

The Barefoot Boy



Boys in a Pasture, Winslow Homer, 1874

The barefoot boy jumped at any opportunity to tend the field.

A tireless worker, he felt great joy working alongside his father and two siblings. His feet were the color of dried mud and chapped from the rocky soil.

After the work was finished, he splashed around in the cool water of the Headwater creek that flanks the family farm.

No matter how often his parents protested against his love of going barefooted around the farm, the boy laughed, and said, "You don't know what you're missing."

The delight of being barefoot compensated for having to wear shoes to school and church. Once at the farmer's market, the boy removed his shoes to compare the bottom of his valley scarred feet to the tough skin of the Hubbard squash. The

customer thought him hilarious.

"Aren't you exaggerating, son?" the boy's mother was embarrassed.

The boy told his mother, "Mama, not everyone knows about winter squash, but everyone has feet, and sooner or later, everybody goes barefoot." The buyer nodded her head in approval. Apparently, the boy had uttered a great truism.

The fields and woods were the boy's Eden. He never vacillated about the things that brought him joy. The boy felt reverence for the land. He said he liked to feel the soil beneath his feet.

Conversation around the dinner table revolved around the day's work. The boy's parents warned him often about the danger of snakes in the field, to which he responded, "Don't worry, mama. Snakes are everywhere. Rats, too. We just need to know how to handle them,"

"Can't argue with that," the boy's father sat back in his chair and nodded his head, laughing.

"Those things can hurt you, you know," the boy's mother insisted. Before she could finish the sentence, the boy was out the door, a piece of wheat bread dangling from his mouth.

The boy was 15 years old, his older brother 18 and his younger sister 13. The boy's siblings thought of their brother as a kind of sage. He taught them a lot about the land, the care of animals, the prairies and the countryside, and all sorts of things that never occurred to them.

One evening, over dinner, the boy said he felt the earth shake. His parents and siblings said they didn't feel it.

"It was subtle, but I felt it. I'm sure of it," he told them.

"Earthquakes never take place around here," the father said.

"What about the 1811 and 1812 New Madrid quakes? We're not far from there."

"I guess that was a pretty rare occurrence," the boy's father corrected himself.

"If it happened once, it can happen again, James," the boy's mother added, addressing her husband.

"I guess you're right."

Several days earlier the boy saw a man from the U.S. Geological Survey placing a marker in a nearby field. The boy took the opportunity to tell the man about the vibrations he felt recently.

The man told the boy that was impossible because small vibrations can't be detected without seismic instruments.

During dinner that night the boy told his parents about his talk with the man. "Mama, I think the man thought I was crazy."

"I wouldn't worry about that, son," the boy's mother said. "They say that horses and other animals can detect such things," she went on.

"Maybe ... even birds can," the boy's father added.

"Father, you sure there haven't been any earthquakes around here lately?"

"No. Not in my lifetime. My father told me about the New Madrid quake. His father told him. These historical things get passed on in families."

"I think about these things often. The New Madrid fault is close enough," the boy continued.

Yeah, the New Madrid fault is west of us, some thirty miles. "I wouldn't trouble myself if I were you."

"If that fault began to rumble, we could feel here. Right dad?" the boy asked.

"Sure. It depends on how strong the tremor is. Anyhow, tomorrow Arthur Rippenburg is coming to fix the tractor. He's bringing me a new part. After that, we need to get to work planting some seeds before it gets any later in the year. I also have to work on the barn's roof."

The children went outside to feed the small animals in the barn.

"James, what's that marker the geologist placed in the Johnson field for?" the boy's mother asked her husband.

"Some kind of sensor. They place those things in many areas around here," the father said.

"He didn't say what it's for?"

"Nah. These government people are a bunch of stiffs. You have a better chance of communicating with the cows."

The following afternoon, after the children returned home from school, the boy was out in the field with his sister, by the family vegetable garden.

"You feel that, Kathy?" the boy asked his sister.

"No. What?"

"The rumbling in the ground. I feel it again."

"Charlie, you're always feeling the earth shaking and no one else even notices."

"What do you want me to do if I feel it? Look at the cows. See how they are nervous."

"Oh, you're just imagining things. Mama always says you have a good imagination."

That night after dinner the family sat down to watch a St. Louis Cardinals baseball game. After the game, the children went to bed. The mother and father stayed up to watch the late local news. The news broadcast began with a meteorologist saying that a 2.7 earthquake was detected by geologists in an area not far from the family farm. The newsman said that apparently few people felt it. He added, "geologist don't believe there is reason to be too concerned." He finished his report by saying, "little tremors are a common occurrence."

"You hear that?" James asked his wife. "Charlie was right. He's been telling me about the little tremors he feels for several days.

The following day was Saturday and the family sat around the breakfast table before heading out to work on the barn, which needed some structural reinforcement in a section where the roof was caving in. Saturday morning was like heaven for the boy, who enjoyed the freedom of being on the farm more than any other activity.

"We heard last night on the news that there was a small tremor in this area. Charlie, you were right. I guess you're one of the few people who felt it," the boy's father said.

"I feel them all the time, dad. I told my science teacher, Mr. Harris, and he said that tremors under 3.0 are rarely felt by people. He said that when they are felt it is because they are pretty shallow tremors under the earth," the boy said. "I know the animals feel them. I watch them and I see how they get scared."

"I still don't know why that government man didn't tell Jimmy something like what the teacher said. He probably suspected some activity in the fault and didn't want to say it. You figure ... " she was interrupted by the boy.

"That man didn't believe me. I even told him about the animals getting riled up."

"I wouldn't make too much out of that. Those government people are either in a hurry all the time or they think people are stupid," the father added. "They don't look too fondly on simple folk."

"I know there's going to be a bigger tremor soon," the boy added.

"What makes you say that?" the boy's mother asked him.

"I often dream about a bigger quake. Everything's pretty clear in my dreams. And ... something strange always happens whenever I feel a tremor. I ... " the mother interrupted him.

"The dreams are really vivid?"

"Oh, yeah. I don't like those dreams. I see things that I can't do anything about. The dreams are always about the area around the New Madrid fault."

"Hopefully, nothing like the 1811-1812 quakes will happen again. That area is more populated today than ever before, with cities like St. Louis and Memphis really close by," the father broke in.

"What do you mean that something strange happens when you feel the tremors?" the boy's older brother asked.

"Mama are we going to have an earthquake?" the boy's younger sister asked.

"No, no. We're you talking about things. That's all. Just talking," the father said.

"Whenever there is a tremor, I see a purplish color mist come up from the land. Sometimes I see the mist before I feel the tremor," the boy added.

"A purple mist? Does the mist last long?" the boy's mother asked.

“No. Only a short time,” the boy responded. “I’ve learned to ignore it.”

When breakfast was over the children went with their father to the barn to work on the wooden structure. The mother remained in the house listening to the radio. The father erected scaffolding the day before in order to reach the roof beams at the back of the barn.

The boy was carrying some tools from the tool shed when he saw chickens scatter around and cows gallop for several feet before stopping. In the horizon, he saw a purple mist that obscured the view of the planted field. He dropped the tools and ran into the barn.

“Get out! Get out!” he shouted at his father and siblings, who were inside the barn.

“Get out, now! Strong tremor. I feel it. Get out!”

The boy’s father and two siblings ran out of the barn. They began asking the boy what he felt when, the boy’s mother ran out of the kitchen door. “Earthquake in the Memphis area. The radio says there is some damage.” She came and gathered with her husband and children outside the barn.

“There. Did you feel that one?” the boy asked.

“I feel it. I feel it,” the boy’s sister said as the father began motioning the family to walk away from the barn. A succession of tremors followed. The boy’s mother began to pray.

A short while later rumbling sounds came from the barn, as the back of the barn began to collapse.