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## The Waiting Place

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# THE WAITING PLACE

BY DENNIS TRUDELL

The small boy ducked and moved quickly on padded moccasin feet to where the heavy undergrowth would hide him from what he had seen in the forest. He crouched for a moment, then cautiously lifted his head and peered through a space in the brush. The face was still there, about thirty yards away, near the base of a large tree.

He turned away and lowered himself to one knee. He swallowed with difficulty, and felt his heart inside the deerskin jacket, as he fought to keep his body from shaking. The second look at the face had been even more frightening than the first, for now he knew it was real. Silence seemed to have isolated him as if the forest were waiting for something, but the boy looked up and saw that the sunlight still came in patches through the thick green of the beech trees. The forest was bright and alive where the patches touched, and muted and deeper in the shadowy places. Then he heard the birds in the branches above and knew that it all was really the same as before. Except that it wasn't, for when he gathered courage and looked a third time the face was still there, motionless by the tree.

The boy had come far into the afternoon woods. It was much cooler here than back at the cabin where there was no shade against the August sun. He had come following a narrow stream, walking a ways from it because he thought that if it became wide and deeper he might see animals drinking from it. Or at least some frogs or snakes, or maybe even an animal track like the one his father had found in the mud. He had walked quietly so as not to frighten away any of the creatures he hoped to see. He had been looking carefully around but for a long time hadn't seen or heard a thing except for the birds, or an occasional faint scurrying off in the underbrush. It was a great shock, therefore, when suddenly he had seen a man's face just ahead through the trees.

Daring now to take a longer look, the boy could see the rest of the man. He was crouching, and not only his face, but his whole body seemed very stiff. The man seemed to be watching for something, for he kept his head straight ahead, staring in the direction of the stream. The boy saw that he was dressed all in green; that was why it was hard to see him right away. Green pants, a green coat, and he wore a green peaked cap pulled low so that even the lightness of his skin wasn't apparent against the natural backdrop. The man's face was in shade and the boy thought that it didn't really look like a face at all, more like a mask that was somehow a part of the dense forest growth. In fact the whole body looked unreal. For a moment the boy thought that perhaps it was a statue, or a big cardboard figure like the ones he had seen at the grocery store. But then he looked at the face again and knew the man was real, very much alive and waiting.

There was something about the grim intent face that made him afraid to look at it for very long at a time. Then something else caught the boy's eye—a long, thin thing the man appeared to be holding. It was dark and looked like a long stick, but it was hard to see in the shadows. The boy wondered what it was, and wondered what the man was doing, crouched there in the bushes.

The boy thought that if he moved just a little to one side he would be able to see better, so, very deliberately, feeling the ground for sticks which might break and give him away, he crawled the few feet. He got to his knees, hardly daring to breathe in fear that his movement might have been noticed. Already, though, his fright was turning to curiosity and soon he had made himself comfortable and raised his head to look.

He peered again and gasped silently, for now he could see what it was the man held. It was a bow, held upright with one hand; the other was out of sight in the man's lap. On his coated back, the boy saw a green quiver, probably packed full of deadly arrows. The boy stared at the face once more. He tried to think of who would have a bow and arrows, but all he could think of was Indians. The man didn't look like an Indian, at least none of the ones he'd seen in the movies. And his face was too angry-looking, the chin thrust almost defiantly as the head remained fixed looking toward the nearby stream. He was watching for something, though the boy had no idea what it could be.

The bow fascinated the boy and he wondered why he hadn't noticed it at first. He had never seen a real bow before, only the ones in picture books and movies. Once he had tried to make one of his

own, but the string had broken the first time he pulled hard on it. The boy breathed quicker now, but this time it was the excitement. He felt he must know what the strange man was doing. Slowly he lifted himself so he could see if the man held anything in his other hand. He stretched his neck, exposing his head for a moment from behind the tangled growth. Sure enough, the man held an arrow across the bow. The boy felt a sudden tremor as the full realization that the man intended to shoot something came to him.

The boy lowered to his knees again. He was so excited that he was afraid he might wet his pants. Looking, he saw that the man was still in the same position, crouching by the tree. With this sudden knowledge of what might happen at any second, the boy felt as though he were a privileged spectator of some great show. His curiosity about the stranger and his unknown target became overwhelming. The boy glanced toward the stream but could see nothing. Except for the birds, up and out of sight in the tops of trees, there was nothing at all to disturb the silence of the forest. Nothing came, or moved; still the man, the archer, waited.

The boy felt a cramp beginning in his legs. He ignored it for awhile, but soon it became quite painful. He decided to shift and lie down, and he found a place where, by lying on one side and propping his head up with one arm, he could still see the man. Then he thought of soiling the jacket and placed some dry leaves underneath his elbow. The jacket was his father's, made from real deerskin. All summer long he had asked to wear it; finally this afternoon, the day before they would go back to the city, he had been given permission. It was far too big, and the sleeves came down, almost covering his hands, but still, he was glad to feel its brown softness around him. He lay now and looked once more at the crouching man. The face was what he watched mostly, although it still frightened him. There seemed an awful intensity behind its fierce stare. The boy thought that the green man must be growing uncomfortable, that he would surely have to change his position soon. Yet still the man remained the same way, his hands on the bow and arrow, waiting and ready. Then the man moved. It was so slight that at first the boy thought he must have imagined it. But, as he watched wide-eyed, he saw it again. One hand, the one which had held the arrow across the bow, that hand was moving slowly, very slowly down and, finally, into a pocket in the side of the green coat. The man had to bend forward so the hand could fit inside, and his body moved that way just a fraction. Then the hand came slowly back into his lap. Lying on the ground, the

boy felt a tingle crawl over his body. He hardly dared to breathe yet at the same time he couldn't take his eyes from the man. All summer the boy had played, sneaking up on pretend enemies and overhearing secret plans but now, this was real. He saw the hand move again, come from the lap and up to the man's mouth. Something was put into the mouth; then the hand returned slowly to the lap and the arrow. The boy figured it must be candy or something to suck on, for he watched closely but could not see the mouth move as if it were chewing. All the while the man's eyes had not wavered an inch from their staring.

For a long time the bowman did not move again and the boy thought that he must be quite strong, for already his own neck and elbow were growing stiff. Gently, he moved his legs and body around so he could lie for awhile on the other side. While he was shifting, he tensed in fear that he would make some noise and give himself away. He took his time moving, cautiously inching, a little at a time. Then, when the boy was settled and watching the man again, he began to invent stories about him—who he was and who he was waiting for.

First he played that the man in green was a private detective after a gang of killers hiding out in the forest. He was a detective who always used arrows to hunt bad guys and was dreaded by all members of the underworld. It was easy for the boy to pretend, as he was used to being left to himself, and he became anxious, half-expecting at any moment to find a furious battle break out in front of him. Then swiftly as his mind worked, the boy saw the archer as an adventurer who had come to slay a great man-eating tiger. The beast had escaped from a nearby circus and had everyone in terror for their lives. No one could shoot a gun well enough to kill the tiger and if only wounded it would be more fierce than ever. What was needed was a single arrow right between the eyes, and only one man in the world could manage that. There he was, over in the bushes watching, waiting for the wild charge. And the boy too waited for the tiger to come.

But this also faded quickly, as did the next pretense about a vampire werewolf who could be destroyed by a silver arrow through its heart. The boy was disturbed because his images refused to stay so he could elaborate on them as he usually would have. Often he spent hours on one story, playing both sides as he romped in the crowded forest, but now it was hard to become involved in any of them. He finally decided it was the man's fault, for every time he

got an idea he looked at the man to verify it. But that face would fit none of his heroes. It was too hard, too intense in its frozen staring.

The boy was forced to move again, and returned to kneeling on the matted ground. During the procedure he almost fell forward into the underbrush, and when he had righted himself a cold sweat glistened on his forehead. Inside of his father's jacket he could feel moisture form and begin to trickle down his body from under his arms. Then he heard something, and quickly looked through the growth and over by the tree.

He was shocked when he saw that the man had raised himself to kneeling and had drawn the large bow. The boy could see clearly now how big the weapon was and for a moment he could not take his eyes from the bent bow and the arrow fixed in place. The man was still rigid, though he was bolt upright, with the one arm held straight in front of him. The other was drawn far back with the string. His eyes now glared in the same direction, his mouth was still the grim, straight line. For seconds the man knelt poised while the boy panted with excitement. Both were transfixed, watching with every sense alert. The boy heard the sound again. It was rustling noise, faint and off by the stream. He looked back at the Bowman. The man's face had changed slightly; his mouth was curled in a vague smile, and the boy thought he saw the eyes narrowing. Then the hand pulled the string back even farther, bending the huge bow in a great arc. Something seemed to pass over the man's body, for after a sudden quiver it raised a little higher and leaned forward just slightly. The boy felt a chill climb his own back. He saw the lips part and tighten as the man clenched his teeth; then the evil smile grew on the face. It was a look the boy had never seen before, and he began to shiver. Still he could not take his eyes from the man.

The rustling came again, but further off this time. It stopped, and the boy saw the smile stop also on the man's face. It changed slowly and twisted suddenly, then disappeared entirely into the grim concentration of before. The man's body relaxed and, moving slowly, he released the pressure on the bow. Then he lowered himself to the crouching position, still looking at the same part of the waiting forest.

The boy was shaking badly now, more frightened even than when he had first seen the staring man. He kept his eyes on the green figure, but all fun had gone out of the spying. He felt queer inside, as if any moment he might become sick to his stomach. Some terrible thing had almost happened, he sensed this instinctively. Somehow he should have known not watch the green man.

Looking around, he noticed the sun had lost much of its power. It was late in the afternoon and the trees were bathed in shadows; there were no longer any patches of sunlight coming through. The woods looked different now, a sinister gloom to the nature he had seen only as friendly all summer. Green was no more a bright and happy color; all had become strange and tense in the air about him. For the first time during the two months the boy felt alone, and in a place where he did not belong. He saw that now, that it was wrong to be there watching in the forest, and he wanted to be far from the strange man, out of the darkening forest and back to the cabin in the clearing, back inside where he could crawl under woolen blankets and be safe. Once more he looked over by the tree and knew then just how evil the green man was. No wonder he had been so afraid of being discovered. He must never, never be seen by this evil green man.

The boy's hands fumbled when for some reason he took a moment to brush a few leaves from the jacket. His mind raced, urging him to flee in haste, but he knew he must remain cautious and he clenched his fists tightly in an effort to control the shaking. Turning, he took a single careful step, then a second, and found the footing solid. Another step, and he let his breath out slowly and took a few more, now growing faster and glancing up to find the way. He didn't see the twig, but he felt it under his moccasin and heard it break sharply in the forest stillness. For an instant he froze, then, in greater fear, he began to run, crashing through the underbrush. He didn't hear the other sound, or the quick whisper of the arrow as it came and struck deep into the deerskin softness for which it was made.