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Boys and Indians

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Turtles are not benevolent creatures, not to me, not anymore, not after that day in our backyard. Now, when someone recalls the tale of the tortoise who won the race, I am certain the turtle cheated. If I happen upon a documentary explaining how a mother turtle lays and buries her eggs in the sand, I secretly hope the tide takes her back to sea before she finishes her task. Turtles scare me, and I have my brother Jim to thank for that fear."

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In the summer of 1964, Jim's purpose in life was to keep up with Mike, our older brother. Try as he might, when Jim attempted to do the things that Mike did, he couldn't replicate the feat. Like a sailor, he followed the charted course, but somehow managed to end up fifteen degrees off course. That day in the back yard, that day of the turtle, Jim redeemed himself. He earned the rank of Mike's first mate.

The night before, our family gathered for dinner. Over meatloaf, green beans and boiled potatoes, Mike reminded us again about the Indian arrow head he unearthed in our backyard three years ago. He told the story now as though he had been on an archeological dig. I knew better. Three years ago, Mike was nine years old. His passion was building intricate highways out of mounds of dirt for his match box cars. If Mike's Corvette hadn't nicked the arrow head on a tight curve, the arrow head might still be a treasure belonging to no one.

I asked Dad if Indians really lived where we lived now, right in our backyard. I tried to imagine how our neighborhood would have looked back then. There would be no fences, no gates, no swings, no slides, no pools. The identical colonial houses, looking like those from my Monopoly game, would have been thatched long houses we learned about in social studies class.

I wouldn't have to walk to school with my brothers, wait for Ollie the crossing guard, or listen to Pete the barber tell us his latest joke. The books I carried on my hip would be history. Instead, I could see my friend Cathy and I working side by side in a garden, sewing our seeds, sharing our secrets, whispering our dreams.

The boys ended my reverie when they raced upstairs to find the arrow head. Mike kept it in a small wooden box in his pine dresser drawer. It had a place of honor, nestled among his Boy Scout badges. Before long, I heard angry voices, then the bedroom door slammed shut. Jim stormed into the back room. I followed him. He ran his eyes and hands over the books on the shelf. The dictionary looked big enough to cause Mike physical harm. I stayed out of his way.

Mom asked me to help with the dishes and when I left the kitchen, I found Jim sitting cross-legged on the living room rug. He was engrossed in a skinny old book about fossils. The book itself looked as if it was decomposing. Jim read while I watched our favorite television programs. Before long, it was 9:00 p.m. Jim didn't hear, or pretended not to hear, when Mom told us it was time for bed. Finally, he grudgingly acknowledged her and flew upstairs with the book tucked away beneath his arm.

In the morning, our parents left for work. I went to look for remnants of felt to make another skirt for Barbie. Cathy would be here soon. I peered up through the basement window, and from the room beneath the ground, I saw Jim head for the garage. He was a man, or should I say a boy, with a mission. Determined to find something older than Mike's arrow head, he heeded tools. Jim looked over his shoulder at the corner kitchen window. He thought no one was watching. I quietly crept upstairs and watched through that same kitchen window. He grabbed a small spade, then changed his mind. This will call for one of Dad's shovels. "Ouch!" A splinter pricked his finger. I should have known it was an omen.

Jim took time to survey the yard. He paced. He tapped the toe of his sneaker on grassy spots, then on rocky ground, then on mostly dirt patches. Finally, he pitched the shovel into the ground. The shovel vibrated and hurt Jim's hand. He grimaced. Jim looked around the yard again, and his eyes settled on a spot beneath the maple tree that had been there as long as I could remember. He took the shovel, stabbed the ground, and this time, the earth moved beneath the metal. He smiled. "This is the spot," he called triumphantly to no one, or so he thought.

I approached Jim as he knelt to move the dirt, his back toward me. I saw him scooping handfuls of warm, moist dirt, his fingers searching, reaching, feeling. Suddenly, a cry so frightening erupted from him that my first instinct was to turn and run. Something made me stay. When I realized that Jim was staring at something dangling from his fingers, I could barely contain my fear and anticipation.

"What is it?" I shouted, forgetting that I was spying on Jim. Without a sound, his shoulder turned toward me. His arm and hand came at me. In his palm, Jim held a turtle shell. Attached to the shell were its head and legs, looking shriveled and leathery.

The decaying appendages reminded me of the peppers our neighbor Rocky grew in his garden and dried in his basement. The smell of his wife Ida's homemade red sauce mingled with the odor of the rotting waste. I felt sick. Jim laughed, but then noticed my colorless face. He put the dead turtle down, draped his arm around my shoulder, and assured me it was okay. Cathy walked through the gate just then, Barbie case in hand. "C'mon Anne," let's get sewing.

That night, after the lights went out, I heard Jim and Mike whispering in their room. "Cool," Mike said. I heard the squeak of the dresser drawer opening, a rustle of paper, then another "cool." I imagine Jim finally drifted off to sleep with a smile on his lips. After all, he found something better than a fossil that day. Though not an arrow head, Jim's buried treasure managed to impress our brother Mike. And me? I don't like turtles.

--Anne Steger