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*DIRGE FOR BOYS*

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In middle summer the trees were emerald fire. Light turned each new leaf to brilliant moss-green paper lanterns in the ancient oak, maple, and elm—survivors of disease years. Trees glowed as their branches swayed. The sun came early and burned away thin grasses in the fields.

Cars came at separate times to the farm house, turning off the dusty side road, slow-rolling up the long lane. The first car arrived in the morning. A woman got out and unloaded a little boy and his bags. After a few words of greeting with grandparents the woman drove away. The second car came in the afternoon. A man got out and led a small boy to the trunk; he opened it and pulled out a small kit bag which he handed over to the child. The car soon disappeared over the hill which marked the one bank of the little valley.

The two cousins were nearly identical. It was difficult to tell who was older. Later, the clearest mark of distinction would become a scar cut through the eyebrow of the younger one. The stitches remained—for the duration of the holiday—laced through the white skin above the eye across the shaved eyebrow and on up the forehead. The older boy had been compelled, on the first day of the visit, to throw a thin, sharp stone at the younger one. But the boys remained close.

They walked for hours, exploring the large 150-acre farm.

Their grandparents were aged and reflective folk who wiled away their afternoons watering the country garden, engaging in long bouts of silence.

The boys were excited. Rummaging through the tin shed one evening they discovered an air rifle. Their grandfather showed them how to clean it. A pile of coins was laid on the counter of the country store in exchange for a cardboard tube of pellets, perfectly round copper balls.

The children woke early the next morning to the sound of their grandfather singing in the kitchen. They dressed and went downstairs. Each boy swallowed cereal without chewing and were soon outside.

They went to the shed.

The gun was pump-action. This thrilled the boys because it was like the shot-guns they had seen in movies. Each took a turn at the thing: loading a single pellet into the chamber, pumping the arm along the underside of the barrel, and pointing it at the shed. The pellets made hollow thuds against the tin wall and left little indentations.

Tiring of this, the boys ran down the path to the dilapidated barn.

The building had collapsed upon itself in a storm. The damage had been irreparable. The boys set pop bottles up along the limestone ledge of the

foundation and fired shot after shot until the bottles were shattered and in pieces.

The younger boy found two jars in the tall grass; when these were broken by the pellets the boys searched deeper in the grasses and uncovered old beer bottles. These were made from darker glass and had grown mired in the grasses close to the soil. The older boy gave the rifle over after the targets were set.

"I got a idea," he said. "If ya hit a bottle ya get ta keep shooting. But if you miss, yer turn's over."

"I dunno," said the younger boy.

"Come on. It'll be a contest for best shooter in the world."

This notion stirred something in the younger boy, and he agreed. He was excited. Holding the gun was difficult. He tried lining up the v-notch with the little metal point at the end of the barrel; then pointing toward the bottle. He missed.

The older boy took the gun. He loaded a pellet into the chamber. He froze as he aimed the gun. And then, *Pomf!* as the pellet flew through the air in a straight line and cracked the beer bottle.

"My turn," said the younger boy.

"Nope. I hit the target, so I get to keep shootin'."

"But you didn't bust it," said the younger boy.

"I don't hafta bust it, just hit it, stupid."

"Oh."

The older boy fired again. A large chunk fell out of the bottle neck. He grew excited and spoke in a strange voice to himself as though he were radio operator: "Captain Smith, we need you to take that enemy agent out," and he answered the imaginary command, saying, "10-4, General. Leave everything to me."

This aroused the younger boy's imagination for a time, but as he watched the older boy continue to fire and the bottle crumble away, he became disinterested and sat on a rock.

"When's it gonna be my turn?" he asked.

"When I miss the target," said the older boy, vigorously pumping the rifle.

The younger boy sighed and stood up. He walked off in the direction of the farmhouse.

The older boy watched him go. He raised the rifle and pointed it at the younger boy's back. He turned and fired at the last bottle. It broke and fell into the grass.

He looked along the empty ledge, turned, and called out to the younger boy. "Hey! Come on! We'll go shoot somethin' else."

"What? What'll we shoot?"

"Umm." He looked around. Tall, brown grass swayed in a blast of hot wind. The farm spread before him, the high fields blending into lower plains

beyond a cow fence. A sparrow darted out of the wrecked barn. It flew in wild, soaring bounds, twisting in the air in impossible ways.

“We’ll shoot birds.”

“Takin’ turns?” asked the younger boy.

“Yeah. Okay.”

The younger boy skipped through the grass. “Where should we go bird huntin’?”

Looking up into the sky, the older boy realised the air above them was filled with sparrows looping and soaring and skimming the tall grasses. It was as if he had never seen sparrows before. One flew straight up over his head and disappeared through a crack in the crumbled wall of the wrecked barn. Another bird burst out through the same opening.

“Come on!” he cried in his radio voice and ran off.

“10-4,” answered the other boy, in his own particular radio voice.

Inside the barn dusty beams of sunlight broke through the wall, lighting everything a bleached grey. The far wall was tumbled down and the roof had sunken in on top of it. It was a jumble of splintered wood and shattered nails.

The older boy noticed another sparrow fly through the hole in the wall and drift up to rest on an angled beam which hung precariously above.

In notches and gaps along the beam were nests of sparrows and hatchlings. On top of the beam were more nests.

The older boy spoke in his radio voice, his hand cupped over his mouth for resonance. “Captain Smith—you and Robertson get into position. The enemy bat planes are your targets.”

“10-4!” crackled the younger boy, his hand cupped over his mouth. But as he watched the older boy take aim at one of the perching sparrows, his hand lowered slowly to his side.

The older boy aimed carefully; the rifle shook uncontrollably in his hands. Instead of squeezing the trigger gently, he pulled at it recklessly. A pellet embedded itself in the porous beam. A startled sparrow leapt into the air from its nest, circling in the dusty shadows and half light of the barn.

“Did ya hit it?” asked the younger boy, his voice hushed.

The older boy did not answer right away. He lowered the rifle and stood motionless, watching the flying bird. Something overcame him. It took a moment for the thing to take shape inside of him, working its thrill over his mind. The idea moved down his arms into his hands and burned there, sweating. It rose out of his stomach and flowed into his chest, circling above him. He could feel his heart beat coldly, tight against his ribs.

“Yer shot,” he mumbled, and passed the rifle.

The younger boy aimed at a hatchling. It was five feet above him. The pellet struck the head protruding out of the nest. The head sank out of sight.

“Didja see that?” shouted the younger boy. He stomped through the old hay on the barn floor in a burst of joy, aiming the rifle at imaginary targets.

He made gunfire sounds with his mouth, Pchow! Pchow!, and radio noises with his cupped hand, “Tffff—Good work, Major Roberts. Any more enemy agents in sight?”—and, in response to his imagined commander, “Yes, Sir!” He knelt down to aim but the older boy pushed him and wrenched the rifle from his hands.

“It’s my turn,” he said, and took slow aim at a bird perched on the beam. The gun made a popping sound and at the same moment the bird fell to the dirt floor below. It fluttered on the ground, its head bent at an odd angle.

“What are you gonna do now?” asked the younger boy.

“I dunno,” said the other, and the two watched the bird.

“Maybe we kin fix it.”

“Looks like its neck’s broke.” The sparrow slowed its frantic movements and lay breathing, moving one wing then the other. “Can’t fix a broke neck.”

“Step on it! Step on the thing,” said the younger boy, though he made no motion toward the bird.

The older boy, too, remained where he was. He handed the rifle over. “Here, shoot it in the head. Put it outta misery.”

The younger boy cocked the air rifle and pressed the barrel against one of the bird’s eyes. When the gun fired the bird shook and then lay still. The small black feathers on the bird’s head were parted by the blast and the pellet had torn its way into the skull. The bird’s body resembled a lump of cloth.

The boys stared down at it for a few moments. Their faces were empty. Many things fought for feeling inside them.

Blood collected on the bird’s small, pointed beak.

“Let’s go outside,” said the older boy. He took the rifle from the loose hands of the younger boy. They walked out into sunlight.

A flatness remained inside them.

“Ohh ...” the younger boy held his stomach as though he might be ill.

The older boy did not look at him. His eyes traced down the long cattle fence and over the lower fields. “Let’s keep a secret over this,” he said. “No-one knows. Let’s keep a secret over it.”

The younger boy nodded.

Their eyes drifted to the horizon and into the sky. The hot light of day spread across their faces. Clouds rolled in the blue above them.

Throughout the night, rain fell onto the grass fields. It coated the black leaves of trees. When the rain first moved down the slope of the valley the noise was a gentle tapping. It rose to a rhythmic drumming as it moved across the gravel side-road at dusk. Everywhere at once the summer heat dropped away. Soon the rain became a hissing roar.

The boys slept heavily, but the rain permeated their dreams with a background that was indelicate and shocking. Though each of them slept on and did not awaken, both began to roll and turn in the large beds of the guest room.

The older boy was having a nightmare. He was stuffed in a basket and carried on the blue back of an enormous bird-person. The creature hobbled as it walked, moving through a damp and endless hollow, struggling along on crutches. The creature wore a short white shroud. The boy could not see its face, but occasionally, as the creature struggled, he caught a glimpse of a long yellow beak. The boy sensed this bird-person was weary from carrying him. He could hear its exhausted breathing. There was something in the basket with him. It terrified him. It was there and yet not there, cold, half-formed, next to his head. But the boy could not move his head, as though his neck were broken. The dark figure loomed fully into shape beside him. It placed a cold metal finger on his forehead. At that moment the bird-person carrying the basket stumbled, staggering in the dimness. Then it fell. The boy was falling, falling.

Their grandfather was not singing in the kitchen. The two boys got up from the table, put their bowls in the sink, and walked out to the shed. The younger boy took the air rifle down from its nail. The older boy filled his pockets with pellets. They wandered the path to the ruined barn but passed it by, making for the lower fields.

The sun lit the trees in the early morning. The leaves, watered throughout the night and filling slowly with moisture, had grown darker.

Grass scratched at their bare legs as they walked. An early morning cicada hummed its song into the air. The sound of its thick metallic buzz startled them.

They moved through the low fields and came to a semi-circle of trees. The ground sank into a large declivity – a watering pond once used for cattle. The pool had swollen above its banks from the rain. Pinched under the surface were lily pads, water flowers, and weeds.

The boys looked into the pool. Water striders skimmed the surface in short bursts, trailing small wakes. A light wind touched the water's face and rippled.

The younger boy knelt and pulled a small stone from the ground. He let it drop into the water. Frightened by the splash, frogs leapt from hiding into the pond, seeking the safety of the depths.

The boys looked at one another. The older boy lay on his belly at the edge of the sloping embankment. He waited. The younger boy got down beside him.

They scanned the water's surface.

Soon the younger boy nudged his cousin and pointed to the shallows at the far edge of the pond. The older boy aimed the gun at a small bump rising cautiously above the surface. Two small eyes protruded from the water.

The older boy squeezed the trigger. A splash upset the still surface. There was a spasm in the water and then the frog's body surfaced, inverted and rigid. The boys passed the rifle silently between them. They bore down on surfaced frogs, aiming and killing. Occasionally, they moved to the water's edge, holding the barrel up to the heads of frogs they'd failed to kill outright.

This act did not trouble them. Eventually, instead of killing off the wounded, helpless frogs, the boys carefully went about the work of blinding them. The younger boy had discovered this technique. He aimed for the head of a large frog but when the pellet struck, it embedded in its eye socket. The frog writhed in the shallows but did not die. The boy seized it by the leg and drew it up onto the steep bank. He pumped the rifle and held the barrel against the frog's other eye. The frog groped madly in the loose sand of the bank, becoming coated in the grit, its limbs moving frantically. Blood flowed from its wounds. The small mouth opened and closed mechanically, filling with sand.

The younger boy's mouth unconsciously mimicked this movement. He stood and wiped his hands on his shorts. Both boys watched excitedly until the frog stopped moving. Its abdomen rose and fell once more and then it was still.

The older boy took the rifle and circled to the other side of the pond. A small frog floated in the deep water. He struck with his first shot and broke the creature's spine. A portion of bone protruded from the wound. The frog's arms beat helplessly in the water. Its legs did not move.

The older boy searched eagerly under the trees. He returned with a stick and used it to reach out over the depths and draw the slowly clawing frog to the shore. Once this was done he set the stick aside. He dragged the frog out of the shallows by one of its back legs and laid it on the dry sand. He looked from rifle to frog and, unsatisfied, once more went up into the trees. Soon he returned with some small twigs. Kneeling, he erected a crude scaffold, against which he leaned the dying frog. Then he moved back, pumping the rifle. He spoke in the voice of the radio.

"The enemy agent is to be executed at once. Captain Smith, proceed with orders."

The frog slumped a little. Then the boy answered in his own voice, saluting, his eyes staring straight and hard out over the lower fields. "Yes, Sir."

The younger boy, who had been watching from the far shore, followed around and stood next to the older boy.

"Can I have a shot?"

"No."

"Aw, come on."

"Get your own enemy frog. Now stand back, I bin ordered to execute."

The younger boy persisted. "Please?"

"No!" repeated the older boy as he took aim, firing into the belly of the injured frog. The force of the pellet knocked the frog over, toppling the scaffold of sticks. A long gash was torn across the frog's white belly. A red foam emerged from the wound. The small throat moved up and down.

"Come on, lemme try!" cried the younger boy. He lunged for the rifle. The older boy kicked him in the stomach. The blow sent the younger boy to his knees on the water's edge.

The older boy pointed the rifle at him. He pulled it up and cocked it. He moved closer.

The younger boy's eyes clenched shut as the barrel was pointed at his chest, then lifted and pressed against his face. He opened his eyes, feeling the barrel on his forehead. It was held tight against his skin and then dragged along the scar, catching on the stitches.

The older boy moved away, turning his attention back to the frog. He pointed the barrel. "This is you," he said over his shoulder at his cousin.

The day crept slowly into afternoon. The boys crouched silently, waiting, and then with quick excited movements, bursts of air and water, they killed the wounded frogs.

But then a moment came when they were merely waiting for frogs. The pond was empty. Carcasses of dead frogs littered the waterside. The boys stared dumbly.

Soon the older boy waved the gun. "Come on," he said, and they moved off toward the upper fields and the farmhouse.

When August came the boys went home in their separate cars. The pond dried away to a light brown dust, devoid of vegetation. Only a hint of moisture could be seen, in the middle, where the deepest of waters had been.