A Reasonable Facsimile

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Abstract

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The man walked out on to the front porch as he took his shotgun out of its case. He was followed by his son who was in his stocking feet.

"Where are we going?" the boy asked.

"We aren't going anywhere. Get back inside."

"Can't I come along?"

"No." The man leaned over and pulled his boots on.

"Sorry, Jeremy. Not this time."

"I won't be in the way. I just want to . . . ."

"I told you to get back in the house. You'll catch a cold standing out here without any shoes on."

"What are you going to do?"

"Nothing. I'm just taking the dog for some exercise. Now go inside and help your mother."

"She's going to town. I don't want to go with her."

The man looked at his son for a moment, and then, in exasperation, he said, "All right. But hurry up and get dressed. I'm not going to stand around waiting for you."

The boy rushed inside and returned wearing a hooded sweatshirt and hard-soled boots. He was carrying a toy rifle, and his father told him to go to the back yard and get the dog.

When the dog saw the boy, he ran towards him until there was no more slack in the chain. When he couldn't run any further, he began to bark and pull against his chain, stretching his collar. The boy scratched the dog behind the ears and when he unfastened the chain, the dog sprinted for the front yard where the boy's father was waiting.

"Did you tell your mother you were coming with me?"

The boy nodded and the two of them started down the dust path.

Anxious to learn and willing to help out, the boy was always at his father's side. (Usually in his way, but always at his side.) One step to the left and one step behind, the boy scampered along to keep up with his father. He had a never-
ending stream of questions. Most of them were nonsense and many were left unanswered, but the flow of curiosity was continuous. The boy would constantly ask his father, “Where are we going?” and, “What are we going to do?” He discussed everything in terms of “we.” It made him feel vital to the process—indispensable. Curiosity and ambition are never as persistent as in youth.

It was the first Sunday in October, two days after the boy’s seventh birthday. The boy thought to himself that seven years was an incredibly long time to be on the face of the earth. The gradual changing of the seasons had gone unnoticed by the boy, but he was aware of the sweet smell of the cool autumn air as it expanded in his lungs.

On one side of the path, there was a hay field. The alfalfa was bright green in contrast to the pale blue of the sky. On the other side, a barbed wire fence stood between the path and some timber land. There were mostly hickory trees and oaks, but a few walnut trees were scattered about.

The boy filled his pockets with acorns and hickory nuts that had dropped onto the path. Stopping to gather the seeds, the boy had fallen behind his father and he had to run to catch up. Although the boy’s father was not an extremely large man, at seven years of age he seemed to the boy to be a man of enormous stature. Even though the father’s long strides were slow and leisurely, the boy had to hurry in order to keep up.

The dog was not fully grown and his limbs were long and clumsy. Having spent most of his life chained up in the back yard, the young animal found his freedom most confusing. He ran back and forth across the path, stopping to sniff everything.

“Dad . . .” the boy asked in a high-pitched voice. “Dad . . .” he repeated, refusing to finish the question until he had been acknowledged.

“What, Jeremy?” his father answered without breaking stride.

“Are we going to shoot some birds today, Dad?”

“Not today, Rum.”

“Ol’ Clyde, he’s going to make a good bird dog, isn’t he?”

“Clyde is a coon hound, Jeremy. Not a bird dog—a coon hound.”
“Well, he’ll sure be a good one. Won’t you, Clyde?”

The dog crawled underneath the fence and found a whole new world of experiences. The boy’s father shouted at the dog to come back, but the dog chased after a rabbit instead.

“Get back over here,” the man shouted. “Clyde, come back here.”

“Get back over here, Clyde,” the boy added with an unnatural sternness in his voice. The dog ignored both of them—to the dismay of the father and to the amusement of the boy.

“I’ll go after him,” the boy said as the dog followed the rabbit further into the woods.

“No, you won’t. You’ll stay right here.” The man continued down the path with his hand in the pocket of his vest and his gun resting on his forearm. As the boy followed, they walked past a walnut tree at the edge of the path.

“Look, Dad. There’s a dead tree. We’ll have to cut that one down.” Unlike the leaves of the oaks and hickories, the dull green leaves on the walnut tree were all shriveled up.

“It’s not dead, Rum. Walnut trees are just the first ones to lose their leaves. All of the trees will look like that in a few weeks.”

The boy picked up a walnut that was lying next to the fence. After examining it for a moment, the boy threw the walnut at the trunk of the walnut tree. The green shell broke loose exposing the mustard-colored nut inside. The boy reached underneath the wire fence and picked up the bright yellow nut. It felt sticky, and when he brought it to his nose, it smelled bitter. The boy threw it down, but the smell stayed on his fingers.

“Dad . . . Dad . . .”

“What, Rum?”

“Was I born when you were in the army?”

“No, Jeremy. You weren’t born yet.”

“Tell me what it was like.” The boy had asked the same questions before, but he had never received an adequate response. He knew that his father had been in the service because of pictures he had seen lying around the house, and he was immensely proud. It was a fascinating source of intrigue for the boy’s imagination and he dreamed of the excitement
that such an experience had to offer.

"It wasn't very nice, Jeremy."

"Did you kill anybody?"

The man stopped and looked out across the hay field. "I expect I did."

"Well, what was it like?" the boy insisted.

"Never mind. Just hope you don't ever have to do the same thing."

The boy imagined himself as a hunter. "Puckoo" he would shout as he took aim at a blackbird resting on a fence post. The toy rifle had some sort of spring device inside that would make a noise if the rifle was cocked, but the boy fancied that his "Puckoo" was more realistic.

The toy rifle had been a birthday gift. The boy had told his father that the only thing he wanted for his birthday was a real rifle. He thought he had gotten his wish when he first opened the box and saw the toy rifle lying inside, but he soon learned otherwise. Sensing the boy's disappointment, the father explained, "It's almost the real thing. It's as close to being the real thing as it can be, without actually being the real thing."

That was of little compensation to the boy. In an attempt to make the boy feel better, the man let his son fire a real rifle at a tin can out in the hay field—that is, the man held the weapon and let the boy aim it and pull the trigger. The boy hit the can, but the kick from the rifle scraped the boy's nose and gave him a black eye.

The boy's eye was still a little swollen as he walked down the dust path. He was still thinking of himself as a hunter when he heard a noise in the woods. He looked up and saw Clyde standing in a clearing about twenty yards away. The boy's father shouted angrily at the dog and the animal turned sharply and ran deeper into the woods. The boy climbed under the fence and chased after the dog. His father called for him to come back, but the boy did not listen. He came to the clearing where the dog had been standing, and then he followed the ravine where the dog had disappeared.

As the boy went further into the woods, he became aware of a faint putrid odor. He had lost sight of the dog, but he continued up the hill. The smell became increasingly stronger.
There was the trunk of a large tree lying along the edge of the ditch, and the boy climbed on top of it. Standing on the dead tree, the boy could see the dog standing in the midst of some yellow bones scattered across the ground. The smell burned in the boy's nostrils and throat, so that he had to cover his nose and breathe through his mouth. A skull was lying uphill from where the dog was standing, and after a moment, the boy recognized it as the skull of the boar.

It had only been a month and a half since the boar had died, but the boy had forgotten about the whole incident. To a seven year old, six weeks seems like an eternity.

It was in the middle of August, and barefoot and brown, the boy followed his father and the veterinarian out to a shed where the boar was resting. The boy's hair was long and unkempt. It bounced with each step and he was constantly brushing it out of his eyes.

As the two men and the boy approached the shed, the animal did not stir. The boar was lying on his side, trying to keep cool in the shade. While the two men were talking, the boy climbed the gate and jumped into the pen. He picked up a stick and hit the boar on the shoulder. The animal slowly lifted his head and gazed at the boy. The boar's hair was reddish-brown, the color of dark stained wood. His eyes were black and sad and set deep in his head. The boar relaxed the muscles of his neck and his head dropped back down to the straw. The boy hit him again, but this time the boar did not respond.

The veterinarian climbed into the pen and walked to the back side of the emaciated animal. The boar's hind legs were thin and his spine stuck out along his back. With the heel of his boot, the veterinarian kicked the boar in the ham. It appeared that the boar was not aware that he had been kicked, and the doctor said that there was not much to hope for.

The boy's father swung the gate open and sat the boy on top of it. The veterinarian was kneeling at the boar's head and he slapped him on the shoulder with his hand. The veterinarian slapped him again, and this time shouted at him.
The animal finally struggled up onto his front legs. The father grabbed the boar's tail and helped the animal drag its hind quarters out of the shed.

Once the boar was out on the drive, the veterinarian helped the boy's father lift the animal up onto its hind legs. The boar leaned to the left, and then balanced himself. He took one step forward and then fell down onto the gravel. The doctor shook his head, and the boy's father sighed.

The two men talked some more as the boy climbed down from the gate and picked up some rocks. He threw two of them as far as he could towards the house. Then he turned and casually tossed one at the boar. It hit him right behind the ear, but the boar did not react. The boy threw his last rock on top of the farrowing house. It made a loud noise when it hit the tin roof, and then it made a soft rumbling sound as it rolled down and dropped off the side.

The veterinarian left and the boy's father went inside the house. A few minutes later, he returned carrying a rifle. He walked towards the boar and stopped about five feet short of him. He raised the rifle and aimed, waiting for the boar to look his direction.

The boar ignored the boy's father. He gazed back towards the shade of the barn where he had been resting. He tried to get to his feet, but his hind quarters remained inert. When he finally turned to face the rifle, everything was simultaneous. The boar's head jerked backwards and to the side just as the butt of the rifle nudged the man's shoulder. The whipcrack sound echoed in the boy's ears, and for a fraction of a second, the boar was motionless. Then a wave of rigidity spread throughout the animal's body, starting in the neck and gradually working its way back along the spine. The hind legs which had been relaxed and motionless became stiff and extended, like those of a stuffed animal. Suddenly, the boar's shoulders began to quiver. The spastic contractions spread to include one leg, and then both. The entire body was shaking and would occasionally jump like a gigantic carp in the mud of a dried-up pond.

The boar's jaw was locked open and the boy stared at the pink ridges on the roof of the animal's mouth. The yellow
tusks were huge and vicious as the body jerked with each convulsion. The tiny black eyes were frozen open and it seemed to the boy that they were staring right at him. There was very little blood. Just a small trickle from the mouth and one ear. And then a few crimson bubbles came oozing out from the snout.

The spasms continued for several minutes. Eventually, the jerks became less frequent. The animal was barely quivering as the father fastened a chain on one of the hind legs. The boy watched in silence as his father fastened the other end of the chain to a tractor and dragged the corpse out of the drive and down the lane. The boar's body left a smooth trail in the dust as it followed the tractor down the road. The boy stood there motionless, with his hands at his sides and his mouth slightly ajar.

The dog was chewing on a piece of dried up hide. The boy jumped down from the log and rolled the skull over with the end of his rifle. Ants came crawling out from the various cracks in the bone. The boy studied the tiny hole in between the sockets where the small black eyes used to be. He raised his rifle and aimed at the tiny hole. "Puckoo" he whispered under his breath. His small body was shaking, and he was unable to control it. In a sudden rage, he kicked the skull with the toe of his boot. The skull rolled down to the bottom of the ditch and stopped in a small stream of water.

"Don't play with that. It's nasty."

The boy didn't realize that his father had followed him into the woods, and he was startled when he heard his voice. The boy turned and looked at his father for a moment. Then he stared at the greasy spot on the ground where the boar had been lying. He looked at the skull resting at the bottom of the ditch and he remembered what the boar had been like before its death. The boy felt an emptiness in the pit of his stomach as he held his toy rifle tightly in his small, clenched fist. He suddenly realized how much colder it was in October than in August, and he felt the hollowness deep down inside that comes with the seeds of understanding.