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IN JUNE

The shallow creek where I jumped as light and long-legged as a water cricket across the rocks holds my childhood memories in its sandy bottom. That creek was wide the June day my cousins hunted down a large snapping turtle. My dad said they live almost fifty years, “Kenny, they are predators and loners, left to fend for themselves.”

I remember dad’s stories of tadpoles, frogs, and the vast distances our creek water traveled before and after it sparkled through our stretch of land. The snapping turtle eggs are left in the sandy creek bottoms to hatch on their own. Many don’t survive. Some lumber about for decades. I imagine these creatures only know to attack and devour, without ever pausing to look into another’s eyes. The turtle we snuck up on that June morning was probably three times our age. Twelve-year-old boys do not think about age and lifetimes. I cannot tell you how my cousins caught the big turtle. I cannot remember them dragging him to the back porch after they slaughtered him at the creek bank. I will never forget the way my cousins deftly tied a rope around its wrinkled neck. I handed them the thick braided jute and watched as with one swift blow they chopped off its puny head.

I had no power to stop them. My earliest memory of how precious the smallest life could be is when I opened an old ring box in my bedroom one spring morning to discover a ladybug I saved there. It breathed the bigger air after a dormant winter and fluttered toward my open window. I felt sorry that I had captured the bug and grateful to witness its resurrection. Since that time, my velvet boxes, secret drawers, and decorative dishes have collected all manner of fossils to remind me of my long connection with

decaying moments.

Danny and Tommy were rough and tumble kids. I suppose that I was expected to keep up with them so I rode my bike over to their house on summer days to try on antics and roughhousing. Maybe I hoped to glean something from them that made me more like other boys. I preferred to play house with my best girlfriend next door. I still keep one of her Barbie doll shoes in a footed dish with some smooth rocks and a skate key. Dad always looked a little weary when I strolled home wearing a headscarf.

“To the bat cave, Robin,” Tommy commanded. I would follow my cousins leaping in arabesque. Most of the time I stumbled upon landing or fell—splat. One of the many calls I answered was “Hey, twinkle toes.” I was the family sissy and learned to love that otherness. My favorite toy, a James Bond attaché case held world secrets, a change of socks, and answers about government and humanity to me. To them it was a machine gun, nuclear bomb, and stealth defense weapon.

I did not turn away when the turtle’s blood spurted. Instead, I watched the eyes of the gourd-shaped head as they fixed on a distant point I could not see. The turtle did not bleed much, its severed body relaxed out of its shell and its four limbs were flaccid, meaty, blubber sticking to the porch floorboards. I stood silent, scanning the damaged grass trail from the porch back down to the creek. I felt a cool summer gust and wondered if murder sent the chill.

Aunt Helen, Danny and Tommy’s mother, congratulated us, “Remove the feet by cutting through the leg joints, like you’d cut a chicken up and then cut off the tail. Remember to be careful of the claws on the turtle’s feet,” she said, “You can soak the turtle in a pot of boiling water and scrub it with a brush to get some of the dirt off of it. I don’t want dirt in my soup.” She made a soup that I never tasted and she didn’t tell me anymore about it. Aunt Helen was my dad’s younger sister. The two of them were peas in a pod. They were plain, friendly Polish kids, with strong compassionate natures, content with and dedicated to their families.

My cousins and I skipped down to the creek side before they attempted to butcher the turtle. Well, I skipped while Danny and Tommy clomped along. We hurried to see if a buzzard would find the turtle's head left on the bank after they dragged their prey proudly to the back porch. I approached the decapitated head to find its jaw snapping and flexing by some fascinating muscle impulse. I checked every hour to witness the turtlehead scolding and bitching as he settled his score. His words were silent but I remember what he said, "There is no beginning; there will be no end." The eyes on the gourd-shaped head of that snapping, predacious creature stared at a distant place I could not see, but felt deeply.

Cousin Danny called me two years ago on a random day in June. The warm morning sun brought little consolation to the voice on the phone. I had not seen him since his wedding and only heard recently about the failed marriage. "My mother is in intensive care at St. Francis Hospital," he began the phone conversation immediately to the point. "We've all been with her day and night," he said. "How did you do it? I had no idea what you were going through when your parents passed." Then he paused, "I cannot bear this. Didn't know if you would want to see her." After a winced silence he added, "Tommy is on a plane from Iraq now, I hope she holds on for him." Tommy is my same age, never married and is now a near-mute loaner. His secrets are deep and mysterious to me.

"Well, Dan," my unfiltered inner voice said, "It's not for sissies. Every day there is some reminder of Mom and Dad's absence." Years of Junes cannot change the sadness or fill the empty air where their sweet voices once laughed, scolded, and praised me.

I appeared at the hospital within the hour toting roast beef sandwiches, chips, and sodas. My cousin's children were standing braced to the walls of the small isolated room and Aunt Helen lay motionless in the cold metal bed with only a few lines connecting her to this life. I looked across the faces of my cousin and his offspring. Each bore expressions that were still, their eyes swollen and leaking. I heard her shouting at me soon after my grandmother,

her mother, died—*Get the hell out of the way, you cocksucker.*

I proceeded directly to Aunt Helen's side as Danny stepped aside with a desperate glance that said—*Do something*

“Hello Aunt Helen, it’s Kenny,” I said and grasped her heavy limp hand between mine. “You are waiting patiently aren’t you? Relax; I think the angels are ready to carry you. No effort; you rest and let them take you.” Her snow-white hair, hardworking hands, and gentle green eyes were just as I had remembered. Once again, there is that distant point I cannot see.

Helen’s potato salad was a staple at every family event. Family gatherings grew fewer as the years passed. I don’t know how or why Dad and his sister drifted apart after their mother died. I did not expect ever to see her looking so tired and defeated. I thought of that damn turtle, flaccid and naked, with its gourd-shaped head and staring eyes snapping its jaw with a story about life never-ending.

“She is calm. You know, Dad kept wrenching and flexing his hand,” I spoke to everyone in the room collectively, “I would say, Pop, are you walking up the mountain?”

I whispered then to my aunt, “You let the angels do the work. Float on up.”

“I think I’ll go down and watch for Tommy,” I changed tone, “I brought you roast beef on bakery rolls.”

I lit a cigarette at the hospital entrance and Danny walked out to me and stoically said, “She passed.”

We stepped back from one another. “I know,” I replied. “Go wash your face; I’m going to stay out here until Tommy arrives.”

On a Sunday in June, we moved a small crewel sofa and Helen’s cherished cherry tables, special curio, and her mother’s crystal into the U-Haul. It rained like hell. On the side lawn that wet afternoon, I pointed out an old snapping turtle lumbering toward the front of the house.

“Leave it alone, you’ll piss it off,” they all dismissed me.

I figured that disconnected clan of turtles had long since left the neighborhood. Most probably, they moved away shortly after I stopped playing

there. I stood frozen and watched the massive old turtle stretching its neck and tilting its head in query at me. I could only see Helen's small head and deep worried eyes.