



Lost Cause

By Margaret Lanahan

The afternoon was bright and warm. Sunlight dappled the ground under the mulberry trees in the backyard. The sharp tang of paint coupled with the balm of fresh cut wood hung on the air contrasting with the smell of baking cupcakes which filtered every now and then from the kitchen door of the house where Tubby lived.

"Kapoom. Kapoom." Two more imaginary enemy soldiers fell before his trusty rifle as he thrust its wooden barrel between the steps leading up to the back door.

Tubby was a ten year old soldier. Having fought his way to this lonely outpost past twenty or thirty enemy riflemen, he was making a last stand ensconced under the high back porch of his home. From this little bricked-in den, he could cover both sides of the house and Mr. Sandburn's back yard, too.

Shooting non-existent people began to grow boring. Tubby settled back against the brick wall and watched the painters and carpenters swarming over Mr. Sandburn's house.

"They sure do make a lot of noise," he thought.

All morning long the painters, carpenters and Tubby had been vying against each other to see who could produce the most clatter.

"Timber," Tubby yelled, charging out from under the porch. The carpenters on Sandburn's roof had released a scaffold rope and the big crossboard had pitched earthward into a stack of bricks. The bricks tumbled into a rocky pile under the blow.

A screech arose. Tubby stopped half-way across the backyard to see where it came from. He couldn't tell, and the men over across the way were not paying any attention to it. As he stood there, his mother called from the kitchen.

"Tubby, is that you?"

"No, mother. It's over at Sandburn's."

She stuck her head out the window.

"Goodness, but you're dirty. What have you been doing?"

"Oh, just playin'" he answered reticently. "Say Mom, can I have a cupcake?"

"Yes. Come in and wash your hands, they're just about ready to come out of the oven."

She turned back into the kitchen. Tubby tromped up the wooden steps and banged the screen door behind him, heading for the kitchen sink.

"Oh, no you don't. You go up to the bathroom to wash your hands — and wash your face while you're at it. Oh, and Tubby, use your own towel."

"Yes'm." He sniffed appreciatively toward the oven in passing. All the way through the dining room, into the hall, up the stairs and into the bathroom, the vision of cupcakes and the icing pan stayed with him.

The bathroom window was opened allowing the outside noise to filter in. That screamly sound was still going on, rising rythmically and falling.

Tubby heard the oven door clang shut, so he hastily swiped at his face, rinsed soap foam off his hands and grabbed the nearest towel. Flinging the damp cloth at a towel rack, he bolted out of the bathroom and down the stairs.

His mother had just finished icing one of the savory cakes when he skidded to a halt on the linoleum floor.

"Boy, do they smell good! Can I have this one?"

"What do you say?"

"Please, may I have this one, mother?" She smiled at him, satisfied that his manners were for the moment acceptable, and that he was paying compliments to her baking by the happily-hungry look of one who is about to be satisfied.

"Yes, you may."

"Thanks."

He had icing on his cheeks already. His mother left the other cakes to cool a bit before icing them and started to get her kitchen straightened up. Tubby was perched on a stool by the kitchen table, right where she wanted to be.

"Why don't you go out and sit on the back steps, out of the way, so I can get these things straightened up and get cleaned up myself before starting dinner."

Tubby untangled himself from the stool sensing that a departure was in order.

"O.K. If you want me," he replied innocently, "I'll be out back." Ambling out the door, not banging it quite so loudly this time, he sat down on the second from the top step to finish off the melifluous morsel.

The painters and carpenters were still banging things around and that awful screamly noise hadn't stopped yet. He couldn't figure out what it could be. Nobody seemed worried about it, but it sure was eerie.

Mr. Sandburn came out his back door, looked up at the painters on his house and called to them.

"Where's all that noise coming from?"

"I don't know," Tubby heard one of them reply. Sandburn walked around the side of his house toward the front. Half way around he stopped and came back.

"It's back here, someplace." His voice was crisp, sharp. The cry was still rising and falling, a sort of sigh and scream all wrapped up into one sound.

Tubby got up from his vantage point, walked on down the steps and across the narrow plot to the low wall which separated the two yards. He, too, wanted to find the source of the weird plaint.

Sandburn had crossed his own yard into the Misses Dunn's, his next door neighbors. He knelt down on the ground by their back porch and peered under the foundations.

"It's one of those goddamn cats," he grumbled. His face began to flush as he strode back to his own yard, picked up a heavy piece of loose wood from the ground and went back to Dunn's. Tubby knew Mr. Sandburn didn't like Dunn's cats, but they hadn't ever screeched like this before, even though they did sometimes sit out and mew all night.

Sandburn was on his knees again before the opening of the foundation. He poked back in under it with his board. Tubby hopped the wall. The cat yowled louder than ever as the angry man jabbed out.

"Damn cats, sittin' out here howling all day and all night. I'll teach those old maids to bother everybody with their fool cats." He reached in under the porch and dragged out a big grey Persian. The puss was kind of crumpled up on the ground, still howling to beat the band.

Sandburn raised the board and brought it down hard on the soft grey fur. An anguished wail reverberated. The carpenter and painters stopped to watch as the red-faced man struck again and again at the cat.

Suddenly, Tubby was running across the ground screaming,

"Don't you do that. Don't hit it. It's my cat!" Sandburn railed again at the clamorous bloody welter of fur and flesh. Tubby flung himself at the stocky attacker.

"It's my cat," he sobbed. "It's my cat."

Sandburn flung the boy from him, kicked the lumpy mess at his feet and strode back to his own yard carrying the bloody club. Tubby was left on his knees, tears coarsing through the icing on his cheeks from the cup-cake.

He looked at the cat through watery eyes. The fur was ripped and splotchy; flesh showed through, whitish-grey and puffy; blood trickled through torn coat and fell drop by drop onto the green grass blades. The cat's eyes, surprised, stare dead ahead, distended, glazed.

Tubby cried afresh, blubbering, "It's my cat! it's my cat! The poor cat."

L'Après Midi d'une . . .

By Allyn Wood

A picnic was spread on the bank and they surrounded it in positions of spiritual abandon. One, a long and somewhat undulant girl, lay among them gazing into the river that rolled peacefully yet dense with clay after the spring flood. The opposite bank, mysterious as an arabesque, hid in its shadow-work of trees the lives that, like theirs, had moved back from afternoon; lives bound to the waterway by probing beak and wading leg, by a diet of fish or of insects whose larval time is passed in mud and water. Look closely! implied the arabesque: a leaf may become a bird.

"Remember this—?" "Remember that—?" cried the picnickers. Their laughter almost equalled the rapids of the river. A little wind arose, rippling water-willow, then their hair. It rippled across the ground, over the new gress, and incense rose, mingled warm and cool like toast and water, and a hush came down, so that everyone realized simultaneously that until now the world had not been silent. The wind swept across the picnic things fluttering white petals of lotus. The others looked skyward, frowning, but the girl drew her eyes from the river to her companion saying, with a drowsy smile,

"I am turning into a salamander."