

"All days are good for being born, all days are good for dying." — John XXIII

The sun was coming up over the land and it was morning. It had rained the night before, a real thunderstorm, the kind that only come once or twice a year and it had left the sky fresh and clean as if the entire morning had risen out of the clear, fast river.

The wind was blowing gently from the west and carrying a fine mist it collected off the leaves. On the ground around the farmhouse were innumerable puddles and in front of the large house was a tree lightning had struck, leaving the trunk half split, the water-soaked tan wood showing. Beyond the tree a dirt road ran and it was dark and muddy. Across the road were the woods and birds were chirping from the trees. A look around the fields revealed a house here and there but mostly just the undulating land and the spots of woods which seemed to gather at the horizon. The sky had a washed effect; the few clouds were only silver streaks across the pale not quite blue sky.

Thirty yards to the rear and east of the farmhouse was the barn. The man had come out of the barn carrying a burlap bag and the boy, who had been standing in front of the house, went after him as the man crossed the road. The man was lean and fifty hard years old. He had fathered the boy when he was forty-five.

The boy ran up from behind his father and fell in step. The father glanced down at his son and was silent. The boy had to walk fast to stay even with his father.

They had crossed the road and were approaching the edge of the woods. They could hear more birds singing now. The sun-haired boy felt the wind come and blow a cold mist on his face. The morning was chilly; the boy was glad that they were walking quickly. He noticed that the bulges at the bottom of the bag were moving.

"What's in that bag, Paw?"

His father was looking straight ahead and did not turn his head to answer. Still, the boy was staring up at his father. He was alone on the farm and he considered his father a friend. They walked a few steps before his father answered.

"Sheets' kittens," he said.

The boy stared down at the ground in thought and in the corner of his eye he could see the black, mudcaked boots of his father moving, sinking into the wet grass. He thought about his father's answer. Sheets, the barn cat, had given birth to four kittens two days before. He had been in the barn the day before playing with the kittens. He did not understand his father's reply.

They reached the edge of the woods. It looked very dark and cave-cool within. His father had slowed down his walk.

"What are they in there for?"

"What?"

"The kittens. What you got 'em in that bag for?"

His father turned his head down toward him and brought his eyebrows together suspiciously.

"Haf to git rid of 'em. Don't need no more kittens."

They were walking in the woods now and the boy forgot the kittens when he heard a rustle on the ground and watched a small squirrel dash up a tree. His eyes followed the squirrel up the trunk and onto a limb where the animal stared back at him. The boy picked up a small stone and cocked his arm but the squirrel only stared back. He held his arm cocked and looked to see if his father was watching. His father was ten yards ahead, walking steadily, holding the burlap bag. The boy looked back at the squirrel which was still staring at him. He dropped the stone on the ground feeling half-ashamed even though his father had not seen the weakness in him. The boy ran to catch up with the man.

He fell into step again, having to take two quick steps to stay even with the one long step of his father. He heard his father's boot come down on a stick and crack it loud in the woods. He could hardly see his father's features in the shade and he thought again of the bag.

"How cum we can't keep 'em?"

The man's face did not turn in the woods but his voice was clear: "Thought you had gone off." That was all he said. The boy knew better, even at five, than to push his father beyond the answer he chose to give. The father was strong and mysterious to him.

They were yet in the woods, walking silently, but the boy could see the clearing up ahead, the place where the woods ended for an interval of sun before they began again. It was familiar but always new to him. They went on but they stopped when the man had a coughing fit and his face turned red and the boy thought he would never stop but he finally did.

"It's ok," the man said and they walked on.

They came out of the woods and the air felt a little warmer to the boy but he could still feel the goose pimples on his arms. His father's arms were large and tan and dark-haired and without any goose pimples. He thought of this and also of how his father was immune to the mosquitoes and he felt somehow that this was a sign that his father was brave. He had asked his father once why the skeeters could not mark him and his father had said: "Indian blood." He knew it was true, his mother had vouched for the man; his father had Indian blood. He loved the father more for it. And now as they walked in the clearing he thought that this too was special: the man was immune to the cold. The man with the black, worn boots was indifferent to the cold that sent a shiver down the boy's spine.

They walked through the tall, wet grass of the clearing and the sun was not high or warm in the sky. The boy could feel the pull of the grass which resisted him like water; and he could feel the wet soaking through his socks, a quite unpleasant feeling, and he could see the water darkening his blue pantlegs. He was walking beside his father and listening to the swish of their walk. Gnats were thick in the air and one happened into the boy's mouth. He stopped and spit.

His father stopped beside him and seeing the long, thin string of saliva hesitating on the boy's lips he raised his finger to the boy's mouth and flicked it clean. The boy spit out again, this time freeing the insect.

"Was a gnat," he said smiling up to his father.

His father only chuckled and ran a rough hand over the boy's head. The boy smiled again.

They started walking again, towards the other woods, and he could see that the man's face was grim. The face was lean-cheeked, strong, speckled with black bits of beard. The grass they were walking through was not so high now. They approached the beginning of the second woods. Out of the brush a small rabbit sprinted into the open.

"Look, Billy, rabbit." His father said it softly, with great reverence.

The boy had been staring at the ground, thinking of the kittens in the burlap bag, but he looked up and saw the tail end of a small brown rabbit skip back into the woods. He looked to his father and caught him smiling, staring where the rabbit had disappeared. His father looked back towards the woods.

They were at the woods and his father led the way in. The boy walked behind his father.

"Paw, couldn't we jus' leave the kittens out here like the rabbits?"

He only saw the back of the man and heard his voice which sounded different, almost as an echo.

"No, they'd starve, Billy. You wouldn't want them to starve would you?"

The boy considered the lumps at the bottom of the bag and was searching for an answer but when he looked up his father had gained a few steps and he knew the man was not waiting for an answer.

They walked through the woods which were similar in every respect to the other woods only when the boy looked up he could see the sky. The boy glanced straight up and nearly tripped on a fat, hard root. He looked ahead and his father was nearly down to the bank of the river. He could see the ground sloping down to the brown river that ran before the woods, and on the other side more woods. The trees across the river did not look so sparse.



When he came down to the bank his father was already squatting on the ground near the water. He was untying the bag. A rock was on the ground beside him. The boy watched the river run smooth and quick, carrying black twigs in the current. He was standing over his father and he saw a fairly large fish jump out of the water for a moment and then return.

"Fish jumped," the boy was pointing.

His father looked up. "What's that?"

"Fish jumped." The boy paused for a moment. "I betcha it was a catfish." He said it only because he knew his father liked catfish and at the moment he could think of no other kind of fish. He wished that he could name all the fish like his father.

"Catfish don't jump," his father said calmly as he reached into the bag. "Probably a smallmouth bass."

"Oh," the boy was disappointed.

His father brought a kitten out of the bag. It was a small ball of moving fur in the man's hand. He held it out to the boy.

"Here, hold this for awhile." The boy took the kitten and it was much bigger in his hands. He looked down at the small black and white kitten and his thoughts were deep for a boy.

The man took the three other kittens out and set them on the ground. They looked down at the moist sand for a few seconds and then began to move very slowly, one paw at a time, as if they expected the ground to turn to something less than ground. The boy watched the man place the large rock in the bottom of the bag. The man turned around and gathered up the three kittens, holding one in each hand and sandwiching the other between. He put them in the bag.

He held out his hand for the other kitten, staring at the boy who burned with shame for the emotion he could not hide. But he handed the man the kitten and the man's face was calm and sure. He ignored the boy's shame which to the boy was both a sorrowful and a forgiving act. He placed the last kitten in the bag and then knotted the cord in strong, decisive movements.

The man rose from the ground and now he was tall and invulnerable again. His face was the face of an Indian as he walked to the water's edge to where a fallen tree stretched into the river. He walked out on the tree to where the water nearly rose to his feet. The boy watched him lay the bag in the water and his heart was beating fast but the current pulled the bag away and down. The man turned around on the log, quite deftly, walked along it a few steps and then jumped onto the bank. The boy watched the boots approach him.

"C'mon Billy." He laid his hand on the boy's shoulder.

They walked back through the woods and by now the sun was higher in the sky and beads of light were falling on the floor of the woods. In the middle of the woods they heard the woodpecker and the father showed the boy where the woodpecker was.

They went on and the boy gathered his courage and asked the man if the kittens knew any pain and the man said no, that drowning was an easy way. And the father went on to say that everything in life had to be born and had to die and that there was nothing ugly or shameful about either one.

When they came to the clearing it was warm and the boy asked his father where the dead go and the man considered for awhile and answered that they go to Jesus.

"All of the dead?"

"No, just the good dead," he answered.

They walked through the last woods where the sun was breaking through in long rays, and the birds were singing and chirping in the trees that were taller than his father, and the boy saw a squirrel on a branch. They walked out of the trees and the boy saw the farmhouse in the distance and the split trunk before the house and the tall uncut grass and large black birds flying in the sky.

And the boy remembered that morning for a long time because later that summer his father took sick with a fever and in the morning they found he had died.

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