

THE EUCALYPTUS FENCE

by Frank Ball

In his youth, Tom Judd had far more than the average charisma found in teenage souls. He was not revered for his grades or athletic abilities, but he was well nigh universally, almost mystically, admired by his peers. Older generations may have assessed some of his behavior as reckless but I thought it was magic. I recall a time, following him down the highway as he drove, alone, in his father's immaculate Model A coupe. He set the hand throttle for highway speed. He then climbed out of the driver door, walked forward on the front fender, around the front of the radiator, back along the right-front fender to enter the right-hand door and regain control, before the car ran off the road. Another time, I saw him escape the emergency door at the rear of the high-school bus, climbing onto the front bumper of the following car, as a friend of his drove the other car up very close.

You should not infer from this discussion that my esteem is now diminished. However, I sometimes wonder if this mystical admiration did not result, at least in part, from the commonality in name with Tom Sawyer. Hazel Hohanshelt, our fifth and sixth-grade teacher, had read his adventures to us in school. The married phase of Tom's life started very shortly after he graduated from high school. For a period, while we were getting used to this transition, several of his high-school friends would sometimes convene in the yard at the home of his first ownership. It was a good-sized yard at the place in Alpine Heights his parents owned for several years prior to his dominion. At the moment I am thinking of, Tom was not present in the group, and whatever the seed was for this idea, I did not pick up on it. Someone decided that Tom wanted to build a decorative fence along the front of the place, to refine the appearance. He did not have any suitable material on hand, and naturally, no money to buy it. So this idea came up, something we could do for Tom and Leata.

There was a dense grove, nearly an acre, of rather small eucalyptus trees standing about a quarter-mile west and about the same distance north of the intersection at Lamb's Corners. There were no houses neighboring these trees, at least at the northwest corner of the grove. They were fairly uniform in size; most had straight, unbranched trunks about four or five inches in diameter, and maybe fifteen feet tall, on average. I had seen this grove from

Tavern Road many times, but held no interest in why it had been planted or who owned it. Without question, the grove was owned by someone. The plan we concocted was to gather some axes, go to the grove in the middle of the night and cut down enough trees to supply material for Tom's fence.

As theoretical concepts go, private property, quid pro quo and due process, were neither exhaustively understood nor rigorously practiced by this group. None of us, however, were so dumb we couldn't understand these concepts, given adequate motivation. I think the insensitivity, demonstrated here, is symptomatic of the testosterone poisoning, so common to the age. On the other hand, the inglorious folly inherent in the expectation that our friend would prominently display the fruits of our clandestine labor in front of his own house may have escaped our analysis entirely.

Jerry Findel, a casualty of the Korean War a few months later, was part of this brainstorm session. He told us he would not be able to participate that night because of some earlier commitment. We decided to proceed without him, as most of us had nothing more inspiring to do and manpower did not seem in short supply. I went home and found two or three of my dad's axes, which I sharpened expressly for this event. I figured, not all of us would be able to lay our hands on a good ax.

At the appointed time (about 2:00 AM), we met to embark on our adventure. We approached the venue on foot, from a direction and path unfamiliar to me, but someone in the group seemed to know which way to go. An uninhibited moon provided ample light for the approach to the grove and for the work at hand. Along the northern border of the grove there was a barbed wire fence separating it from virgin brush land. The brush was not so dense as to seriously impede foot travel but it was much too tall to allow visual bearings. We arrived at the northwestern corner of the eucalyptus grove as a group and proceeded to select individual trees, of appropriate size, far enough apart so there would be no danger of interference with swinging axes or falling trees. After a few moments, enough time for me to chop about halfway through a four-inch trunk, there suddenly occurred a remarkable disturbance.

An unfamiliar voice from outside of our group, yelled from perhaps thirty or forty feet away, "Head for the hills, you thevin' bastards!" This remark was accented by a blast from a shotgun. The impact of numerous pellets on the tree trunks and nearby brush made me immediately aware the blast was a shotgun. I wasted no time trying to figure out why I had not intercepted any of the pellets or what to do with the ax in my hand, but rather embarked on a

direct line for the tall brush. I had a good deal of experience crossing barbed wire fences but I have never done it faster. The next few seconds were punctuated with more muzzle blast and pellets spraying through the brush. I was accustomed to the sound of a 410 shotgun because my father owned a .22 caliber/410 over-under single shot. It was rarely used by anyone but me, because it was such a wimpy gun. The sound ringing in my ears did not seem much like the report from a 410. Now that may be, because I was not usually on the muzzle end of the report, but I think it is because the sound, in question here, came from a 12 gauge.

As I entered the brush, I instinctively made two or three right-angle turns every five or six feet and hit the ground as quietly as I could. As I lay with my face in the leaf mold under the cover of high brush, I remember trying to balance the physiological imperative to breathe with the tactical requirement to be most silent. My stint in this rigid position lasted much longer than comfort would allow. In fact, comfort had little to do with it. Under these circumstances, I would not expect my sense of elapsed time to be accurate, but after what seemed to be a couple hours beyond the cessation of all unnatural sounds, I began to crawl generally northwesterly. After perhaps another half-hour I was able to get my bearings and proceeded to walk home. I knew I was closer to the car I had used to meet the group than I was to home, but the car belonged to my father. I thought prudence indicated avoidance of its further involvement.

The next morning I returned on foot to retrieve the car. I did not, however, afford the axes the same consideration. Very little was said about this event, in the next few days, even among the participants. It seems to me, the response others had taken must have been as individual as my own. It was almost as though nothing had happened (at least nothing we wanted to talk about). When I did hear some news on this topic it was cause to reflect on a number of things, including quid pro quo and due process.

It seems Jerry Findel had pulled off a highly successful practical joke. He had taken someone with him for an unrecognizable voice, fired the 'shot gun in the air and thrown hands full of gravel into the brush for effect. I must say, it was effective!