Thanks

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I WALKED out to the orchard and stopped beneath the apple tree, looking up into the greening branches. A dry limb crashed down toward me and I jumped out of its way as it landed, scattering dead twigs into the tall grass.

"'Bout got ya there, young fella. Sorry I missed." The voice crackled from somewhere in the moving greenry overhead.

"Albert! How are you? Gee, I didn't know you were home." No one ever really knew when Albert would come home. For as long as I could remember he had provided everyone in the family with a guessing game each spring, each of us trying to pick the day he'd call from the station to come pick him up. "How were things in Illinois?"

"Stayed a lot warmer'n if I'd 'a' been here in Ioway," the voice from the branches replied. I hadn't seen him since he boarded the train last October and headed back for Galena, "where the wind can't get to ya in the valleys," he would say. Every autumn when the weather cooled he decided it was time to go back. And each spring, after the grass had come to life and the apple trees were greened out, he'd return to spend the summer on Grandma's farm. His first job, invariably, was to prune the apple trees.

Another branch crashed down. "Look out there, young fella. It'll git ya yet." Sometimes I wondered if he knew my name. It had always been "young fella," it seemed. Anything else now would have been a disappointment. The branches stirred and a boot appeared, and another, followed by two thin legs.

"Wait, I'll get the ladder under you," I offered.

"Don't need it." Out of the leaves appeared a small frame, smaller than I had remembered, and older. Bracing himself in the crotch of two limbs, he turned and looked

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down, two days’ growth showing on his leathery face. “Stand back, young fella.” He wrapped his arms around the trunk and swung to the ground, the small pruning saw swinging from a cord around his wrinkled neck. “Damn trees,” he cursed. “Can’t never get ahead of them dead limbs.” He spat a brown stream from his toothless mouth.

I smiled. “You’d probably stay in Galena if it weren’t for the apple trees.”

“Dang right. Somebody’s gotta clean ’em up, though.” I knew better. It was more than the trees that brought him back.

He took off his dirty felt hat and wiped his brow with a patched shirt sleeve. “Ya know, this weather makes me think o’ when the Mississippi’d back up and we’d take our pitchforks into the backwater where the cats’d be, and we’d. . . .”

Suddenly school disappeared, and debts, and the draft . . . and time. I knew the story of catfish in the backwaters. Every spring and summer for, I guess, all my life I had lied it as he told me about the fish, and the raw pork tied to a hook to catch foxes in their dens, and the skunk hunts with hickory poles, and the hounds and 'coons—things other boys read about in books in libraries. The tales he told were familiar, but each time they were new.

We stopped at the back porch. “You wait here just a minute, young fella. I’ll be right back.” He disappeared behind the screen door and came back out carrying a crumpled paper sack. “Here. Ya might have some use for these.” I took the sack. It was tradition.

“Thanks.” I reached in and pulled out a handful of yellow cloth bags marked “King’s Pleasure.” Every spring when he came back to Grandma’s he would give them to me, his winter’s collection of empty tobacco pouches. It had started a long time ago. I couldn’t remember when. I never knew why. “Thanks, Albert.”

I put my hand on his shoulder and we sat down together on the stone steps of the big house.