

The Rain

It had taken them several hours to reach the tiny clearing alongside the brook which had been their favorite fishing spot since he could remember. As a small child the water had frightened him, its swift turbulence and noisy confusion causing him to worry whenever he watched his father wade far out into the center of the stream. Now, however, old enough to look forward to playing in the coolness of the still pools hidden amongst the huge smooth surfaced granite boulders along the banks of the brook, he allowed himself a sigh of relief from the frustration they had shared almost from the beginning of their outing. Since the unanticipated traffic on the interstate near their home, through the extra miles added to their journey by a detour brought about because an ancient wooden bridge had washed out during a recent storm, and, most aggravating of all, while they lost almost an hour changing a tire punctured by an especially sharp piece of slate protruding from the rough surfaced woods road, their's had been an unusually tiring afternoon.

"Well, we're here ... finally!" his father exclaimed as they pulled into the campsite he had cleared long before the boy was born, "You start unloading the stuff from the back and I'll clean up the tent area ..."

"Can't I stretch my legs first?" he asked, with a small groan for emphasis.

"No. It'll be dusk soon and I'd rather get the camp set up before we lose the light. Get going now!"

His collapse out the door was a minor protest of sorts, but it was lost on his father who had already begun to clear the ground where they would set up the tent. He muttered a mild curse to himself, but, remembering what had happened when his mother had heard him do so, he made very, very sure that not a sound escaped his lips.

A result of his father's customary good planning, all of their gear was packed neatly into small army surplus rucksacks and battered plastic milk crates. Not a coincidence, he was sure, each load was just the right size for him to lug, and he'd soon assembled next to the tent site the necessities for their weekend's residence in the woods. During one of his many trips back and forth from the car he amused himself by reading the print embossed upon the side of a milk crate, "Private Property - any unauthorized use will result in civil and criminal ...". Although a bit confused, he chuckled thinking of the time they had driven back to the supermarket because his father had found an item in one of the grocery bags that didn't show up on the register tape, "It's stealing, Paul, even if it's only a few cents."

"... Paul ... Paul ..." he opened his eyes to find his father glaring down at him, "... you do with my tackle box? Did you remember to bring it from the car?"

"Ah ... ah ..." mostly what he remembered was placing one of the milk crates next to a weather beaten tree stump and then sitting down to take a brief rest from hauling the stuff from the car, "... I ... ah ..."

"Well, must I go fishing with your 'ahs' or can you tell me where the box is?"

"It's under the tarp. Last time we came you told me I should always put things where they wouldn't get wet if it started raining."

"That's right, I did. Good job ... but it's a bit early for a nap. You get a fire started while I go pull in a couple of nice brookies," his father rummaged under the plastic cover until he found his gear, "and then we'll have a nice supper."

He watched as his father walked down to the stream, acutely conscious of the fact that as he approached the water his stride became more purposeful and the breadth of his shoulders was as much a part of the beautiful scene as were the rocks and trees and the very blue sky above it all. With a soft sigh of resignation, knowing beyond any doubt that he could never grow up to be so strong, he began the task of collecting small pieces of downed wood and bits of bark with which he would carefully construct their tiny but effective campfire.

"Paul ... "

"Yes, Dad?" he looked out of the corner of his eye to see if he'd left open the resealable cellophane bag which contained the bread his mother had baked fresh for them right before they left the house.

"I ... um ..."

"What did I do, Dad?"

"No, son. What I'm trying to say is that I'm sorry."

He paused for a moment, not quite sure what to do with this unanticipated piece of information. "What ... what do you mean, Dad? Did you do something wrong?"

"Yes ... yes, I did."

"Oh."

The two of them sat beside the fire silently for several minutes more, neither seeming to have the inclination to move quickly from the place that they were. Finally, after the fire had been prodded and stirred far more than was necessary to maintain proper combustion, the older of the pair spoke.

"Paul."

"Yes, Dad?"

"Do you want to know why I'm sorry?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Why didn't you ask me?"

The moon stopped rising, and the river's timeless song diminished in volume to become only a minor part of the forest's evening symphony. The branches of the tall birch trees ceased their gentle swaying dance, the sudden stillness announcing that the wind itself was going to wait for the birth of a new truth.

"I ... I knew that when you were ready you'd tell me."

"That's it ... atta boy, you've got it! That was a perfect cast."

"I held it just the way you told me, Dad."

"I know, son, I could see. But remember, you don't hold it that way because I told you to, you ..."

"... I know, hold it that way because that's the way it's supposed to be held."

His father's smile put the sun to shame, and ... of this he was sure ... the two of them were standing in the most perfect place in the world.

"Dad?"

"Yes?"

"I've got a question."

"Hmmmmm ... would you like an answer?"

"Yup."

"Well then, seems to me that your next step is to ask, isn't it?"

"Dad?"

"I'm still here."

"Dad, where does the water in the river come from?"

"What do you mean?"

The boy looked upstream for a second, trying to see beyond the where the river curved to hide itself in the forest, then back up to his father's face, "Well, the water keeps flowing and flowing all the time, even towards the end of the summer when it hasn't rained much. So ... so where does it all come from?"

His father turned towards him, slowly reeling in the bright yellow monofilament line he'd allowed to drift downstream with the current. Checking to see that his son was looking at him, he directed his gaze past the bend in the river, up slightly so that he was looking just above the birch trees etched brightly white against the deep blue sky. The boy followed his father's eyes with his own, "What are you looking at?"

"You asked me where the water comes from, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"What do you see?"

He looked closely to the horizon, knowing that he mustn't answer until he'd found for himself what his father was referring to. Could that be it? Was that ...

"The top of the mountain."

"That's right. That's where all the water comes from."

"But ... but what about when it doesn't rain for a really long time?"

"The mountain holds the water. Sometimes, during the winter, it saves it as ice and snow. Other times, when there is drought, it hides it away within the folded rock buried deep inside itself. Then ... when the time is right, and the earth is tired of being dry and the fish want to swim and all the life around us is thirsty ... then it lets some of the water go, just enough, mind you, to get by until it rains again."

"Where does the water go after it leaves the river?"

"To the ocean, where it becomes a home for all the animals that live in the sea."

"And ... and ..." his mind twisted upon itself, but he couldn't quit reach past the edge of what he had discovered.

"And, you want to know, what happens then and why don't the oceans fill and where did the rain come from in the first place?"

"Yes! How did you know?"

There was a sudden far away look in his father's eyes, their deep brown mystery suddenly filled with tears, "Because I, too, once wondered the same thing."

"Did someone tell you the answer?"

Softer than the clouds floating above them, "Yes."

"Well ..."

"The water floats up from the sea and becomes the clouds above us. The wind brushes them against the tops of the mountains, and, because they're so soft and the mountains so hard, they cry the rain down ... and that happens over and over and over again, as it has been happening since, well, since forever."

"Oh."

He looked to the mountain, then down to the water swirling around at his feet, "Dad?"

"I know, Paul ... I know what you're going to ask me."

Oddly, he wasn't surprised, "How do you know?"

"Because ... because I'm your father, you're my son ... because that's the way it's supposed to be."

The fact was evident, beyond debate, as was the fact that he knew he was about to step away from his childhood, "So ... so, what was I going to ask you?"

"Why is everything the way it is ... that's what you wanted to know, isn't it?"

He looked up at his father, feeling for the first time how incredibly soft was the touch of the man's strong hand against the back of his neck, "Yes."

His father surveyed all around him one more time, as if checking to make sure that everything was in its proper place, then, with a smile, back down to him.

"Because, my son ... because that's the way it's supposed to be."

And it was ... and he knew it ... and his only surprise was that the knowing didn't surprise him at all.

His mother was in the kitchen, busily restoring her domain to the pristine state in which she so fussily kept it maintained. His father was reading one of the newspapers he'd missed while they were up in the mountains, muttering to himself something about "... we can't let that go on ... who do they think they are ... it's not right."

Next to the couch his little sister was jumbled upside down in the cage which had been cleverly disguised as a playpen so as not to admit to the world the true nature of her existence. Busily eating her own foot, something which had shocked him at first until he'd realized that she, as did all babies, had special safety mechanisms built in to prevent such attempts at self-ingestion from being successful ... in the case of this latest weird behavior, it was her fat ankles, which, as he'd finally with a sigh of relief discovered, were much too big for her to get past her lips. He glanced at her for a second or two, thinking mostly how fortunate it was that he'd never been so strange.

"Paul?"

He looked up to find his mother standing next to him.

"Yes, Mom?"

"Are you finished with the trout, or ..."

As she spoke, he noticed that she'd placed her arm across the broad expanse of his father's shoulders. Gently ... ever so gently ... her delicate fingers ... ones which made the old upright piano tucked in the corner of their living room sing tears from his eyes ... softly, softly she stroked the sun reddened skin on the side of his father's neck. While he watched, his father's hand came up to hers and, taking it carefully in his own, brought it to his lips for a second ... just a second ... then, just as carefully, placed it back upon his neck.

"... or do you want to pick at it for a while longer?"

"Mom?"

"Yes, Paul?"

"I ... I love you, Mom."

Her eyes widened ... just a fraction, but he noticed. And, at the same time, his father's eyes left the paper in front of him and focused on his own ... then, following the direction of his son's gaze, he turned to look at the woman standing next to him ... finally, with a mixture of admiration and sadness, he looked back to his son.

"Why ... why, I love you, too, Paul. Where ... where did that come from?"

His father smiled ... a giggle slipped past his sister's foot ... the world traveled a tiny bit further around the sun.

"From the mountains, Mom ... from the mountains."

"Why ... I mean, how ... I ..."

He looked to his father, whose face was already buried once again in day-old news, "Go ahead, son ... tell her."

"Because, Mom ... because that's the way it's supposed to be."