

Taking it in the Shorts

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Digging Holes

It was shaping up to be another hot summer day in southwest Louisiana. At 8 o'clock in the morning, it was already 70 degrees Fahrenheit. There wasn't a single cloud in the sky to help slow the sun's burning rays. Jerry's father was speaking to Jerry and his three older brothers out on the back lawn. Jerry had no real idea what his father was saying as he was only picking up bits and pieces. He was eight years old at the time and as is typical for one that age he wasn't paying much mind. At some point, his father said something about brush and trees. At some point later Jerry heard the phrase, "it better be done by the time I get home, or else!" It was the "or else" that caught his attention, and it was only then that he decided to actually tune in. As was often the case, Jerry was too late. The important matters had already been discussed. With the "or else" bouncing around the back of his head, Jerry became a little worried. A feeling was creeping over him that this was going to be no ordinary day.

When the conversation ended their father got in the car and drove off, he was on his way to work. The old Colony Park station wagon left the driveway and headed up the dirt road,

leaving a plume of brown dust in its wake. It was then that Wayne, Dave, and Jerry received instructions from Billy. The family lived on a thirteen-acre farm and a good part of the land was still pretty raw. The instructions were to remove dead trees and brush. They were to make way for grazing pasture for the family's livestock. They owned a couple of Jersey cows. Jerry was not happy. Clearing trees and brush sounded to him a lot like work and at his age, he didn't like work. It was summer, and summer was the time to play. Jerry was on the verge of revolt when he remembered the, "or else". Jerry wasn't entirely sure what that meant, but it didn't sound very pleasant. Like a good soldier, he followed the others to the shed, put on a pair of work gloves, and grabbed a shovel.

The work was hard, at least the little bit the younger boys did, and the hands of Jerry's Timex moved at a snail's pace. Twenty minutes in, they thought they had been there a week. Like normal kids, the three younger siblings complained the whole time. So much so that Billy became quite irritated with them. Billy was 17 and he was soon to be a senior in High School. As the oldest child, he possessed many odd characteristics that the rest of them wanted nothing to do with. He was responsible, he was practical, and he was a hard worker. The fact that the other three weren't any of those things, at least not at that time in their lives, annoyed him more than a bur in his sock. It wasn't long he was ready to string them up, and after another thirty minutes or so of their belly aching he tried. No one knows for sure what set him off, it might have been the incessant whining, or it might have been that they weren't doing much other than whining. Regardless, Billy exploded. With clinched fist and gritted teeth, he stormed toward them, not caring which one of them he caught. Sensing impending doom, the three boys scattered like cockroaches in a dark room when a light turns on.

The three boys were smaller and slower than Billy, but they were wiry. The fact that they ran in three different directions didn't hurt either. Billy could only follow one of them. Wayne, who was 13 at the time, and Jerry escaped without incident and met up some distance away, but Dave, who was 10, was not so lucky. He had to run for his life. After a somewhat lengthy chase with several near misses, Dave was able to disappear into a mass of bushes. Billy rifled through the shrubs for several minutes but was unable to find him. Having lost one culprit, Billy, who was still quite agitated, popped his head up in search of another. Wayne and Jerry were well out of range by then and they felt safe. That is until Billy saw them and started moving in their direction. Jerry was about to turn and run when he noticed that Billy stopped. Billy stood for a few seconds staring their way. Then out of nowhere he raised his hands to his mouth and hollered, "This isn't over!" Even though Jerry was a good 50 yards away, the words caused the hairs on his arms to bristle. It kind of reminded him of the, "or else", their father spoke earlier. Billy turned to go back to work, the boys moved to regroup.

The three amigos, as they were often called, finally reunited. Sitting on some rotted logs down by a creek bed which ran through one corner of the family farm, they began to make plans. "Or else" aside, they were not going back to work with Billy. They agreed that clearing brush was boring and stupid. But, they also agreed that they couldn't hide out by the creek all day either. They had to find something else to do. Over the course of the next hour or so they tossed around various ideas. They could go fishing. They could call some friends for a game of baseball. They could ride their bikes into town. They could collect pop bottles to return for deposit. The discussion included a few other options as well. They weighed the pros and cons of each idea and in some cases arguments erupted. With so many possibilities, the problem took what seemed an eternity to solve. After a lengthy debate, they decided to build a fort.

Forts were big things back then. For the boys, they represented places of refuge. They were private sanctuaries away from undesirable people, like parents and other siblings. More than that, they were often the product of and/or the source for many an amazing adventure. They loved to build forts, and they did it as often as they could. In the course of their young lives they built treehouses and constructed teepees. They even fashioned a free standing log cabin out of saplings and rope. With them, creativity was abundant. Though, the same was not true of craftsmanship. They often put minimal emphasis on detail design. They used whatever scrap material they could find. They cared more about building forts than about building them right. Not one of their projects survived more than one heavy rain. But, that didn't stop them. They always had fun during and after construction. Never before did they regret any amount of effort put into a fort, no matter how short-lived the product. It was settled, they would build a fort. The only question that remained was what kind of fort would it be?

Again, a lengthy debate ensued. After all the arguing ended, they decided to build an underground escape. It would be like an igloo with the upside down. They would dig a large hole in the ground, at least four feet deep and six feet square. They would cover the hole with logs and then with limbs and finally with dirt and leaves. One corner would remain open as an entrance. A small piece of plywood would act as the cover to the entrance. It would be for a door. They would combine miscellaneous small boulders with dirt from the hole to create a fire pit. They would construct the pit near the entrance, for light, for warmth, and for cooking. As far as they were concerned, when finished it would be fabulous.

To be sure, a hole in the ground was not their first choice. The boys would have preferred something more regal, more majestic. But, they had to deal with constraints of both time and

resources. They had little of either. Regardless, they couldn't be more excited about the project. The only thing left to do was to start building.

At that, they found themselves at a crossroad. To build they needed to gather what few resources there were. One such need, a pretty important one as it stood, was tools. They knew they needed tools for digging, cutting, and pounding, and they also knew where the tools could be found. Unfortunately, many of the tools they needed were at the work site, with Billy. That was an alarming thought, one that made Jerry shiver in 90-degree weather. Facing Billy again didn't excite any of the younger boys, but Jerry especially was apprehensive. In his head, all he could hear was, "this isn't over!" A discussion ensued that lasted for several minutes. In time they decided to complete the fort they had to have the tools. Mustering up as much courage as they could, they started a long, perilous journey back to the work site.

They made their way toward their destination, where they were sure Billy was waiting. They were all very nervous. The nearer they drew to the site, the more on edge they became. Jerry was shaking in his shoes. Slow and careful, they advanced. Upon reaching the perimeter of the work area, they went into stealth mode. They tiptoed over and around twigs and leaves. They sneaked through bushes, and they hid behind trees. Soon, they arrived at a small clump of scrub oaks, a mere twenty yards from where the tools lay. There they stopped to perform recon. Their health and safety demanded that they get a fix on Billy before Billy got the fix on them.

Quiet as bunnies and attentive as a barn cats, they anxiously looked and listened. There was no sign of him, anywhere. Of course, that was no consolation. Billy was a hunter. He hunted very small, very fast, very elusive animals. He hunted squirrels, and he was good at it. One thing they understood, to be a good squirrel hunter, one had to be a ninja in the forest. One

couldn't be seen and one couldn't be heard. That was Billy. He could sneak up on a rattlesnake. Jerry was on edge.

Jerry thought Wayne and Dave were feeling it too. A twig snapped somewhere in the distance. In unison, they all flinched and turned toward the source of the noise. Still, they couldn't see or hear anything. It was nerve wracking! Where was Billy? Minutes passed. Two minutes turned to five, which soon turned to ten. Still, nothing! They weren't sure where he was, but he didn't appear to be at the site. After a couple more excruciating minutes they decided to leave the security of their hiding place. Ever cautious, they crept into the work zone and moved toward the tools.

They were only a few yards from the tools when without warning a voice bellowed from up the hill. It was Billy. "What are you little brats doing back here?" he roared.

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An Adventure

My mother and two sisters entered the house and walked through the living room. I was lying on the couch reading a comic book. Mom stopped and looked my direction, my sisters continued on to their room.

“Hey Jerry, how was your morning?” she asked.

“Not too bad,” I said. “I had cereal for breakfast, I watched some TV, Oh, and I was nearly killed.”

“Again?” she asked without missing a beat. She was looking at me with a smirk on her face.

I glanced up at her, somehow I had the feeling she didn't believe me. I had a pretty active imagination, there was no denying. But, I didn't complain about near death experiences on a regular basis. Granted there may have been one or two other times, three if I counted the horse incident. Still, I was her son. She should react better when I said something like that. Her low level of worry was distressing. I went back to reading.

Sensing my contempt, she said, “Sounds like you’ve had a rough one, little man.” She crossed the room and sat down beside me on the couch. Acting like an actual concerned mother, she asked, “Do you want to tell me about it?”

“No,” I said. I was perturbed. I was pretty sure she didn’t believe me; I was pretty sure she wouldn’t believe my story.

“Oh, come on,” she ribbed. “It couldn’t have been that bad, could it?” She smiled at me and poked me in the side. “Come on, honey, talk to mommy. I do care!”

I sat up and set the comic book on the coffee table. Looking her in the eyes, mustering as much sarcasm as possible, I asked, “Really, you care?”

“Really,” she said, with eyes wide and pleading. She was trying hard to exude sincerity. She must have been successful because I relented. To me it was a traumatic experience, one that would be with me forever. I realized that spelling out the circumstances might get me in trouble, but I had to tell someone.

Filled with nervous energy, I sat up straighter. “So, here’s what happened,” I started...

Summers in Louisiana were hot and humid, and with school out the days were long. Vacation weeks passed. With preplanned activities completed, it became difficult keeping boredom at bay. The year was 1972. In that era we didn’t have all the distractions of modern times. There was no cable TV; we had 3 channels from an antenna. There were no personal computers, no video games, and no cell phones. Much of our amusement came from activities that involved the family. We also spent a lot of time outdoors. When the family wasn’t around, after completing our chores, we had to find ways to entertain ourselves. By midsummer we had tried all reasonable, practical ideas, in some cases many times. One could only shoot so many

baskets or play so many rounds of marbles. We could round up the neighborhood kids on occasion for a rousing nine innings of baseball. But, the remaining hours and minutes crept along at the speed of a stampeding turtle. There were times when we had to be creative. And, even though I was only nine, I was not beyond creative.

The late July morning was bright, with very few clouds in the sky. Birds were singing their morning songs, and dew glistened off the tall green grass. It was a beautiful day. Two of my brothers, Wayne (age 14) and Dave (age 11), had left to do some early morning fishing. They went without me, yet again. That wasn't an uncommon practice for them. Our favorite fishing hole was a few miles away and they had to get on the road early to get the best spots, I slowed them down. So they said. I thought it was because I always caught bigger fish and they couldn't deal with losing to a nine year old. Whatever the reason on this particular day I was on my own.

After my usual bowl of corn flakes, I watched a couple of episodes of Tom and Jerry. While the first episode was entertaining enough, I became bored during the second. It was only 10 A.M. and I was already pacing the floors. I had experienced other days like this, where I longed for something exciting to do. We lived on a farm at the time and in truth there was no shortage of things to do. I could pick vegetables from one of our several gardens. I could play with the animals. We had all sorts of animals, including cows, chickens, ducks, rabbits, dogs, and cats. I could attempt any of the activities on our family projects list. But, I didn't consider any of those options to be too exciting. Then, I also had access to piles of comics, boxes of coloring books, and mounds of games and puzzles. Any other day I would have made do with any of those things, but again they weren't real exciting. No, this day I was craving something more. I wanted action, exhilaration, maybe even a little danger.

An adventure is what I was looking for. I needed a quest and a quest is what I would seek. I wasn't real sure what it would look like when I found it, but I felt confident I would know it when I saw it. Somewhere in my surroundings, something would call to me, something would speak to me, and something would grab me. To find my quest, I decided to explore the house.

Because it was familiar terrain, I began my search in my own bedroom. I shared a renovated attic loft with two of my brothers, Wayne and Dave. Nothing that I owned would be very compelling, that much I knew. But, I thought something of my brothers' would be more captivating. I scoured the room. I looked under beds, glanced in closets, and dug through drawers. All in hopes of finding anything that would motivate and inspire. I even checked a few hidden stashes that I wasn't supposed to know about. They had a lot of the ordinary. There were ball mitts, marbles, Frisbees, comic books, and even a cool Swiss army knife. But I found nothing too exciting. I headed downstairs to check out the rest of the house.

I didn't even bother going into my sisters' room. My sisters, Marie (age 16) and Suzie (age 6), shared a room at the bottom of the attic stairs. I was 9, they were girls, I was pretty sure there was nothing in there for me. And anyway, if Marie ever found out I was going through her things,... I bristled thinking about that.

There was also no way I was entering my parent's room. That was way off limits. My father raised bird dogs, Irish Setters to be precise, and he loved to hunt quail. He had a collection of shot guns, and a few other calibers, that he kept in his bedroom. Under no condition were we kids to be anywhere close to the guns without his knowledge and consent. "Or else"! I had been on the receiving end of his "Or else" before. I was pretty sure it was a place I didn't want to visit again any time soon. I strolled by the open door without as much as a glance.

I arrived at the last bedroom in the house, the domicile of Billy (age 18), my oldest brother. A month before, Billy graduated from high school. While his room was also off limits, I knew he had some cool stuff. I had a feeling in it was where I would find my adventure. I started into the room and then stopped. Realizing if I was caught in his domain, I would find myself on the receiving end of a serious butt kicking, I decided I better slow down and think. To be safe I needed to know where everyone was, especially Billy. My father was at work. Before breakfast Mom took Marie and Suzie shopping. Wayne and Dave were off fishing. But, I wasn't sure about Billy?

I stepped back into the hall and called out his name. There was no answer. I turned and walked through the kitchen into the living room hollering as I went. I checked the bathroom. Still, there was no answer. I couldn't find Billy anywhere. I walked out the front door and did one lap around the house, still no Billy. I wasn't sure where he was but it didn't appear he was going to be an immediate problem. I was ready to proceed. Even so, I had to be careful.

Reentering the house, I marched down the hall back to his room and stood in the doorway. Cautious as a mouse in a cage full of sleeping cats, I entered his chamber and took a quick look around. The first thing I noticed was that his .22 rifle was not on the wall. Like my father, Billy was an avid hunter. But, he wasn't into birds. Billy liked to hunt squirrels. He had a .22 caliber rifle with a scope that he kept mounted on a gun rack, and he knew how to use it. Billy was an excellent shot; he could knock a squirrel out of a tree from fifty yards. He rarely returned from a hunting trip without something to show for it. His skill with that rifle was impressive. What was even more impressive, to me at least, was that the rifle was gone. I knew if the rifle was gone, he was gone. Billy had gone hunting and I was all alone.

Knowing I had the house to myself put me at ease, but I also knew I couldn't dally. When Billy went hunting he was gone for the day. But, I would still need to return anything I might borrow before he came back. I also had to contend with the rest of my family. I didn't know when they would be home either. Getting caught "borrowing" by one of them was about the same as getting caught by Billy. They would rat me out quicker than a blink. Family or not, there was no honor among thieves. I went right to work.

Again, I panned the room from side to side, this time taking in the details. There was nothing of interest in plain sight. I knelt down and looked under the bed, still nothing. I strolled to closet and slid the door open. I checked one side, shifted the doors, and peered in the other side. There it was; I had found adventure. When I saw it my eyes lit up like a lighthouse and a tingling sensation spread through my tiny frame. It was exactly what I was looking for, action, exhilaration, and even a little danger. In the corner of the closet stood a fiberglass recurve bow, with two arrows and a forearm guard.

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