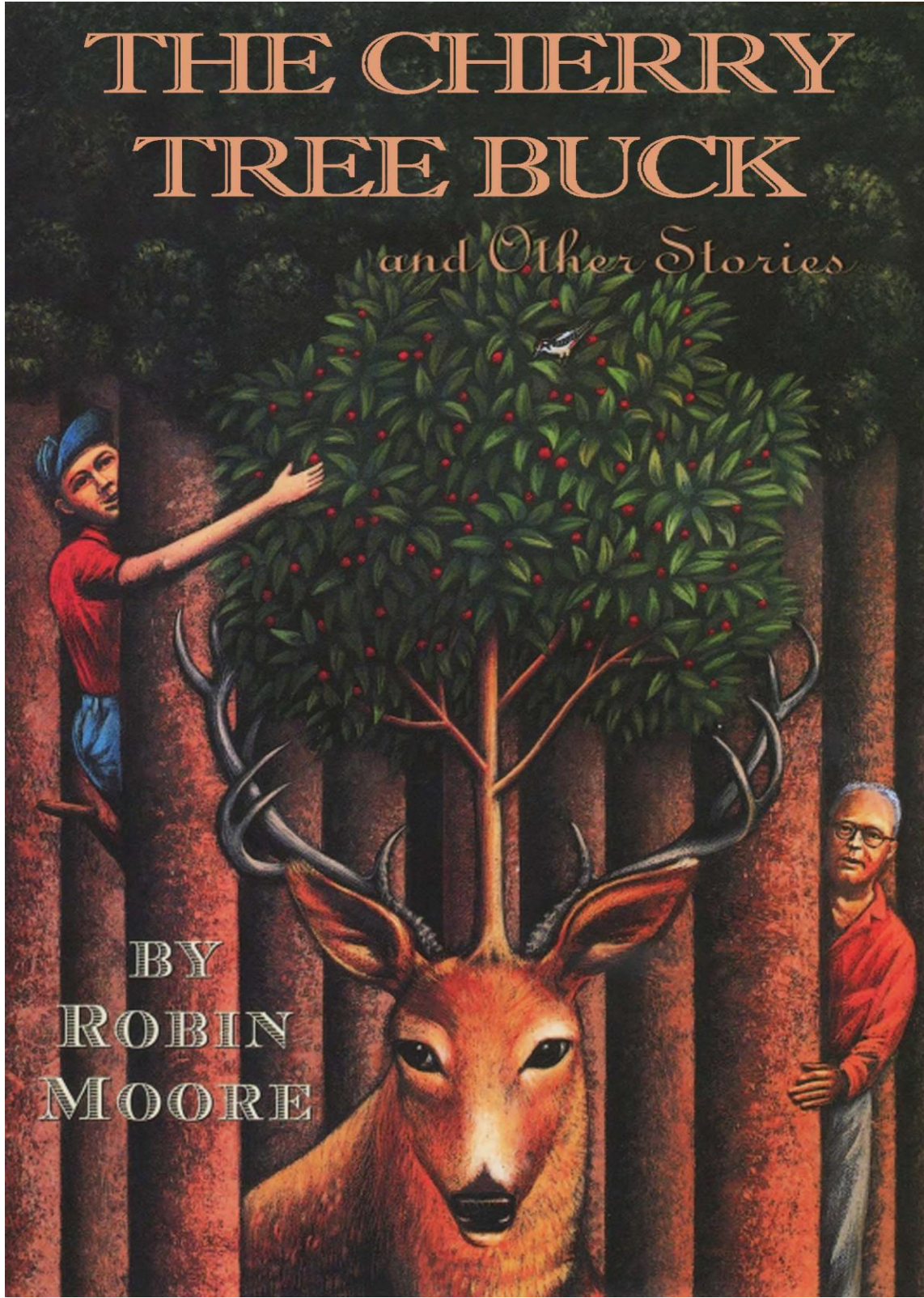


THE CHERRY TREE BUCK

and Other Stories

BY
ROBIN
MOORE



The Cherry Tree Buck
and
Other Stories

Tall Tales from the Pennsylvania Mountains

Robin Moore

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Dedication

For anyone who has ever heard the call of the wild....

...Follow Storyteller Robin Moore and his grandfather on their tall-tale adventures in the Central Pennsylvania woodlands as they discover a toothless rattlesnake, an eagle who thinks he is a chicken, a fish who learns to live on the land and, of course, a cherry tree buck.

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Introduction

I learned about the woods from my grandfather.

From the time I was old enough to hold a fishing pole, my grandfather and I spent every spare moment outdoors, enjoying whatever the wind and weather had to offer.

In those days, our part of Pennsylvania was still pretty wild. We could see black bear and wild turkey from the back porch. We could pick blueberries and collect mushrooms. We could drink right out of the streams and walk through the hills all day without seeing another person.

Sometimes we would wander off the familiar trails and plunge into the deepest, tangliest art of the thicket, just to see what was there. Sometimes we would sit quietly on the banks of a stream or at the edge of a meadow, waiting with watchful eyes. And sometimes, when we were very lucky, we would get a glimpse of the natural world that remains hidden to most people.

Some of the things we saw were, literally, incredible. Whenever we tried to tell our family or friends, they'd accuse us of pulling their legs. After a while we just kept quiet.

It's been nearly forty years since my grandfather died, and I think it's time to tell about our adventures. I once asked him, "What's the secret to telling a good story?"

He grinned. "No secret to it at all. Just start with the facts and go on from there"

The Cherry Tree Buck

When I was a boy growing up in the mountains of central Pennsylvania, my grandfather used to take me deer hunting up in the woods behind our house.

We went every year in the first weeks of December, after the leaves had fallen but before the first snow, while the yellowed cornstalks still stood in the fields like a pale army rustling in the wind.

My grandfather was an old-fashioned kind of person. He never took much interest in modern hunting equipment. Year after year, all through the 1950s and 1960s, he took me hunting with the same rifle; an old flintlock muzzle-loading gun that my great-grandfather had owned many years before I was born.

In all the years we went hunting together, we had never gotten a deer. But we were never discouraged. We knew that some year something miraculous would happen.

And one year a miracle did happen. Or I guess it was a miracle. You can judge for yourself... We set off early one morning to climb the mountainside and wait by a deep trail, hoping to catch a glimpse of a big buck.

But we were no sooner settled than we realized that we had made a terrible mistake. We had the rifle and some gunpowder, but we had forgotten to bring any bullets.

We felt pretty stupid—there we were, all the way up in the woods, with no bullets.

Fortunately, my grandmother had packed us a paper bag of cherries.

We were sitting underneath a big hemlock tree, eating the cherries and spitting out the pits, when I had an inspiration. I looked down at the cherry seeds in my hand.

“Grandpa,” I said, “couldn’t we use these for bullets?”

My grandfather nodded. “It’s sure worth a try,” he said.

My grandfather dropped a charge of gunpowder down the barrel of the rifle. Then he wrapped the cherry seed in a little cloth patch and used his ramrod to shove it into the barrel. He poured a spot of priming powder in the flash pan and snapped it shut. We were ready.

Just then we heard a rustling sound up ahead, and a magnificent buck stepped out onto the trail. He was a “six-point,” meaning that he had six pointed tines on each antler—a very impressive rack for a Pennsylvania deer.

My grandfather raised the rifle and sighted in on the deer’s chest. He held his breath and squeezed the trigger.

There was a shower of sparks, a loud explosion—and then the air was filled with blue smoke.

The rifle had gone off just fine.

But when the smoke cleared I could see the deer standing there, seemingly unhurt. He was shaking his head from side to side, as if stunned by the explosion.

I noticed that the hair on top of the deer’s head was ruffed up, and I realized what had happened. My grandfather had aimed high. Instead of going into the chest, the hard cherry seed had flown through the air and stuck in the skin on top of the deer’s head.

Finally, the deer came to his senses and ran off.

We both thought it was one of the strangest things we had ever seen.

The next year, in the spring, we were out walking around in that same part of the woods when we saw something even stranger.

We looked up the mountainside and there was a cherry tree in full blossom, walking down the trail toward us.

I looked and I could see: It was that deer, with a cherry tree about three feet tall growing out of the top of his head!

I realized what had happened.

That seed must have been stuck under his skin all winter and in the spring some rain probably fell on him—so, naturally, the little tree just sprouted right up!

A little later in the season he got about a dozen red cherries on the tree, hanging in between his antlers.

We decided to protect the deer because, even in central Pennsylvania, we very rarely get a deer with a cherry tree growing out of the top of his head. So we posted “No Hunting” signs all over our land, and the local hunters respected that.

That deer grew up pretty well.

And the cherry tree grew pretty well, too. It got to be about fourteen feet tall. And you could get a bushel of cherries just by following the deer around and picking up what he dropped.

We had a ball watching that deer in every season.

The one year, during the hunting season, a terrible thing happened. My grandfather and I were inside the house early one morning, eating breakfast, when we heard a sound in the woods behind our cornfield. It was the sharp, earsplitting crack of a modern rifle.

We looked out our window to see a hunter walking out of our woods and into our cornfield.

We put on our coats and walked out there to tell him he wasn't allowed to be on our land. But as we were walking through the dried cornstalks we was something dark lying in the corn rows.

When we got closer, I could see it was the cherry tree buck.

I never saw my grandfather lose his temper like he did that day. He stormed through the dried corn and located the hunter just as he was coming to the edge of the fields. I could see that he wasn't from around here; he was one of those sportsmen who drive up from the cities every fall with the price tags still hanging from their hunting clothes. My grandfather grabbed him by the seat of his pants and walked him off our land.

When he came back, my grandfather examined the deer. But it was no use.

The deer was dead.

Normally, when we came across a road kill or when someone gave us a deer he had shot and didn't want, we would give the meat to my grandmother and she would use it for steaks and soups and stews. My grandfather would tan the skin for moccasins and hunting bags. And we would find a use for just about every part of the deer: tying fishing flies from the tail hairs and making whistles from the leg bones.

But we didn't do that this time. Instead my grandfather got two shovels from his workshop. We dug a hole in the center of the cornfield and buried the deer with his legs folded under him, his nose facing west, and that cherry tree sticking up out of the ground.

It was worth a try.

The following spring, the tree gave us a beautiful crop of cherries.

Early in the season, I walked out with my stepladder and bucket to pick the first cherries of the year. I set up my ladder and climbed into the upper braches, dropping the cherries into my bucket.

Then I made the mistake of popping one into my mouth.

“Ow!” I yelled. I had bitten into something sharp.

My grandfather came running over. “What’s the problem?” he asked

I fished around in my mouth and pulled out two little twiggy-looking things.

“I’m all right, Grandpa. I must have gotten a sharp stem in my mouth.” I said.

I reached up, picked another cherry, and slipped it into my mouth.

“Ow!” I hollered again. That hurt worse than the first time!

“Now what?” my grandfather said. “Is there something wrong with those cherries?”

Something had jabbed into my tongue. I reached into my mouth and pulled out two sharp curvy things.

Then I looked up into the cherry tree and realized what had happened: Every one of those little individual cherries had a tiny set of deer antlers in them!

“Well, I’ll be—“ my grandpa said. “That’s amazing.”

It *was* amazing. Year after year that tree bore us crops of cherries with little six-pointers in them. They were perfectly good cherries. The only problem was, by the time you had de-pitted and de-antlered them, it would take you all afternoon to get enough for a pie.

We still have a few of those miniature antlers around the house. We use them for toothpicks when company comes over.

As far as I know, that cherry tree is still growing in the center of our cornfield. And I hope it grows there a long, long time.

The Sawdust Bear

Back in the 1920's, thirty years before I was born, our part of Pennsylvania was a haven for black bears. They made their homes in the rocky crags of the mountains that surrounded our valley. Every now

and then, people would see bear tracks in the mud along the streams. Sometimes they would even see the bears in broad daylight, foraging for food.

Then one year, late in the fall, when my grandfather was barely twenty years old, he shot one of the biggest black bears ever taken in the Pennsylvania mountains. He didn't mean to shoot him. It was an accident. Grandpa had been out deer hunting with his old flintlock rifle when he stumbled across a black bear.

The bear charged; my grandfather fired.

The bear fell dead.

It took five men to drag the shaggy creature out of the woods. People came from all over to see it. Bears are so elusive that, even in those days, there were many people in our town who had never seen one up close. The men spent the rest of the day skinning and butchering, doing a real careful job.

Herman Hemsley, one of the men who helped with the skinning, was a part-time taxidermist. He said he would stuff the bear for my grandfather so he would always remember his close brush with death.

My grandfather agreed. He could picture how magnificent that bear would look standing by the fireplace in the living room, its blue black fur burnished by the firelight.

It took Hemsley three months, working evening and weekends, to get that bear stuffed and mounted.

First, he built a sturdy frame from stiff wire. Then he added contours by wrapping the frame with strips of cloth, layered with wood shavings and sawdust. Once the form was completed, he sewed the

huge skin over it and added teeth, claws, and glass eyeballs. Then he mounted the whole thing on a heavy base made from solid oak.

I guess Herman wanted the bear to look fierce. So he stood him up on his hind legs, his mouth forever open in a silent roar, his paws extended in a threatening gesture. Everyone agreed it was Herman's masterpiece, the highest form of the taxidermist's art.

One day, early in spring, a bunch of men loaded the bear into my grandfather's pickup truck and drove it up to the house. This was back when the brick house was new. He and my grandmother had gotten married the year before and were just beginning to settle into the routine of life together.

When my grandmother saw the truck pull up, she came out onto the front porch and stood with her hands on her hips.

"I hope you're not thinking of bringing that thing into the house," she said.

Grandpa was momentarily stunned. "What are you talking about? Of course it's going in the house, right next to the fireplace in the living room."

My grandmother shook her head. "Oh, no, it's not," she said emphatically, "I'm not spending the next forty years sweeping up bear hair and dusting the cobwebs off that thing!"

Grandpa threw his hands up in the air. "Well, where do you expect me to put it?"

My grandmother pointed to the shed behind the house, where my grandfather had his workshop.

"Put it back there," she said.

"What? Have you lost your senses?" grandfather shouted.

Herman spoke up, trying to reason with grandma. “We can’t put it in the shed,” he explained. “This is a fine piece of taxidermy. It’s gotta be stored under optimal conditions. If we put it out there, the fleas will lay eggs in the bear’s fur, the rats’ll chew on his feet, and the field mice will make nests in his ears!”

My grandmother planted her feet and crossed her arms. “You men can talk all you want. That bear is not coming in this house.”

Still, my grandfather was determined. Ignoring his young wife, he made the men unload the bear and carry it up the front steps.

But the shaggy beast wouldn’t fit through the front door. And as Grandma pointed out, he wouldn’t stand up in the living room either; the ceiling was too low.

So, in the end, they followed my grandmother’s wishes. They carried the bear out to the shed and placed him in the corner of my grandfather’s workshop, where he stood on his hind legs for thirty years, until I came along.

Herman Hemsley was right. The shed wasn’t a good place to store the sawdust bear. The fleas ate at him until his ears were bare and his hair fell off in clumps. The mice nibbled at his feet and squirrels bored in through his ear holes and stored nuts in him for the winter.

But I loved the sawdust bear. To me he was always immense, powerful and full of strange magic. I was never afraid of him, like the other kids were. It’s true, his posture was threatening, his claws massive and wickedly sharp, his teeth were powerful and looked so dangerous.

But the one thing the taxidermist could not change was the expression on the bear's face. He never looked fierce to me. Instead, I thought he looked puzzled and a little sad. Those glass eyeballs gave his gaze a faraway look. From where that great bear stood, he could look out the window over my grandfather's workbench. His gaze always seemed to be fixed on something beyond the cornfields and the pumpkin patches, up in the mountains where he had come from so long ago.

Many times I wondered if the sawdust bear felt confined in the workshop, away from the sunlight and the wind and the smells of the open air. But a secret part of me was glad that he was there, always waiting for me when I came to visit.

Then one day, when I was about ten years old, a strange thing happened.

It started innocently enough. My grandfather and I were in the shed. It was a brisk winter's day and Grandpa had a crackling fire going in the woodstove. He was sitting on his stool at the workbench, rewiring a toaster for my grandmother. I was poking around, aimlessly going through an old chest of drawers that stood against the wall.

I opened a small wooden drawer. There, in the weak light, I could make out some strange objects. They were made of pieces of wood and hollowed-out bones, tied together with scraps of leather and twine.

"Grandpa," I said, "what are these?"

My grandfather put down his tools and came over to see what I had found.

He smiled. "Why, Robin, I forgot I still had those. They have probably been sitting in that drawer for thirty years."

“What are they?”

“Well, they’re animal calls. This one is a mallard duck call. And this one here is a turkey call, for spring gobbler season. And this—“ he held up a strange-looking thing made from a hollowed-out deer antler with a piece of birch bark threaded through it—“this is a female bear grunt call.”

“What’s it for?”

“For hunting bear! You blow in the end of it and you can imitate the sound of a female bear grunting in the mating season. That way, you can bring the males right to you.”

“When is the bear mating season?”

“Well, Robin, it’s just about now. For the next month or so, the females will be calling to the males. Of course, there aren’t as many bears as there were in the old days, so it’s harder and harder for bears to find a mate.”

“How about that female we saw in the woods last summer? Would she be making a call like this?”

“Well, sure. I guess so.”

“Grandpa! Let’s go up in the woods and find some bears.”

My grandfather shook his head. “No, Robin, that would be way too dangerous. You shouldn’t be messing with bears during the mating season. They can get real ornery this time of year. Now let’s put these things away and forget we ever talked about it.”

Sadly, I placed the animal calls back in the drawer and slid it closed.

But I just couldn’t get the thought of that female bear grunt call out of my mind. I had to hear what it sounded like and, more important, I had to see if it really worked.

In the days that followed, I hatched a plan. I would take the call and sneak out into the woods, making my way up the mountainside to a clearing where, the summer before, we'd seen a black bear and her cubs. To be safe, I'd climb a tree. Then, with all the proper precautions made, I would blow the call and wait to see what happened.

A dozen times I almost told my grandfather, hoping he would join me in the adventure. Deep inside, I suspected that he was as curious as I was but was afraid of what my grandmother might say if she found out that we had snuck out to spend time with the bears.

So the next Saturday morning, when no one else was up, I crept out to my grandfather's workshop, slipped the call into my pocket and headed for the mountainside. In a half hour, I was up a tree on the edge of the clearing, with the call pressed to my lips.

I blew softly at first, not knowing what kind of sound it would make. What came out was a pretty impressive grunting sound. I blew again, harder this time.

All the while, I had my eyes on the clearing, hoping to catch a glimpse of a black bear.

It didn't take me long to learn the nuances of the bear call. I discovered that if I buzzed my lips as I blew, I could create an interesting tremolo effect. Before long, I was giving a little concert of bear grunts from my perch in the tree.

As the call grew louder, they echoed off the mountainsides. The sound filled the woods, ricocheting across the hills and drifting down into the valley.

At last, I saw a bear approaching. A big male lumbered into the clearing on all fours, his nose held high. I grew a little afraid and stopped blowing calls. I just sat in the crook of the tree limb and watched him.

It was while I was straining to keep him in view that I heard a sharp crack. The branch gave way beneath me! I dropped fifteen feet and landed in a pile of leaves.

I wasn't hurt, but the sound of my fall had alerted the bear. He turned and looked at me for what seemed a very long time. He wrinkled his brow as if he was trying to figure out what I was.

At that moment I was genuinely afraid, and sorry that I had done such a stupid thing.

The bear surveyed me for a long time. I held as still as I could, pretending to be a tree stump. The bear dropped on all fours and casually walked toward me. When he was within a few feet, he stopped and sniffed me. His black nostrils were less than a yard from my face. The moisture from his breath formed a cloud that drifted in my direction, bringing me his terrifying animal scent.

I braced myself for a swipe from his razor-sharp claws. Or a head-long charge that I knew could come at any instant.

But it did not come.

Instead, the bear rumbled deep in his chest, making a great sound that seemed to shake the ground underneath me. Then he turned and was gone, moving heavily up the mountainside and into the cover of the trees.

I waited until I could no longer hear the sound of his paws on the leafy trail. Then I pulled myself to my feet and ran back to the house on shaky legs. I had been terrified, and I knew that what I had done was stupendously foolish. But what an adventure! I had called up a wild black bear, come face to face with the animal, and lived to tell the tale!

But as I neared my grandparent's house, I realized that I couldn't tell the tale. Who would I tell? My grandfather would be mad at me for disobeying. My grandmother would be furious at me for risking my life. My friends would never believe me.

This was the bittersweet irony of it: I had had a great adventure and I couldn't tell a soul about it! I decided that I would slip into the workshop, put the call in the drawer and never mention anything to anyone.

But when I got to the shop, I noticed that something was strange. The shed door was standing wide open. I was certain I had closed it when I left, and I knew my grandfather had not left it open.

"Maybe it was the wind," I said to myself. I stepped inside and swung the door closed.

But when I looked into the half darkness of the shed, I couldn't believe what I saw.

The sawdust bear was gone!

In the corner where the bear used to stand, nothing remained but the heavy wooden base—and a double trail of sawdust going out the door and up toward the mountainside.

Then I realized what had happened: That female bear grunt call had been so effective that it had even rekindled the passions of a bear that had been stuffed for thirty years! The sawdust bear was out roaming the mountainside, looking for a mate. No wonder he wasn't interested in me.

Now there was no way out of it. Later that morning, I told my grandfather the whole story.

He couldn't believe it at first. I took him out to the workshop and showed him the sawdust trail. But he was still doubtful. Even after we followed the tracks up the mountainside for a ways, Grandpa found my story too hard to believe.

Then, a few days later, one of the workers down at the local sawmill told Grandpa that he had spotted a large black bear, prowling around the sawdust piles.

“It was the strangest thing,” the man said, “That bear sat down on his haunches and began using his paws to shovel sawdust into his mouth. A sawdust-eating bear! I’ve never seen anything like it!”

My grandfather and I knew what was happening. The bear was just swallowing a little extra sawdust to make up for the stuffing he had lost during his dash for freedom.

I like to think the bear did find his freedom. I like to think that he made it up into the mountains, to the place he had been looking at through the window for all those years. I’d like to think that he heard the grunt of a real female bear and that he found a mate he lived out his life in peace and safety, as a bear should.

My grandfather and I never told anybody what really happened to the sawdust bear. We said we had hauled him out to the town dump and thrown him down in the sinkhole with a bunch of other things that no one wanted anymore: old washing machines and broken bicycles and cardboard boxes.

But I like to think that he’s still up in the mountains, somewhere. And if he is, I hope we never find him.

The Diamondback Rattlesnake

There is nothing more pitiful than a toothless rattlesnake.

Grandpa and I saw one down at the Black Moshanon Nature Center one hot summer afternoon.

The snake was curled up, coil on coil, in a square wire cage on a table in the far corner of the room. We walked over and had a look at him.

My grandfather knew the naturalist, a young fellow named Herbert who used to pump gas at the neighborhood filling station. He was a gawky, awkward kid with no mechanical ability whatsoever, so his future at the service station was limited. But then he found this new job, for less pay but more prestige, at the local park. He got a uniform and a badge and the tourists would call him “Ranger Herb”, which pleased him to no end.

“Well, Herb,” my grandfather said, “looks like you got yourself a diamondback here.”

“Yep,” Herb said, coming out of the office, “that’s a real *Crotalus adamanteus*.”

Herb always did enjoy showing off.

“How’d you get him?” I asked.

“Oh, one of the game protectors brought him in. He was living under the porch over at the visitors center. The park director wanted to kill him but then I stepped in. I said I thought it would be much smarter to have him defanged and use him here at the nature center as an educational tool.”

Herb seemed very pleased with himself.

“You mean he can’t bite anyone?” I asked.

“Nope. Look here.” Herb got a stick and poked it through the wire cage, touching the slumbering snake on the snout. The reptile lazily opened his mouth in a wide yawn. Sure enough, the two front fangs were missing. When the snake closed his mouth again, he looked like a toothless old man.

“If he hasn’t got any fangs, how does he hunt and eat?” Grandpa asked.

“Oh, his hunting days are over,” Herb said, “I catch field mice and feed him one every couple days.”

“What does he do,” I asked, “gum it to death?”

“Nah, he just swallows it whole. Then he lies there and digests it, slowly.”

My grandfather and I shook our heads. “Pitiful,” Grandpa said.

I’ll admit that, up until that moment, I had never had that much sympathy for rattlesnakes. Like most everybody, I was afraid of them and tried my best to stay out of their way. But there was something about this snake and its situation that saddened me. The rattlesnake opened its bleary eyes and looked at us absently. His tail flicked once or twice, but the rattle sounded feeble and halfhearted.

“Will the fangs ever grow back?” I asked.

“Normally they do,” Herb said, “but for some reason, that hasn’t happened to this fella. I guess he’ll just be toothless his whole life. In the meantime, it’s lucky for us. The Boy Scout troop that meets here has been working on Reptile Study Merit Badge and the boys have had a great time handling him and observing his habits.”

“Think he’ll hibernate here for the winter?” I asked.

“Won’t have a chance to,” Herbert said. “The nature center closes at the end of the season and I gotta go back to the filling station. I’ll probably just release him in the woods out back and let nature take its course.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“What Herbert means,” my grandfather put it, “is that he’ll starve to death. Without a set of fangs he’ll be as helpless in the woods as a newborn babe.”

“Well, Robin,” Herb said, “You gotta understand. These things happen in nature. Survival of the fittest and all that.”

“Except for one thing,” Grandpa said, “It was you, not nature, that decided to take out his fangs.”

“Maybe so,” Herb said, “but at least the Boy Scouts got to learn something from the whole thing. I always say, if you don’t teach these kids to respect the environment, where is our world gonna be?”

Grandpa and I cast sidelong glances at each other.

“Grandpa,” I said, “couldn’t we take that snake—“

He held up his hand. “No. Don’t even start thinking that way. Your grandmother would skin me alive if I brought home a rattlesnake.”

“She wouldn’t have to know,” I assured him, “We could keep him out in the workshop. She never comes out there.”

“But how would we feed him?” he asked. “And what would we do with him once winter comes?”

When my grandfather started talking like that, I knew I was winning him over.

“Besides,” I said, sweetening the deal, “you know that wood carving project you started and never finished? The one with the rattlesnake coiled around a tree limb? This way you’d have a live model to work from.”

I could see that I had him.

“Well, maybe you got a point there.,” Grandpa conceded, “All right, we’ll give it a try. Herbert, if that rattler doesn’t grow a new set of fangs by the end of the summer, we’ll take him off your hands.”

Herb shrugged. "Suits me."

We stopped by a few times during the summer to check on the snake. Each time, Herb assured us that he was as toothless as ever.

Just before the Labor Day weekend, Herb called us to come over and get our snake. He said we could take the wire cage with us.

It was easy sneaking him into the workshop. My grandmother didn't suspect a thing. We were sure she would never discover our secret. She never came out to the workshop. She considered it a smelly, untidy place and couldn't understand why we spent so much time out there. Grandma had even made my grandfather run a phone line from the house to workshop so she could call him for dinner without ever having to set foot in the place.

I made a mouse trap out of metal bucket full of water and a block of wood, with cracked corn for bait, and fed the snake a steady diet of drowned mice.

The rattler was not a very exciting pet. He slept most of the time, curled up in his cage.

Then one morning something happened that changed all of that.

I found my grandfather at his workbench, polishing something with a piece of steel wool. On the bench in front of him were several nature books, showing drawings and photographs of snakes with their fangs exposed.

Grandpa blew the dust off his work and held it under the workbench light.

"Well, Robin, what do you think?"

Between his thumb and forefinger was a slender, polished piece of bone.

"What is it?" I asked.

Grandpa beamed. "It's an artificial fang. Here, look, I got two of 'em. I made them out of chicken bones from last night's dinner. Pretty realistic, huh?"

I looked back and forth from the illustrations to the fangs. I had to admit, they looked pretty authentic.

"They look great," I said, "But how are you gonna attach them?"

"Already thought of that. I figured I'd use that real strong instant-bonding glue I use to fix your grandmother's necklaces."

"But he really won't be able to use them, will he?"

"What? The necklaces?"

"No, the fangs!"

"No, Robin, he won't. But I figure it'll just make him feel better about himself. Just like when I got my false teeth. Being toothless is a terrible thing. I know. I've been through it. "

Grandpa reached into the wire cage, caught the snake right behind the head and drew him out, laying him on the workbench. That snake thrashed around and whipped his tail in the air. He was surprisingly strong. But we finally managed to get him calmed down. Grandpa forced the snake's mouth open and, working quickly, I put a dab of glue on the end of each fang and popped them into place against the roof of the snake's mouth. The glue dried instantly.

We put the snake back in the cage and watched.

At first, the rattler just crawled around and around. But at last he settled down and seemed to be considering his new condition. I ran into the house and brought out Grandpa's hand-held shaving mirror, and we set it up so the snake could see himself.

The rattler opened his mouth wide and turned his head from side to side, checking himself out from every angle. You don't have to know much about rattlesnakes to tell that that snake was pleased. Instead of lying there in a miserable coil, he held his head high, flicking his forked tongue and shaking his rattle like crazy.

Grandpa opened the cage door and the snake slithered out into the room, gracefully negotiating the piles of wood and boxes of tool, flicking his tongue at everything.

Grandpa and I were pretty pleased with ourselves. We sat and watched that snake for quite a while, just enjoying the poetry of his movements as he made his way across the wooden floor of the workshop.

It was fun watching him, but after a while the sound of his rattle got on my nerves. It was the same pattern, over and over.

All of a sudden, my grandfather sprang from his stool. "No," he said, "It can't be..."

"What?"

"Shh...listen: Dah...Dit Dit Dit Dit...Dit-Dah..." It was as if my grandfather was speaking in a foreign language.

"What is it?" I insisted.

"Morse code," my grandfather said.

Morse code! I didn't know much about Morse code except that my grandfather had been a telegraph operator during World War I and that he had sent thousands of messages across France and Germany using this system of dots and dashes, long and short sounds.

“Listen,” he said, Here it comes again: Dah...that’s one dash, that a T...Dit Dit Dit Dit...four dots, that an H...Dit-Dah, that’s A...Dah-Dit, N...Dah-Dit-Dah, K...Dit Dit Dit, S.”

My grandfather and I looked at each other in astonishment. It couldn’t be a coincidence. That snake knew Morse code and was trying to communicate with us!

We listened to the message again and, sure enough, it was the same.

“How did this snake learn Morse code?” Grandpa asked.

“Well,” I said, “why don’t you ask him?”

My grandfather knew instantly what I was thinking. He grabbed a metal spoon from the workbench and sat cross-legged on the wooden floor in front of the snake. The rattler wasn’t rattling anymore, he was just looking at my grandfather with expectant eyes.

Tapping with the spoon on the wooden floorboards, Grandpa tapped out a slow series of Dits and Dahs, saying, “Greetings, friend. How did you learn Morse code?”

Once he had finished, the snake stared at my grandfather for several seconds. For the first time, I noticed a change in the snake’s eyes. They were not just dark dots anymore. Within the darkness of its gaze, I could see that a keen intelligence was at work.

The snake began rattling. I watched in amazement as my grandfather grabbed a pencil and a pad of yellow paper and began writing furiously. Letter by letter, word by word, an astonishing story developed.

After being captured and suffering the indignity of being defanged, the snake was sure he was going to die. But as time went on, he accepted Herb’s mice as food and settled into the impossibly boring period of captivity. The nature center was quiet, except when the Boy Scouts had their meeting there.

Then the room was filled with shouting, whooping boys, all of whom wanted to handle the snake and poke things into his mouth. He was repelled by the whole idea.

But one thing about those Scout meetings did fascinate him. Although snakes cannot hear as we do, they are very sensitive to vibrations through the ground. The Boy Scouts used the long table his cage was on from their Morse code practice. They had set up two telegraph keys on the table and would tap out messages to one another endlessly.

Since he was a captive audience to the vibrations coming through the table, the bored reptile seized on the intellectual challenge of deciphering the code. By the end of summer, he was an ace at it. He had tried to communicate a few times, using his rattle to summon a response from the boys. But they were thick as stumps and never paid any attention to him. So the snake waited for an opportunity to communicate with more receptive humans. And when Grandpa gave him the fangs, he thought that maybe his chance had come.

After Grandpa read me the entire message, he tapped out, "Good boy."

To which the snake answered: "I'm a female. You can call me Sheba."

So we did.

In the days that followed, we had many fascinating conversations with the snake. Sheba insisted, for instance, that humans have no reason to be afraid of snakes and that snakes have a lot to teach. For one thing, Sheba said, a snake can shed its skin, moving on to a new life and leaving the old worn-out life behind.

I remember reading in one of history books that the ancient Egyptians honored and revered snakes for just that reason. The book had said that snakes were the symbol of rebirth and regeneration and were highly respected.

Sheba certainly did change my ideas about snakes, and about a lot of other things, too. Moving with painstaking slowness, letter by letter, my grandfather filled two writing tablets with messages taken from the snake. I still have them somewhere. Maybe I'll make them into a book someday.

Then a strange thing happened. It was toward the end of summer, on a hot day in August. I had just finished breakfast at my parents' house when the phone rang. It was my grandfather at the other end, but I could hardly hear him. He was gasping and trying to talk, but he sounded like he was a thousand miles away.

"Grandpa?" I said, "Grandpa? Are you there?"

There was no answer. Then, through the receiver, I heard a strange buzzing, and I realized it was the rattlesnake! By now, I knew Morse code pretty well myself. I concentrated on the sound of the rattles coming through the phone lines. Dit Dit Dah-Dit, F. Dit Dit, I. Dit-Dah-Dit, R. Dit, E.

FIRE!

I looked out the window, toward my grandparents' property and saw smoke billowing from the open door of the workshop!

I raced out the back door, sprinted across the yard, and burst into the workshop. My grandfather was sprawled on the floor, one hand over his heart, his face as pale as moonlight. I could see that he had fallen and knocked over a kerosene lantern. A small fire was crackling in a pile of scrap wood by the workbench. The snake lay in a coil by my grandfather's head, its tail near the receiver of the phone.

I took all this in with one glance. Quickly, I filled a bucket with water from the big sink in the corner and sloshed it onto the burning wood. The fire died instantly. Kneeling by my grandfather, I saw that he was unconscious but still breathing. I snatched up the phone and called the ambulance. By the time I hung up, I could hear the siren coming up the main street of our town.

It was my grandfather's first heart attack. A minor one, the doctor said, but still serious enough to keep him off his feet for a week or two. By the end of August, my grandfather was fully recovered.

Once grandpa came home from the hospital, we told my grandmother about the snake. We wanted her to know how Sheba had saved Grandpa's life.

"Well," Grandma said, "I never thought I'd be thankful to a rattlesnake. But I guess I am."

I didn't have much time for the snake while Grandpa was getting back on his feet. Even though she had been kind of a heroine, I guess I was so worried about Grandpa that I neglected to feed Sheba or spend time with her.

Then one day I walked into the workshop and saw that Sheba was gone. As I was searching for a sign of the brave snake, I saw something light and papery stuck between the stones of the foundation. I knelt and carefully drew it out. It was a perfect replica of Sheba, right down to the eyes and the mouth. She had shed her skin. And shed this life, leaving behind this exquisite reminder.

I walked outside and held the skin up to the sky. Hundreds of diamonds glittered in the sunlight.

I smiled, thinking about this cold-blooded reptile who had taught me so much. The thought occurred to me that if a snake could learn Morse code and communicate with humans, maybe we could

learn some of the animals' languages, taking just a few short steps in their direction, so that the day would come, just like in the old storybooks, when animals and humans would speak the same language.

If you enjoyed these stories, consider purchasing the full book, [The Cherry Tree Buck](#), on [Amazon.com](#).

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