

Training Exercise

by Jensen Beach

The other day I'm in the backyard with one of my kids, doing what he's calling a Training Exercise, which is basically the two of us with flashlights, shinning the beams over the grass and up into the night to see what we can see. My kids goes, Pop, a name he calls me because his mother thinks it's funny and charming, and which she has been encouraging despite my complaints. Pop, he goes, look at that. And I look and I see that he sees just beyond the grass, about a yard or so behind the tree line—our house butts up to a small swatch of forest—a man. It's late. Not too late, not even fully dark yet, but still it's definitely late enough for it to seem odd for a man to be hanging around the forest in my backyard. My son shines his flashlight on him. The flashlight is a plastic lion and when he squeezes a lever on the handle, the mouth opens, the light comes on and the lion growls. So my son, he shines the growling lion flashlight at the man, and the man growls back a very deep and shaky growl that comes from his chest. By now, I'm starting to get a little freaked out, to be honest, because I once saw this terrifying documentary on *PBS* or *Discovery* or some channel like that about feral children and this man is making me think of that. I halfway expect him to jump out of the trees on all fours and attack us with his teeth and underdeveloped linguistic skills. The flashlight keeps growling and the man keeps growling back and the lion's plastic teeth are casting this weird silhouette on the man's face, and we're all stuck there, locked more or less, in what's looking to me to shape up like an eternal battle of wills. But then I notice that the batteries on my kid's flashlight are starting to go. The beam is turning orange, the growl is going soft, apathetic. The man steps forward, brushes past the trees and holds a branch on the large pine nearest our lawn up as he walks underneath it. He's oddly genteel about this. As he's holding the branch up with his finger tips just high enough for him to walk under without brushing his hair on the dangling needles, I see that

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he's wearing a dark blue suit and also that he's much younger than I had anticipated. For some reason, hiding in the woods behind houses at night strikes me as strictly the habit of an older person. But this guy, he's young. I'd guess twenty-five, but I don't really have an eye for age. He takes a couple long, looping steps over the tall grass at the tree line and sticks his hand out for me to shake. This kind of formality has always put me ill at ease for its ritual and the regularity with which I tend to violate such expectations. He grabs my hand really firmly and says, "Nice to meet you, good sir." I try to pull away too early as usual, but he's holding on tight. There's a tribe, as far as I understand it, which lives in the Amazon jungle and cannot understand the concept of numbers. They get only as far as what they can see. They trade large items, like baskets full of beads and fish because it's easier to count the baskets than their contents. When I first heard about this, I thought, well imagine that. The more I considered the facts of it, though, the more I began to understand that I'm just the same way. If I can't see it, I can't believe it. The man then takes my son's left hand with his left hand and tells my son nice to meet you too, young man. So the three of us stand there for several long minutes, maybe five if I'd have to guess, holding hands in an uneven triangle. It feels nice, a little reassuring, oddly, as it gets even darker and our hands all begin to sweat and the lion growls once or twice, I can't be sure, and the man smiles and we all smile at one another and there is light, so much light I don't know what to do with it.

