

Between Scareds

By Bill Wolfe

"You're just chicken! "

"Am not!"

"You're chicken and yellow and ought to be wearing a pink dress."

"Then you go down there and check it out!"

Brent had me and I knew it. Boyhood logic. You either get it, or you don't. I really didn't want to be the first one down there, where we'd heard the commotion after the plane—or whatever—crashed near the old quarry.

All we knew was, it was bright, burning, and very quiet till it hit the ground.

Trapped between two scareds. That was me, alright.

What? Don't know what that is?

Not too surprising, really. Let me explain.

My dad was a war hero. He really was. He even had the scars to prove it. Though he never talked about it. Not with me, anyway.

My dad told me once that sometimes, bravery is nothing more than being trapped between two scareds. He told me—only once—that when it happened, he was more scared of letting his buddies down than of dying. And he hated the Japs for making him choose. His word, not mine. He earned the right, don't you think?

Me? I was scared to be the first one down there and maybe even more scared to look like a sissy in front of my friends.

I had a bad feeling about the whole situation, but that didn't stop me from joining in with the rest, laughing at Jimmy when he got all momma's boy on us, and went running home to tell his folks.

It was only later that I realized Jimmy had a better look at it than we did.

That left just the three of us, me and Brent and Larry.

With Jimmy gone, we knew we had at least an hour—probably more—before any grownups came to check it out. So, mostly because I'd let myself get caught, I went. . .or at least I told them I did. I was trapped between two scareds, alright.

I'm not really ashamed that I just walked a little ways down the path and then hid for about twenty minutes. What haunts me to this day is what I told them when I went back.

It was meant as a joke. It was. But I just didn't think it through. I was planning to laugh at them when they came back empty-handed. And I still believe that today. Even with everything that's happening. Even since Jimmy called.

I was breathing hard like I'd run all the way up from the quarry, but I was faking it.

"It's a plane, and there's two dead guys. Pilots. I think they look Mexican. And there's all this money just laying around and blowing in the wind. No tellin' how much has already burned-up in the fire."

Brent and Larry looked at each other, and with a loud whoop they started running down the path I'd just come up. They didn't even look back to see if I was behind them.

As soon as they were out of earshot, I actually did laugh, a little. I remember thinking how I'd be lounging there on the flat of a big rock, all rested and ready to lord it over them that I'd fooled them both.

I remember laying back, letting the heat from the sun-warmed limestone soak through my tee-shirt and watching the clouds and birds drift by on a dusty, hot, perfect summer day.

I remember the smell of dried leaves, fresh growth, and a little bit of sweat.

I remember thinking how they would be mad—but not really.

I remember trying not to think that they had done what I was afraid to do. They would know what was down there and would tell me about it. . .thinking I already knew.

They would never know that I was just too scared see it through.

And then I remember the screams.

I was halfway home when it flew overhead and disappeared. I got a much better look at it, that time.

I'd like to say I thought they'd be okay. But then why would I tell everyone that I'd done what Jimmy did, and refused to go down to the quarry? I told them that I waited up top and ran away when I heard the screams. They all assured me I'd done the right thing, even Brent and Larry's parents.

The freaking screams!, they haunt my dreams.

And such screams they were. Though it's been forty-two years since that terrible day, the memory can still send chills down my spine.

Those boys. Those boys who would pick-up a copperhead barehanded and chase kids around with it; those boys who didn't flinch when we cut our thumbs so we could become blood brothers; those boys who should have stood at my wedding, and consoled me through my divorce.

Those boys should be fat and old, and with me now. We should be parked in front of the TV, drinking beer, cussing and hoping that the things silently floating front of every major world government building are nothing but some stupid hype for some Hollywood movie release, or something. Those boys who would recognize—as Jimmy and I do—those images on CNN.

But I'm caught between scareds, again. I'm scared that those things are going to open up and spew death in every direction. And I'm more scared, maybe, that they'll open up the one on the White House lawn, and Brent and Larry are going to come walking out.

What if they've learned the secrets of the universe?

Should it have been me, instead?

What if they are ambassadors of peace?

What if they bring death?

What if they're mindless robots?

What if they've been suffering all these years?

It should have been me.

What if they still remember the story I told them?

What if they tell?

I've got my shotgun next to me, just in case.

Sorry, Dad.

The End