Three Shots

*By Ernest Hemingway*

Nick was undressing in the tent. He saw the shadows of his father and Uncle George cast by the fire on the canvas wall. He felt very uncomfortable and ashamed and undressed as fast as he could, piling his clothes neatly. He was ashamed because undressing reminded him of the night before. He had kept it out of his mind all day. His father and uncle had gone off across the lake after supper to fish with a jack light. Before they shoved the boat out his father told him that if any emergency came up while they were gone he was to fire three shots with the rifle and they would come right back. Nick went back from the edge of the lake through the woods to the camp. He could hear the oars of the boat in the dark. His father was rowing and his uncle was sitting in the stern trolling. He had taken his seat with his rod ready when his father shoved the boat out. Nick listened to them on the lake until he could no longer hear the oars. Walking back through the woods Nick began to be frightened. He was always a little frightened of the woods at night. He opened the flap of the tent and undressed and lay very quietly between the blankets in the dark. The fire was burned down to a bed of coals outside. Nick lay still and tried to go to sleep. There was no noise anywhere. Nick felt if he could only hear a fox bark or an owl or anything he would be all right. He was not afraid of anything definite as yet. But he was getting very afraid. Then suddenly he was afraid of dying. Just a few weeks before at home, in church, they had sung a hymn, “Someday the silver cord will break.” While they were singing the hymn Nick had realized that someday he must die. it made him feel quite sick, it was the first time he had ever realized that he himself would have to die sometime. That night he sat out in the hall under the night light trying to read Robinson Crusoe to keep his mind off the fact that someday the silver cord must break. The nurse found him there and threatened to tell his father on him if he did not go to bed. He went in to bed and as soon as the nurse was in her room came out again and read under the hall light until morning. Last night in the tent he had had the same fear. He never had it except at night. It was more a realization than a fear at first. But it was always on the edge of fear and became fear very quickly when it started. As soon as he began to be really frightened he took the rifle and poked the muzzle out the front of the tent and shot three times. The rifle kicked badly. He heard the shots rip off through the trees. As soon as he had fired the shots it was all right. He lay down to wait for his father’s return and was asleep before his father and uncle had put out their jack light on the other side of the lake. “Damn that kid,” Uncle George said as they rowed back. “What did you tell him to call us in for? He’s probably got the heebie-jeebies about something.” Uncle George was an enthusiastic fisherman and his father’s younger brother. “Oh, well. He’s pretty small,” said his father. “That’s no reason to bring him into the woods with us.”

“I know he’s an awful coward,” his father said, “but we’re all yellow at that age.”

“I can’t stand him,” George said. “He’s such an awful liar.”

“Oh, well, forget it. You’ll get plenty of fishing anyway.” They came into the tent and Uncle George shone his flashlight into Nick’s eyes. “What was it, Nickie?” said his father. Nick sat up in bed.

“It sounded like a cross between a fox and a wolf and it was fooling around the tent,” said Nick, “it was a little like a fox but more like a wolf.” He had learned the phrase “cross between” the same day from his uncle.

“He probably heard a screech owl,” said Uncle George.

In the morning his father found two big basswood trees that leaned across each other so that they rubbed together in the wind.

“Do you think that was it, Nick?” his father asked.

“Maybe,” Nick said. He didn’t want to think about it.

“You don’t want to ever be frightened in the woods, Nick. There is nothing that can hurt you.”

“Not even lightning?” Nick asked.

“No, not even lightning. If there is a thunder storm get out into the open. Or get under a beech tree. They’re never struck.”

“Never?” Nick asked.

“I never heard of one,” said his father.

“Gee, I’m glad to know that about beech trees,” Nick said. Now he was undressing again in the tent. He was conscious of the two shadows on the wall although he was not watching them. Then he heard a boat being pulled up on the beach and the two shadows were gone. He heard his father talking with someone. Then his father shouted, “Get your clothes on, Nick.” He dressed as fast as he could. His father came in and rummaged through the duffel bags. “Put your coat on, Nick,” his father said.