

# Clarence



“I’m getting tired of sitting on this wooden bench; I should go do something. With Pete off acting like one of the boys, he’ll keep them occupied all afternoon.”

“It’s great to have him on a campout. Remember when we were the only two adults and by the middle of the afternoon the scouts were coming to you complaining they were bored—like you were the one that was supposed to keep them entertained.”

“Yeah, they only came to me because you’re so grumpy. When you’re smoking a cigar and reading a book they won’t get within twenty feet of your chair. You wouldn’t get away with it if there were other troops around—they’d tell you to go off to some designated smoking area.”

“Of all my bad habits, if the only thing they pick up from me is smoking a cigar, I think we got off pretty lucky. Hey, why didn’t you bring Ben on this trip? We aren’t doing any strenuous backpacking or anything. He could have come”

Jesse Hulse

“He isn’t even old enough for cubs. Once in a while, he can tag along, but I don’t want him to think he gets to come on every Boy Scout outing. Besides, I took him out—just the two of us—a couple of weeks ago. We went to San-Lee Park. It’s close to home and with enough space to do a little hiking. The trail around the lake is about a mile, and he got to watch a beaver on the far side. As we came back to our camp we heard the weirdest thing.”

“What was it?”

“It sounded like a wooden block you’d see in a kid’s rhythm band. Not quite like that, but it’s hard to describe. It was a loud percussive sound. Looking up, it was coming from a crow. I watched him for a long time to make sure. I’d never heard a crow make a sound like that, but it was him. His throat was moving just a little when he made the sound. Have you ever heard of a crow making that kind of sound?”

Bill fell silent for some time. “Jack, How long do crows live?”

“I think most only live a few years, but I was reading the other day about one that died recently. He’d been injured as a fledgling—a thunderstorm knocked him out of the nest and broke his wing. Somebody found him and took care of him. He couldn’t fly, but they made a pet of him. He was pushing sixty when he died.”

Jesse Hulse

Bill sat without speaking until Jack started fidgeting. “Bring your camp chair up to my tent. This’ll take a while, and we’ll need cigars.

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Bill picked up the bundle of a dozen or so cigars he’d brought with him and counted them because he trusted the boys, but mostly he trusted them to be boys. He lit one and handed one to Jack along with the lighter. He took a few puffs, unsure where to begin: “I had no idea he was still alive, but I think you found—well, I guess you could say—my mentor.”

“What are you talking about? I know North Carolinians have a long tradition of blarney from their Celtic ancestors, and there’s the tradition of tall tales in Boy Scouts, but you made it sound like we were going to have a serious conversation.”

“Jack, you’ve known me long enough to know when I’m serious and when I’m not. I’m gonna tell you a true story as I remember it. You can decide whether I’m telling you the truth or I’m crazy. Not sure which it is myself, but I do know that I’m not intentionally lying to you.”

“Fair enough. I’ll hold an open mind.”

“The house I grew up in was just outside San-Lee Park, and I spent most of my free time in the woods there. When I was eleven I joined Boy Scouts, and when I finished my First Class

requirements in a little over a year, my mom was so proud of me. I really had trouble with the Morse code requirement, and she's the one who got me through. She made up pictures for each of the letters—A was an apple. I can still see her drawing the apple for the dot and the extra-long stem for the dash. She drilled me on those symbols until I was dreaming in Morse code. By the time she was done with me, I could send and receive about fifteen words a minute.”

He paused, swallowed hard, and continued: “The court of honor was Friday night and she promised to sew the First Class badge on my uniform that very night. But there was an accident—we spent Friday night with her in the hospital. She never woke up.”

Jack was speechless as his friend continued: “Thursday afternoon I sat through the funeral in a daze. I'd been taught that boys didn't cry. It was a lie, but one I tried my best to live up to it. Outside I was expressionless, but inside I was Niagara Falls. Somehow I thought holding the tears in would help my dad through it, but nothing could help him. Which meant he couldn't be there to help me.”

“I'm sorry Bill, I can only imagine what you were going through.”

“It was rough. The only thing that seemed to help was going into the woods and spending as much time as possible watching and

listening. The sounds of the stream, frogs, wind through the trees, and the birds—especially the birds. With practice and concentration, the calls of different birds were discernible—not just different varieties, but different individuals. I could tell them apart, not all the time, but sometimes.”

“No wonder you are so good on nature walks with the boys.”

“I had help.”

“What sort of help?”

“There was this one crow that baffled me; he didn’t sound like any of the others. Crows usually have a cawing sound as well as some coos, rattles, and clicks. Those were known to me, but this crow had a call all his own. He sounded like somebody hitting a piece of hardwood with a mallet. It sounded just like what you described to me. It was mesmerizing and somehow therapeutic. Crows are territorial, and I could never find out just how big their territory is, but this one seemed to spend most of his time in one tall pine. So, my time was spent near that tree too.”

One of the scouts came by, “Mr. Fielder, can we play capture the flag?”

“What did your Senior Patrol Leader say?”

“He said to ask you.”

“Tell him he was elected to make decisions—so make one.”

With the interruption handled—if somewhat gruffly—Bill continued: “One day while sitting in my regular spot under the tree and listening to my crow, there was an unmistakable sequence of sounds. Listening over and over it began to sound like code. But that was nuts. Still, the rhythm was clear, and repeating, “.... . —. — — ... .. —. —... . —. — .. —.”. Suddenly, I realized that I was reading the code, ‘HEY BIRDBRAIN’. I yelled, ‘Who are you calling birdbrain.’ The bird continued in code, ‘I don’t know, maybe the one who’s talking to a crow.’”

Bill’s cigar had gone out while he was talking and he stopped to relight it and gather his thoughts. Reliving all this seemed to be taking its toll, but in a moment he started again: “You’re pretty snarky for a crow aren’t you?”

“Have you ever talked to a crow that wasn’t?”

“Fair enough. I was pretty good with code, but even with fifteen words a minute, it makes a devilishly slow conversation. I asked his name and he told me I could call him Clarence like the angel in *It’s a Wonderful Life*, since he was going to get me through this. He added there was nothing for him in this since he already had wings.”

Clarence glided down from the pine and landed on a downed trunk. “How are you going to get me through this? You can’t

bring my mom back.”

His coded reply came: “What can I do? Mostly, you need somebody to listen. Clicking out code takes too long—especially when you are the one decoding. So, your job is to talk, while mine is listening.”

“Sitting on the log next to the bird, words started trickling out of me. Pretty soon it was a deluge of both words and tears. Clarence listened to me telling about my mom, how much fun she could be, and how much I loved her. My sobbing was uncontrollable as I confessed all the times I’d disobeyed her and disrespected her. There were even times when my stupid actions had made her cry.”

Clarence interrupted me: “She always loved you. There wasn’t a time when she held those things against you.”

“How he knew that I can’t say, but even through code he was somehow convincing. It was nearly dark when I got home, but Dad didn’t even ask where I’d been. He was in his own world that seemed to be growing smaller each day.”

Jack lit a gas stove to make coffee. When it was done he poured two cups and handed one to Bill without saying a word.”

“The seventh grade had just ended and the summer vacation was in front of me. My days were spent in the woods at the base of

Clarence's tree. Through the hot humid summer, my butt was attached to a log next to the crow. He listened to me for hours nodding his head to show he was still paying attention. Sometimes he would interject some coded comment, but mostly he just let me talk out the misery of my soul as I breathed in the goodness of the trees and flowers.”

“When fall came—and with it compulsory education—Clarence was waiting every afternoon in the usual place. He was the one who heard about the girls I had crushes on, and the one who heard my complaints when my shyness kept me from even talking to them. He kept saying I'd be alright and made me believe it. He listened to my pain and gave little hints of how the misery could help me understand another's hurt, and be able to comfort.”

“As my eighth-grade school was winding down my dad got a job managing a manufacturing plant in Mexico, and we lived there until college. After a degree in chemical engineering at Texas Tech and a couple of jobs in synthetic chemistry, a recruiter called with a job back here in the “Old North State”, twenty miles from where I grew up. It didn't take long for me to grab that. This has always been my home. I've driven past San-Lee Park a few times—even went into the parking lot once—but I just couldn't bring myself to look for that big pine tree. Clarence would have been dead, or maybe a product of my grieving mind.



Jesse Hulse

But there wasn't enough courage in me the verify it."

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A week later Jack's car went through the gate of San-Lee Park. A few minutes walk brought him to a big pine tree where he sat down on a fallen log. He had been thinking of the story he'd heard and just didn't know what to do with it.

Suddenly he heard a percussive sound and the rhythm kept repeating itself. Jack pulled a piece of paper from his shirt pocket and compared what he heard with the code he had meticulously copied.

The rhythm was clear, and repeating, .... —.— — —... ..—.—...  
. —.— .. —.

"HEY BIRDBRAIN".