The Tree House

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Benjamin, a rather Frail boy of seven and a half, unhesitatingly walked through the forge puddle which obstructed his way. The water, especially toward the middle, proved too deep for his worn, patched rubbers. But Benjamin didn't mind a "soaker". In fact he rather enjoyed the momentary pleasure of the warm, muddy rain water on his feet. Nor did he even consider the scolding which invariably followed when he came home with his feet wet, his only unpleasant feeling arising when his feet later became chilly in the coolness of the June late-afternoon. His two older brothers would have been home from school long ago; first communion practice had detained him. Still, he would have been home earlier had he not remained after the others. When there were no people in the church he liked to walk its long aisles: he enjoyed the feel of the thick carpet as he walked; he imagined he might sink in it if he followed it through the small opening into the dark room next to the St. Joseph's altar and he always shivered and felt a kind of pleasant weakness when he approached it."

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Benjamin, a rather frail boy of seven and a half, unhesitatingly waded through the large puddle which obstructed his way. The water, especially toward the middle, proved too deep for his worn, patched rubber boots. But Benjamin didn't mind a "soaker". In fact he rather enjoyed the momentary pleasure of the warm, muddy rain water on his feet. Nor did he even consider the scolding which invariably followed when he came home with his feet wet, his only unpleasant feeling arising when his feet later became chilly in the coolness of the June late-afternoon. His two older brothers would have been home from school long ago; first communion practice had detained him. Still, he would have been home earlier had he not remained after the others. When there were no people in the church he liked to walk its long aisles; he enjoyed the feel of the thick carpet as he walked; he imagined he might sink in it if he followed it through the small opening into the dark room next to the St. Joseph’s altar and he always shivered and felt a kind of pleasant weakness when he approached it.

"Benjy, where have you been?" The sharp voice of his mother assailed him at the door of the house. "I see your feet are wet again. Well, young man, you must of course take your shoes off before you can come in. Where have you been anyway?" "Communion practice." He mumbled these last words as he hurriedly pulled the wet shoes from his feet, anxious to escape the stern glance of his mother as quickly as possible. Dinner was accompanied by the usual unpleasantness. Benjy's mother, since his father had died, had been forced to take a job during the day. After working long hours she was tired and inclined to be rather short-tempered by dinner time. "Don’t lean back in your chair," she reprimanded him, "do you want to break the back off?" Benjy acquiesced thoughtlessly. "Benjy had to go to the principal for sassing back Sister Paul," his older brother Daniel, an eighth grader, remarked. "He's in the last row 'cause he can't read good, Johnny Miller told me," observed fourth-grader, David. "He can't read because he's dumb like you," replied Daniel. "You better shut up." With these words David rose from the table and attempted to strike his
brother who was sitting out of reach on the other side of the table. "Now you've spilled your milk," shouted Daniel. He welcomed the accident because it would cause his mother to forget the cruel taunt which caused it and would enable him to take command of the unfortunate situation which had been essentially his fault. Sensing this, he ordered David to "clean up the mess you made." "Can't I have a little peace and quiet at least at my dinner," demanded the mother, "now you can all shut up for the rest of the meal." Benjy, meanwhile, began to make a furrow through the middle of his mashed potatoes.

Dinner over, Benjy decided to go outside. The night being rather chilly, his mother insisted that he wear his sweater. He went down into the basement where he kept it. Some moments later, Daniel, preparing for the mighty game of "one-o'-cat," followed him down the stairs to get his bat and ball. Realizing that his brother had not heard him follow, Daniel decided to "play a little joke" on Benjy. Hiding under the staircase with his bat in hand, Daniel waited until Benjy approached almost to the foot of the stairs. At this moment he leapt from behind the staircase and screamed at his unsuspecting brother. Benjamin, too frightened to move, his speech paralyzed by the sudden and unsuspected terror, merely stood before his brother, his eyes riveted on the baseball bat which his brother had raised menacingly over his head, his hands assuming an almost suppliant position in front of him. A few seconds later he screamed, screamed and ran up the stairs clutching the small dragging sweater behind him. His mother had heard the commotion and went to investigate. "What's all the noise?" she asked Daniel. "Oh I just scared Benjy, ma." "Darn you kids," she replied, "can't I ever have one minute of peace and quiet in this house? I work hard all day, all I ask is a few minutes of quiet at night. Now, go on out and play." "But all I wanted to do was scare him a little," said Daniel. "Just go on out and play," his mother reiterated, "and leave me a few minutes peace in the day." Benjy, meanwhile, had gone to the living room where he sat tensely in the large enveloping arm chair, stroking the pet cat. His gaze happened to fall on his father's picture. The aura of honor and respect with which the rest of the family surrounded the memory of the father and his pictorial representation here on the mantle-piece had never affected Benjy. Perhaps he had been too young to remember the man. In any case he had not built a "glorious legend" about him as many sons of deceased fathers often do. Gazing at the picture he wondered for the first time what his father must have been
like, he wondered what a "father" did, what purpose did he have. The fathers of some of his friends took them to ball games and bought them hot dogs and popcorn. He thought he might like that, he had always liked hot dogs and popcorn. A few minutes later, seemingly much calmer, he left the house.

An ancient oak tree whose shade in summer encompassed the entire back yard was Benjy's private retreat. During the warm months he would spend long hours climbing and descending or merely sitting in its branches. From its height he could gaze, unobserved, upon the whole neighborhood. He loved, for instance, to watch them play ball. He would pretend to be a radio announcer and would sit for hours "broadcasting" a crucial game. His mother, although constantly warning him that he would someday "break his fool neck," nevertheless had not forbidden his climbing the tree. His brothers, occupied with what they considered much more interesting diversions, never bothered him there. The tree, Benjy often thought, was a place where only he, not his brothers nor his mother, existed. Only he knew its secret adventures and its sublime pleasures and, fearing that they should be discovered, jealously guarded them by being secretive and clandestine at all times with his mother and his brothers. It was here that he went now. The cat which he had been fondling, leapt from his arms across the next yard and Benjy ran toward the tree and immediately began climbing it. Then he saw it. Situated on a sturdy branch midway up the trunk was the beginning of what appeared to be a tree house. A few wood planks, slabs from packing crates, uneven in length, had been nailed to the branch. Benjy climbed to where it was being built. For several seconds he simply gazed at it. Then he began to cry, first softly and then convulsively, his frail body racked with choking sobs. Seizing the planks, he violently pulled them, one by one, from the branch. Then he swung from the tree, dropped to the ground and ran, crying bitterly as he went. Across the field at the back of the house he fled. In the background the ball game was progressing and the noise of the boys could be heard by anyone in the vicinity. But Benjy did not hear them. Benjy heard nothing and kept on running. Finally he fell, mercilessly tripped up by a tree stump in his path.
He pounded the ground with his fist, sobbingly. For long moments he lay there. Then he went home. He went directly to bed. In the warmth and protection of his bed he fell asleep, more exhausted than he had ever been in his life.

"Benjy, your breakfast is ready. Come on, lazy one, you've got to be at church at eleven o'clock." The imperious tone of his mother's voice brought him to full wakefulness immediately. He got up and dressed slowly. On the floor of the bedroom shared by his brother was a baseball bat and glove. Benjy saw it, but looked away quickly and, buttoning his shirt as he went, ran down the stairs. At the kitchen table his brothers were halfway through the morning meal. "Somebody got into the oak tree and pulled out the planks we had nailed for the tree house." It was Daniel. He knows, thought Benjy. "Benjy is always up in that thing, maybe he knows something about it," his mother answered. "Yah, maybe he did it." laughed Daniel. Benjy, excited almost to the point of trembling, hoped desperately that it didn't show. With a tremendous effort he swallowed a glass of milk and tried to concentrate on the morning funny paper. After several agonizing efforts to swallow his cereal, he excused himself and left the table. "No wonder you're so skinny, never eating properly," admonished his mother. "Well never mind, if you want to get sick don't expect me to take care of you." Daniel mentioned something about baseball scores but Benjy hadn't heard it; he had gone into the living room and put his hands over his ears. At precisely 10:45 Benjy left the house for church.

A gray, sombre sky which all morning had been threatening rain, suddenly, in a thunderous release, exhumed its contents on the landscape. Benjy ran the last block home. How easy it all was he thought. Some of the kids had been afraid. But he, as though he had been going for years, had been the first in line. He smiled as he thought how awe-stricken Miller had been at his action. "It was easy," he had told some of them waiting fearfully in line: "all I got was three Hail Marys: he didn't even hail me out." Approaching the door of his house he didn't even notice the huge limb that had been stricken from the oak tree: he was occupied thinking exultedly of the presents he would receive for his first communion tomorrow.