

The Box

Sam was, on his best days, quiet and passive. He preferred to be left alone in his room for hours upon hours; the *do-not-go-in* room of our house. The reason for its inaccessibility boldly unveiled itself to me in the summer of '05, as I hadn't been the best at respecting my brother's space. The first time I snuck into his room that summer had been in late June, when I was trying to find my BugBox.

I opened his door, letting it creak. I was fearless at the time, mindless to the risks involved. I didn't think to be quiet in the least, instead choosing to search through all his things: magazines, candy wrappers, CDs. That BugBox had recently proven itself to be my prized possession, and I was distraught at its sudden disappearance. I had caught a grasshopper in it just the day before, and it was just a matter of time before it would shrivel up and die. That is, unless I retrieved it and released back into the wild.

I found a large box, in a corner of his room, under the trash can. It wasn't my Bugbox, but it had the potential to contain it. Sam had duct-taped the lid shut, so I resorted to biting through it. I had several loose teeth, two of which began to bleed as I continued to gnaw the corner of the tape. I was starting to get concerned by the amount of blood that I was seeing, but distracted myself with the idea that my actions were heroically saving a grasshopper's life. I heard the footsteps of someone downstairs, and immediately recognized them as Sam's; a lumbering beast. The footsteps were getting louder, proceeding upstairs, but I refused to give up my quest and retreat into the safety of my room. Besides, Sam would see the state of his room and know that I had been ransacking it, anyways. An unprecedented error of judgement on my part. I thought I had more time.

I turned and saw him standing in the doorway, eyes wide. I relinquished the duct tape from my jaws, with a string of blood and spittle falling from my chin. As he advanced, I had just enough time to wipe it away.

"GET OUT OF HERE," my brother screamed. In one motion, his right hand grabbed a fistful of my shirt, and the other had my ponytail. My scalp ached. I scratched at his arms, but he still held me in the air. In '05, he was fourteen and large for his age.

He dropped me, and I landed on my back. His eyes found the box immediately, half-chewed duct tape hanging off of its lip. He turned back to me. "What the fuck are you doing in here, huh?"

I rubbed my head. I don't remember crying, but I must have been, because I struggled to speak. "I was looking for my grasshopper."

"There's no grasshopper in my room, I don't have your grasshopper! Why would I take your grasshopper?"

The question startled me. I hadn't considered it before. Shame overcame me. "I don't know. I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

“Don’t come in here, ever. Do you hear me? Don’t open anything that isn’t supposed to be opened. Jesus, leave me alone!” His voice was cracking. For some reason, that made me even more scared. I didn’t see him cry very often. Dad had trained him out of it after he turned six.

I ran past Sam and into my room, slamming the door and hiding under my covers. A few days later, I found my BugBox under my bed. The grasshopper lay stiff, on his back, on the grass I had layed out for him. His legs stuck up in the air, as if he was presenting my failure to me. *I’m dead. Look at me, do you see what’s going on? You could’ve saved me.*

Summer was at its peak on the day of our lawn party on July 21st. Our parents hosted a Fourth of July party every year, but this was the only weekend where all their guests were available, so it became an American-themed cookout. My parents had invited their usual crowd of friends and neighbours to the party, which eventually spread from the backyard into the middle of the street. I played with my friends for most of the day, but was called back by my mother when it was time to eat.

“Where’s your brother?” Mom asked me as she flipped my burger patty.

“He left.”

“To do what?”

I told her that I didn’t know. She didn’t probe the subject further, but I saw her eyes flicker from her food to the street. When she got pulled into a conversation by a neighbour, she finally gave up her search for her son, and I was forced to stand between the two women as they discussed their husbands overtop my head.

At around ten, Sam tried to get past the gathering undetected. By then, the sun had set completely on the barbecue, and the excited chatter from the evening had devolved into drunken laughter and occasional yawns. My friends had been sent to bed, which is why I was sitting on the porch alone when Sam came up the steps.

“You missed the fireworks,” I told him.

He looked tired, but he didn’t snap at me like he usually did. Instead, he sat down beside me and the two of us regarded the group of grown-ups down on the road.

“How were they?”

“Blue and red,” I responded. “The last one was white and sparkly.”

“America is bullshit.”

“I concur.” I had learned that word in school, and thought it sounded appropriate.

“I want to move to Canada.”

I supposed that he was being angry for the sake of being angry. He did that often. “Canada has cool animals. You could ride a moose.”

I was searching for the motivation behind his words. His face gave nothing away.

“SAM!” Dad’s voice rung clear, silencing the rest of the party. “Come down here, son!”

Sam's face turned cold. He pulled his hood over his head and went back down the stairs to greet the neighbours. Dad pulled his arm around my brother's shoulder and handed him a bottle.

"We're toasting."

"To what?"

Dad laughed loud, raising his glass. "America, son! We *do* things. We're *strong*. The place is built for the two of us, by brave men who carried it on their shoulders." He downed the remaining drink. I couldn't see Sam's face, but I could imagine the face he was making. "Drink up, Samuel."

Sam sipped.

"Not like a girl. Drink, *drink*." My father tipped the bottle at a drastic angle so the contents drained. Sam coughed it up, and the neighbours' laughter rang out down the street.

The Summer Festival was something that I waited in anticipation for during every summer. It was on the first weekend of August, always, right when summer was winding down and a breeze could be detected underneath the heat. On the first of August, I had decided to spend the entire day out in the park, alone, catching bugs in my BugBox. I had developed a strategy since my unfortunate grasshopper casualty; I caught them with a net, settled them gracefully into their box, and then would remove them after several minutes of inspection. I no longer trusted myself with bugs for any longer than an hour.

The breeze blew in a moth from the grass. It was one of the big, furry ones. Its blanket-feathers flapped rapidly, trying to combat the wind like salmon combat the current, but eventually gave up and caught a gust, riding it right into my net.

I put it in the box, carefully so as to keep the wings intact. I watched it flutter. It had blue spots that stood out against the grey with shocking prominence. I loved how it looked. I wanted to show Sam.

"Sam," I called out as I stood in the entryway, "I found a bug."

No answer. I waited before proceeding upstairs and knocking on his door. "Sam," I called again, pressing my ear against the wood. I waited some more. I considered the risks involved for about a minute or so before turning the knob. I could now see a sliver of his room through the crack in the door. Curiosity overrode me, wore me down. It felt like I was playing right into the devil's hands somehow. My actions were out of my control now, all offered up for him to use how he wanted them to be used. It was foolish, but my resolve grew soft as I peeked into Sam's room and found it vacant; his belongings thrown back to their designated corners, his box re-taped. I eyed that box for what felt like an eternity, staring it down. I was challenging it. *You don't scare me. You can be opened if I want you opened.* In my mind, it eventually bent its head in submission, giving me permission to creak the door open further. Just a bit further. I took my first step onto his carpet. My feet tested the texture, the scratchiness of it against my calloused heel. That step put me in motion. I was on a mission, now. I was no longer exploring, I was

invading. Eyeing the box again, I considered my options. If I was already in his room, then it wouldn't be very becoming to leave so quickly. It would be cowardly to shy away now, wouldn't it? There was a mystery to be solved, new ground to discover, and that box had been taped tightly in the back of my mind for weeks. I went to work.

Using my teeth had not only been time-consuming, it had been disgusting. I settled, this time, for prying at it with my fingers. At last, the tape stretched off from the box, and I stuck my finger underneath to pull the rest off. I was done quickly. I looked at the box's lid. I opened it.

I stared at its contents for a while. I didn't really know what I was looking at, and because of this I found myself unsure of how to react. I wasn't expecting anything specific, at all. In my mind, the box was sealed shut, its mystery an unanswerable one. The duct tape had been its protector, as had the box lid. I understood that now. I shouldn't have been so hasty when taking them off. I tilted my head, staring some more. The only thing that felt clear to me was that I had made a mistake.

Sam was at the foot of the stairs. I had been in such dismay that I hadn't heard him enter the house. I grabbed my BugBox and bolted, hoping that my feet were quiet. The duct tape was lying in strands on the floor of his room, the box lid was placed on its side against the wall. There hadn't been time to undiscover the mystery. It was bared, open in my brother's room, effectively solved. Regardless, I took my moth and my BugBox and my net and crawled under my bed, in hopes of surrounding myself symbolically with my earthly possessions before I died. I heard Sam, down the hall, entering his room. The footsteps stopped, and a thick silence took place. I cowered under my bed, bracing myself for confrontation. I focused on the moth that I had captured, as it batted its wings madly against the glass. We both hid under the bed, both willing the world to be the same as it had been half an hour ago, in the park.

The footsteps started up again, moving from Sam's room to back into the hallway and traveled to my room.

"Come out of there," Sam ordered me. I did as I was told, believing compliance to be the safest course of action. I slid out feet-first, leaving my moth underneath to protect it.

I stared at my shuffling feet and refrained from crying. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to. I just wanted to show you my moth. But you weren't there. And I didn't know you would be back right away, so I waited in your room to surprise you. I'm sorry. I didn't even see anything, I just left right away. I'm sorry."

I waited for a retaliation. With Sam, no crime went unpunished, especially those that had been repeatedly enforced. I didn't want to look at his face, so I focused on his hands. They were balled up in the white-knuckled fists he was surely planning to lay against my cheek. Instead, he spoke:

"Are you going to tell Dad?"

Sam, in the summer of '05, had never ceased to throw me off-guard. In confusion, I lifted my head. Sam looked younger than me in that moment. His face was red, tears brimming on his lashes, and the fear... He was caged in, like a moth is so often caged in. The fear came out of his

eyes, out of his hunched shoulders. He was afraid because he thought that I was more powerful than him. I had leverage, all the blackmail in the world. And he thought that I would use it.

“No.”

Sam met my eye, trying to gauge my sincerity. I *was* sincere, and I kept his gaze to prove it.

“Ever?”

“Never.”

Sam broke down at my word. I had never seen anyone really break down before, outside of sad movies. It was much worse when you knew the person. It felt as if Sam had been holding something in, something weighted with importance, something he had never explored until now. He grabbed me, tears streaming, and held me for a long time. I didn't know what to do, so I held him as well. He was scared, weak, and overwhelmingly alone. He had created his own duct-taped box to sit in, to isolate himself from the rest of the world. Whatever secrets he kept, he kept in that box. The box was his home, and he loved it. He sought comfort from it. But, as the tears soaking into my shirt told me, he now wanted very badly to escape. And I would go with him, I told myself. I would follow him to Canada. I would follow him anywhere.

