

## Snake Tail

I sat on my front porch stairs; my upper half shaded by the canopy that guarded our front door from the harsh June sun. My freckled legs rested on the cracked brick stairs in the sun absorbing the heat. I sat there like most days in the late morning and waited for my friends. Though today I itched, and descended the terracotta steps.

A thick, heavy blanket of sunlight toppled over the roof of the house. I ran down the block till I heard Sam's high-pitched voice yell from his room on the second floor. He crawled out from the window, with ease, and dropped to the roof of his garage. The old pine tree waited at the edge of the sloping roof. Scars littered its branches from use. Another head poked out after him, he struggled to get his wider frame out of the window. A bit of encouragement from me and a couple *gentle yanks* from Sam, the new face made it out.

"This is my friend Caleb," yelled Sam. "From my hometown."

The duo climbed down, though Caleb jumped halfway. He marched up to me, he was tall, taller than me. I reached out with my right hand, like my father taught me.

"Hey, I'm Robert," I said modestly. When our hands locked together, his tight grip crushed my own.

"What's up? I'm Caleb," he said boisterously. He looked down at me when he talked. "So, Sam told me you guys have a hideout in the woods where the creek is."

I glanced over at Sam who was sniffing the flowers from his mother's garden. Caleb poked me and repeated his question. I nodded to him and checked on Sam again.

"You two got to smell these daisies," Sam called face deep in the flower bed.

I shook my head and waved him to come along. We raced to the forest through the small private college campus across the street from my house. Past the fountain filled with stagnant algae-infested water.

I told Caleb, “after long days at the creek mining up clay for plates, making fires, or swimming, we sit on the fountain edge.” The summer breeze of Kansas settled into cool evenings on those days.

Sam raced ahead of us over a wooden bridge, holes of varied sizes and shapes covered it. Below I could see the relaxed flow of the creek, green leaves shook from their branches floated effortlessly into the water. Quiet explosions of rings formed, like rowboats sailing across a placid sea before the congested rapids. Boulders of concrete filled the creek and only little stream channels filtered through gray mass.

“Hurry up,” called Caleb from across the bridge.

They waited at the well, where the same sun-bleached green rubber hose coiled around the pipe and pump. I lifted the stiff handle, jerking it up and down until the water shot out. Caleb reached for the hose, and took his first sip of the boiling water.

“What the hell!” screamed Caleb. “I burned my mouth on this shit.”

“You have to let it rest,” said Sam taking the hose from him, “idiot.”

We passed the hose around in a rotation, “down there,” I pointed, “about halfway is our hideout.” I turned back to them, “hey, stop passing it back and forth,” I grabbed the hose and sprayed Sam with it.

We laughed until Caleb asked, “so, what even are we gonna do? Dig up clay and make pot?”

“We can do whatever we want,” said Sam pulling down on the handle of the pump.

“There's lots of wildlife here,” he continued to struggle so, Caleb helped him. “Thanks.”

“What kind of wildlife?” he asked.

“The snake is still around isn't it Bobby?” asked Sam.

“Maybe, but the hideout isn’t near it's den I don’t think,” I replied wiping excess water from my brow. “Let’s go to the hideout first.”

I started towards the entrance of the forest trail. The younger trees guarded the entrance of the trail bowed in creating a canopy. The roof of leaves and branches shield most of the heat from us but in some areas shards of light speared through. Fresh wood chips left the trail stiff, but unpacked and spongy.

“Right up ahead after this clearing we’ll be at the entrance,” I pointed, staying one step ahead.

We reached the opening in the trail and tall, green grass surrounded us on both sides. A couple trees sprinkled throughout the vast space, beds of pink honeysuckle and yellow dandelions patches invaded in rows on by sides. The invasive plants consumed more of the grass every day. The path decayed from wood chips to pockets of grass and weeds alike, the further we journeyed in. Until we bottle-nosed back into a dense wall of trees.

“This is it,” Sam said pointing to the cave-like weaving of branches and saplings. As we immersed ourselves deeper into the woods I watched as the foliage grew denser the farther, we ventured in. “Watch your head, Caleb, you’re taller than Robert so you might get stuck by some loose...”

“Christ!” spurted Caleb. “You couldn’t’ve warned me sooner?”

“It's a rite of passage,” I chuckled, echoed by Sam’s laugh. “We don’t just bring anyone to the hideout.”

I reached the end of our short entrance and rounded the final oak and gazed over our hideout. Slabs of concrete stacked onto each other, and slowly slipping down sloped ground towards the shallow creek. Trees grew on little concave cliffs that came up like waves on both

sides of the opening, and their roots dug out below, hanging like stalactites. Sam was already halfway down on his way to the creek crawling over our small firepit. It was charred black on its perimeter and covered in shards of glass and partially burnt sticks. Caleb stood tall at the top gawking at the sight.

I stood with him “This is all ours,” I told him stepping down to the concrete littered ground.

I walked by our larger firepit marked by charred stone full of ash. Above nearly ten feet was a low-hanging branch, its leaves were burnt black from a fire we had made earlier in the summer. The hideout was divided into sections. The main area was the center where the ground was the flattest. On my side I had to step off the concrete into a cubby of dirt and roots. I hung a metal linked chain and metal pole along the exposed roots. The other side was, Sam’s, he had a bucket of glass shards, wood and bark in a stolen trash can for fires, and a blow-torch that we also stole from the maintenance shed on campus.

“So now what are we gonna do?” Caleb asked following me down.

“We could mine some clay,” said Sam jumping into the creek. “Our plates and cups from yesterday should be about hard enough to drink water!” he shouted from below, his hands and feet already covered in mud and clay.

“Or we can make a fire,” I added.

“Let’s walk farther down the trail,” said Caleb. “I want to see the rest of it.”

“Alright!” shouted Sam springing out of the creek.

Down the trail we passed by a half-burnt tree that marked another one of our trails we used. It had been split in half by a lightning bolt, or at least that is what my father told me and that is what I told Caleb as well. We turned left and found another clearing.

A bench sat at the top of the three dikes wood chips became sparser on each lower level. Grass only grew in patches where the ground was not constantly trampled, and wooden logs set in as steps to the lower levels. At the bottom was a low standing concrete bridge that led to the other side, but we were not supposed to go over there because our parents did not allow it. Though that rarely stopped us from crossing the bridge when we wanted.

“What’s on the other side of the creek?” Caleb asked.

“Wild pigs I’ve been told,” I replied. “But I’ve never seen any. Just tracks.” I looked over my right where the creek had eroded most of the dirt and sand into another little cliff. “Over there is where we jump off into the water when it’s deep enough to swim,” I pointed.

“Let me jump,” Caleb approached the edge. “Off it.”

“No!” I shouted and paused. “We don’t go over there anymore,” I shook my head.

“Yeah, our friend says he was bit by the snake,” said Sam squinting. “I’m not sure about that, but we have at least seen the snake in that area.” Sam peeled dried mud and clay off his hands. “We’ve stayed away the last couple weeks.”

Caleb kept walking towards it though, so I ran in front of him.

“Here, I’ll show you where we think it lives,” I said. I crept forward pushing the brush out of my way until I came upon a small hole in the ground. I could still feel the curiosity from

Caleb, so I grabbed a small stick and stuck it in, fishing around. “See if it does live here it’s not here right now so we can just head back to the hideout.”

“Let’s hunt the snake down!” Caleb yelled grabbing the stick and waved it above his head.

Sam’s eyes grew when we exchanged glances, and I saw the corners of his mouth curl upwards.

“I don’t like snakes.” I replied scratching the back of my head. “I’d rather just make a big fire and burn stuff.”

“I think we should hunt down the snake,” Sam said walking past me to stand by Caleb.

“How about we go back to the hideout,” Caleb said, “and we see what happens.”

I just shrugged and we went back to the hideout this time taking the secret path marked by the burnt tree. It ran parallel to the main trail, but narrower. The trees were tightly packed, and we had almost no room to walk. We walked single file back, constantly rubbing shoulders against the branches and slipping on the loose dirt cliff side, a twenty-foot drop. This path had a view of the low-flowing creek and the other side of the creek. The other side was the least explored part of the forest.

After we returned, we gathered the wood and piled bark and dry leaves on as well. Before I could soak our pyre kindling, a large gust of wind blew overhead. The leaves quivered from violent flurry some were ripped from the branches and swirled down to us, a few even landing in the pyre. Then Caleb took off down the slope towards the creek and Sam followed.

“Look!” Sam yelled. “Look it's the snake!”

He was right. The snake was swimming in the water. Its wet back glistened as it slithered through the pockets of sunlight.

Caleb was down in the water now chasing the snake. I hurried down to join the chase with them not wanting to be left out. We started throwing pebbles at it as we caught up to it though it turned back to face us. Caleb grabbed a large rock the size of his head. The snake raised up trying to appear larger in front of us the three giants.

Caleb dropped the rock onto the snake's back half, and it tried to escape after the rock made its impact. Caleb used a stick to hold down the snake's head pushing it deeper into the soft clay ground before hitting the snake on the head. While dazed, Sam rushed up and began to stomp rapidly on the snake head and upper body.

I stood there and watched them. Why I was not joining them if the snake had bitten my friend it was my responsibility to protect him since I was one of the older kids and biggest. For weeks this snake had terrorized us away from the best swimming spot in the creek. I grew up in this forest, it was mine, but I just stood there watched a stranger defend it. Even Sam helped and he was doing more than me to defend our second home.

The snake lay motionless on the ground, and I stepped forward. Caleb grabbed the rock off the snake. There was a gash in the snake's skin about three inches long. As I inspected it, I could see it still breathing. Caleb also saw this and stomped right on its head and pushed his foot down sinking his sneakers deep into the clay. The snake's tail wriggled violently as if it were

trying to pull the infinitely stronger creature of Caleb off from top of it. Finally, I pushed Caleb off it.

“Look! I think it’s had enough,” I yelled, my voice cracked from the strain. Caleb backed off it and I knelt down with a stick in hand to fish its head from out of the clay. The head popped out and I crouched down to prod at it. Blood flowed out of the open wound into the water. I leaned in, and saw blood drip out of its mouth. Then the snake lunged forward fangs out, instinctively using the stick I threw it up the wall of dirt. The creature rolled back down gradually; into the water. Dirt clotted up the gash mixing with the crimson liquid.

“Is it dead?” asked Sam.

“No, I see it breathing still,” said Caleb pointing at its unrhythmic breaths.

“It’s had enough.” I said, “It won’t bother us anymore,” but I knew that was a lie. If it did survive this, it would carry on its normal life.

“We have to kill it,” said Sam as he walked up to me. “Otherwise it will just suffer.”

I knew he was right. I had killed thousands of bugs before this, but this seemed harsher, crueler. Maybe it was the dragged-out manner in which this spontaneous execution had taken place. It may have been that it was a bigger animal, but why did this have such an effect on me?

I felt a jagged object being placed in my hands. It was wet and covered in clay. The rock was the same Caleb had originally dropped on the snake and he handed it to me. Unconsciously I raised the heavy rock over my head. Clay dripped onto my face narrowly missing my eye. I felt the rock all around searching for the sharpest edge to try and make this as clean and quick as

possible. After I fumbled to position it for the final blow, I got a scent of iron, I could taste it. The snake was trying to move, but was stuck and bleeding, blood flowed down the creek. I closed my eyes as the rock left my hands. I heard a splat followed by clay smacking against my shins. I listened to the frantic splashing of water.

A knot rolled in my stomach and a hand wrapped over my shoulder. I opened my eyes to Sam standing next to me.

“That was great!” yelled Caleb patting me on the back and giving Sam a high-five. “I can’t wait to tell my dad about today. Jeez what a day!”

This was not what I thought about when thinking of a *what a day* kind of day is. Those were reserved for laying in the sun on a trampoline with friends after a long day playing in the forest, and comparing our sprouting armpit hairs.

The three of us left the snake there in the murky red water, still wriggling. As we got farther away, the splashes of water grew quieter until it was lost to the rustling of trees above us.

I continued all the way home, I said my goodbyes to them as I left. I had to get home and tell my dad what happened.

I reached the driveway, my legs covered in mud, and my dad was in the garage cleaning the grill. His hair was tied back in a ponytail like always. He saw me and walked towards me with a smile. I could feel the knot growing in my stomach again. I tried my best to shake it away and put on a smile.

“You must have had quite the day,” my dad laughed.

“It was crazy,” I said, forcing a grin. “You remember that snake I told you about, that we saw?” He nodded. “Well, today Sam and his friend and I hunted it down. And we killed it. We crushed it with rocks!”

After the words left my mouth I smiled as big as I could. But my father’s face turned to disgust.

“Why, Robert?” he asked.

“What?” I replied, “It’s almost bitten us before. We had to do it.” I akimboed my arms and stood up tall like the snake had.

“You murdered a frightened animal.” He instructed sternly. “That is nothing to be proud of. Wipe that grin off your face.”

I crumbled fully expecting a beating like usual, but he walked away. Without another word or look my dad went back to the grill.

I waited there looking for something to say, but there was nothing I could say. I confronted him with a mask, and he shattered it. I walked back to my front porch and sat on those cracked brick stairs. I looked for anything to distract me, but nothing could, so I waited. Until my mom called me in for dinner.