

During a rainy lunch time, Jason sat at a table in the school cafeteria with his two friends, Bill and Sonny. He said he had an idea that he had been thinking about for a while. Pulling a picture of a slingshot from his pocket, he showed it to his friends.

“How about we each make one of these and then see who’s the best shot.”

“Cool,” Sonny replied.

“Let’s do it,” Jim said.

Bill mused, “It might take time to find a good branch.”

“How about in a month we do a shoot off. That’ll give us time to find a branch and do some target practice,” Jason responded.

The boys agreed that Saturday, April 1st, would be the day.

Saturday morning, the air was fresh after an evening thunderstorm. Jason planned to hike in the forest preserves near his home in quest of a branch. He reasoned tree limbs would litter the ground, given that high winds caused the loss of power during the storm. He knew the forest path would be muddy, but he decided to go, anyway. Before starting out, he stopped in the garage and picked up a bow saw in case he spotted the perfect Y branch.

Sloshing along the forest path, he scrutinized the fallen limbs. Splashing through puddles; his gym shoes and socks became squishy wet. Someway into the forest, finding no success, his

muscles tensed; frustration bubbled, but he pushed on. Finally, Jason eyed several fallen limbs near a line of oak trees. He reached down through the wet leaves and flipped over a large limb. Rivulets of water showered his clothes. Undaunted, he surveyed the limb. Suddenly, his eyes popped with excitement. He jumped about, mud sprayed from his shoes, and he sang out, “Yes! Yes! I found you.” He ecstatically sawed off the Y shaped branch. Flowing with enthusiasm, he happily splashed through muddy puddles as he ran all the way home.

Breathing hard, he returned the saw and bounced up the back stairs and into the house. He removed his shoes and threw them in the utility room sink. Jason then bolted up the stairs to his room and placed the Y branch on top of the heating vent to dry out.

After school on Friday, he ran his hands over the oak wood and deemed it dried to proper hardness. He carried the Y into the garage and, using his jackknife, carved notches on the top of each arm. Then he cut two rubber strips from an old bike inner tube and looped them around the notches, tightly wrapping each band with dental floss, thus securing them to the arms. He cut the tongue from an old shoe and fashioned a leather sling to hold ammunition.

Jason showed his handiwork to his father. Tim said he did a marvelous job, but cautioned Jason about doing harm with the slingshot. Dad said in a serious tone not to hurt the things that Mother Nature had given to us.

“Sure, I won’t, Dad,” Jason replied, thinking his father meant animals and birds.

On the way home from school the following week, Jason filled his pockets with stones. At home,

he dumped his ammunition into a pile not far from the big, old hickory tree in the backyard. Opening an old can of red paint and used it to paint a three-ring target on the tree. He smiled, remembering how his dog Rags, a big, old floppy guy, would make a bee-line for it and let flow a steaming stream of hot, yellow urine, soaking the base of the tree's trunk.

One morning, however, Rags didn't answer Mom's call for breakfast and the family never saw him again. Jason knew his dad was trying to make him feel better when he told him that some animals feel it's their time. When they do, they go away so their family will not see them die. Jason accepted his father's explanation and thought that it was a kind thing that Rags did. It was strange, Jason thought, that after Rags ran away, two tree roots surfaced, looking somewhat like shaggy dog paws.

Jason practiced every afternoon after school, wanting to win the slingshot competition. He grinned when stones ripped off pieces of bark inside the target, causing the tree to bleed amber tears. He ignored the fallen shards of bark that lay curled and lifeless at the base of the tree.

One afternoon, Mom walked into the backyard as Jason was shooting at the tree. "Jason!" she said, "I hope you are not hurting that tree. It's been a good friend to our family through the years. We love the tree. It's a wonderful place to relax and read under its branches in the summer, have picnics in its shade, and in the winter, we use some of its twigs in the fireplace. Maybe it's not a good idea to shoot at it."

Jason responded, "Dad told me I shouldn't shoot at animals or birds, so I think the tree's okay. Anyway, the bark will grow back."

“I hope so,” Mom said, ringing her apron as she walked back to the house.

One day, after he had fired a large stone smacking the target, the word “Enough!” reverberated off the back of the house and throughout the yard. Jason lowered his slingshot, looked about the yard and back toward the house, but saw no one.

He called, “Mom, is that you?” No answer. He shrugged his shoulders and went back to his target practice.

Pulling back the sling pouch to his ear, he aimed and fired. A loud groan shredded the air as the projectile ripped off another chunk of bark. Suddenly, a limb swung down, plucked the slingshot from his hand; two branches scooped Jason under his arms and squeezed him tight.

He yelled, “Hey, what the heck?”

More limbs descended, enveloping Jason in a leafy shroud. Air oozed from his lungs as twigs and leaves invaded his nose and climbed down his throat as a large limb lifted him and thrust him against the tree trunk. Pain bolted through his body; fear shot up his spine. “Stop! Please stop! You’re hurting me!” But the tree didn’t stop. Jason wanted to scream but couldn’t. Volcanic terror erupted as he felt himself sucked deeper and deeper into the cellulose fibers of the tree. His heart pumped sap, his arms and legs became a crook halfway up the tree trunk. Branches sprouted from his extremities. Black burls appeared, looking much like eyes and an open mouth. A graveyard silence fell over the yard.

The silence ceased when his mom called for Jason to come in for supper. She worried when he

failed to come. He was never late for supper. Elizabeth hurried into the living room and told her husband Tim of Jason's failure to come when she called.

Tim dropped the evening paper and said, "I'll get that darn kid."

He ambled into the backyard, calling Jason's name. However, no response from Jason. Dad walked near the stones Jason had accumulated and glanced up into the hickory tree. To his surprise, he noticed Jason's slingshot dangling from a branch. Tim thought it strange that his son would throw his cherished slingshot up in the tree. He called again, a black crow cawed and flew from a large branch. In the meantime, Elizabeth telephoned Bill and Sonny's parents, but to no avail. Bill and Sonny joined Tim. The three scoured the neighborhood, but Jason was nowhere to be found.

Tim returned home and called the police. It was a small town and two officers quickly arrived at the house.

Elizabeth told the officers in a halting voice, "That was... before, before suppertime over... three, three hours ago. Please... please... find him."

Harry Thompson, an officer and a friend, said, "Don't worry, Lizzy, kids sometimes just get lost when they're looking for something or maybe he just fell asleep some place.

However, at 1:00 AM, Officer Thompson returned to the house and reported that they failed to find a trace of Jason, but he said with assurance that they would resume the search in the morning.

A year after Jason disappeared, Tim sat in the shade of the old hickory tree. He liked to sit there on Saturday afternoons and read. He didn't know why, but it made him feel closer to his son. A gust of wind rustled the hickory leaves. Tim glanced up from his book, cocked his head, when he thought he heard, "Dad, me and Rags are here." Tears flowed into his eyes. For the first time, he noticed burls on the hickory's bark. The thought occurred to him they look much like a boy's face. He shook his head and shrugged, thinking perhaps he had been reading too many Stephen King novels.