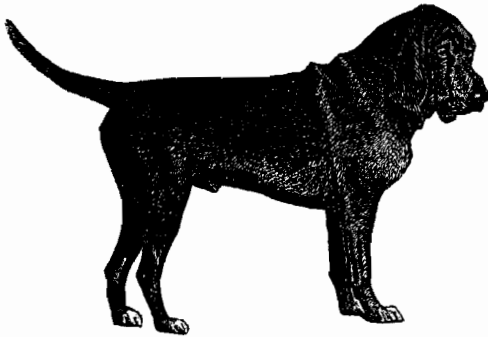


# How a Small Boy Became Tough

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Once upon a time there was a small boy who lived with his sister the poet, his father the woodcarver, and his mother the enchantress at the edge of the forest, beneath the great mountain. Because his sister was often away practicing her poetry, the small boy many times played alone; and although he was a well-meaning small boy, who didn't want to make trouble for anyone, he did get into plenty of mischief. When the small boy's father went off to sell his carvings in the city, he warned the small boy not to play with woodcarving tools, but of course the small boy played with them anyhow, curious to see what the saw would cut and the chisel would shave and the ax would split. Likewise, the small boy's mother warned him not to drink any of the magical potions, tonics, and elixirs she concocted from herbs to cast her healing spells; but when she wasn't looking, the small boy sometimes sampled them, just to find out what they were and what they did.

Nothing bad ever happened to the small boy because of his curiosity, even if he did accidentally drill a hole in their table one time and temporarily turned himself into a frog another time. Because nothing bad ever happened to him, the small boy felt confident about getting into a particularly powerful potion his mother



was brewing one afternoon to send to cure a dragon who had a stomach ache. While the small boy's mother was in another room looking for a dragon-sized bottle to put the potion in, the small boy sneaked a cup of it and drank a sip. It tasted like soya milk, so he gave the rest to his cat, a shaggy, sleepy orange tom too dimwitted to know magical potions from milk or soya milk.

The next thing the small boy knew, the shaggy, sleepy, dimwitted orange tom had become the hugest lion the room could hold. Still, the small boy wasn't frightened. The lion looked friendly, and now he spoke to the boy:

"Through the magic of this potion," the lion said, "I have become a messenger from the God of Cats with the power to grant my master one wish. But you better make your wish before sunset, because this stuff wears off fast, and a damned good thing, because now I'm too big to sleep in my favorite corner by the woodstove."

Since the small boy wanted to become big himself, as big as his father or even the neighborhood giant, he had trouble imagining why anyone, even a cat, would want to be smaller. But the small boy had no trouble making his wish. He wanted to be tough. It was a big world, he was not yet big, and if he could be tough, he thought, he wouldn't have to be afraid of anything. If he was tough, he wouldn't have to worry about bears coming out of the forest to eat him (even though the only bears he had ever seen were really only friends of



## FICTION

his mother, who came in disguises they created with their own spells.) If he was tough, the small boy believed, he could go with his father on his trips to the city, and scare away bandits. He could even protect his mother from the neighborhood giant, who seemed friendly enough, but might really want to carry her off, the way giants in story books did.

"I want to be tough," the small boy told the lion.

"Very well," said the lion. "Go find the toughest thing in the forest, and whether it's a plant, an animal, or even a stone, tell it. 'I want to be tough like you.' When you come to the toughest thing, it shall tell you, 'You are tough like me,' and you shall be. Do it by sunset." With that, the lion changed back into the cat again, stretched, walked behind the woodstove, and promptly fell asleep.

The small boy rushed out the door, looking for the toughest thing in the forest. He didn't really want to meet a bear, but if he did meet a bear, he thought, he could become tough like a bear, so that's what he looked for first. "Hey bear, hey bear!" he called as he went, making so much noise that he scared a big old black bear out of the berry patch down by the river that flowed down the mountain behind his house. "Hey bear!" the small boy yelled at the retreating bear's back, "I want to be tough like you." But the bear was running too fast to hear him. Then the small boy laughed to himself. Bears couldn't be all that tough, if this one ran away.

The small boy stood alone for a while at the edge of the river, trying to decide what else in the forest might be very, very tough. He saw a deer with long antlers and two does. They walked to the river to drink, and for a moment the small boy thought the deer must be very tough. But then they all looked up, noticed him, and ran away as quickly as the bear had run. The small boy laughed again. Deer couldn't be tough, either.

He sat on a large rock to think. Maybe rocks are tough, the small boy guessed. After all, his cat had mentioned stones, and rocks are just large stones. "Hey rock," the small boy said experimentally, just to see what would happen, "I want to be tough like you." But the rock didn't reply. "Hey rock," the small boy said again, knocking on it with his fist to wake it up, "I want to be tough like you." Still the rock didn't answer. The small boy cupped his hands, took cold water from the stream, and threw it on the rock. "Hey, dumb ass rock!" the small boy said. "Wake up! I want to be tough like you."

"Hey, dumb ass boy!" a voice responded. "Rocks can't talk. They're not very tough, either. Look at that

one, with moss and lichen growing all over it. If you were tough, would you let that happen to you?"

The voice didn't come from the rock. The small boy looked all around, until he spotted what looked like a smaller rock nearby. Only it wasn't a rock. It was a snapping turtle. The small boy smiled. "Turtles can't talk, either," the small boy said.

"So I'm a figment of your imagination," the turtle replied. "Go ahead; talk to rocks. Your mother does. She talks to me, too. So does the bear, the deer, and the giant. But I don't give a damn if you talk to me or not, because I'm a turtle, and like you say, turtles can't talk. Why should we? We only live about five hundred years apiece and watch you humans chopping down our forests and dumping your crap into our rivers. What would we have to talk about, anyway?" With that, the snapping turtle headed off.

But the small boy stopped him. "Wait, turtle!" he called. The way the turtle talked, it must be pretty tough. Anything would have to be tough to live for five hundred years. The turtle also had a fine armored shell to protect it. That must make it tough. "I want to be tough like you!" the small boy cried.

The turtle paused long enough to snicker. "You think I'm tough? If I was tough at all, I wouldn't let you humans get away with so much. Instead I drag around my whole house, to hide under. Truth is, small boy, I'm a cowardly fellow. You want to talk to somebody brave, like the big white pine behind your mother's house. He stands up there, straight and strong, through the worst thunder and lightning storms. Rain, shine, sun or snow, he doesn't give a damn. The big white pine is so tough even the eagles use him for shelter. Go ask him."

The small boy decided that might be a good idea. The cat had mentioned plants, too. The small boy ran back up the hill from the river to his house, stopping only when he reached the big white pine.

"Big white pine," the small boy said, "I want to be tough like you."

The big white pine spoke only in a low whisper, barely audible above the breeze. "I am strong," the big white pine said, "but tough? I don't think I am so tough. I stand where I stand because I don't have feet to move, only roots. Where my roots grew, they must stay. No matter what the weather, I have to stand here. If there's a fire, I can't run. If a hurricane blows up, I might be knocked over. I'm afraid all the time of the beaver, who might chew me down, eat my bark, and use me to

make her lodge. Maybe you should go ask the beaver. She's plenty tough."

The small boy had to hike down to the river and then upstream a quarter mile to get to the beaver's home. It was a long journey for a small boy who had already spent a long day getting into mischief, even before he went looking for the toughest thing in the forest. Still, sunset was coming and the small boy knew he had to find the toughest thing soon, or his wish wouldn't be granted. He ran, walked, waded in the river, and generally went as quickly as he could, until he found the beaver paddling slowly in the middle of a wide pond behind her dam, enjoying the quiet evening.

"Mrs. Beaver," said the small boy, "I want to be tough like you."

The beaver looked surprised. "Me? Tough?" she answered. "I'm not tough at all. What makes you think I'm tough?"

"Well," said the small boy, "you can chew down the big white pine that lives for five hundred years."

"Oh," said the beaver. "I don't think that makes me tough, but if you do, maybe it does. But is that what you want, to be able to chew down trees? If you want to cut down trees, which I'd rather you didn't, because it takes away my dinner, you should save yourself a whole lot of trouble and do it the way your daddy does, with a chainsaw and an ax."

The small boy laughed. "Silly beaver!" he said. "I don't want to chew down trees. I want to be big and mean and win all the fights."

The beaver stopped her paddling and just floated. "Then you don't want to be like me," she said. "I'm not big, or mean, and I hate fighting. In fact, we beavers all hate fighting so much that when the trapper comes to club us, we only put our paws over our heads so that maybe it won't hurt so much. If you want to be big and mean, you should go see the trapper. He'll be around anytime now, because there's a fox in one of his traps up yonder."

The beaver pointed the direction and the small boy set off. He knew his mother and father disliked trappers, and he knew he was pretty near to lost in the woods, and he knew also that it was going to be sunset any time, but if the trapper was the toughest thing in the forest, the small boy had to find him soon. When the small boy heard the fox crying in the trap, he broke into a run. It was a lady fox. She was crying for her cubs, who cried back to her from their hole nearby. The small boy thought again of his mother, the

enchantress healer, and how he would miss her if something happened to her. But that was partly why he wanted to be tough, he remembered: to protect her, and his father, and even his sister the poet, even if she had recently made up a poem about the time he turned himself into a frog.

Rather than listen any more to the crying foxes, the small boy followed the trapper's trail toward the road, hoping to meet him there. Soon he saw the trapper coming—and the trapper saw him.

"Hey You, you little bastard!" the trapper yelled. "What the hell are you doing here, scaring away the animals and messing with my traps?"

The small boy stopped. He was very frightened. Yet anything that frightened him, he thought, had to be tough. "I haven't scared away any animals," the small boy told the trapper. "I found the fox in your trap, and I came to find you, because I want to be tough like you."

"A fox in my trap, eh?" the trapper grunted. "Good. I'll skin her. I'll show you how to be tough, all right. I'm the toughest son of a bitch around here. You think bears are tough? Coyotes? Eagles? Wolves? Mountain lions? Hell, I trap 'em all. I shoot 'em in the head if they don't die in my traps, and I skin their asses and that's how I make my money to buy my guns. I have all kinds of guns. You name it, boy, and I can kill it. I'll show you what tough is."

The trapper stank like a scared skunk. He didn't seem like a nice man at all. But he must be the toughest thing in the forest, the small boy reminded himself, waiting to become as tough. When would it happen? How would it happen? They had walked almost all the way to where the fox was crying in the trap when the trapper suddenly stopped. There, across the clearing, coming toward the trap from the opposite direction, came the neighborhood giant.

"Hello, giant!" said the small boy, because even though he wanted to be tougher than the giant, he and the giant were friends. But the trapper turned and ran.

The giant immediately released the fox from the trap. The small boy watched her run off to her cubs, glad they would have their mother again. "The trapper isn't really the toughest thing in the forest, is he?" he asked the giant.

"The trapper's a loud-mouthed coward," the giant told him.

"But he kills bears, coyotes, eagles, and mountain lions," the small boy said. "What's tougher than that?"

"The trapper kills mostly helpless little things," the giant replied. "Rabbits and muskrats. And they're tougher than he is, because no matter what he does to them, some of them survive. They even chew off their own feet to get away. You catch him in a trap, and he wouldn't have the guts to do that. Anything's tougher than the trapper."

"Then who is the toughest thing in the forest?" the small boy asked. "Who is tougher than everything else? Is it you? I want to be tough like you, Mr. Giant."

The giant picked up the small boy, put him on his shoulders, and started up the hill toward the small boy's home. "I'm not so tough, either," the giant explained. "I'm big and I'm strong, but your mother is more powerful than me by far. Both of us work for the Goddess of the mountain, and she is more powerful than both of us together."

"But who is the toughest?" the small boy asked again. "I have to find out before sunset, so that I can have my wish granted and become just as tough. Is it my father?" the small boy guessed, as they were already getting close to the house and the small boy could hear his father splitting a few pieces of stove wood.

"Oh, he's tough enough," the giant said, putting the small boy down. "But all of us are just tough enough. The rocks are tough enough to endure forever, because they must. The turtles are tough enough to be mistaken for rocks and survive, because otherwise something else would eat them. The deer and bears are tough enough to live where they live, and the big white pine is tough enough to be a big white pine. The beaver, the fox—we're all tough, just tough enough to be ourselves, and still, none of us are so tough that we're tougher than everything else. In that way, you're as tough as me or anyone. Try to be tougher, now, and you'll just be ridiculous and dangerous."

The small boy was confused. But it was also dark. The sun had set.

"Maybe I'm just tough enough to be a small boy," he decided. Besides, he was tired. He heard his mother the enchantress singing to him, calling him in to go to bed. He ran to her arms, and as he ran past, the shaggy, sleepy dimwitted orange tom cat looked up and winked.

"Your wish was granted, small boy," the cat said, then went back to sleep.

