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The Spring

Neal Bates

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The Spring

High School Short Story Competition

Neal Bates, Second Place

Coffee High School

It was a chilly October morning in the Appalachian Mountains, and the leaves were just beginning to turn red and gold. The old man and his dog could be seen ambling across the clearing they had crossed a thousand times before. The oldster walked the slow, methodical, determined walk that accompanies old age. The dog walked at nearly the same pace, his head lowered to the ground. They hardly made a sound as their feet shuffled across the well-trodden path.

They would hunt bushy-tails today while the hickory nuts were still plentiful. He had seen five of the little devils frolicking back and forth all in one tree just the day before. He fancied that they barked at him in mockery because they had known he had no gun. However, the first order of business would be to traverse the hollow across the clear-cut from the cabin and refresh himself with a draught from the spring. The water looked unusually clear this morning and the sunlight dancing off the ripples seemed to be relaying a message to him in a silly sort of code. He cupped his hands and broke the surface of the spring. He suddenly felt faint.

When he awoke, the dog was standing directly over him, pawing him in a confused manner. The old man carefully lifted himself to his feet and bent over to retrieve his antique firearm. He peered about and rubbed his eyes once to clear his vision. There it was as plain as day. The largest black oak tree he had ever seen loomed directly on the opposite side of

the spring. The more he observed his surroundings, the more astonished he became. The entire forest around him was full of such giant oaks. Where was the clear-cut? It was as if it had never existed. This was all too much. He ambled up to his old familiar sitting rock which overlooked the spring and took a seat. Something was wrong; this could not be the same boulder which had been worn smooth through three generations of sitting. Its edges were rough and sharp. This could not be true.

Surely some fit of madness had taken him. As the old fellow sat contemplating his own sanity, he heard a once-familiar bird call. It seemed a bit out of place, but this did not bother him immediately. Then the reality hit him. He had not heard that call in over fifty years, but he knew the owner at once. It was an ivory-billed woodpecker. It was then that he saw the majestic bird light in the lower branches of a tree close by. The markings were unmistakable. It could be nothing else. He watched the bird for several minutes until it flew out of sight.

With his peripheral vision, he caught a glimpse of a fleeting shadow to his right. He turned his head just in time to see a dark, swarthy man, clad in buckskins and carrying a rudimentary bow, making a hasty retreat into the forest. Who could this man be, who had crept up on him so silently that even his dog had not detected him?

'Who could this man be, who crept up so silently?'

The old man, now totally perplexed and bewildered, made the short descent to the spring where his canine companion sat and watched patiently. He fell to his knees and dipped his cupped hands into the cool fragrant spring water. He drank deeply. The old man then took his rifle from its original resting place. He summoned his companion, and they method-

ically made their way back up the hollow, across the clear-cut and onto the dog-trot of the cabin where his rocker sat. He leaned his rifle against the wall, patted the dog on the head and proceeded to light his corncob pipe. He blew a few smoke rings and said aloud, "Well, them bushy-tails ell still be thar tomory." □
