

# A Kid in a Candy Store

W.M. Akers



It wasn't the candy he wanted. It was the skateboard. Tommy had been staring at it for weeks, every day on his way home from school, admiring it through the window of the skate shop on Market Street. It was a longboard—a serious skateboard, not meant for tricks or speed, but for long rides down hills, on busy roads, or all the way across town. This was a skateboard that could change Tommy's life forever. No longer would his parents have to pick him up after school, or at the movies or the mall. The longboard would be able to take him home.

It was ocean blue, with chrome wheels and an elaborate drawing of a rocket ship on the underside. Each time he pressed his face against the glass of the skate shop, he felt himself fall into that picture, and his dreams of riding the longboard became mixed up with dreams of interstellar travel. He wasn't just going to the mall. He was going to Mars, to Alpha Centauri, to anywhere in the galaxy he felt like. He was going to conquer the stars.

Or he would have, anyway, if his dad weren't such a cheapskate. There's something about fathers that makes it impossible for them to understand skateboards.

"Dad," Tommy said. "It's the world's finest skateboard. It could change my life forever."

"That's great," said Dad. "I'm all for kids having hobbies. But that's an expensive little toy, and—"

"It's not a toy!" Tommy felt himself about to lose his temper. If he shouted, he knew he would never come close to owning his board. He collected himself. "It's a whole new way of life. When you were my age, what was the thing you wanted more than anything

else? The thing you dreamed about? The thing you promised yourself you would get, no matter what?"

"A Black Shadow."

"A what?"

"A Vincent Black Shadow—the world's finest motorcycle. A more beautiful piece of machinery has never been designed."

"So yeah, this board is like the Vincent Black Shadow for the 21st Century. So you see why I have to have it."

"You know what my dad told me when I asked for a Black Shadow?"

"What?"

"Nothing. I didn't ask him, because I knew he'd think it was nothing more than an expensive toy. I went out, got a job, and started saving."

"Man," said Tommy. "I was afraid you'd say something like that."

"Dads are the worst, aren't they?"

\*\*\*

Tommy walked up and down Market Street looking for someplace to work. The pizzeria wasn't hiring. The coffee shop said he was too young. The comic book store said he didn't have enough experience.

"But how can I get experience," Tommy asked, "if nobody will give me a job?!" The comic book clerk didn't answer. Tommy composed himself, said thank you, and left.

The only store with a "HELP WANTED" sign was the one he had been dreading most: Orson's Confectionaries. The candy store.

Whoever thinks that all kids love candy stores has never been to Orson's. It had been in the town since the dawn of time, and hadn't been updated much since. A dark, winding

dungeon of a store, its shelves were filled with jars of weird, sticky gums and sucking candies so hard they could crack your teeth. Over all of it stood Mr. Orson, a hard-eyed skeleton of a man whose long grey hair and baggy clothes made him look like an out-of-work wizard.

Tommy didn't know how the confectionary stayed in business. He'd never seen a kid go in or out, and he'd never heard anyone talk about buying something there. How could that store turn a profit? And why would a store with no customers need an extra employee? Tommy didn't want to find out, but the skateboard demanded he try. He pushed on the creaky old door, sucked in his breath, and plunged in.

"How may I help you?" said Mr. Orson. He sounded like a snake with a cold.

"I, uh, uh...I—"

"You're looking for sweets?"

"No, well, uh—"

"Some raspberry rope, perhaps?"

"No thank you. Actually, I—"

"A chocolate lover, are we? Perhaps you'd prefer a chunk of Carlsberg Chew? It's the finest dark chocolate made in Germany. It has real hazelnuts inside!"

"That sounds good, but actually—"

"I see," said Mr. Orson, and his eyes went wide. His mouth crinkled up like a dead leaf, and Tommy got the impression that he was either about to scream at him, or sneeze. "I understand completely now."

"Understand what?"

"You are a boy...with a sour tooth." He reached behind him, to the highest shelf on a rickety bookcase, and presented Tommy with a star-shaped, tiny yellow candy. "Try this. A Sunburst Express—a sour candy of my own design."

"Yeah?"

"Free of charge."

Tommy licked his lips. If there was one thing in life he loved more than skateboarding, it was sour candy. The grosser the better, he thought. A candy wasn't any good unless it made you squeeze your face together, shut your eyes, and want to cry. That's how you knew it was nice and sour.

"It's pretty sour?"

"It will make your tongue turn inside out."

Tommy reached for the candy and popped it into his mouth. At first, he tasted nothing. But then, as he began to chew, it was like an oil tanker had spilled in his throat. His gums were on fire. His tonsils were tap-dancing. And his tongue...his tongue felt like it was about to turn itself inside out!

"Oh my goodness!" he gasped. "This is the best candy I ever tasted."

"Why thank you," said Mr. Orson. "Have a sip of Fizzberry Soda. It will ease the sensation. Now, you're looking for a job?"

"How did you know?"

"I could just tell. Desperate for a new toy, are you?"

"It's not a toy! It's...well, yes. That's right."

"The Sunburst was a test. I don't want anyone working here who doesn't love sour sweets."

"I love 'em more than anything!" Tommy remembered the skateboard. "Well, practically anything."

"Good," said Mr. Orson, as he handed Tommy an apron. "Then you'll be getting your new toy very soon indeed."