

ONE BOY'S LIFE

I wasn't raised to be a killer.

My arrows rattled in their quiver, a sawed -off Quaker Oats box with a string looped through two small holes. I stepped out onto the morning lawn, the dewdrops shining like shards of glass. Halfway down the hill of our yard, a robin's head jerked side to side, forward and back, as it yanked a desperate worm out of the ground. In a blink, the bird swallowed it's prey. I will avenge that worm, I thought. That's what I'll do. One black Keds tennis shoe after another, I edged forward.

To my front, the robin snapped erect, his accusing eyes gazing sideways at me. With my left arm, I extended my bow; with my right, I reached back into the quiver and pulled out my best arrow. Eyes trained on the bird, I notched the arrow in place. I drew back the bowstring. Breathe in, breathe out, relax, I thought, as the bird and I locked on each other, statues alone on the silent block. Avenge. Do what you have to do, all of them did it, my boy heroes in book after book, the men and boys who once roamed the deep, green forests of American myth. I released the arrow and tracked its flight as it scuttled across the ground, startling the bird into flight. My knees shook with relief, my pulse slackened, horrid images of a dying bird vanished. I retrieved my errant arrow and happily returned it to the quiver. At the top of our block, the first car of the morning rolled down the quiet street, announcing a new, welcome day.

I was never again to pursue the wild robin. Like many young boys, I was influenced by my father's example. My dad sometimes hunted ducks or pheasants, but he never encouraged my brother or me to shoot guns and often said he could not imagine killing something as beautiful as a deer.

Deprived of trophy antlers, or even a robin's beak, my brother and I chased after other rituals of youthful identity, like rubber band gun duels, cork rifle assaults on plastic soldiers and the percussive thrill of cap guns. In our pre-video game era, we watched endless television shows where good guys shot the gun out of the hands of bad guys with never a drop of blood shed. Antiseptic conflict that allowed young men to feel like warriors, but not turn into outlaws, strong-arm grifters or bank robbers. We would be solid, strong and safe within the bounds of the acceptable life.

So much of this was my lucky gift: the quiet, comfortable street we lived on, the arrow of good fortune (it could have left the robin gasping for air and the young me scarred in some hidden fashion), a father who hunted, but harbored no lust for the kill. The neighbors were pleasant, the schools close-by and worthy. None of this explains what happened the sixth summer of my life. I suppose it was a typical day on our elm-sheltered block. My friend David, who lived up street, and I had gotten together and whiled away the morning playing the usual games—imaginary wars, some tossing of a football. I must have gone home just before noon for lunch, the details of the morning are hazy to this day. As I sat down to eat, the front doorbell rang. My mom left to see who was there; I heard her call out to me, her voice edged and taut. At the door, I saw David, his forehead swathed in gauze and bandages, and his mother, one arm wrapped around David, the other pointing—no, shaking-- at me.

“He hit him with a rake,” she said. “Look at him. It could have been his eye. It was the back side of the rake, thank god, or it could have blinded him. I thought your son was a nice boy. He always seemed like a nice boy. Look at this. Why would he do this?”

There seemed to be no answer to this question. My mother, turned ashen, apologized, said it would never happen again and vowed to punish me. David's mother turned, her arm still draped over his shoulder, and left. That night, my father demanded to know why I had done what I had done. I stammered:

“I wanted to see him bleed.”

Those words struck my father dumb. But I had nothing else to say. No pleading from my mother, no demands from my father, no amount of time or anguish could extract any other explanation. I had nothing else I could offer, no reason to submit, no witness to give. I didn't know why I had done it, couldn't summon what words or gestures had driven me to attack my friend. In the days that followed, my parents eyed me closely, but the subject was soon dropped. Over the years, they would sometimes mention the "rake thing", always with a nervous laugh and a forced, rueful smile and never with anyone from outside the family present. To this day, a lifetime later, the question that shadows me is this: where did that boy come from on that summer morning? Who was that boy? Do I know him? And will he ever return?

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