A Summer’s Trade

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Realistic fiction tells a story about characters and situations that seem real but come from the author’s imagination. As you read, notice how the story’s events give rise to the ending.

Why do people make sacrifices for others?
A dusty pickup bounced along the rutted, dirt road on the Navajo Indian Reservation outside of Gallup, New Mexico. The early morning sun brought out deep red hues in nearby rocks, and yellows and purples on distant mesas. In the passenger seat, Tony barely noticed how the ride jostled him. He had made this long trip to Gallup with his mother many times.

This morning, Tony daydreamed about spending some of his summer days at home on the reservation instead of going into Gallup. He would ride with his father, helping to tend the family’s roaming flocks of sheep and goats. But Tony needed a saddle before he could sit for hours on the back of a pony.

In the Trading Post next door to the restaurant where his mother was a waitress, Tony had discovered a beautiful, used saddle for sale. Its dark leather was worn smooth, and there were small nuggets of turquoise laced into the rawhide braid wrapped around the horn. Mr. Hilson, the owner of the Trading Post, invited Tony to help out around the store. In payment, Mr. Hilson put twenty dollars a week into an account for him. As soon as he earned enough money, Tony wanted to buy that saddle. He hoped no one else bought it first.
“Here we are,” said his mother, as she parked in front of the Trading Post. Tony got out and slammed the truck door. The high desert wind fluttered the bandana covering his straight, black hair. “Come see me at lunchtime,” his mother said. Tony waved as she walked toward the restaurant.

The bell on the door jingled as Tony walked into the Trading Post. “Good morning, Tony,” said Mr. Hilson. “Today, I need you to unpack some canned goods and stack them carefully on the store shelves. Then you can sweep out the storage area. It’s really dusty back there.”

“Okay, Mr. Hilson.”

The Trading Post did a lot of business. Tourists came to buy Indian-made goods, such as baskets, pottery, turquoise jewelry, and colorful, woven rugs. Regular customers could buy or trade for just about anything they needed.

Navajos could trade or “pawn” their jewelry in exchange for cash. Some did it because they needed money. Many did it because they wanted their turquoise jewelry to be safe in the Trading Post vault until they needed it for ceremonial wear.

Tony worked hard. There was almost always sweeping to do. Unpacking boxes and stacking things on shelves was a regular job too. If Mr. Hilson was busy, Tony could help customers. He knew where to find everything that was stocked in the Trading Post.

At lunchtime, Tony went next door as usual. He sat on a tall stool at the counter. Clattering dishes, chattering voices, and cooking aromas filled the air. Merl’s Diner was always busy.

As customers ate, Navajo craftsmen took turns coming in from their vendor stands outside to move among the tables, offering their jewelry and art for sale. Sometimes Tony’s grandmother did that too. One day a week, she came to Gallup with him and his mother to see his aunt’s handcrafted silver necklaces and rings, set with turquoise and coral stones.

After lunch, Tony returned to the Trading Post. The first thing he saw was a skinny man in worn denims and a black hat looking at saddles. The man picked up the saddle Tony wanted. “How much for this, Mr. Hilson?” he called out.

“That’s one seventy-five,” Mr. Hilson answered.

The man put the saddle down, but kept rubbing its smooth leather. Tony held his breath. Finally, the man moved away.
That afternoon, Tony spent some time straightening the traditional Navajo rugs displayed on wooden rods in the Trading Post. With their complex patterns, the rugs took months to design and complete. Tony's grandmother wove rugs and had a loom outside her hogan.

When he was younger, Tony had spent many days at Grandmother's side watching her work. While she wove, she told Tony stories about the ancient days of the Navajo People, or Diné. He learned about the sacredness of the Turquoise Mountain, towering in the sky to the east. He learned about Changing Woman and how her twin sons killed many monsters to save the People. He loved the story of how Sun Bearer first brought horses to the People.

On the drive home after work, they passed Tony's aunt's trailer and Grandmother's nearby hogan.

"Look. My uncle is home early," said Tony. "There's his truck."

"I wonder what that's about," said his mother. "I guess we'll find out tomorrow when we pick up Grandmother." Tony's uncle worked many miles away in Chinle, Arizona. His job was driving tourists through Canyon de Chelly to visit the many ancient Anasazi ruins there.
The next day when Grandmother climbed into the truck next to Tony, she explained what had happened. “My daughter’s husband broke his foot. He can’t be driving tourists for a while. No paychecks for at least a month. He’s worrying about his truck payments.”

When they got out of the truck at Merl’s Diner, Grandmother followed Tony into the Trading Post. Her velvet skirt swished as she marched over to the pawn counter and removed her silver and turquoise bracelet—the one she had worn since she was a young woman. Tony stared as she gave it to Mr. Hilson and received some cash in return. Grandmother didn’t say a word as she walked past Tony and out the door toward Merl’s.

On the drive home that day, Grandmother was quiet. One hand covered her wrist where she had always worn her bracelet. They dropped her off at her hogan. As his mother backed the truck away, Tony blurted, “My grandmother pawned her bracelet!” His mother turned to look at him. “That’s her business,” she said sternly.

Tony was worried. He knew how much that bracelet meant to Grandmother. She almost never took it off.

The next week, when they stopped to pick up Grandmother for the drive to Gallup, Tony’s aunt came out to the truck, followed by Tony’s two young cousins. “Grandmother is not well,” she said. “She hasn’t come out of her hogan for a couple days. It may be time to call the medicine man.”

“I’ll talk to my husband about it,” Tony’s mother said.

Tony crossed his arms and lowered his chin. He knew what Grandmother needed.

“By the way,” said Tony’s aunt, “she gave me some cash to help with expenses while my husband isn’t working. Wouldn’t say where she got it.”

That day, the drive to Gallup seemed endless. When they got to Merl’s, Tony ran to the Trading Post and went straight to the pawn counter. “Mr. Hilson,” he said. “I have to buy back my grandmother’s bracelet.”

“You know the rules, Tony. Pawn can’t be sold except to the owner for at least six months,” said Mr. Hilson.

“But it’s for her,” Tony’s voice quavered. “She’s sick. She needs it back.”

“Well, since you’re family, I guess it might be all right.” Mr. Hilson hesitated. “Should I take the money out of your account?”

Tony stood up straighter and nodded. “Yes, please. Today.”
On the drive home, Tony said, “We need to stop at Grandmother’s. I have something for her.”

His mother said nothing, but she turned off the main road and stopped in front of Grandmother’s hogan. Tony got out and quietly entered. Grandmother was lying down, her eyes closed.

“My grandmother,” Tony whispered. He held out her turquoise bracelet. She opened her eyes and nodded slightly. Tony approached and carefully lifted her wrist. Then he slipped the bracelet back on where it belonged. Grandmother closed her eyes again, and Tony left the hogan.

That night, Tony’s father drove over to see Grandmother and talk with his sister about arranging for a healing ceremony. He returned in a happy mood. “Grandmother is better,” he reported. Tony closed his eyes and smiled.

The following week, Grandmother went with Tony and his mother to Gallup. When they arrived at Merl’s, Tony dragged his feet toward the Trading Post. He had to start all over again, saving for a saddle. He kicked a few bottle caps along the sidewalk and finally went inside.
Grandmother was talking with Mr. Hilson. Tony went to look at the saddle. There was an empty space on the sawhorse where it used to sit. Someone had bought it.

Tony hid from Grandmother as she left the store so she wouldn’t see his sad face. Somehow, he made it through the day without anyone asking him what was wrong.

When it was time to go home, he went out to the truck. His mother said, “You got your saddle, my son.”

He looked at her in confusion and shook his head. He didn’t know what to say. She pointed to the back of the truck.

Tony hopped up and leaned on his forearms, feet dangling, to see into the truck bed. He couldn’t believe it. There it was . . . his beautiful saddle. His mother smiled and climbed into the truck.

Tony felt Grandmother touch his shoulder. He turned, and she nodded slowly, her wrinkled, brown face not quite hiding a smile. “Mr. Hilson traded your saddle against my next rug,” she said. “Now, let’s go home.”