Island 79

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Image Credit: Elise S.,   
Clarksville, MD

The year was 1885, and in March my average life was turned upside down. Pa got offered a high paying job with the postal service out in Oregon. I was only ten at the time we left our home in Cleveland, and started the trek out west by covered wagon with two other families. Everything was going smoothly until tragedy struck in Idaho. Charlie, my elder brother, caught typhoid fever and passed away at the age of sixteen. Pa and the other two fathers did their best, but we simply did not have time for a proper burial and service because winter was coming soon and we had a lot of miles ahead of us.   
  
I spent most of my time by myself, fishing and chasing critters around, but my brother’s death changed things around here. Charlie was a sharpshooter, one of the best I had ever seen, and without him we had much less venison and buffalo. Since Charlie is gone, I now need to look after my younger brother, Eugene. At times this, eight year-old causes more trouble than I ever thought a child could. Heck, just last week he managed to take the axle off the back of the wagon and broke it playing baseball. Baseball was a new game we learned when Pa took us to the Cleveland Spiders’ first professional game against the Cincinnati Redstockings. It was very new and confusing, but a great game none-the-less. It took us three days to fix that axle and get on the trail again.  
  
The first day we made it to our new home was also the day we spotted the first flake of snow. Our village was surrounded by thick woodlands on three sides and a lake that reminded me of Erie to the west. With the help of the friendly townsfolk, we put together a pretty nice cabin in less than a week. While Pa started his new job, I helped Ma around the house for the first winter. I looked after Eugene and my sister Katherine, who was only four. Once the weather broke, Eugene and I headed to the center of towns to meet some of the local boys. We met some similar looking kids playing marbles and we introduced ourselves. Jeb, Alvin, and Geoffrey were all born and raised in Oregon, and they had the same interests as Eugene and I. They loved adventuring in the woods, and that is all we did that spring and into summer.  
  
It was about two weeks past the Fourth of July when we met up at the lake for a game of hide-and-go-seek. Once we all got to the dock, Alvin told us he would be it, but when Eugene went to dive in to the lake, he forcefully stopped him.  
  
“Hey! What’s your problem?!” the feisty Eugene screamed. “You cannot swim in Toxic Lake! It is dangerous; some of the most poisonous creatures in the world reside in there.”  
  
Eugene adhered to this warning and the game continued. I ran about three hundred feet and hid behind a rock. Once Alvin caught and tagged the others, he started searching for me. After about five minutes, he spotted me and chased me for what seemed like two miles. All of a sudden, both of us came to a complete stop and stared at something that had come into our sights. There was a three-quarter of the way completed bridge leading to an island that neither of us had ever seen. The bridge was not regular by any means; it was about five feet wide and perfectly level. Whoever built this placed the rocks perfectly and had a specific purpose in mind.   
  
The walk back to the dock took about fifteen minutes, where angry looks welcomed us back.  
  
“What took you so long?” exclaimed Geoffrey.  
  
The faces of chagrin turned to excitement while Alvin explained. While we were pondering the situation, Jeb mentioned his father was a local history, expert so we headed there to find some answers. After telling us he had never heard of such a bridge, Jeb’s father looked hard out the window for a moment, then jolted back to reality. According to him, thirty to forty years ago there was a local urban legend. People had always dreamingly talked about Island 79, which was the one we had seen, but it was soon dismissed. Jeb’s wise father pointed out that it was even named after gold, the seventy-ninth element on the periodic table. Scientists told the people that gold is only common in California, not Oregon, and that the island is too small for it to be logical. Jeb’s Mother came into the room when she heard this.  
  
“That is the bridge of old Mr. Anderson.” She continued, “He was an eccentric old man, who was obsessed with that legend. We heard he was going to build a bridge, but nobody believed him. He died a few years back and nobody gave it a second thought.”  
  
Later that night, we met up at the park. Eugene showed the boys baseball, which we played regularly now. After the game, before the sun set and we needed to go home for supper, I suggested we finish the bridge. This sparked a long debate which concluded with us deciding we wanted a new frontier to discover. We would start this massive project at sunrise tomorrow morning.  
  
It was impossible to sleep that night. I kept tossing and turning, and when I finally managed to sleep, I kept dreaming of that mysterious island. Anxious and tired, I was excited when the sun peered through my window. We met at the bridge and started moving rocks. The daily itinerary was to build all morning, go home, eat lunch, build some more, than go play for a little before supper. This schedule was kept for a month until school started and we needed to cut back our hours. When winter came, we had made significant progress. The school year was tough, and the winter crawled by.   
  
Finally when we were able to get to work, we worked harder than ever. Just into April, we reached land and this made all of our hard work pay off. Island 79 was complete with a murky swamp to play in, luscious vines to swing from, and best of all a cave to make our clubhouse. Our first meeting was scheduled for the first day of summer. Eugene and I got there right after Geoffrey and Alvin. We waited about fifteen minutes for Jeb and were about to start without him, when we heard his footsteps.  
  
“Look what I have!” Jeb stated with excitement.  
  
“What?!” we questioned him simultaneously.   
  
“Candles! That way we can actually see what we are doing down here.” He responded coolly.  
  
The room illuminated, and we started the meeting by carving our names in the wall with Charlie’s old hunting knife. I pressed the knife to the wall, and I saw something shining from behind the cave wall. My face lit up and I showed the boys. We   
frantically started scraping away the rock and exposing more of the precious metal. Our first meeting, and we struck gold.  
  
After a little bickering, we accepted a proposal to mine it ourselves and bring the gold to the town for everyone to share. We all wondered how we would transport it back to town. The gold was too heavy for us to carry. Jeb brought up the fact that the Short Line Rail Road had an abandoned storage shed behind his house; we could use the old tracks and a small cart to bring the gold back.   
  
The undertaking of this project was as hard as building the bridge. Thank goodness the bridge was level; this made it way easier. Mr. Anderson knew what he was doing; I almost felt bad cashing in on his life dream. He lived his life dreaming of doing what a few young boys just did. As summer break was coming to an end, and after a lot of bumps, bruises, and hard work, we finished the track and mined all the gold. It was the first day of September when the leaves were a beautiful array of colors, when we organized at town meeting on the shore. Puzzled faces and vast confusion were seen throughout the audience when we brought the cart in covered with a raggedy, old, blanket. We tore it off and screams of delight were yelled from the joyous townsfolk. As soon as the happiness settled, it turned to violence. Bliss was soon replaced with greed, and parents arguing now drowned out the cheerful screams.   
  
“My son actually has the intelligence to make it to Stanford and become something special, we need that money!” was shouted by a selfish mother.  
  
“We have dreamed our whole life of opening our own business,” screamed another man.  
  
Fights broke out and the situation turned ugly. What had we caused? We did not have much time to wonder before Eugene interrupted.   
  
“Hey everyone, look over here!” The young boy screamed at the top of his lungs.  
  
Eugene then, with all his might, pushed the cart on its side into Toxic Lake. Shock is the only word that could describe it. The mood drastically changed once more. After a few short seconds of anger, reason prevailed. Eventually, little Eugene became regarded as a town hero and received an honorary key to the city. Life continued normally. We still played on Island 79 everyday, grew up, and led average lives. However, the townsfolk were never the same. People were just friendlier in general now, and the village was now a happier place, all thanks to little Eugene. I could not be more proud of him, and I know Charlie would be proud of both of us.