Polecats

Tom Caulfield*
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Abstract

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SAMMY, come here.” Ralph said. He was thirteen, Sammy seven. Sammy moved up beside his brother and bumped him on account of the rough footing, but it was on purpose. The swat didn’t come and Sammy wondered.

“See that big stump there on the left, Sammy?”
“There?”
“No, that’s your right, stupid. Your left, this hand.”
“That one?”
“Yes, I got a number 2 trap set in a hole on the side away from us if you want you can go see what’s in it before I do.”
“Gee, okay!”
Watching Sammy move towards the stump Ralph decided a loon could make better time in a more graceful manner than his brother could.
“What do you see?”
“Nothing yet.”
“Get closer, stupid, only don’t fall in, you might spring the trap . . . well?”
“I see something, Ralph!”
“What?”
“It’s got a pointed nose and beady eyes and little ears. It’s head is black and it’s got a stripe . . . Aihh! It’s a skunk, Ralph!” Sammy’s stubby legs carried him twenty yards straight away from his brother before they tangled up and dropped him. Looking behind him he scrambled up and faced his brother over the stump.
“Damn you, Ralph!”
"I'm going to tell mother."
"I don't care, you knew I couldn't smell it or I wouldn't of gone near that stump." Sammy said. His nose had been stopped since yesterday because of dust and milkweed.
"I know you wouldn't of 'cause you're such a big baby." Ralph turned and started towards the road.
"Where you goin', Ralph?"
"Back and ask Uncle Ed what to do, stupid." Ralph kept going slowly saying this over his shoulder.
"Wait for me!"
"Hurry up."
"But what if the skunk gets me?"
"You'll stink."
"Ralph, wait up."
"I ain't gonna, I gotta find out how Uncle Ed thinks I ought to get that skunk out of the trap."

Ed MacIntyre was sitting on the low, concrete porch at the front of his house when Ralph walked around the corner of the house with Sammy following.
"Uncle Ed?"
"Yes."
"Uncle Ed, how do you get a skunk out of a trap?"
"Is it alive?"
"Yes."
"How do you know?"
"'Cause," Sammy said, "I saw what it looked like and I saw it move." His hay fever was obvious as he spoke. Ed looked hard at both boys for the first time.
"How did you come to be looking so close at a live, trapped skunk?" Ed said to Sammy.
"'Cause Ralph said I could."
"Is that right, Ralph?" Ed said.
"Yes, but I thought it would be dead. How do I get him out of the trap so he won't squirt me?"
"Well, you could let him starve." Ed looked at Ralph while he said this.
"But that would take a long time. Skunks are tough," Ralph replied in a way that chilled his uncle.
"Can you see his head?" Ed asked.
"Sure, Sammy saw him head first."
"Then, get a stick and knock him out. You can release him while he's out cold and he can't squirt you."

"A long stick?" Ralph asked.

"No, a short stout one. You can't hit good enough with a long one." Ralph whirled and was off as soon as he heard this. Uncle Ed always told him what to do about trapping.

Sammy stayed and looked at his uncle. Sometimes he wasn't sure but what Uncle Ed knew more than his own Dad. Uncle Ed winked and smiled at him. Sammy smiled back; he didn't know why except that he always smiled back at his Uncle Ed.

"Ralph, Uncle Ed said you aren't supposed to take his splitting axe away from the chopping block," Sammy said as he caught up with his brother as the latter was leaving the wood pile in the general direction of the stump.

"He won't know if you don't tell him, stupid. And if you do I'll tell Mom you swore at me."

"What are you going to do with it?"

"I'm going to cut me a stick from a birch sapling so I can hit that skunk real hard without breaking it." Ralph swung the axe at a young pine tree. "Like that. See? If the axe handle wasn't strong it would have broke."

Sammy watched his brother cut his stick and followed him to the stump where the skunk was caught in the trap. He stayed back when Ralph started for the hole after making a half-dozen practice swings on some young, green ferns.

"How many times you going to hit him, Ralph?"

"I'm going to knock him out right off. Then I'm going to kill him," Ralph replied.

Sammy suddenly felt sorry for the skunk. He had looked a little like the black kitten at home. But this one was caught in a hole and his brother was about to beat its head in.

Sammy leaned forward to see. His brother was on his knees, before the hole preparing to swing the stick with both hands. Wump. It was a wood on wood sound. Ralph struck again and Sammy instinctively recognized the sound of flesh yielding and being crushed by a harder object. Ralph raised himself up to strike again. But that rending sound had penetrated Sammy too deeply. He screamed. Ralph turned, startled by the scream.
The pain-crazed skunk turned, too, one hundred-eighty degrees, and defended himself as nature had ordained. Ralph fell backwards with his legs beneath him as though the brown liquid had struck him down. The fetid fluid arched from the hole to Ralph's face not unlike a steady stream of miniature mortar shells. Sammy screamed again. Ralph rolled over and on his knees cried, "It got me, it got me... Mother, Mother!" Then he bolted blindly towards home. Sammy was still whimpering. He'd cried hard at first, where Ralph had knocked him down as he ran for home. Sammy didn't know why he had cried so hard. He was glad he was almost finished when he saw Uncle Ed coming. Ed walked over to the hole and drew a high-powered pistol. Swiftly, gently he relieved the animal's suffering. Sammy came to stand by his uncle. He saw the tension go from the little body and relaxed the hold he had taken on his uncle's free hand.

— Tom Caulfield, Sci.'55

CAPITAL PUNSHMENT 1955

Once, in a cold stony light
With people filling the courtyard
To witness the hand of right,
We saw a man writhe and twist
and then choke at the end of a rope.

It was longer ago than that
Men were dragged upon the block
While ladies knitting and purling sat,
Were held by the hair in place until —
blade met wood with a knock.

But now behind a plate of glass,
Perhaps with noses pressed
Like children in a candy store window,
We watch a balded woman strapped
Gently, for we're years from the rack;
A jerk, and then her fingernails are black.

— Richard Day, Sci. '55