

Fortress

The digging began in June, in the afternoon of the very day school let out for summer.

Five, six, sometimes eight or even ten hours a day, one shovelful at a time until we'd hollowed a pit probably ten feet deep by twenty wide, about fifty yards from the edge of the woods where the old man lived who owned a landscaping business and who was always scowling at us.

We were able to jump in the pit by early July, sliding over a massive piece of plywood one of us had procured from God-knew-where. The four of us—me, Russell, Kenny, and Damon—sat knee to knee in the darkness, unsure what to do next. But we knew how cool it was. It just needed some housewarming, and it needed to be bigger. Our underground fort would only be more awesome—or, “wicked,” or “radical,” as we called it then—if we could just keep expanding it.

We threw down some shag rug remnants, inexplicably tossed to the curb outside some crazy person's house who didn't know treasure when he saw it. To this we added a battered card table and a bunch of candles, which we left to burn without thought to fire or asphyxiation—turns out we didn't need to worry: the candles hardly gave off any light or smoke anyway. So we came to leaving a sliver of the plywood open so we could at least see the nothingness and each other's faces. It wasn't quite wicked or radical enough, so the digging continued. And continued.

Kenny occasionally got stupid with the monotony. To break it he would balance his shovel end on the palm of his hand, running zig-zags and tight circles as the shaft threatened to fall. When it eventually did, the metal end smacked Russell across the crown of his skull. He pitched forward and tumbled into the pit. Russell just lay there, eyes closed. He was breathing; I could see the little puffs of dirt next to his mouth. A slow trickle of blood had pooled up at the point of impact and traced a line into Russell's ear. I thought to tug on his shoulder and try to wake him up, but a stronger impulse, one rooted in self-preservation, I suppose, told me, told all of us, to get the hell out of there. So we ran, and we didn't look back.

We didn't see Russell again for several days. He wasn't at the fort, so we knew he wasn't dead—or at the least, we knew he hadn't died there. But soon enough he came back and when he arrived, he walked straight up to Kenny and whacked him in the back of the knees with his shovel. Kenny toppled over and writhed around on the ground for several minutes. The score had been settled. Had it been anyone else outside of our circle who had done that to Russell, accident or not, he'd better have hauled it out of town. But when Kenny eventually got back to his feet, that was the end of that. Wordlessly, we resumed digging.

When Russell had been gone, the obvious thing would have been to go to his house and check on him. But none of us was brave enough to do that.

Back when Russell had first moved into the neighborhood, we kept our distance from his house because of his dad, a retired cop who was only capable of speaking at one way-too-loud volume. He had a perpetual thumping vein across his forehead and a permanent glower on his face. The German shepherd named Bear that he kept locked up in the backyard to prowl in the shin-high grass was almost as scary. When it barked, white foam accumulated at his mouth, just like Russell's dad. The only time Russell's dad seemed like he wasn't furious were those few occasions when he sat Russell on his lap and let him steer the car while his dad worked the pedals. But then he stopped doing that. And then he left—just moved out one day and never came back.

It was right around that time that the fights started. Soon, they began to come almost weekly. We rarely even knew where these other kids, the victims, came from. Usually, their sole offense was walking through our neighborhood, taking the cut-throughs from one shopping center to another. Russell would spot some lone offending kid, or he'd focus on one runt in a small group, and he'd beat the hell out of him. I always feared that I'd be dragged in, that Russell versus whomever would turn into a battle royale and I'd have to defend myself from people I had absolutely nothing against. So I stood well away during these fights. I'd never been in one before and I wouldn't know what to do once one began. I almost peed myself during one fight when Russell whipped a knife from his back pocket, as if conjuring it in a magic show.

In my head, I screamed at him: *Why the hell do you have that? Where did you even get it?* Instead, I said nothing. It seemed natural for Russell to have it—a thing way beyond any of us, way beyond our experience or temperament. But for Russell, that knife was like an extension of himself, as if the leading edge of entering adulthood would come at the end of a blade, and Russell would take us there. The only question was how willing we were to go along for the ride. Fortunately, Kenny suggested he put it away, that he didn't need it, and Russell listened, folding up the blade and handing it over before proceeding to beat the hell out of the kid. Russell slapped him in the face, then jabbed at his jaw, and then, finally, while the kid hardly put up any defense at all, crammed him in the stomach. The kid doubled over, fell to his knees, and puked. Russell took his knife back, slid it into his back pocket, and we walked off, back to resume digging, none of us saying a word about it, as if we had simply gone off to someone's house for lunch.

When we did take breaks, we'd usually head to my house, or sometimes Kenny's or Damon's. Never Russell's; not after the first few times. Even without Russell's dad there, the house was no less unsettling. There was the darkness, for one thing, as if daylight simply refused to let itself in. There were brown rugs with dark stains, heavy brown shades that were always drawn, furniture in so many shades of brown. But by "furniture," I mean only the couch and an end table. Apart from that, it was mostly just piles of old newspapers and magazines. Best I could tell, there wasn't even a table to sit at and eat.

There seemed to be no set rules or regulations there, either. My family ate at the same hour each evening; not gathering at the dinner table was a sin excusable only by, say, emergency surgery. Meals in Russell's house occurred more spontaneously. Russell and his older siblings—one brother, one sister—grabbed food when it was available: a handful of chips here, a glass of milk there, dry cereal, maybe bologna and cheese.

Russell's sister had greasy hair and crooked teeth and we always assumed that was why we never saw her smile. She looked old at sixteen, defeated, and perhaps all the impulses toward smiling, all the funny or amusing or wonderful things that induce smiles in people, were simply sucked out of her life, or never there in the first place. The brother was deaf and he smelled weird—like canned spaghetti sauce—and the moaning noises he made when he "spoke" thoroughly spooked us. So after the first few times, we rarely went into that house anymore.

The last straw for me was when I walked in on Russell's mom in the bath. She hadn't locked the bathroom door. Assuming it was free, I walked in and took a step toward the toilet before I realized that she was soaking in the tub, a glass of wine on the ledge. The extreme redness of her nipples startled me. But she didn't even blink. I muttered some kind of stunned apology and fled. I was terrified of seeing her again. If I *had* to go over there, I'd stand on their front lawn waiting for Russell to come out. Unfortunately, she came home one day while I was standing outside, arriving in a battered truck driven by a guy wearing a leather vest and no shirt underneath, his head shaved bald but for a long gray ponytail. She acted as she always did, which

is to say she hardly registered my, or Russell's, existence. When he came bounding out of the house, shovel in hand, he ran right past her and neither of them exchanged a word.

The following week, while we played a pickup game, she stood on the edge of the grass, cigarette dangling from her lip. No one had even noticed she'd arrived until she started yelling. First, it was encouragement: "C'mon, hit it out of the park!" That type of thing. But soon, unmoored by her presence, our play got worse and she started berating us, hurling derision at our inability to hit, or field, or throw cleanly. She saved her worst for her son: "Christ, you throw like a grandmother. Damn it, hit it, you little shit. Just like your father—total loser." Eventually she tottered away and the game resumed. But our hearts were no longer in it and we went home. I don't know where Russell went.

Most days, Russell hung out at the fort after the rest of us left for dinner. And he was usually there before the rest of us the next morning, too. I suspected that he even slept there a few times. But he always denied that, and we didn't ask too many questions.

Russell was an invaluable part of our crew; Kenny and Damon and I, with our stable homes and fathers in the house who used to toss Frisbees with us on weekends and take us to ballgames, and with mothers who drove us to school and soccer practice and who volunteered with the PTA—we knew, deep down, that we lacked toughness, that Russell rounded us out, made us more men than boys. And at the fort he dug more enthusiastically than the rest of us, with fewer breaks and more zeal, as if his life depended on it. We knew it was a good outlet for his energies. We knew: if he wasn't digging he'd be fighting.

And the fights had started getting weird and unsettling.

During one of them, sometime in early August, he struck out in every direction, completely undisciplined—usually, he got into a boxer's crouch and danced around with his hands out front, always moving his feet—long strands of mucus and tears flying from his face in every direction. So much so that the kid whose ass he was kicking kept pleading with him to stop because Russell was getting snot all over him.

When it was over, we didn't talk. Russell had cried and we didn't know why and we sure as hell weren't going to ask. Better to just leave it alone.

It was a long walk back to the fort. We were just about there before Damon remarked: "Hey, you really whooped his ass."

"Shut up," Kenny said.

When we got to the path at the edge of the woods that took us to the fort, where the old man lived, Russell headed right instead of left, so we wordlessly followed. That was the path to the car.

Well, it used to be a car. By the time we discovered it, it was just a rusted ghost of a car. It had thin trees growing through the hollowed hood and trunk. It still had most of the roof, somehow, though it looked like you could punch straight through it if you wanted to. The glass from the windows was long gone, as were two of its doors. The other two had long ago been opened and each was furrowed into the ground, a slope of dirt and leaves reaching a quarter of the way up. The gear shift had still been there when we first discovered it, but after a few tugs it broke off in our hands. The most prominent remaining feature was the enormous steering wheel. You could see the shaft connecting under the floorboards and when you turned it the wheels turned, too. It gave one the impression of driving—at least it did to a bunch of kids who had never driven before; the closest any of us had come was Russell when his dad used to take him "driving." But the seats, incredibly, were more or less intact. There were gouges in the vinyl, places where discolored and rain soaked tufts of foam spilled out, but otherwise, two of us could

plant ourselves back there and, with two people up front, pretend we were on some kind of joyride.

But the car lost its appeal not long after we'd discovered it—for most of us, anyway. After all, you couldn't do much more than sit in its filthy husk and turn a ghost wheel. But Russell liked it. He liked anything to do with cars or trucks: the bigger, the better. He told us that his dad had gotten injured while on the job and didn't want to do desk duty so he quit to drive long haul trucks and one day, any day now, he'd come back in some massive Mack truck and Russell would go with him and hit the road.

“What about school?” Damon asked.

“Shut up,” Kenny said.

“Hey, Russell, you wanna sit on my lap and steer while I drive?” Damon asked, laughing.

Russell punched him in that tender spot where his arm and shoulder met. Hard. So Damon left. “I'm going to the fort,” he muttered.

Eventually, Kenny and I followed. But Russell stayed. He often did. While we walked away, I looked back at him and saw him turning the wheel. He didn't come back to the fort that day.

A couple of weeks later, late-August, the sky an oppression, grayish with haze and distended with building moisture, as billowing black clouds marched across the sky and thunder rumbled in the far distance, we sprinted to the fort, ready to slide open the plywood and duck inside to test the weatherproofing. But when we got there, we skidded to a stunned halt. The top had not only already been taken off, but it had been splintered, torn up into a thousand jagged pieces, and was mingled with dirt and leaves and branches and our furniture, jumbled inside the pit, or what used to be our pit, our fort, our dreamed of home and escape. It had been filled almost completely and it was only after standing there, silently, trying to take it all in, that we even noticed the bulldozer tracks etched into the path in the woods and leading directly from the old man's house.

All our months-long labors, reduced to nothing more than a toothed jumble of detritus, probably decimated in less than half an hour.

Thunder boomed and then a crack of lightning streaked the sky before the rain fell all at once, massive drops packed into sheets as if someone rent the sky in two. Rivers of mud snaked around our shoes, each path leading to and then dropping into the reaming holes of our once-fort.

Well, that was that then. We gave it up, or at least the three of us did, accepting victims to the adults who made the rules. Our little world, we were reminded, still existed in the wider world, a place where we were regarded as little more than insignificant beings worthy of little more than suspicion. All there was to do was grow up, become men, and then share in the rule-making, sure as we were that we would never look down our noses at kids just because they were kids. But even then I had a sneaking suspicion I would do just that. True, we weren't bad kids, and true that old man never even bothered to try and talk to us, figure out what we were actually doing in the woods behind his house. He just made his assumptions, and how could that ever be defended? And yet, look at it another way and it was pretty easy to see: if I were an old man and I spotted a bunch of kids doing God-knew-what, would I take the time to ask questions? I suspected, even then, that I probably wouldn't. That's what it meant to be an adult.

But Russell didn't take it like the rest of us. He ran out of the woods, his shoes sliding across the tracks of mud. We followed and emerged from the lip of the trees to see him climbing over the man's fence.

“Come out of there, you coward,” he yelled. He banged on the guy’s sliding glass door. “Come on. I’ll kick your ass. I’ll kill you. Come out of there!” he screamed.

It was late morning and a weekday so the guy was probably at work or something. Still, we weren’t about to hang around. We sure weren’t interested in a meeting with the cops. Instead, Kenny, Damon, and I took off while Russell stayed behind, continuing to scream. Before I turned the corner at the end of the street, I looked back to see Russell remove his shoe and chuck it at the guy’s window. I ran like hell, the rain lashing at my face, my shirt and shorts clinging to my skin, my shoes squeaking all the way home, where I would get dry, settle in, maybe have something to eat.

Summer ended soon after and my freedom went with it. I was expected to earn good grades and because I was struggling in algebra, I had to meet a tutor after school. I didn’t see much of the guys. Kenny went to a Catholic school and Damon and I didn’t have classes together and Russell hardly showed up for his classes at all, and it wouldn’t have made much difference if he did as I was in the GT classes and, well, he wasn’t. In any case, he soon got suspended. I wasn’t sure what happened; differing accounts ranged from his uttering a threat to pulling a fire alarm to calling in a bomb scare to stabbing the principal, which we were pretty sure wasn’t true as Mr. Davies had always walked with that limp.

It was Damon who called me one day in October. He’d found him.

I ran over to the abandoned car, past the mess that used to be our fort, and there Damon sat, reading a comic book while Russell lay slumped over in the driver’s seat, a bottle of Smirnoff still gripped in his hand. Convinced he would die out there if we left him, we lightly slapped at his face, tugged on his shoulder, and eventually just waited it out until he sobered up and could stagger home. There, we guessed, his mother and sister and brother would be waiting for him. Or not. They never seemed to be waiting for him.

We didn’t see Russell again after that. Eventually, they were all gone—the entire family. Just up and out one day. Gone.

Maybe Russell found a truck and drove. Away. To some other place, a place to start over. Maybe. But in the end, he was just . . . gone.

I went back to the old neighborhood recently, the first time in over thirty years—a quick detour while in the city for a business conference. It was a blazing hot day. I would say just like back then. But back then, the heat was something almost aspirational, as if it held promise—long days, adventure, freedom. Now, when “long days” meant something else entirely and freedom and adventure were in short supply, the heat felt more like subjugation.

My old house looked a bit rundown, as did much of the neighborhood. It hadn’t aged well. But Russell’s old house, actually that looked pretty good. It even had flower boxes on the windowsills.

I headed over to the old fort site. It was easy enough to find—a huge open area where the vegetation refused to grow. I supposed all the old junk that I knew was just below the soil prevented it. I preferred to think, instead, that its barrenness was some kind of memorial.

To what, I did not know.

I’d done some Internet searches for Russell, of course, but came up virtually empty. It was interesting that way, how I hadn’t done the same for Kenny and Damon, whom I had also lost touch with years earlier. I just assumed they were well and lived lives like mine: got married, raised kids, lived in the burbs, enjoyed good employment and vacations and restaurants. That sort of boring, privileged thing, just like I had. But I couldn’t imagine such a life for Russell. There had been a Facebook account once, but it was more than six years old when I found it and

hadn't been updated. Before that, there was a stretch of three years that showed an interest in mixed martial arts, a flirtation with becoming an ordained minister, and a life spent in different locales, far-flung from one another with no discernible relationship: northern California, rural Georgia, the plains of South Dakota. Then, he seemed to have disappeared. And there has been nothing since.

The only thing left to wonder is whether he's finally stopped somewhere, or if he still has the wheel between his fingers.