



*From The Golden Age  
of Science Fiction*

THE  
JEROME BIXBY  
READER

From the Golden Age of Science Fiction

## The Jerome Bixby Reader

[Our Town](#)

[Little Boy](#)

[The Draw](#)

[The Slizzers](#)

[The God Plink](#)

[The Holes Around Mars](#)

[Zen](#)

[Where There's Hope](#)

# OUR TOWN

BY JEROME BIXBY

*The jets got all the young ones in Smoky Creek. Only the old folks were left—with their memories. And the jets—friendly or hostile—would never get them....*



A jet bomber and four fighters had appeared low over Bald Ridge, out of the east. They'd curved up as one to clear Lawson's Hill, their stubby wings almost brushing the treetops, their hiss and thunder rolling back and forth between the valley walls like a giant's derision; they'd dipped into the valley proper, obviously informed that Smoky Creek, Tennessee (population 123) had no anti-aircraft installations, and circled the town at about five hundred feet. They circled and looked down—broad slavish faces with curious expressions, seen through plexiglass, as if thinking: *So this is an American small town.*

Then they took altitude and got to work. The first bomb was aimed at the big concrete railway bridge spanning the upper end of the valley; that was the main objective of the attack. The bomb exploded four hundred yards north of the bridge, at about six hundred feet altitude—the ideal point from which to flatten Smoky Creek. Low altitude bombing can be tricky, of course, especially in mountain country. A-bombs were cheap though, turned out by the carload; not like 20 years before, when they were first developed. So it was likely the bombardier tripped a bomb over the town just for the hell of it.

The next bomb got the bridge. The next tore up a quarter mile of track. The next tore up a quarter mile of road. That was the mission. The bomber circled, while the fighters strafed Smoky Creek for good measure; and then they roared away past Lawson's Hill, over Bald Ridge, into the east toward their invasion-coast base.

Everybody died. The bombs were midget A's, designed for tactical use; so Smoky Creek wasn't reduced to dust—just to sticks. There wasn't much heat from the bomb and there was hardly any residual radiation. But everybody in town died. Concussion. Smoky Creek had been comprised of one main street and three cross streets, and that's not much area—the wave had thumped down from right above, like a giant fist.

Everybody died, except twenty-one old men and women who had been off in the woods at the far end of the valley, on their annual Grandfolk's Picnic. They didn't die, except inside.

---

Three months later, an enemy jet came out of the sky and over the valley. A

scoop arrangement under its belly was sniffing Tennessee and Alabama air for radioactive particles. It sniffed low over the town, and then again—a ruined town might hide an underground lab and converter—and then it barrel-rolled and crashed. Nine rifle bullets had hit the motor; straight back through the jet intake, into the blades.



A year after that another jet came low over the town, and it crashed too. Only three bullets this time; but a jet motor's like a turbine—you get a blade or two, and it goes crazy.

Two years after that, Ben Bates (no longer Mayor Ben, because a mayor has to have a town; but still the man in charge) knocked off playing horseshoes in what had been the Town Hall. Now the building served as a recreation hall; there were horseshoe pits at one end of the long room, there were tables for checkers and cards, and a short tenpin alley along one wall. Three years ago the alley had been twice as long as it was now; but then there were young men around who could peg the length of it without tiring every time. Overhead the roof sagged, and in one place you could see quite a piece of sky—but under the hole the old men had rigged a slanted board watershed that led to a drainage ditch; and scattered through the room were a lot of supporting posts and timber braces. Actually the building was about as safe as it had ever been.

There were other buildings like it; buildings that the bomb hadn't pounded flat or made too risky. They were propped up and nailed together and buttressed and practically glued so they'd stay up. From outside you'd think they were going to crumble any minute—walls slanted all cockeyed, boards peeled off and hanging, and roofs buckling in. But they were safe. Fixed up every which way—from the inside. All from the inside; not an inch of repair on the outside. It had to be that way, because the town had to look like a dead town.

After the men had finished propping, the women had come along with all the furniture and things they'd salvaged, and they swept and scrubbed and did a hundred jobs the men never would have thought of; and so the old people ended up with half a dozen buildings to live in, secretly and comfortably, in the town that had to look dead.

"Arthritis is bad," Ben Bates told his teammates and opponents. "Hell, I'm just giving away points. Maybe next week. I'll rest up, and kick you all around next week."

He lit a cigar, a big grey man with long legs and a good-humored mouth, and he watched Dan Paray throw one short; then he strolled over to kibitz at the



checker game between Fat Sam Hogan and Windy Harris, at one of the tables near the door. Late morning sunlight slanted in through the window by the table and struck light off Windy's glasses as he leaned across the board, thumped a checker three times and said triumphantly, "King me, Sam. You're getting blind, I swear. Or dumber."

Behind his back Ben Bates heard a shoe ring against the stake; then he heard it spin off, and he grinned at Owen Urey's bullfrog cussing.

Tom Pace was saying urgently, "Look—look, Jim, damn it, you didn't no more shoot down that plane singlehanded than I did. We was all shooting. Godamighty—where you get off claiming *you* brung it down?"

Ben turned and sat down at the table next to the checker game, and stretched his legs in the sunlight. He raised thick brows like clumps of steel-wool at Tom and at old Jim Liddel, who sat in his pillowed armchair like a thin, scowling, bald, mansized spider.

"You keep talking so high and mighty," Tom said, "we'll carry you out o' here and take you and dump you in the creek. You can tell the fish about who got the plane."

"Still arguing over who planted the shot, huh," Ben grinned. "Regular feud, you two."

"Well, hell, Ben," Tom said, and bit down on his gums so his whiskers almost hid the end of his nose. "I just get filled up on this old windbag hollering how he—"

"You go call me a windbag once more, Tom Pace," Jim Liddel said, and he stirred his all but helpless body in the armchair, "you're gonna have a sore eye, you seventy year old whippersnapper. *I* brung it down."

"In a hog's behind, you brung it down, Mister Dan'l Boone!"

"It 'us just after I let loose it started smoking," old Jim snarled, "and nobody else was shooting right then! You're gonna get a sore eye, I swear—tobacco in it. I can spit to where you sit, and I can spit faster'n you can move, I bet, unless you're faster'n a fly, and you ain't. You just ask anybody who was there ... it 'us just after I shot it started—"

Tom Pace thumped the table. "*I* was there, you old ... now, now, Jim, don't

spit, for God's sake! Hold on. What I mean, I was there too, and maybe somebody's shot from a second or two before was what done the trick. Maybe even my shot! Takes a plane a while to know it's hurt, don't it? Ever think o' that?"

"Maybe," Ben Bates said. "Maybe, maybe. And maybe. Let it go, you two. It ain't important who done it; we oughta just be grateful we got it."

"Grateful *I* got it," Jim Liddel grunted.

Tom Pace said, "Now, looky here, Jim—" Ben Bates nudged Tom's leg under the table; and then slowly, fingering his jaw he said, "Well, now, Jim ... I figure maybe you did, at that. Like you say, it smoked and crashed right after you shot, so I always kind o' figured it *was* you brought it down. But that's a hard thing to prove."

Jim snorted. "Can't prove it! But I got it, all right. A man knows when he sunk a shot."

"In a varmint, maybe," Tom Pace objected, "or a man. But you claiming to know where to hit a plane the worst?"

"We was *all* shooting at the front, up where they put the motor," Jim said nastily. "Don't know about planes, but I know my aim. I got it square-on."

"Well," Ben said, "why don't you just let it lay, eh, Tom? Jim's got a lot on his side." He looked sidewise at old Jim, and saw that Jim was still scowling at Tom. Old Jim was ninety eight, and some set in his notions.

"Mm. Hell," Tom said reluctantly, after a second, "I ain't saying you *didn't*, Jim. That ain't my intent. I just get burned when you yell you did, like no man dared say you was wrong. Sure, maybe you're right. But ain't you willing to admit you might be wrong too?"

"*No*," Jim Liddel yelled, and from the checker table came Windy Harris's encouraging, "You tell 'em who got that plane, Jim!"

Ben Bates scraped an inch of ash off his cigar against the table-edge, sighed and got up. He looked down at the glowering pair and said, "Well, come the next plane, if there is one, we'll shove a rifle in your hand, Jim, and see how good your eye is. You too, Tom. Till that time, reckon this is no place for a reasoning man."

"Sit down, Ben Bates," old Jim snarled. "If you're a reasoning man, sit down. Be glad to talk to one, after Tom here goes away."

"You go to hell. *I ain't* going no place," Tom said, and he picked up the cards and started shuffling them in his stiff hands.

Ben sat down and stretched out his legs again.

After a second, old Jim said wistfully, "You know, I wish I *could* still handle a rifle, Ben. Or do anything but sit. No way for a man to live, to have dead legs and dying arms." He shifted in his cushions. "You know, I reckon when I start to really die—die all over—I'm gonna get up out o' this chair. I'll stand up, somehow, even if it kills me faster. A man oughta fall when he dies, like a tree, so they know he stood up in his time. A man oughtn'ta die sitting down."

"Sure, Jim," Ben said. "You're right about that."

"Never had a sick day in my life, until they dropped that bomb. Why, I could outpitch and outchop and outshoot any of you whippersnappers, until they ..."  
Old Jim walloped the chair arm. "Damn, I made up for it, though! Didn't I? *They* put me in a chair, I sat in it and *I* got me an airplane, and that's more'n they could do to me, by golly, they couldn't kill me!"

"Sure, Jim," Ben said.

"And when my time comes, I'll be up and out o' this chair. Man oughta fall and make a noise when he dies."

"Sure, Jim," Ben said. "But that's a long ways off, ain't it?"

Jim closed his eyes, and his face looked like a skull. "You squirts always think a man lives forever."

---

From outside came the late morning sounds: the murmuring of Smoky Creek at the edge of town, under its cool tunnel of willows; the twittering of a flock of robins circling above; the constant soft rustle of the trees that crowded the green hills around. From the warehouse down by the tracks came the faint sounds of livestock—and the voices of the men whose job it was to look after them this week: to feed them, turn them out into the big pens for an hour's sunlight, then drive them back into the warehouse again.

Lucky the warehouse had stood the bomb—it was perfect for the use.

"Wonder how the war's going," Tom Pace said. He dropped some cards and bent painfully to retrieve them; his voice was muffled: "I just wonder how it's going, you know? Wonder who's killing more than who today.

"Maybe," Tom continued, coming up, "it's all over. Ain't seen no planes for couple years now. Maybe somebody won."

Ben shrugged. "Who knows. Don't matter none to us. We're ready as we can be if another plane comes around. Other than that, it ain't our concern."

"Darn tootin'," Tom said, and pushed the cards together and started shuffling again.

Jim Liddel said, "War!" and looked like he'd bit into spoiled meat. "Never settled nothing ... just makes the biggest dog top-dog for a while, so he can get his way. Man, I wish I could still lift a rifle, if an airyplane come around! I'd love to get me another one." He put his thin back against the cushions and pushed at the edge of the table with his hands. Jim's fingers didn't move so well any more; some were curled and some were straight out, and the joints were different sizes, and now they were trembling a little. "Sometimes when I think o' Johnny and Helen and all the kids—when I think o' that day, and those damn bombs, and that white tower o' smoke up over the town, I ... oh, godamighty, I'd love to see another airyplane! I'd shout and yell and pray; I'd pray almighty God for you to get it!"

Ben pulled on his cigar with stiff lips, and said slowly, "Well, we might, Jim. We just might. Two out o' seven ain't bad." He puffed out smoke. "We been running in luck, so far, what with nobody ever coming back loaded for bear. Reckon that means the other five didn't see us, low as they was; probably didn't even know they was being shot at."

"They musta found bulletholes, though," Tom Pace said. "Afterwards. Not a chance we'd all miss—" he bobbed his beard at old Jim—"specially with Dan'l Boone here plugging away. They'd know they was shot at, all right. Might even find rifle bullets."

"Maybe they did," Ben said. "Nobody ever come snooping back, though."

"Wouldn't know where to, would they?" Windy Harris said. He and Fat Sam Hogan had stopped playing checkers, and had been listening. "Smoky Creek

looks dead as Sodom. Buildings all down, and stuff knee-deep in the streets. Bridge down, and the road out. And the valley is way the hell out o' the way ... no call for them to suspect it more'n anyplace else. Less, even. They'd likely figure somebody took a potshot from a hill ... and there's a pack o' hills between here'n outside.

"Looks like," Ben said. "We just got to keep it that way. We got a good plan: if the plane's up high, we just freeze under cover; if it comes down low a time or two, we figure we're likely spotted and start shooting. We shoot, and maybe it shoots too, and we pray."

"It's a good plan," Jim Liddel said, looking out the window. "We got two."

Windy Harris got up and stretched out his arms.

"Two ain't *enough*," old Jim said bitterly.

"Well," Windy said, "I hope we keep on getting 'em—them as sees us, anyway. Hope nobody *ever* knows we're here. It's peaceful here. Way off by ourselves, nothing to do but get up and go to bed, and do what we want in between." He sent tobacco juice into the cuspidor by the door. "Right now, me, I guess I'll go fishing down by the creek—promised Maude I'd bring home a cat or two for supper. Anybody come along?"

Tom Pace shook his head, and old Jim looked like he'd like to go, if he only could—and Ben said, "Maybe I'll be down a little while later, Windy. Keep to the trees."

Windy left, and Tom Pace shuffled the cards and looked over at Jim Liddel. "You going to play with Ben and me, you old windbag, or you going to keep bragging so loud a man can't stand your company?"

"Why, you whippersnapper," Jim growled, "you just go ahead and run 'em. Reckon a reasoning man and a nitwit's about the best I can do right now."

Tom dealt out two cards, and said, "War!" without dealing out the rest. He looked at Ben, his eyes cloudy. "Got a cigar, Ben?"

Ben handed one over and held a match, and Tom got it going, puffing longer than he had to, like he didn't want to talk yet.

Then he said, "It didn't have to happen." He worked the cigar over to the corner of his mouth and settled it in the nest of stained whiskers there. "None

of it had to happen—what happened here, and whatever happened outside the valley. It just didn't have to happen."

"Course it didn't," Ben said. "Never has to. It just always does. Some people got reasons to let it happen, and some ain't got the sense not to."

Fat Sam Hogan said, "I don't figure there's anything in the world a man can't sit down and talk out, instead o' reaching for a gun. Don't know why that oughtn'ta hold for countries."

Ben Bates looked at one of the two cards Tom Pace had dealt—his hole card. It was a four, and he lost interest. "Yup," he said, "it holds all right ... they'll just both reach half the time anyway. One war on top of another. Even one right after this one, ten years or so, if this one's over. I just bet. Every country wants a piece out o' the next one's hide—or his poke—and they won't give an inch except in talk; they won't really buckle down to stop a war. Never. Not if they can't get what they want by talk." He looked at the card again, just in case—a four, sure enough. "Only time there's never a war is when everybody has what they want, or figure they can get it without killing somebody. But the second they see that's the only way, then it's war. War, war, war. It's a rotten way to run a world, killing to decide who's right or wrong ... 'specially killing people who got damn little say about it. But I seen three-four wars now, and they don't look to stop soon, judging." He shook his head wonderingly. "Put half the money they spend on killing toward curing, instead, and helping them that wants, and finding out all about diseases and such ... why, shucks, it'd be a brand-new world."

"I seen five," Jim Liddel said. "I seen wars come and go. I fought in one. Afterwards, every time, they say everything's fine. The war to save this or that's over, and things are fine. Then somebody wants something somebody else has, and they're at it again, like two bulls trying to hump the same heifer. Bulls don't have enough sense to know there's enough cows to go around; but people ought. It's a big enough world." He worked those hands of his together until they were clasped, and he pushed them that way against the table-edge until the overgrown knuckles looked like chalk. "When I think o' that noise, and that cloud, ... how we come running and screaming back here into all the dust and mess, and all them bodies ... I ... Ben, I...."

"You lost heavy, Jim," Ben said. He let smoke out of his lungs, and it curled

off into the broad beam of sunlight that came through the window, and it looked like the smoke that had shadowed a murdered town. "Heavy. You lost heavier'n any of us."

"You can't count it," old Jim said, and the chalk was whiter. "We all lost the same; I just had more of it. Our kids and their kids—and *their* kids ... lost heavy? What can a man lose more'n his life?... And if you're as old as us, what's your life except the family you made out o' your own flesh? What else's a man got when he's eighty or a hundred?"

Tom Pace said, "Ruth and Dave and their kids. I remember little Davey. He called me Tom Peach. I bought him a toy plane for his birthday. That was a couple days before the real planes come. I buried it with him ... I think. I think it was him I put it with. It mighta been Joey ... they looked alike."

"A man ain't nothing, when he's as old as us," Jim Liddel said, his skull sockets closed, "except what he done. *He* ain't much any more, himself; he's mostly what he done with his life, whatever he done and left around that he can point to and say, 'I did that', that's all. And what's he got left if they take that away? We can't make it again. We made Smoky Creek; built it; wasn't a thing here that didn't come out o' us or ours. We made the valley, after God give it to us; wasn't a thing here we didn't let live or help live or make live. We made our families, and watched 'em fit into the town and the valley, like the valley fits into the world, and we watched 'em go on doing what we done before them: building and working and planting and raising families—going on, like people got to go on. That's the way it was. That's what we had. Until they dropped the bomb and killed it—killed all we done that made us men." Tears were squeezing out of the skull sockets, and Ben Bates caught Tom Pace's eye and looked away, out the window, at the green walls of the valley that was a coffin.

"I just wish an airyplane would come around again," old Jim said. "*I—just—wish*. You know, Ben?"

Ben tried to talk and had to clear his throat; he put out his cigar in the ashtray, as if that was what was wrong with his throat, and said, "I know, Jim. Sure. And maybe you'll get your wish." He pushed back his chair and tried to grin, but it came out sour. "Maybe you will, you old fire-eater—and what if one comes and we get spotted and it shoots us up or goes back and tells

everybody we're here? That's one wish we don't want the good Lord to grant, ain't it? Ain't it, now?"

Jim didn't say anything.

Ben got up and said, "'Bout noon. Guess I'll go home for a bite and then go down and fish with Windy."

Jim said, thinly, "I meant, I wish one would come and we'd *get* it."

"Well, maybe one will," Ben said, turning toward the door. "They built a slew o' them. And maybe *we* will, if it does."

---

He stopped by the door of the Town Hall to listen carefully, his sharp old eyes half-shut. Behind him, at the far end of the room, somebody made a ringer, and Dave Mason said, "Nice, Owen," in his reedy voice. Ben listened and didn't hear what he was listening for. He stepped past the rifle that leaned beside the door and made his way to the end of the porch, walking close to the wall. The summer sun stood at noon, and the porch was in shadow; beyond, the street was a jumble of boards and broken glass, its canyon walls of leaning building-fronts and sagging porches, its caverns of empty windows and doorways shimmering in the heat. You couldn't see much dirt along the way; where the debris didn't come to your knees, it reached over your head.

At the end of the porch Ben stopped and listened again; heard nothing. He stepped down and walked as fast as he could—damn arthritis again—to the porch of the next building.

This had been Fat Sam Hogan's Hardware Store, and about all that was left of it was the porch; the rest was a twisted mess of wood that slumped away to the ground at the rear. The porch had been down too, right after the bombing—but the old men, working at night, had raised it and braced it up. Something to walk under.

A Springfield stood, oiled and waiting, against the wall. Ben paused and touched the barrel—it was his own. Or rather it had once been his own; now it was the town's, strictly speaking, to be used by whoever was nearest it when the time came. It was a good gun, a straight-shooter, one of the best—which was why it was here instead of at his house. A man could get a better shot from here.