The boys liked to watch pigs being born. Drying them off in the straw. Putting them next to the sow’s teats. Watching them discover the little world of the farrowing pen. But after a while the boys would get tired of this and go off to do something else.

Except for the youngest boy. He liked to stick around by himself. When the other boys left, he leaned down and put his face close to the sow. Now that there was no one there to laugh at him. This way he could hear the pig coming, and when it was born his face was right over the newborn. He quickly put his eye over the eye of the little pig. When it opened its eye, the first thing it saw was the boy’s eye, only an inch or two away from its own.

The boy stared into the pig’s eye and the pig stared into the boy’s. What the boy liked to see was the expression on the pig’s face. It was a look of surprise. But not a big surprise. Not the startled look of seeing something you didn’t expect to see—like a ghost or a creature from Mars. More like the look of somebody waking up in the back seat of a car who doesn’t realize how far he’s gone since he fell asleep. The look that says, Oh, I didn’t know we’d gone this far, but okay.

Then the boy lifted his head so the pig could notice everything else. The pig knew what to do. Stand up, breathe, look around for a nipple. The boy didn’t try to keep the pig from its business. He knew they both had their own worlds to live in. That didn’t change the fact that for a few seconds they had been somewhere that nobody else would have to know about.

When drainage tile was put in the bottom lands, corn could be planted where only slough grass grew before. But the tile drained the pond too. The boys couldn’t remember when ducks and bullheads swam there, but the pond was still surrounded by willow trees and made a good place to get away from everything. They’d go down to the pond and look for old bottles and badger holes, or they’d make dust castles out of the pond bed.

Then one year there was a big flood and the pond was back in spite of the drainage tile. When the waters went down, the boys went to the pond to see what it looked like with water in it. They brought fishing poles, figuring that where there was water there would be fish. Corn stalks and debris from all over the county were hanging in the willow trees around the pond and the pond was brimming with muddy water. They fished for an hour and now and then saw ripples in the water that told them something alive was in there. But they couldn’t tell what.

Then one of the boys hooked something. It didn’t fight much but it was big. His pole bent like a horseshoe. The boy managed to pull it toward the shore slowly. They were expecting a big mud turtle, and they had sticks ready. Then part of the catch showed itself on the surface, a large rolling motion, like a big fish turning over on its back as it swam.

“I saw its yellow belly!” shouted one of the boys. “It’s a giant catfish!”

But it wasn’t a catfish. It wasn’t anything alive at all. It was a dirty dress the flood had brought from somewhere. The boys took it off the hook and laid it out on the shore. It was a girl’s dress. When they squeezed the water out, they could see that it was yellow, with small red flowers. It had two pockets and white buttons at the neck. The boys fastened the buttons and checked the pockets. They were empty.

The dress lay on the shore and the breeze started to dry it. The colors became clearer and brighter as it dried and the hem ruffled a little in the breeze.

As a joke one of the boys drew a head over the dress. The other boys joined in, scratching legs and arms in the soft dirt. “There,” one of them said. “There is our yellow girl.”

The boys left her lying there, knowing there was little chance that such a flood as the last one would come and wash her away. They went down to the pond often that summer, always saying they were going fishing. And they did catch a few small bullheads. The yellow girl stayed in place through the
summer and when the weather changed her at all the boys fixed her up again by retracing her head, arms, and legs in the dirt. They came to think of her as their sleeping beauty, though none of them stooped to kiss her.

**Scar Tissue**

He stopped chewing on his cigar and laid it down next to the lantern. It simmered there on the burnt spot where he had laid other cigars. He picked out an egg from the bucket and rubbed at a spot with the damp dishcloth. He would start talking now. The boys sat at the edge of the hoop of lantern light and looked up at his face.

“Well, I’m a pretty old farmer,” he said. “I can remember the days before rat poison. There was as many rats back then as good stories. Good talkers and good workers. In those days you could tell the speed of a man’s hands by checking the scar tissue on his legs.”

He held an egg up to the lantern light, as if he could tell this way which ones would be culled out at the hatchery.

“One time we was shelling corn. Corn shelling. Five or six of us shoving corn in the hopper. We was going for a thousand bushels. Big crib. And big rats. I don’t know how many. Lots of them. They was legion. We seen their tails slickering in the corn. They was digging right ahead of our scoops.”

He laid an egg down and wiggled his short forefinger as if he could make it look like a rat’s tail. He picked up his cigar, chewed on it, and laid it down on the burnt spot again.

“First thing you gotta know about rats is they’re dumb, but they know when they’re in trouble. The second thing you gotta know is that when they’re in trouble, they don’t run for light—they run for dark.”

He adjusted the wick on the lantern. The egg bucket was not quite half empty. The boys leaned back on their hands.

“So we was almost to the bottom of this corn when we run into them rats. First one trickles out. Then the whole works. Like when one ear of corn falls out of the pile and then it all comes down. So we start stomping. I must of stomped a dozen of them when the fella next to me misses one when he stomps. And that rat swickers around real quick and comes at me from the side where I can’t see him. He is looking for a dark tunnel. And he finds it. My pants leg! He saw that little tunnel over my shoe and up he comes. I had
on wool socks, the thick kind that gives rat claws something good to dig into. Good footing. So he gets his claws in my wool socks, looks up the tunnel, and don’t see daylight. He must of thought he was home free for sure.”

He paused and rubbed his chin while the boys squirmed.

“Well, you know, in those days, rats was always running up somebody’s leg. Specially during corn shelling. I guess it was just my turn. You just had to figure on it a little bit during corn shelling. Like getting stung when you’re going after honey. You was always hearing somebody yelling and seeing him kick his leg like crazy in a corn crib or pulling his pants off so fast you’d think he got the instant diarrhea.

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“Now let me show you the scar that critter give me.”

He pulled up his overalls. His leg was white and hairless. Just below the knee, on the inside calf, was a set of jagged scars.

“That’s how fast my hands was,” he said. “I grabbed that sucker before he could clear my shoestrings.” He rubbed the scars with the tip of his finger, gently, as if they were still tender.

“There’s the top teeth. And there’s the bottom,” he said. “I grabbed and I squeezed. And I squeezed. And the rat bites. And he bites. I felt his rib cage crack, but his teeth stayed in me like they was hog rings. I guess we both got our way. Now he’s still hanging there dead inside my pants while we killed the rest of them rats. Then I pried him loose with my pocketknife. Stubborn sucker. But he knew a dark tunnel when he seen one.”

There were only two eggs left in the bucket. He rinsed the washcloth and took one more chew on his cigar. He picked up an egg and rolled it over in his hand looking for spots.

“Now almost any old farmer can tell you his rat story. They’ve all had a rat or two up their pants. But just ask him to show you his scar tissue. I can wager you this—the ones with slow hands won’t show you where they got theirs.”

The boys giggled a little as he put the last egg into the crate with his careful hands. It was time to make their escape. The door to the shed was open.

“Watch out for the dark now,” he said as the boys filed out, their shirttails fluttering behind them into the night.

*Electricity*

The boys remembered the night electricity came to the farm. At least the oldest did, and the others pretended to. Or they’d heard the story so often
they thought they remembered it. After a while, it didn’t matter who really remembered it and who didn’t. They all knew the story.

It was the night the big switch was thrown somewhere at some big dam. This was long after the electrician had spent weeks wiring all the buildings, putting switches on walls where only wallpaper had been, putting a long fluorescent light like the ones they’d seen in town right in the middle of their kitchen ceiling, so that the old lantern had to hang on a new hook until the big switch was thrown.

The night of the big switch: that’s when all these dead wires and gray light bulbs were supposed to come to life. Could it really work? Could electricity get all the way out here from that big switch at that big dam hundreds of miles away?

A letter had come telling how to get ready for the big night. Five o’clock pm on such and such a day the big switch would be thrown. *Have all switches turned off,* the letter said, *and turn them on one at a time.* As if the big dam couldn’t stand to have all of its electricity sucked out at once. Which made sense to the boys. Cows kicked if you tried to milk all four teats at once. And a horse would take more easily to four riders if they didn’t all get on at the same time. Imagine a chicken laying ten eggs in one shot. It made sense.

So the night of the big switch they sat around the kitchen table waiting, switches turned off. Waiting for five o’clock. Then they saw it happen—a light on the horizon where there hadn’t been a light before. Then a light in the neighbor’s window, about a half-mile away. Then lights popping on everywhere. It looked as if the whole world was covered with fireflies. The new light was not the yellow light of lanterns, but the white clear light of electricity. Light clear as water from the big dam, wherever it was.

One of the boys flicked the kitchen switch. And it happened right there. The big switch worked, even here. It was as if the ceiling opened with light: a fluttering fluorescent angel. A splash, a *woof,* a clatter of light. Light brighter than high noon on the Fourth of July. They looked at each other in this new light—every freckle, every smudge, every stringy hair, every ring around the collar, clearer than ever. Then they looked around the room—the cupboards, the wainscoting, the wallpaper, the ceiling where the old lantern dangled like a hanged man.

And out of the throat of one of the horrified light-stricken grown-ups came the words, *My goodness! Look how dirty this place is!*

So the first night of that great fluorescent light they spent washing the walls. Every one of them. Every inch. That was the story the boys knew.
That was the story they would always be able to tell, whether they remembered it or not.

**One Dead Chicken**

In the neighborhood where the boys lived, people went to a very strict church. It was a church that taught that people are evil, and that if they were left to themselves, the whole world would turn into a cesspool. If left to themselves, they would eat each other like dogs. Or worse. As the boys understood it, rules kept people from going all out in their naturally bad ways. Rules and punishment. Maybe the punishment even more than the rules.

But obeying rules was sort of like holding your breath. You could do it for a while if you really kept your mind on it, but sooner or later *Poof!* and you’d be back to your bad old self. There didn’t seem to be much middle ground. What you were doing was either good, like holding your breath, or bad, like letting it all out. A few games might be in the good category if they weren’t being played on Sunday and so long as everybody was being a good sport. Which, they supposed, meant not feeling bad if you were losing and not feeling good if you were winning. Almost all work was probably all good because it almost always felt bad in the doing. What was hardest to understand was why things that felt so good in the doing could be so bad when looked at from the point of view of having been done.

*I am so disappointed that you did that.*

How could anybody be disappointed in a boy doing what made him feel good? He was just being his naturally bad self. Was he supposed to hold his breath and believe some kind of rule that was the opposite of what he really was?

One day a boy who was thinking too much about good and bad caught a chicken and stuck it head first into a gallon syrup can full of water. When the chicken was dead, the boy didn’t ask himself, Now, why did I do that? He asked himself, What can I do with this dead wet chicken? Which meant, Where should I hide it? He buried it in the grove and then came back out into the ordinary world where nothing looked particularly good or bad.

He was supposed to feel guilty for doing something terrible like that. He didn’t. He was supposed to be punished for doing something so awful. He wasn’t. When he looked around, he couldn’t see that he was any better or worse
than anything or anybody around him. Only one thing was different now, and that was this one dead chicken. And that didn’t seem to make things better or worse. It pretty much left him back where he started.

House Visitation

Once a year the minister and an elder from the consistory visited every family in the church. The house visitation day was so important that the house had to be cleaned spotless, and all the dandelions had to be dug out of the lawn. House visitation meant taking off overalls and putting on suits and ties right in the middle of the day in the middle of the week. House visitation was serious business, and the boys knew it.

Visitors and hired hands left when the minister and elder drove into the yard. These men in black suits weren’t coming to look at the crops or to talk seed corn, that was for sure. They were more like the IRS coming to check out the bottom line of everybody’s hidden lives.

And how is your spiritual life? the minister was likely to ask, after opening the meeting with a prayer that told more than it asked about how everyone was guilty even of sins they didn’t know they had committed because they were born guilty. He would ask questions about family devotions, about taking the name of the Lord in vain, and about Sabbath Day observance. He would ask if there was anything that anybody knew in his heart that should be talked about. The elder would listen to the minister and then add a question of his own. Sometimes the elder asked the hardest question, like In what ways do you feel you have grown closer to God during the last year? The boys would sit nervously on the sofa, hoping the grown-ups would answer all the questions so that there wouldn’t be any left for them.

But one year the youngest elder who had ever been selected in the church came with the minister. He believed in making people comfortable before the serious talk started. He chatted with the boys about baseball and 4-H. He asked them if there were any new pigs on the farm. He asked them about their new dog Fritzy. He asked if Fritzy did any farm work.

Oh, yes! said one of the boys. He chases the pigs. He barks and chases them if one gets out!

Now all the boys were excited about telling the young elder about Fritzy’s escapades. They interrupted each other in their excitement, each trying to add
new dimensions to Fritzy’s barnyard achievements. And in all this excitement, like passing gas in Sunday School by mistake, one boy blurted out, Yes! And Fritzy bit the boar in the nuts!

House visitation didn’t turn out as bad as the boys thought it would that year. They never did stop blushing as they sat quietly on the couch, but the grown-ups answered all the minister’s questions before he could even think of turning to the boys. The young elder sat quietly with his eyes wide and his lips tight. He looked as if he had been stunned by an electric cattle prod. Of everyone in the parlor, he looked like the one to whom God had spoken most directly that day.

The Dream

ONE night the youngest boy dreamed that someone in his family would have to die. It was a law or something. He was not scared in the dream because there were many people in his family, and he, the quiet one, seemed least likely. He figured he would be the last to go.

Then the whole family decided that he was the one who should die. He ran away through the cornfields with everybody chasing him. They had buckets of gasoline they were going to throw on him and burn him.

His oldest brother caught him in the cornfield and was laughing. The rest of the family came running up behind, with gasoline spilling all over.

Then he woke up.

The next day the boy took a closer look at everyone around him. They did not look like people who would kill him now. They did not even look quite like the family in the dream. It was just a dream, he thought. But he did not say, Pass the potatoes. He did not ask them for anything.

What If

WHAT would happen if you lit a fire in the haymow, took one of these matches and lit the hay here by the door, then sat in the door and yelled Fire! Or you could yell Help! and see who came running.

But what if you couldn’t get the fire put out?
You could put it out. You just stamp on it with your foot, and it goes right out.

Nothing came of the talk that morning. It was just an idea. But a week later the boys found some twelve-gauge shotgun shells in the toolshed. If you give it a shake, one of them said, you can hear the BBs inside.

So they decided to get the BBs out. They peeled open the end, and out came the little black BBs. Then they noticed the shell was still not empty.

How do you get the rest of that stuff out? one of them asked. He stuck a nail inside the shell and got the little paper wadding out, but the dark, packed gunpowder was still inside the shell. They put the shell in the vice, then hammered with a nail, trying to chip the gunpowder out. It wouldn’t chip out, but at least it didn’t explode. They didn’t know that the little cap on the other side, where the firing pin hits, is what made the shell explode.

Something distracted them—maybe a rat, or hunger, or boredom. They left the shotgun shell locked in the vice where the men found it later, along with the hammer and nail. The men figured out what the boys had been up to right away. They released the shell slowly, trying not to squeeze the firing cap. Their hands shook. They knew what might have happened, and they relived for an instant their own boyhoods, remembering the tree that fell the wrong way, the rope they almost didn’t get loose from a friend’s neck, the ice that was just as thin as they were told it was—all those moments of curiosity or ignorance that might have killed them. They chatted with each other about their own adventures, dropped in a few nervous chuckles, then coached each other toward anger and the work to be done.

The Harvest

At harvest time, things didn’t go on in their usual way. The women came out of the houses and gardens wearing gloves, overalls, and shoes that were too big for them. But they were ready for work, ready to bring in what everyone had been waiting for.

Where did they learn to do all of these things? You never saw them on the tractors at other times. And now here they were, even driving catty-cornered across the picked corn rows at just the right angle so they wouldn’t bounce off the seat—where’d they learn that trick? And for the oats harvest,
somehow they knew how to shock bundles in perfect little tepees all over the stubble. They didn't try setting up four bundles at a time, but the bundles got set up—and set up so they didn't tip over in a wind. Some of them even pitched bundles—maybe not as fast as the men, but the women were fussier about getting the oats heads pointed into the threshing machine in a straight line. And who taught them to keep the cattle from sneaking out when a load of grain was being drawn through an open gate? As strange as they looked in those big clothes, they didn't waste any steps.

The men joked about how funny the women looked getting on a tractor or bending over in the field, and the boys laughed along with them.

But at night, when the women had to quit early to cook supper and clean up the houses, the boys moved in to take their places, figuring that at harvest time the fields would be as friendly to one hand as another. They couldn't throw bundles with the kind of muscle the men had, but they got some work done by trying to remember the way the women did it.

That Could Have Been You

T
HE boys knew that on the farm danger was everywhere, sometimes in the teeth of a spinning gear, other times in the jaws of a growling boar. Danger could plunge from the sky in jagged-edged hailstones or collapse beneath them in weak timbers over a well. Hay balers didn't care what they baled, and silage choppers didn't care what they chopped. But mostly the danger the boys knew was in stories about what happened somewhere, someplace, just out of sight, in the next county, down the road six miles, somewhere else. The bull that crushed a man against a gate. The woman who drowned trying to save her child from rushing spring floods. The man who broke his neck falling from the haymow. The tornado that killed a whole family except the two-month-old baby, who was found in a lilac bush without a scratch on her.

The boys listened to the stories, and they didn’t argue with the truth of them. They’d had their own fair share of close calls. There was the eighty-pound hay bale that fell thirty feet and exploded in a green spray around them, and the lightning that splintered a huge box elder right after they decided to run out from under that very tree and play in the rain. Once a steel splinter from the corn sheller flywheel whirred like a table saw past their heads.
And they had their cuts and bruises. Knuckles that looked as if they’d been gnawed on by meat grinders. Sprained ankles and wrists. Blood blisters that took toenails and fingernails off as they healed. Small concussions that were good for weeklong headaches. Wood slivers of all sizes that had punctured every part of their bodies. And that’s not even counting all the skinned knees and nose bleeds. The boys had plenty of bangings-around, but nothing so bad that they weren’t able to talk about it, maybe even boast about it, the next week.

In town on Saturday nights, the grown-ups would point out what terrible things had happened to other people:

See those farmers with all those missing fingers? Cornpickers did that.
See that boy who doesn’t have an arm in his sleeve? Power takeoff did that.

The evidence was everywhere: missing thises and missing thats. Hobblers and limpers and a scar-face or two. Farms tore lots of people up, no doubt about it.

Then the grown-ups would always come up with the clincher: That could have been you, they’d say. That could have been you.

Of course it could have been them. The boys knew that. They also knew that it was impossible to explain that they still lived without fear, lived as if every day held the promise of adventures in the sunlight, even if the sky was dark, even if the icicles hanging from the eaves on the barns could drop at any moment like dazzling swords and impale them, pinning them to the snow—the way one did to this twelve-year-old not so far away, just far enough away that the boys didn’t know his name.

**The Robin’s Nest**

Their grandfather was going to show them where a robin had built a new nest in the grove. They walked along, staring up into the leafy branches, when one of the boys tripped on something. His ouch! made everyone’s eyes look down instead of up.

Until now it had been such a quiet and easy day, with the sun and breeze mixing together like whipped cream and sugar and spreading a sweetness over everything and everybody. Seeing the robin’s nest with its pale blue eggs would have been what this day was all about. And now this.
The boy who tripped sat down and grabbed his foot. Something sharp stuck out of the ground, a rusty pointed thing. This is where we used to bury old equipment we didn’t need anymore, said their grandfather. That’s the tooth of an old dump rake trying to sneak back into the world.

The boy who had tripped saw that the others were finding the metal tooth more interesting than his misery. He got up and helped them pull on the tooth, which was curved like a sliver of moon—and when they pulled, it was as if they were unzipping the earth, which split open, and plant roots frayed out from the wound like tiny threads.

Look at that, said their grandfather. He kicked at the dirt they had loosened. He knelt down and started into the dirt. Look, he said, and held up what looked like a bent horseshoe. This is called a twisted clevis, he said.

He went back to digging. This is part of the knotter for the binder back in the days of threshing machines. And here’s a piece of a corn shucker glove. See that little hook that would pull the husk back? And here’s the sediment bulb off an old tractor.

The grandfather was acting like a dog going after a hidden bone, scratching away with his strong old hands as if digging up and naming this useless junk was good for something.

This here is from an old harrow, he said. Those there from a cream separator. Here’s part of a stanchion lock. That’s from a doubletree. See this? It’s a gear from a derrick for lifting the fronts of wagons off the ground.

The boys watched and listened. What their grandfather was doing didn’t make much sense. If you’re going to throw things away and bury them, why not forget about them and do what you were going to do—which was find that robin’s nest? But they waited, and after a while they could see that their grandfather must have gotten what he needed. He shoved dirt back over what he had dug up, brushed off his dirty hands, and looked up into the tree branches with them.

It sure is a nice day, he said. Perfect for finding a robin’s nest. Now be quiet. We don’t want to scare her away.

Go to the Ant, Thou Sluggard

It occurred to the youngest boy, early in the morning when his mind was still swimming in daydreams, that there were two kinds of people in the
world. It came to him very clearly: there are people who are always trying to
give something, and there are people who are always trying to get something.
Givers and getters, he called them in his daydreaming mind. His grandfather
was a giver. If you saw him coming, you knew he had something to give, maybe
some advice, maybe something he had made for you. A neighbor across the
section was just the opposite. He was a getter. He was the one who mowed the
grass along the railroad track because he could get that hay free. No wonder
people called him a go-getter.

The youngest boy talked about his giver and getter ideas over breakfast.
The other boys laughed at him. There are two kinds of people in the
world, said one, people who can find their socks and people who can’t. The
youngest boy knew which kind he was.

No, said another, there are two kinds of people in the world, people who
are so stupid that they think there are only two kinds of people in the world,
and people who aren’t that stupid.

Maybe there was another set of two kinds of people, the youngest boy
thought: the ones who make fun of and the ones who get made fun of.

The grown-ups put a stop to the talking. You want to talk about getting
and giving? All of you get ready for church or we’ll give you something to think
about.

Good thing it was a Sunday, so the youngest boy could have plenty of
time to be by himself, inside his own mind, while the preacher preached.

But the preacher said something so loud that the youngest boy couldn’t
daydream himself away from it: Go to the ant, thou sluggard, consider her ways
and be wise.

That probably meant there were two kinds of people in the world: lazy
people and workers. But would the workers be the givers or the getters? the
youngest boy wondered.

There was an anthill in the grove, so the youngest boy went to the ant that
afternoon to consider her ways. All the ants looked like real go-getters, just
like the neighbor who tried to get his hands on everything he could get. But
the ants didn’t seem to be getting anything for themselves; they were hurrying
back home to give what they had got, maybe even to the sluggards somewhere
deep inside the little world of their anthill.

There are three kinds of people in the world, the youngest boy announced
over supper: people who get, and people who give, and people who get to give.

One of the grown-ups said, Where did he pick that up?
YOU didn't see something like this every day—a green and red parrot flying across the hog yards and landing on the pointy-topped metal grain bin. Just perching there and squawking as if it owned the place, as if it thought it could carry on like a noisy angel on top of a Christmas tree or something.

All the boys saw it. All the boys heard it. Look at that thing! they yelled. Then they ran to the house where the grown-ups were having afternoon coffee. Everyone ran outside to see and hear what the boys saw and heard. The parrot was gone.

It was big and green and yellow and red! shouted one of the boys.

And it went like _squawk squawk_! said another. It was right there on top of that metal grain bin.

But the parrot wasn't right there, or anywhere, and the grown-ups didn't have much patience with the idea of a parrot flying around the hog yards or perching on a grain bin. It wasn't even close to April Fools' Day, so this kind of nonsense, making everybody run outside for nothing, wasn't something they wanted any more of, did the boys understand that?

The grown-ups went back to the house to finish their coffee, but the boys set off to find the parrot which, so far, had done nothing but get them in trouble. They figured anything that big, with so many colors on it and with such a loud squawk, should be easy enough to find. When they first saw it flying over the hog yard, it hadn't really flown all that fast, and it flapped its wings so hard that it probably couldn't have gone very far without needing to stop to catch its breath.

They started by looking in the grove. Then they checked every barn and shed. Sometimes they stood and listened, waiting for the parrot to give itself away. Nothing. No red, green, or yellow feathers. And not a sound except the ordinary sounds of the sparrows chirping and the pigeons _ooo-googling_ and the pigs scruffing around and the electrical transformer humming a little.

At supper nobody talked about the parrot. The next day the boys went looking for it again. Not a flutter. Not a squawk. They talked about the parrot among themselves—how big it was, how bright the colors were. They wondered if the hogs had seen it, and what they might have thought of it. They wondered if the parrot had flown over the cows, and what the cows would make of seeing a parrot in the pasture. And what would a pigeon or sparrow
think? Would something as strange as a parrot on the farm be able to make friends with any of the animals?

A few days later, when they still hadn't seen any sign of the parrot, they started wondering what else it might have been. Could it have been a crow or something with some sort of colorful cloth it had picked up somewhere? Maybe a little girl's bright sweater? But what about the squawking? No birds around there made that kind of noise. When they weren't talking to each other about the parrot or whatever it was, they started wondering if they had seen or heard anything at all.