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a story
of a father
and a boy

E. W. TEDLOCK, JR.

'Twas a fond ambush'

In the blind time between sun-bright things and dream-dark shapes, the boy and the father would play in the shaded garden. Only the sounds and lights of the house played with them, calling toward bed and the good, warm time until dawn. From the older brother's phonograph, soft tunes enchanted them home. Where the sister sat close to the radio, hits strikes and outs muttered near victory. And where the mother made things to wear against winter, the whir of the sewing machine never stopped. Only Freckles the dog was quiet, contentedly curled like a white ball where water had cooled the great bush by the wall.

"Where is that boy? Where can he be?" the father would call after him, into the not quite dark night in the green-shaped yard.

The father would look under the cherry tree, where the birds had left seeds like fallen Christmas tree things. He would peer through the shadows of the big-fruited peach tree, where the leaves curled far down. He would search along the dim pattern of the walk, looking behind the slender curve of a chair or under the dark red wood of the picnic table.

"Where can that boy have gone now?" he would call, letting the worry climb in his voice, not knowing when the boy would jump laughing out to surprise him. For the words were magic, the "abacadabra," the "presto chango," of their game. They could do anything.

The boy and the father played until bed time, over and over, without getting tired. They always began the same way. They started off, hold-

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ing each other's hand, down the walk, away from the house and the light and the sounds, into the dark. The farther they went, the stranger it was. The walk was a road, and they were exploring the night-changed world.

"What a fine night it is," the father would say, as if nothing could happen. "Look at this apple tree. See how it has grown. What a fine tree it makes."

But as he talked of fine nights and fine trees, the boy's hand slipped out of his and vanished soundlessly into the big darkness.

At first the father pretended not to notice. "What a fine tree it is," he said. "How it has grown. We should have apples next year."

Then he was surprised that the boy was no longer beside him, looking and listening. He could see nothing but the high leaves of the apple tree, the vacant curve of the walk, the shadows of things in the night. The radio still muttered its far off game. The music rushed in the hollow house. The hum of the sewing machine stopped, and started again. But the boy had vanished.

Freckles the dog was not worried. He stirred and sighed sleepily in his cool water nest. At home in his hutch in the playhouse, Cotton the rabbit thumped twice unconcernedly. The apple tree kept on growing, toward next year's fruit. But the father was worried. He had to search, up and down, back and forth, until he found the hidden, waiting boy.

He went fearfully along the dim pattern of the walk to the big-fruited peach tree, and parted the spaces between the curled leaves. He peered under the cherry tree, but only the bird-fallen seeds glinted back. And he called, "Where is that boy? Where can he be?"

He turned toward the house, where light shone dimly out among the chairs and onto the picnic table. And as he went, he began to sound very worried, calling "Where is he? I wonder where that boy has gone to now!"

He looked behind the slender, curving chairs, and of course there was no one there. Then he turned to the dark cave under the roof of the picnic table. And as he bent down, very worried, to look in, the darkness jumped. With a sudden loud "Here I am" the boy leaped up and threw his arms around his neck and caught him tight.

That night this was the last time they played the magic game. The father was glad, not because he was tired, but because once, in the middle of the game, just after the boy had vanished, he had felt, just for a moment, as if it had really happened. The way the boy did it was magic, and you did not want to forget the magic words.