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Beginning to write a story is something like diving under a cold shower—or taking the first plunge into Sugar Creek when the water’s cold. It’s hard to get started. But after I’m in, paragraph deep, and my thoughts are splashing around a little, it certainly feels great. My words go swimming and diving and having a good time—in ink, of course, because I always use a pen when I write.

So, hurrah! Here I am, already started, trudging along faster than anything on a brand new Sugar Creek Gang story. Does it ever feel good to be writing again!

In just a minute I’ll explain what I mean by “trudging.” That is, I’ll explain it when I’m telling you about the last time our gang went in swimming before school started that fall.

That was kind of a sad day for us—that last Saturday. Especially for Little Jim, and I’ll have to tell you about it even though I don’t like to write about sad things.

Hm, I wonder how many miles the point of a boy’s pen travels while he’s writing a long story like this one’s going to be. Hundreds and hundreds of miles, I guess, although I never figured it up. Not liking arithmetic very well is the main reason.

Well, none of us boys wanted school to begin, even though we knew every boy ought to have an education if he wanted to amount to anything. But at last that wonderful summer was over, and we knew there wasn't any way to get out of it. Going to school is like starting to swim too. After you get in, it's fun, and it's good for you. It washes all the ignorance off a boy and makes him feel good.

It was Saturday, the last Saturday of our summer, and it was noon at our house. I took the last bite of my three-cornered piece of black-berry pie and chewed it as long as I could because it tasted so good I hated to swallow it. Then I looked across the table at my dad's bushy blackish-red eyebrows to see if he was going to say no when I asked him if I could go swimming.

Charlotte Ann, my three-month-old, black-haired baby sister, was in her blue-and-white bassinet, kind of half lying down and half sitting up like a baby bird in a nest full of pillows. She was smiling as if she was happier than anything and was gurgling and drooling, which means she was making bubbles of saliva tumble out of her soft little lips. And her arms and legs were going like four windmills whirling all at once. Her pretty little ears looked like the halves of dried peaches, which somebody had glued onto the side of her head.

She's getting prettier all the time, I thought. *If only she doesn't get red hair like mine.* I could see that someday maybe there'd be freckles on her

nose, and I felt sorry for her because I had freckles myself and didn't like them. In fact, there were freckles all over my face.

Dad's big eyebrows were halfway between up and down, and Mom was busy eating her pie and smiling back at Charlotte Ann. In fact, Dad was looking at Charlotte Ann too, as if Bill Collins—that's my name—wasn't even important anymore. I had had to take second place at our house ever since Charlotte Ann was born. That's what a boy has to do when a new baby comes to his house to live.

I sighed, thinking about how hot it was and looking over the top of a stack of dirty dishes in the sink by the window. I was wishing I was outdoors running through the woods toward the spring, where I knew Dragonfly, Poetry, Circus, Big Jim, and Little Jim would be waiting for me and where old Sugar Creek would be almost screaming for us to come and jump into it.

The creek wanted to prove to us its water was still warm enough to swim in, even if it was going to be fall pretty soon. Then it would be winter, and Sugar Creek would have a cold, sad face until the spring rains came and washed it again and the sun melted its ice coat and made it happy. Say, if I were old Sugar Creek, about the only time I could ever be happy would be when a gang of boys was swimming in my warm, sparkling water.

I looked away from the window without seeing the dishes and was looking at the little Scottish terrier design on Charlotte Ann's bassinet

when I said, “Look at her wave her arms and legs, Dad! I’ll bet she could swim without even having to learn how.”

My dad could read my thoughts just like I could read an electric sign on a city store. You should have seen his big eyebrows drop like a grassy ledge caving in along Sugar Creek. “Those aren’t swimming movements,” he said, taking a last bite of pie. “Those are movements a boy’s hands make when he is doing the dishes.”

That’s why I was the last one of our gang to get to the spring that day.

It seemed to take almost an hour to wash those dishes. While I was doing them, I looked down at Charlotte Ann, who was still making spit bubbles. Her lips were like two red rose petals all wet with dew, and I thought, *Go on, little innocent child, and have your play! Someday you’ll grow up, and then you’ll have to work!* And for a minute I was mad at her for not growing faster.

But pretty soon the dishes were all done and set away, and I was feeling happy again. I made a dive for my straw hat, which was on the floor in a corner where I wasn’t supposed to put it. Mom always wanted me to hang it up. A jiffy later I was outside, my bare feet carrying me lickety-sizzle down the path through the woods to the spring.

I tell you, it was great to be with the gang again. Maybe I’d better tell you about our gang just in case you may not have read my other Sugar Creek Gang stories—although it seems

everybody in the world ought to know about us, with all the newspaper publicity we got after Little Jim killed that fierce old mother bear. If he hadn't, she might have ripped him all to pieces with her horrible teeth and claws or maybe hugged him to death the way bears do.

Well, this was our gang: Big Jim, our leader, who was so big he had actually shaved his fuzzy mustache once and who had been a Scout; Little Jim, a great little guy with blue eyes like Charlotte Ann's and the best Christian in the world; Circus, our acrobat, who right that very minute was sitting on the first limb of a maple sapling looking like a chimpanzee; Poetry, who was short and globular—which means “round, like a globe”—and who knew 101 poems by heart; Dragonfly, whose eyes were very large like a dragonfly's eyes—he could see better than the rest of us; and me, Bill Collins.

The new member of our gang was there too, Little Jim's pet bear, the little black baby bear whose savage mother got killed in my last story. That brown-nosed bear was the cutest, most awkward little fellow you ever saw. He could already do a half dozen tricks. We had named him Triangle because there was a three-cornered white spot on his chest like black baby bears sometimes have.

Little Jim had put a new leather collar on Triangle's neck with the word *Triangle* engraved on it. And Little Jim's favorite Bible verse was right below that: “Train up a child in the way

he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it.”

I never saw anybody in my life who was a better Christian than Little Jim, and he wasn't ashamed of being one either. In fact, he was proud of it.

Poetry had made up a good poem about Triangle, which started like this:

Black little, bad little, brown-nosed bear,
Frowzy little fellow with a tail that isn't there.

Bears really don't have tails except for a stubby little stump that looks kind of like a dog's tail that has been cut off. Only Triangle's tail didn't stand straight up the way a tail does on a happy dog. It hung down the way a sheep's tail does.

No girls belonged to our gang. None of us boys liked girls very well. Girls are such funny things, always scared of mice and screaming whenever they see a spider or something. Circus *did* have a kind of nice ordinary-looking sister whom I'd made up my mind I was going to kill a spider for as soon as I got a chance—which I didn't get until school started that fall.

But we decided to let Little Jim's bear belong. Bears aren't afraid of mice. They even eat them. Triangle liked mice, frogs, fish, ants, bees and their honey, blackberry pie, and things like that. We couldn't let him eat too much honey or other sweet things at one time, though, or he'd have gotten sick.

You should have seen that little fellow swim! He was as playful as a kitten in the water. And he was only about three times as big as a big tomcat, although he was growing fast.

Well, there we were, all of us barefoot, knowing that next Monday we'd have to wear shoes all day at school and feeling sad because of it. All of a sudden, Circus—who, as I told you, was sitting on the first limb of a maple sapling—let out a war whoop, slid down the tree, and started running toward the swimming hole, yelling back over his shoulder, "Last one in's a bear's tail!"

In less than a jiffy all the gang was running right after him as fast as they could go—all except Little Jim and Triangle and me. That mischievous little rascal of a bear had evidently made up his mind he didn't want to go in swimming, because he wouldn't even get up when Little Jim told him to. He just lay there in the sun as though he was too lazy or sleepy to move.

I caught hold of the chain that was fastened to his collar, and both of us pulled and scolded until Triangle growled a disgusted sort of growl and whined lazily. That made Little Jim decide to give him a switching with a little willow switch, which is what you have to do with baby bears when they won't obey you.

That switching helped a little, like punishment does a boy for a while, and soon we were on our way to the swimming hole. I noticed when we were half pulling the little bear along behind us that the collar around his neck was a

bit too loose and maybe we'd better tighten it another notch. But Little Jim said he thought that'd be too tight and might choke Triangle. Besides, the collar was locked on, and the key was at Little Jim's house almost a quarter of a mile away.

Then we were at the swimming hole. Because Triangle was still stubborn and didn't want to go into the water and was cross when we threw him in and wouldn't do any of his tricks for us, Little Jim decided to tie him to an ash sapling up on the bank.

"Smarty," Little Jim said. "I'm going to tie you up behind this big stump so you can't even watch us. That's your punishment for not cooperating," which was a word our teacher uses on our report cards. When we don't obey her or join the others in their play or work, she gives us a check mark in the square that says, "Does not cooperate." (That fall there was only one of the Sugar Creek Gang who had a check mark there, but I won't tell you which one of us it was because I don't think my parents would want anybody to know.)

Each one of our gang had his favorite swimming style. Little Jim used the breaststroke, which made him look like a white frog swimming in the water. Circus used the crawl stroke. In fact, most of us did. That's the kind of stroke many fast swimmers use. But Poetry, being an expert swimmer, had a newfangled stroke called the "trudgen." He just lay facedown in the water, rolled his barrel-like body from side to side, and

swung his arms in long, overarm movements, each arm taking turns. His feet under the water worked like my mom's big silver-colored scissors do when they're cutting out a new dress for Charlotte Ann.

All the time I was in swimming I kept thinking about little brown-nosed Triangle up there on the bank behind the stump, and I thought, *What if the little fellow should slip the collar over his head and run away?* There was a big cornfield right there beyond the stump, and a baby bear might get lost in a cornfield, not having any mother to take care of him. And pretty soon it'd be fall and then winter. Or what if somebody who wanted to steal him and sell him to the zoo should sneak up and slip the collar off his neck and carry him away?

More than an hour later we sort of came to ourselves and realized we'd better get dressed to go home. Tomorrow would be Sunday, and we'd have to polish our shoes and do some extra chores on Saturday so we wouldn't have to do them Sunday. As I told you in my last book, all of our gang went to church and Sunday school. We felt sorry for any boy who didn't want to go and for all the kids whose parents didn't think a boy's soul was as important as the rest of him.

Imagine a boy going to school five days a week to learn reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, history, and other important things and then not go to church just once a week to learn about the Bible, which is the most impor-

tant book in the world. It tells you how to be saved, which is even more important than being educated.

Well, Dragonfly got dressed first and ran up the bank toward the old stump to untie Triangle, with Little Jim and me right at his already-dirty bare heels. All of a sudden Dragonfly stopped dead in his tracks and cried, "Hey! He's *gone!* Triangle's *gone!* Somebody's stolen him!"

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We couldn't believe our eyes, and yet we had to because Triangle *was* gone and only the chain and leather collar were there. Little Jim stood with the collar in his hand, looking down at the Bible verse on it with big tears in his eyes. Pretty soon a couple of his tears splashed out and fell on my bare toes because I was standing close to him.

I gulped and got mad instead of crying, because the leather collar had been cut in two with a knife. Somebody's boy hadn't been trained up in the way he ought to go. Whoever it was, I thought, it must have been somebody who didn't like us very well—that is, if he had just cut the collar so the bear could run away and hadn't stolen him.

Right away I thought of the Till boys, who lived on the other side of Sugar Creek. Their father was not a Christian, and they hadn't been to Sunday school and church in their lives. They belonged to a rough gang of boys that our gang had licked last summer in the Battle of Bumblebee Hill, the new name we gave that hill after the fight.

We were standing there and all talking at once with nobody listening to anybody when

Dragonfly, who had been looking around a little, yelled, "Hey! Come here, quick!"

And then we all saw what he saw: bear tracks going down a corn row, right behind a man's shoe prints, which were going in the same direction!

I never realized how much I liked the mischievous little rascal until right that minute. Of course, if the man—or whoever it was who had stolen him—would sell him to a zoo, he'd get plenty to eat, but he'd have to live in a cage all the time, I thought.

With Big Jim and Dragonfly in the lead, the rest of us followed, Little Jim carrying Triangle's chain and cut collar. We looked kind of like a funeral procession, I guess. Only we knew we weren't on our way to any graveyard unless it was to the baby bear's grave.

We kept on hurrying through the cornfield, behind Dragonfly and Big Jim, who were following Triangle's tracks. We were especially careful not to let the sharp edges of the sword-shaped corn blades cut our eyes.

All of a sudden we came out on the other side of the field, where there were a rail fence and a road. There the footprints disappeared, and we couldn't find them again. That meant, if my thoughts were right, that the man who had taken him and led him away had probably climbed into a truck or car and driven away with him.

Since we couldn't find any more tracks, Big Jim went back to study the ones we'd been fol-

lowing, which was hard to do because we'd all walked right along in them and most of them were covered up with barefeet tracks. Once Big Jim stooped down and looked a long time. Then he called us and said, "These tracks are a lot older than the bear's tracks. There are little dust spatters in them!"

Well, that settled that, and my great idea had been crazy, but just the same I hated to give it up. Of course, if I was wrong, it meant that Triangle had just run away and we'd probably find him, or our folks would, or somebody.

It wasn't far from where we were to the swamp and the old sycamore tree, where so many important things had happened, so we went there to talk things over and to decide what to do. Big Jim called a meeting, and it was while we were sitting there in the grass with a lot of gray-headed dandelions around, looking like old men who didn't have much longer to live, that I got to thinking about Old Man Paddler, who lived up in the hills.

He had taught us boys so many important things and had shown Little Jim how to teach Triangle to dance a jig. Old Man Paddler had had a pet bear cub himself once when he was a little boy almost seventy-five years ago. That bad little black, brown-nosed bear had liked Old Man Paddler almost as well as he had Little Jim.

Old Man Paddler wore long white whiskers and was the kindest man you ever saw, and he was happy. I heard my dad say once that the devil doesn't have any happy old men, which

means that if you want to be happy when you're old, you'll have to start being a Christian when you're young.

That kind old man knew all about bears and pretty nearly everything else. You could ask him almost anything, and he could answer you. My dad said he had been a lawyer once. He had had three children, all of them boys, but none of them had lived to be more than twelve years of age. Then his wife died too and left him all alone in the world, and he had built a cabin up in the hills and lived alone. And after that, he'd rather do something for boys than anything else in the world, on account of not having any.

Well, while we were sitting under the old sycamore tree talking about what had happened to Little Jim's bear, I kept on thinking about Old Man Paddler, who had been a lawyer once, and I thought we might ask him what to do about getting the bear back.

Dragonfly thought we ought to tell the police—so that in case he had been stolen instead of having run away, they'd put detectives on the case.

Poetry didn't like that idea at all. He said the Sugar Creek Gang were better detectives than any policeman detectives, meaning he thought Poetry himself was pretty good.

"Didn't we catch that bank robber without any help?" Poetry asked, which was true. "And didn't we find Old Man Paddler and save his life? And didn't we kill a bear all by ourselves?" he finished.

Just then Circus rolled over and turned a somersault backward and said excitedly, "I'll go and get my dad's big hounds," meaning his father's long-eared, long-tongued, sad-faced hunting dogs. "And if we let 'em smell Triangle's collar," he explained, almost yelling, "they'll follow his tracks with their noses and find where he went."

That looked like the best thing to do, so we voted on it like grown-ups do in their business meetings. Poetry made what is called a "motion," saying, "I move we get Circus's hounds and let them trail Triangle."

Dragonfly said, "I second the motion," meaning, "I'm in favor of that too."

Then Big Jim said in a very businesslike voice, "It has been moved and seconded that we get Circus's hounds and that we let them trail Triangle. Are you ready for the question?" That meant he wanted to know if we were ready for him to ask how many of us wanted Circus to get his dad's dogs.

So I piped up and said, "Question."

Big Jim cleared his throat and said, "All in favor of the motion raise your right hand."

In a jiffy all our kind of dirty right hands were up in the air except Little Jim's, and it wasn't on account of his not knowing how to vote either. I looked at his eyes because I saw him give his head a toss the way he always does when he wants to get tears out of his eyes without letting anybody know there were any there.

Then Big Jim said, "Those opposed use the

same sign.” And Little Jim’s hand shot up as though he was waving good-bye to somebody he liked very much and wouldn’t ever see again.

“The motion is carried,” Big Jim said, which meant that most of us wanted the dogs, and the meeting was over. Pretty soon they’d put their noses on the collar and on Triangle’s tracks and sniff. Then they’d go bawling and howling on the trail, following the tracks. Their noses can smell fresh animal tracks better than a hungry boy can smell fried potatoes at supper time.

Little Jim was too brave to cry, but his voice sounded as if it had tears in it when he said, stuttering a little, “Th-they’ll c-catch T-Triangle and b-bite him and m-m-maybe t-t-t-tear him to pieces with their big sharp teeth!”

So, without calling another meeting, we decided right away, for Little Jim’s sake, not to get the hounds.

Something had to be done, though. You can’t let a baby bear run loose in a neighborhood—for he is bound to get into trouble. And maybe somebody who doesn’t know he’s a pet will see him and shoot him, or maybe somebody’s dogs will kill him.

We finally decided to keep our eyes open and to go home and tell our folks he was lost and have them keep their eyes open for him too. We all felt sorry for Little Jim as well as for ourselves, because we all liked that “frowzy little fellow with a tail that isn’t there.” When anything is lost, you seem to like it even better.

Do you know what Little Jim said to me that

afternoon when he left our house to go on home? He was always piping up and saying something important. He said, "I'll bet that's why Jesus likes boys so well—'cause so many of them are lost. I'll bet He likes Tom Till an awful lot."

And that made me remember I'd promised my Sunday school teacher I'd go over and see little red-haired Tom Till and try to get him to come to Sunday school tomorrow, and I hadn't done it yet.

As I said, the very minute I knew Triangle was lost, I'd thought of the Till boys but especially of their mean-faced, hook-nosed father, who drank a lot and whose words most of the time were as filthy as a mud puddle in a barnyard. I don't know why I thought of him, but I did, and I felt sorry that Little Tom Till had to have that kind of a daddy. I was afraid of Big John Till too.

Well, a promise was a promise, so I decided I'd go over to Tom Till's house after supper and, while I was there, look around a little to see if I could find a brown-nosed bear cub with a white triangle on his breast. I wondered what would happen if I did find him. Or if John Till would get terribly mad at me for asking Tom to go to church with us tomorrow . . .

As soon as supper was over, I told Mom what I'd promised my teacher. Then I went in and looked at Charlotte Ann, who was asleep in her little Scottie dog bassinet. I took a big breath of fresh air and tried to feel brave, and I said to sleeping Charlotte Ann, "Little sister, I'm going to war now. I may come back with a

broken arm or a black eye or something, but duty calls me.”

I was hoping something very important about Tom Till, so I ran upstairs to get my New Testament. While I was in my room, I shut the door for a minute and went down on both of my knees, which is what I do when I pray. My dad says it takes a brave man to get down on his knees and pray all by himself.

Anyway, my knees were just beginning to feel a little bit tired on the hard floor when all of a sudden the door burst open, and my dad came in.

“Oh, excuse me,” he said. “I didn’t know you were here. I thought you’d gone.”

I looked up quick, and there were tears under his big eyebrows. Then without even looking at me, he gave me a great big hug and said, still not looking at me, “I’d rather have a praying boy than any other kind, Bill. I’m sorry I interrupted you.” Then he turned and went out and shut the door, and I finished what I was doing.

When I went downstairs, Dad was in our front room standing beside Mom, looking down into Charlotte Ann’s bassinet, and he and Mom were hugging each other, which I always liked to see them do.

Then with my heart as light as a feather I went outdoors and jumped on my bicycle and pedaled down the road and onto the Sugar Creek bridge toward Tom Till’s house, wondering all the time if anything important was going to happen to me before I got back.