

## Geoff's Rare Gift

(Excerpt)

As the sun sank slowly into the ocean, the big tractor-trailer backed up to an empty dock and stopped. Geoff heard the air brakes blow off. He watched the driver's feet step down from the cab and cross the parking lot. Then all was quiet.

JR was ready to roll. "This is California, right? Right? OK, let's get going I'm getting hungrier by the minute."

Carefully, the pair pulled themselves from the truck and sneaked across the pavement toward the gate. It was quickly growing dark.

"Rat's. The gate's locked!"

Then, JR heard the noise. Standing on his hind legs he sniffed the breeze.

"Guard dog!"

"Quick," whispered Geoff. "Get inside."

"Get inside where?" JR desperately wanted to know.

"Inside my shell. Hurry up. I'll just move over. It's a tight squeeze, but we'll make it buddy."

"Can you do that?" JR asked.

But, he didn't wait for the answer. He took one look at the guard dog rushing toward them and jumped straight inside Geoff's shell. Then, Geoff pulled in his head and closed the door. It was dark and stuffy inside.

But outside, they could hear the dog pacing round and round the shell looking for JR. His nails made scratching sounds on the roof. He sniffed all along the edges of Geoff's shell.

"Hey, his breath's terrible," said JR.

"Shhhhhh."

"Well, it's true."

"QUIET!"

"OK, OK".

After what seemed an eternity, the hot breath and scraping sounds stopped.

"Is he gone yet, Geoff?"

"No."

"Well, what's he thinking?"

Geoff was silent for a moment. "He's thinking that if he stays real quiet maybe you'll come out to see if he's gone."

"Then what?"

"JR, you don't want to know."

"Sure I do."

"OK, then. Are old are you now?"

"I'm four-- almost 5 actually."

"Well, if you come out now you'll never be five."

"Really!"

JR was unusually quiet for a moment.

"Geoff?"

"What?"

"How old are you?"

"I'm 103 years old."

"Really! You don't look a day over a hundred."

"JR, will you please shut up. I'm trying to listen."

"OK. OK"

Cautiously, Geoff poked his head out. The coast was clear...for now. The pair edged their way carefully around the fence looking for a small hole. Finally, JR pointed excitedly at the fence. There was a place where the guard dog had been digging--a couple of wires were bent back and some dirt was piled up.

"OK," said Geoff. "Here's my plan."

It was a tight squeeze but JR crawled under the fence. Then, while Geoff hid in his shell a short distance away, JR whistled for the dog. It didn't take long-- about 5 seconds maybe, and the guard dog was snapping at JR through the fence and digging at the hole.

JR started making faces. He stuck out his tongue. He rolled his eyes and put his fingers in his ears and wiggled them. He turned back flips. Now the guard dog was so mad he was digging faster and faster.

Dirt was flying everywhere. The dog's head was entirely underground, then his shoulders. At last, he was practically all the way in the hole. His head was sticking up the other side of the fence where JR was kicking dirt in his face.

Geoff watched from inside his shell. Just when the guard dog looked like it might actually get under the fence, he stuck his head out and shouted: "Hey DOGFACE." The dog looked around and charged Geoff. But Geoff pulled his head in and shut the door.

When the dog looked back JR was gone too. He scratched on Geoff's shell. He barked at the fence. But it did no good. Finally, he gave up and wandered off around the building. Geoff quickly, well sort of quickly, crawled to the hole, squeezed his way in and with a little more digging came out the other side. Then he filled the hole in behind him.

With a final sigh of relief, he and JR hit the road.