



Rob Hughes thought his kid was a genius—or, if not a genius, at least a very smart boy. Aaron was only five years old and already he could tie his shoes, count to 120, identify pictures of animals in books and recognize the constellation of Orion. Sure, he referred to it as `Oh-wyan,' but he knew it when he saw it; Rob had taught him that. One of Rob's friends, Cecil Mills, had a teenage son named Davis who had been studying constellations since receiving a telescope two Christmases ago. Davis had been showing off his knowledge in the Mills' front yard one night, pointing out such common sights as the big and little dippers, the Pleiades and Andromeda. Rob had then pointed into the sky and asked Aaron to identify a different constellation, to which then four year old Aaron piped up "Oh-wyan!" That surprised the hell out of everyone. Everyone, that is, except Rob Hughes. To Rob it was merely proof of what he'd been saying all along. His boy was a genius, who had kissed the Blarney Stone somewhere around birth and could talk the ear off of anyone who stood still long enough. People could not believe he was only in Kindergarten.

"Don't go too far out there now," Aaron's *Papaw* said from the porch swing. It was dusk and Rob and Aaron were standing in the yard in front of his in-laws' backwoods

Wayne County, Mississippi farm. The property was surrounded by an expanse of pine trees broken only by a red dirt road that ran in front of the farm, along Papaw's 180 acres of property. The rain from earlier in the day had pooled in a low cypress patch next to the pines and a mist rose from it, hugging the ground as it spread into the forest itself.

"I said, don't go too far out there," Papaw repeated. "It gets boggy."

"We heard you, Papaw," Aaron sang.

"Hope so. You track mud on your Mamaw's carpet she'll wear you both out. "

"Your papaw's got the right idea," Rob said. "Better get you off the ground so you don't get us worn out."

Aaron giggled, then held out his arms like Superman as he was lifted off the grass and seated across the back of Rob's shoulders. They walked out into the yard, past the rope swing that hung from a branch of the big oak by the drive-way and stopped by the row of plants and bushes that grew at the edge of the regularly mowed section of the yard. There they were met by one of the oddest things on Papaw's farm, *the creepy tree*.

Rob supposed that the creepy tree was not so much a tree as it was a tree branch, but it was still plenty creepy. The gnarled old branch, which looked as though it had been dead for a long time, was secured to the stump of a buried fence post via a thick well-rusted metal bolt. The creepy tree forked mid-way up its height. One of its limbs curved toward the ground, but did not quite touch it. The other limb curled up and then around upon itself in a most unnatural manner, as though it had been broken over at some point during its life then continued to grow in the new direction. The end of this

deformed limb intersected with a third limb, perhaps from separate tree which had made the mistake of growing too close to the first. The third limb had been sawed from its original tree, leaving it entwined with the main limb of the creepy tree, forming a knot of wood. A rose bush had been planted next to the post stump and its thorny vines had grown around the unnatural host structure like gray barbed wire, enhancing the vague air of menace surrounding it.

Rob had always supposed that Papaw had found the two trees grown together and cut away the odd limbs and bolted it to the post to form the creepy tree. The other possibility was that he had somehow engineered it as some kind of organic sculpture. It would have taken years or possibly decades to accomplish, but Rob didn't put it past the old man. There was scarcely a tree on the property that hadn't had a branch from another tree grafted onto it at some point. On papaw's farm, there were apple trees that bore pears and peach trees that bore plums. This and the fact that there was a remarkably similar creepy-tree bolted in the front yard of Papaw's nearest neighbor, "Old Man" Manning, lead Rob to believe this might not have been an accident. Rob had once asked Papaw about the two trees and the reason they existed. He didn't recall receiving a satisfactory answer, but had finally chalked it up to some kind of backwoods superstition.

"I hear crickets," Aaron said.

"Oh, yeah. Plenty of them," Rob said, pausing to listen to the crickets, birds and other assorted nocturnal creatures, warming up for the night's performance.

"Can you hear that deeper chirping?" Rob asked. "Sounds like *wok wok wok*."

"Yeah."

"You know what makes that sound?"

Aaron seemed to think about it for a moment. "Big crickets?"

Rob laughed. "No. Those are frogs."

"Nuh uh. Frogs say *ribbit!*"

"Yeah, but the little ones sound like they're chirping," Rob said. They listened for several seconds. "Now listen to this," Rob said. He held his hands up on either side of his mouth and shouted "Hello!" In the distance, they heard the shout echo "*hello.*" Rob cocked his head to the side and was not surprised to see a quizzical expression on Aaron's face above.

"Hello!" Rob shouted again.

"hello" the echo answered again.

Now an array of expressions crossed Aaron's face, from elated to confused. This was something altogether new for the boy and he didn't seem sure what to make of it. Rob decided to let him in on the secret. "That's an echo. The sound of my voice is bouncing off the trees."

Aaron's lips mashed together and he looked suspiciously at the forest for several seconds. "Hocco," he said.

"No, Aaron. It's called an echo."

"Hocco."

"No, son. Say it with me. Eh-ko. Echo."

"The Hocco *makes* the echo, daddy."

"No. Nothing makes the echo. Well, nothing out there. We make the sound, but it bounces off the trees and comes back to our ears as an echo. See? Here, listen. Hamburglar!" Rob shouted. From the forest the word "*hamburglar*" echoed back. Rob shouted again. "Mister Snuffleupagus."

"...*fellupagus*," the echo said.

"Well, if you do one that's too long it covers itself up," Rob said. "See, it's only an echo. Just like I told you."

Aaron was quiet for a moment, then said, "The Hocco makes the echo."

Rob grunted and his teeth clinched slightly. It was irritating that his genius son didn't seem to be grasping this relatively simple concept. They'd had the same sort of trouble during a car trip the previous summer when Aaron insisted that the white sand on the banks of a distant creek bed was actually snow. It had angered Rob that his son wouldn't accept his word that it was not snow, until Rob realized that Aaron was only pretending in the first place. The kid knew that it was really sand, no matter how much he might have wished it had been snow. He just loved to make believe. Aaron was always making up imaginary friends or giving names and personalities to his stuffed animals and other inanimate objects. No deficiencies in the imagination department for Rob Hughes's boy, that was for sure.

"A *Hocko*, you say?" Rob asked, deciding to play along for the moment. "Where is the Hocko?"

Aaron pointed toward the woods.

"I don't see it. What does it look like?" Rob asked. Aaron didn't answer, though. Rob looked up at him and saw the boy's expression shift with a purity that made Rob's scalp tingle. Somewhere in that boy's head, gears were meshing. He decided to try another angle.

"Why does the Hocco make echos?"

Again Aaron was silent for a moment.

"The Hocco's trying to find you. It says everything you say so you'll keep saying stuff. Then it *gets* you."

"What happens when the Hocco *gets* you?" Rob asked. Aaron didn't answer. "Come on. You can tell me. What happens?"

Aaron closed his mouth tight and shook his head rapidly from side to side.

"You know what I think?" Rob said, slowly sneaking his hands along the sides of Aaron's legs. "I think the Hocco creeps through the woods real slowly `til he finds a little boy and then... and then... he tickles them!" Rob grabbed Aaron's stomach, tickling him furiously causing a burst of giggles and squeals. The tickling lasted for nearly half a minute, ending only when Rob began to lose his balance and took a step forward for support. Aaron's squeals immediately turned to a scream which echoed back from the trees, slightly muted. Aaron heard the echo and clapped a hand over his mouth. It would almost have been comical had there not been fear and tears in the boy's eyes.

"Hey, kiddo. What's the matter? Why are you crying?"

"I want to go in the house, daddy," Aaron sobbed.

"Why? I thought you were having fun?"

Aaron shook his head.

"You're not scared of the echoes, are you? Because you don't need to be. It's just sound bouncing off the trees. Listen... Echo!" Rob shouted.

"...echo," came the reply from the trees.

Aaron shook his head again. "The Hocco makes the..."

"No, Aaron. It doesn't. The Hocco doesn't make any echoes because there isn't any Hocco. He's make believe. Just like on Mr. Rogers." Rob then wished he hadn't mentioned Mr. Rogers at all. *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* was not one of Rob's favorite shows. He didn't see the sense in Rogers telling kids that the *Neighborhood of Make Believe* wasn't real then disproving this by showing them physical sets and puppet characters that really existed. He also thought Mr. Rogers was too much of a sissy to be a good influence for Aaron. Rob made a mental note to add Mr. Rogers to the list of shows his son was forbidden to watch.

"I want to go inside," Aaron said.

"Not yet. Not until you learn that echoes are nothing to be afraid of." Rob stepped past the creepy tree and began walking down the slope of the yard toward the cypresses and the woods beyond. "Echo!" he shouted, but he only heard part of the reply because Aaron began to fidget around his neck.

"No, daddy. I want to go inside, now," Aaron said in a hushed whisper.

Rob was tired of this Hocco foolishness. There was a place for pretending, sure, but letting his son be overcome with fear of a make believe creature was not something he was going to stand by and allow. He knew other parents that would have dropped the subject in the name of child appeasement, but he wasn't one of them.

"Just listen," Rob said. He began walking toward the trees, defiantly shouting, "There's no such thing as Hoccos!"

"...uch thing as hoccos," came the echo.

"No, daddy, no..." Aaron sobbed, squirming on Rob's shoulders. It seemed as though he was trying to climb on top of Rob's head to get further from the ground. The boy was pulling his legs up and holding a tight grip on Rob's forehead with his arms.

"Stop that," Rob said. He was so distracted that he didn't see that the ground was becoming boggy until it was too late. His foot squished down into a wet patch of grass, but didn't stick. Aaron continued to wiggle and climb, trying to get his feet under him atop Rob's shoulders. In the process, Aaron's knee came up hard beneath his father's left ear, bending its lobe up, slightly tearing the connective skin between it and his neck. Rob screamed, bringing one hand to his injured ear and the other flailing to grab Aaron's arm to keep him from falling off. He caught the arm awkwardly, just as Aaron was slipping off his shoulders, and managed to pull him back up into a semi-seated position before using both hands to lower the boy to the ground.

"What do you think you're doing?" Rob yelled. "You don't hurt daddy like that!"

Instead of sobbing uncontrollably as Rob expected, though, Aaron wasn't

listening at all. His eyes were staring wide at the woods. Rob turned to see what he was looking at and his body flinched. He thought he saw a shape... something, moving swiftly behind the trees. Then it was gone. Only then did it occur to Rob that he had heard no echo after his scream a few seconds ago. A chill crept up Rob's back. The crickets, frogs and birds had become profoundly silent. In fact, the only sound Rob could hear at all was the blood rushing behind his ears as his eyes strained against the failing light for any further movement in the trees.

"Time to come in," a voice from behind him said. Rob nearly jumped out of his skin, spinning around to come face to face with Papaw. The old man held an expression that meant business. "I said, it's time to come in. Mamaw's got Aaron's bath ready."

Rob cast one last glance at the trees but saw nothing there. Aaron was still staring at them, though his eyes didn't hold quite as much fear as before. "Come on, Aaron," Rob said, touching the boy's shoulder. "Let's go in."

Inside, Aaron submitted to his bath without the usual struggle and seemed, after an hour or so, to return to his normal self. Rob continued to ponder what had occurred earlier, trying to make sense of it. He decided that the reason he hadn't heard his own echo was because he had been too distracted by the injury to his ear. In fact, come to think of it, the injury itself might have impaired his hearing for a few seconds. And he hadn't actually seen anything moving in the trees. It had been dim out, making it much easier to think you were seeing things when you really weren't. Even if he had seen something, it was probably a deer—the woods were full of them here. It was all perfectly

explainable.

When Mamaw announced, at 9 p.m., that it was time for all boys to be in bed, Aaron didn't raise a protest, but asked his father if he would come to bed too. They retired to the back bedroom of Papaw's little brick farmhouse and climbed into the double bed with the brown, painted metal-frame. As usual, Rob was about to read Aaron his nightly bedtime story, but thought better of it. The only book they had brought for their visit was the *Gateway to Mystery* illustrated collection of short mystery stories. Aaron liked it because it had a painted picture of Sherlock Holmes on the cover, though there was only one Arthur Conan Doyle story in the book. The rest were written by such greats as Charles Dickens, Edgar Allan Poe, Robert Lewis Stevenson and Anton Chekov. Rob almost wished he'd never bought it in the first place. The stories all seemed to have an air of menace to them that didn't seem appropriate for Aaron's age, especially now considering the excitement earlier in the evening. In the interest of preventing nightmares Rob decided to forego the bedtime story. He was, however, careful to turn on the night-light near the bed—merely for Aaron's benefit.

Sleep itself came fitfully. Outside, the crickets and frogs were especially loud, even through the glass of the windows. Whippoorwills sang *Chipped the widow's white-oak*, beckoning to one another in some birdy mating ritual. And in the distance, hound dogs bayed to their masters after treeing some unfortunate critter. Rob lay there, listening to these sounds, not sleeping and cursing quietly to himself that the animals of the world were conspiring against his slumber. As if that weren't enough, he also had to pee. Since

there would definitely be no sleep without first divesting himself of the half pitcher of iced tea with which he had washed down his supper, Rob got up and walked through the darkened house to go to the toilet.

The bathroom was located in the center of the house, just off of the dining room, but to get there Rob had to walk from the back bedroom, through the empty middle bedroom then through the living room and dining room, with only the light from the windows to guide him. Still, Rob managed to make it all the way to the bathroom without stubbing a toe in the darkness. After first shutting the adjoining door that lead into Papaw and Mamaw's bedroom, Rob peed, wondering for the umpteenth time why anyone would put the one and only toilet right next to the dining room. He had asked Papaw about that one time and had been informed that he was welcome to go use the old outhouse in the chicken coop out back, which had been the primary toilet before they turned a spare closet into a bathroom back in the mid-50s.

Rob's toes were not as lucky on the return trip through the living room. In the darkness, he stubbed his right big toe on the edge of the wood-burning heater in the living room. He immediately launched into a fit of cursing that was almost completely drowned out by the resonating clang from the heater's metal housing. Another sound was almost drowned out as well, though not one originating from the heater. Rob barely noticed it at first, but caught the tail end of it as the clang and his cursing died down. Outside, in the distance, there was a shout. He paused to listen and heard it again.

"...hello."

Rob shook his head violently from side to side, trying to shake off the drowsiness that was obviously welling up in him. He didn't want to admit it, didn't want to even think it, but the distant shout he heard sounded exactly like his own voice. At this point, he wanted to be wide-awake in the hope that what he had heard had been in his own imagination. It hadn't been a bird or crickets making the noise, for they were again silent.

"...*hamburglar*," came another shout from outside. It sounded closer this time. Rob didn't know what was happening, but that chilly feeling had returned to his spine. As he reached the middle bedroom, he saw the door of the back room illuminated by the night-light. He was half-way to that door when the light began to flicker. He didn't remember it flickering before, but it was certainly providing intermittent light now. It continued to flicker on and off until Rob reached the back room, at which point the light winked out entirely.

"*Mister Snuffleupagus!*" his own voice shouted outside, now from the front yard. Then there was another sound. It was very similar to the sound of a weed being torn out of the ground by its roots, only much louder. It was accompanied by the sound of splintering wood. Then something solid crashed into the front of the house, shattering one of the windows behind Rob, in the living room. Whatever object had been thrown fell away from the window, clattering to the cement porch surface.

"Aaron, wake up," Rob said moving toward the bed in the darkness. He had to get his son out of there. He didn't know where they would go, but anywhere else seemed wise at the moment. Papaw had plenty of guns. Maybe they could get one and hole up in

a closet. And where was Papaw anyway? The man could hear possums in the garden at midnight, but wasn't up after all the noise outside?

"Echo!" came a shout from the front porch.

Rob felt the covers of the bed, touching the place where Aaron had slept, but his son wasn't there. He turned on the bedside lamp, but its filament popped instantly. The afterimage of the flash afforded Rob a view of the bed that told him that Aaron was indeed missing from it.

"Aaron! Aaron, where are you?" he whispered.

The night-light flickered to life again, sending shadows dancing. Rob turned and for only a second saw the shadow of something dark and cat-like reflected on the wall. It had tall ears. Then the light went out and remained out.

"There's no such thing as Hoccos!" the Hocco echoed.

Within the closet of the back bedroom, buried beneath three layers of spare blankets, Aaron cried and tried with all his might to block out the sounds he could hear just outside the closet door.

He had always been a very smart boy.

the end