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LITTLE COE ran until the beating of his heart filled his head and the breath was a sharp pain in his lungs.

He scrambled across the dusty, rocky gully and went reeling down the path that led beneath the tall pines and swinging wild grape vines.

It was cool here, with the hot summer sun shut away. The heavy carpet of fallen pine needles was soft beneath the horny callouses of his bare feet.

He was a thin youngster of eleven years. He had long arms and hands. The bones in his face were delicate and fine. Like his snivelling mother's, Big Coe always said. Little Coe's skin was very fair, dusted with freckles, and his cheeks and nose were peeling from sunburn. The corner of his mouth was clotted with dried blood. His lower lip was swelling a little and the taste of the blood was hot and sickening in his throat.

Ahead was a depression carved by nature, and there a crystal clear spring, sheltered by huge moss-grown stones, gurgled to the surface.



BE A MAN!

by **TALMAGE POWELL**

Coe's father kept telling Coe to be a man. Then Coe found out just what his father meant. . . .

Little Coe fell full length beside the spring. He wiped his face with the tattered cuff of his faded blue denim shirt. Then he lowered his hot face to the kindness of the water.

The water's chill was sharp, like the touch of cold, brittle metal. He drank until curds formed in his convulsing stomach and dipped his matted yellow hair into the spring. Big Coe cut his hair four times a year and the next cutting was due in a week; and it was like wearing a blanket on the head. Little Coe felt the water go seeping through his hair until it bit his scalp.

He sat up at last, water running around his ears and down his neck to mingle with the sweat blackening his shirt and faded overalls.

He was feeling better now. His mouth didn't hurt so much. But a different fear came to him. It was an old, old fear. He couldn't remember when it hadn't been a part of him, tucked in a dark, terrible place inside of him.

He sat with the dark place opening and the fear stealing out through him. I won't go home, he thought. I'll run away. I could get a job, or steal, or beg. I purely can't go home.

His soft, quizzical blue eyes deepened until they were haunted mirrors. The corner of his mouth began to twitch.

I'd get caught. I'd get sent back home. And that would be worse than ever.

If'n I could just die . . .

A twig snapped behind him, and Little Coe whirled, crouched. Froze.

Big Coe had entered the glade. He stood looking at the boy a moment. He was called Big Coe by all the neighboring mountain people. He was a big man in a country of big men. His body, clothed in jeans and brogans and blue shirt, suggested the qualities of a bull. His face was a heavy mass of meat hacked by a hurried sculptor's hand. His eyes were heavy-lidded and narrowed as he looked at Little Coe.

"Where you been, boy?"

"To—see if the chinkapins beyond the holler are ripe."

"Are they?"

"Yes, pa."

"Did you get some?"

"No, pa."

The big man took a few steps toward the quaking boy. The heavy fingers touched the boy's chin.

"You got a bust on the mouth, boy."

"Pa, I . . ."

"How'd you get it?"

"I—I fell down, pa."

The gray eyes held Little Coe in the rigid grip of terror. "You're a liar, boy. I can tell."

Little Coe's mind formed a wish of despair. Please, ma, come to the spring for a bucket of water.

He wanted to throw a wild glance over his shoulder. The weather-browned, clapboard house

was on the slope, just two hundred yards from the spring. It could be glimpsed through the foliage of pines and green-leafed laurel. Maybe he would see her coming out of the house, thin and bent, a bucket in her hand. He wanted her to come so much that the wish simply had to come true.

And yet a part of him never wanted her to come. She was the only frail shelter Little Coe had ever had. She had known Big Coe's iron hand far longer than Little Coe. It had left its mark upon her, and each time she stood between him and Big Coe, she paid. It was one way Big Coe had of measuring himself as a Man, as the master of his house.

And so Little Coe fought the wish until it died in his mind.

She must not come.

Please don't let her come.

"I'm waiting, boy," Big Coe said.

"Pa, I . . ."

"Is that all you can say. You yellow, soft-livered little snake, can't you get no words out?"

"I went about the chinkapins, pa."

"And you didn't get none. A bust on the mouth, instead. Who, boy? Who run you off from them chinkapins?"

"Nobody, pa, I . . ." Little Coe's teeth snapped together and his head jerked on his shoulders as Big Coe's palm struck him across the cheek. He could feel the hot sting of the blow. For a second or two, the world was a black nothing. Only the pain and fear and terrible hate were real.

"You're fooling with a man, boy," Big Coe said. "Now don't give me none of that sissy lip. Who chased you from that chinkapin patch?"

"Josh Billings, pa," Little Coe said dully.

"And you let him do it?"

"Only after he knocked me down and kicked me in the ribs, pa. I stood up to him till then, I swear I did, pa."

Big Coe grunted. His lips were thin across his heavy, square, yellowed teeth. He spat on the ground.

"Come on, boy."

Little Coe's throat worked. "Pa, there really ain't many chinkapins this year."

"Come on," I said. "Ain't nobody taking them nuts from us."

Big Coe grabbed the collar of Little Coe's shirt and shoved the boy forward. Little Coe stumbled.

"Stay on your feet, boy. Us Simpsons always stay on our feet. Nobody takes nothing from us."

Little Coe wanted to ask Big Coe about the time Henry Hyder had taken the knife off Big Coe in the beer joint in town. Henry had made Big Coe get on his knees and apologize. But Little Coe knew to keep his mouth shut about that.

With every beat of his heart a pulsation of sickness, Little Coe retraced his steps. Back across the gully. Up the long, long hillside so hot in the sun of late mountain summer.

Along the path that led through the timber. And at last he was standing trembling at the head of the meadow, Big Coe behind him.

The meadow was long, waist high in grass. It was surrounded by the serene beauty of the mountains, canopied by a sky of light blue velvet. But Little Coe saw none of that. He could only stare ahead along the slope to the chinkapin bushes a hundred yards away. Once, Little Coe had heard, the chestnut-like, sweet little nuts had been plentiful in the mountains. But a blight had come and today, in Little Coe's lifetime, the chinkapins were rare delicacies to be prized, to be roasted or boiled and eaten to the last crumb of sweet white meat.

The whole of the long hillside looked devoid of life and Little Coe's heart quickened with hope. Then came a rustling of bushes and Josh Billings came into view dragging a gunny sack. He was picking up the chinkapins, burrs and all. He would pop the burrs and remove the nuts when he carried the sack home.

Little Coe felt his knees go to water. He looked at Big Coe's face and a constriction caught his throat. Big Coe was looking at Josh with a smile of strange pleasure on his heavy face. He looked at Josh's long arms and heavy shoulders, big for a boy of thirteen. And then he looked at Little Coe and the expression on Big Coe's face deepened.

"Go get him, boy."

"Pa, I . . ."

"You heard me," Big Coe said softly.

Little Coe swallowed and took a step forward. He felt very old. He felt as if each of his eleven years had been a century, a limitless suspension of time clouded by the heavy shadow of his father's presence. Long ago he'd accepted the fact that he was a yellow weakling, not big and brave and tough as Big Coe had been at his age.

He knew he couldn't whip Josh Billings.

He was going to have to take a beating.

Josh heard Little Coe's approach and glanced up. Josh had a flat expressionless face and muddy-colored eyes. He was red-headed, and his red eyebrows grew together over the bridge of his nose.

Josh stood with the sack clutched in one hand, looking from Little Coe to Big Coe.

Little Coe cleared his throat. "You give me back my chinkapins, Josh. I'm here to take them."

Josh kept his attention centered on Big Coe, and when it became apparent that Big Coe was going to make no move, Josh said, "Come and take them, you little rabbit."

Little Coe forced himself to move closer to Josh. He stood with his hands balled into fists. "I mean it now, Josh!" To him, his voice sounded thin as it made a forlorn crack in the silence of the summer day.

"Aw, get the hell out of here," Josh said, "before I chew you up and spit you out for hound dog bait."

Little Coe gave a last look over his shoulder. He couldn't retreat. Big Coe was watching the scene with glistening eyes.

Little Coe's lip began to tremble and he bit down on it, hard. He drew desperately on his courage and reached for the gunny sack. Josh hit him in the mouth, right where he had hit Little Coe before.

The pain was a hot flash exploding behind Little Coe's skull. He lashed out blindly. He felt his knuckles smash against yielding flesh and was surprised to hear Josh scream in rage and pain.

Josh bore in on him, swinging blindly. Their fighting was furious and silent. Little Coe beat at his tormentor with all his strength. He was forced back. Josh knocked him down, kicked him in the stomach, and backed up a few steps. He stood looking at Little Coe. His breath was coming fast and there was a trickle of blood seeping from Josh's nose.

Little Coe pulled himself away from Josh. His strength was gone. His moment of high courage and wrath was slipping away from him. He was puking sick, and he looked up at Big Coe and said, "Pa, I . . ."

Big Coe grabbed his overalls gallus and jerked Little Coe to his feet.

"You get in there and whip him—or I'll whip you," Big Coe said.

Josh was wiping his nose on the back of his hand. He made no advance, but when Big Coe shoved Little Coe toward him, Josh's fists lashed out again.

Little Coe tried to cover his face with his arms. The driving fists numbed his forearms, knocked them aside. The hard knuckles smashed his cheeks, his jaw. He was down again. Gasping against the grass. His body hot and cold at the same moment.

Sun, sky, clouds, trees, everything about the day melted into an unreal haze. Little Coe felt big hands on him once more. The hands were pulling him to his feet. A deep, rough voice was in his ear. "You whip him, or you'll get it good!"

One of the heavy hands was thrusting a hard heavy object into Little Coe's hand.

A stone.

A flat, murderous stone.

Little Coe obeyed the heavy, hard hands and went in swinging.

He felt the sweep of the stone halted. Halted so hard it jarred his entire arm. He heard a sound like a pebble being dropped in mud.

And then he stood crouched, gasping for breath, peering hard through the haze.

He began to make out details.

Josh lay on the ground before him. There was a ragged hole in Josh's temple, and the hole was spilling grayish blood.

Little Coe tried to speak. A shiver passed over him as he saw the way Josh was looking straight

into the rays of the blinding sun. Seeing nothing.

Little Coe turned his eyes away. He looked at Big Coe, and he was unable to look away. After several seconds, even the thought of Josh was no longer the focal point of his mind.

The big man who touted his own bravery stood as if rooted to the hillside. He stared at the dead boy. He was trembling all over. His eyes bulged. His face was gray, his mouth slack.

Little Coe had never seen such a craven, shrinking thing in his whole life, not even in a cur dog.

He moved up to Big Coe and dropped the bloody stone at Big Coe's feet. Big Coe looked at him and made a whimpering sound in his throat.

Little Coe set off across the hillside. Like little

bombs, silent words were bursting in his mind. Words to be said to the sheriff. To the whole countryside. *Pa come up while Josh was picking on me and Pa picked up that rock and popped Josh with it and I don't reckon he meant to kill Josh but Josh fell down and Pa was so stricken he purely couldn't move.*

It wasn't far from the truth, just stretching the truth a mite. Little Coe thought. And even if the sheriff didn't believe him, Josh's folks would. He knew the Billingses very well, and he knew their way of dealing with a situation like this.

As he turned down the path, Little Coe ran very lightly.

He ran as if small, gay wings were on his eager feet.

