The Circle

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Abstract

He tried to listen, but his mind wandered. The religious words seemed weak and ineffective out in the open air. They were solemn, somber, dusty words that weren’t vital enough to compete with the breeze and the bright sun and the fresh smell of the evergreens...
HE TRIED to listen, but his mind wandered. The religious words seemed weak and ineffective out in the open air. They were solemn, somber, dusty words that weren't vital enough to compete with the breeze and the bright sun and the fresh smell of the evergreens. His eyes left the casket and rested casually on the distant trees. Unconsciously he probed the remote, shady darkness that lay enclosed beneath them. His thought slowly drifted into a protective daydream; he found himself wading once again through the deep green maze of underbrush and foliage — young, so young, he had been then.

... He was a light-haired boy. The sun played through his hair. And his face shone brightly in the sunlight like a flower. In the summer he wore short pants, and sometimes went barefooted. He lived near a green, grassy field and a quiet woods...

"Robert, run down to the store and get me a loaf of bread, will you? Right now. And take an umbrella."

... Sometime when he was four or five, he was allowed
to, or was no longer told not to, leave his yard and wade through the pale, mysterious grass of the field. It had rippled in the wind, and had kept its secrets hidden. As he ventured out, the yard fell far behind; his house grew distant and weak, small and silent. The long blades of grass bent only slightly as he passed, just enough to see where he'd stepped. He was very small, even for four or five; he could sit down and see nothing but sky out in the tall grass. He grew to love the grass and the bright sun and the high breeze. He didn't know he loved it until one day when he found that he knew so much about it. He knew about the tall sunflower way out in the middle and he knew about the clump of thistles on the other side. And he knew it ended by a barbed-wire fence and a gravel road. And so he knew he loved it . . .

"Robert, it's time you went out and got a job. You're old enough to earn a little money for yourself, now. Some­day you'll have to support yourself. You may as well learn that right now."

. . . One day he wandered through a part of the field that he'd forgotten to explore. At the end, he found a shadowy, quiet woods. He stood very small and solitary, looking in with wonder. The woods remained silent; the grass rustled in the wind behind him. The heavy branches loomed out over the open field, and farther in, they crowded upon each other and lay crumbling in weird piles among the underbrush. They embraced a thick darkness through which the sunlight flickered silently from some remote, mysterious place. He looked for something alive, waited for something to stir the heavy black limbs, to shatter the stillness that brooded deep within. But the woods stood un­moved — huge and deep, invincible to the wide space and bright sun behind him. . .

"There's nobody but you and your sister to help me, now. He didn't leave us very much. But we'll just have to do the best we can. It could've been worse, I suppose. You've got a good job, and there's the social security. Hang up my coat, will you? Thanks." She sat down slowly and heavily.
It was dreary in the room. But the halflight was comfortable. It was protection.

"Well, I hope your wife never has to go through this, Robert. It's terrible." Her sister's voice was thick and heavy suddenly. He looked away, out the window at the rain. How long would it go on?

... It was thick and soft under his feet. He heard a woodpecker rapping somewhere further in. Somehow it seemed bright and sunny, not dark as it was from the field. The leaves glowed over his head as the sun shone through them and made him feel very warm and pleasant. He looked up through layer after layer of dark and light green foliage. The heavy trunks stretched up and disappeared among the leaves. He picked his way through the thinnest spots in the underbrush, slowly, and then more rapidly. He was conscious at first of his own noisy rustlings. He'd pause now and then, as if to determine if anything resented his intrusion. But the woods remained indifferent.

After he had gone a little way, he discovered a clump of saplings that had all grown from the same kind of tree. They were just high enough to spread a roof of young, silvery leaves over his head. He thought of the sunflower out on the field. He wove among the slim shafts of the saplings until he felt himself completely surrounded. There was one spot deep within the clump that lay beneath a hole in the foliage. The sun streamed down, touching the leaves that bordered the hole and turning them to golden green, and then fell to a circle of warmth in the grass. A broken limb from the mother tree lay in the circle and disappeared at either end into the grass and the saplings.

He looked around the circle. The limb seemed to invite him to sit down. He sat down and felt very comfortable and warm. He straddled the log, and rested his elbows on his knees. His hair caught the light as it flooded down into the circle, and held it or flung it back in copper glints. His face was solemn, and his eyes were intent. He looked pensive, almost melancholy; he appeared to absorb the tranquility with a strangely adult repose. Yet within he was a child, reveling in the pleasant warmth and solitude, the
golden secretiveness of the place. Within, he was young, very young, like the saplings and the small, silvery leaves and the dancing light. He watched the dappled shadows flicker on his arm, and he looked up and turned his head around to either side as he bathed in the luxury of protection, the novelty of leaves for a roof.

“I never hear from you anymore. What do you do with yourself? We used to have so much fun when you were home. If I didn’t come and see you, I don’t think you’d know I was alive. Well, when they grow up, they forget all about their relatives.” She sat down on a straight chair. She looked at him, half questioning, half frowning.

“You were always so quiet. A good boy, but so quiet. Guess you haven’t changed. You’re just like your father.”

He stared at the fire.

She turned on a lamp.

“It gets dark so early now,” she said.

She sighed.

He waited. How long would it be. Two seconds? Thirty? How long could she sit there without breaking the silence?

“You sister called. She wants you to pick her up and bring her over home. I’m going to take care of the baby while she washes clothes. We can all have lunch together.” He flinched inside.

“I hope it doesn’t rain tomorrow. Sunday is such a dreary day anymore. I’m glad you two will be coming over. It’ll be nice to have us all together again.” The fire hissed as drops of water came down the chimney. When would it stop raining?

. . . The water ran fast and muddy over the rocks. He sat right in the middle of the limb that had fallen across the creek. The woods crowded and crumbled over either side. He was alone, completely alone. The sun was hot on his small, bare legs and on the back of his neck. He leaned his head back until it cradled between his shoulders. He closed his eyes and felt his cheeks absorb the heat; he felt his forehead grow hot as he stared into brilliant red darkness. Then he opened his eyes and looked up through the foliage. The sky was blue — intense, dazzling blue. . .
The sky was a bright blue, and the sun warmed the back of his neck. The breeze whipped light and free, and rolled the tops of the distant trees. His face was solemn. He seemed pensive and melancholy. But within, he reveled in the warmth and the light that flooded all around him. He lingered a few respectful moments after the sermon, and then turned from her grave and the others and picked his way, slowly at first, then more rapidly, through the stones to the gravel road. He crossed to the barbed wire and stepped carefully over. He barely left a trace in the long grass as he made his way towards the quiet woods beyond.

**After the Party: January 1**

*By Donald Watkins*

Grim morning,
Night's slim lady steels her eyes with coffee,
Gently pleating and binding the body
Which armed every man the night before with
His heart's true lance; she crushes an olive while
Under foot,

Her young cat,
Tearing tinsel from January's tree
And made wholly contrite by popcorn beads,
He kneads the mock flesh of a plastic bird
Fallen so bright among the limp silver
Of Christmas.