You warm enough?"

35. The boy nodded, wrapping the blankets around his shoulders. He drew his knees up so he was half-curled around his warmth.

36. "You'd really like one. We'd never feed it meat. They eat very little."

37. Jane stood up and went to the door. The boy peered from where his head was almost beneath the covers. "Dream about something besides hamsters," she joked. "Good night now."

38. She switched out the light. The boy added something about the cleanliness of hamsters, but his voice was drowsy and she didn't answer.

39. The dishes in the kitchen were scraped and stacked. Jane ran the water over her hand waiting for it to warm. The pipes whistled. She picked up a plate in one hand, soaping the dish brush with the other. She washed the dishes, taking care not to make much noise.