

Introduction | The Fort

I vividly remember a day in the early 2000's when I was making the long trek home from school on the bus. It was a very long ride - roughly 50 minutes, and by the time we finally arrived at our stop I was beyond ready to be home. On this particular day, my pent up anxiety and puberty-driven angst, coupled with an intense excitement to be in the comfort of my room (away from the terrors of middle school), were through the roof. The number of stops our bus made before we got to Prairie-Schooner Road - no, I'm not kidding, that was the name of our stop - seemed to have tripled, and my need to be off the yellow student hauler was at an all time high.

We finally got to this kid named Ryan's stop at Hood Circle, and I could feel my body start to physically loosen and calm down knowing that we got off next. My Brother hadn't taken the bus home, and for whatever reason my Sister wasn't on, either. It was just me and our sweet neighbor girl, Mary, who lived just up the hill from our house. Her mom used to drive us to the bus stop in the morning, and my Mother used to pick us up in the afternoon. But now that I was 12, I drove us. Yes, I was that kid - the one who's parents just handed him the keys to whichever car was running that week and was told, "Drive safe, son."

I basically ran down the narrow bus aisle and leapt off the stairs to the gravel embankment on which we waited ever so patiently until our driver gave us the go-ahead to cross the road. Sometimes there were oncoming cars, and unfortunately a driver from Kindergarten had nearly let us be killed when she motioned for us to go and a septic truck almost ran us over. Since then, our driver took extra time to ensure our voyage to the other side ended safely and soundly.

We hopped into the the old, blue, 1970-something Chevy Chevelle my Dad had us driving that week. In one fluid motion, I shoved the keys into the ignition, brought the engine to life, and pulled the gear shifter to "D". Mary asked why I was in such a hurry, and I quickly fabricated some kind of lie citing my need to pee as the primary reason for being so hasty.

As we bombed down our winding, dirt road towards Mary's house, I replayed the day's happenings over and over in my head. I had been asked to step out of Mrs. Simmons class for talking too much during quiet time. Our cafeteria had served some god-forsaken entree called "haystacks." And worst of all, a kid named Cody had called me a fudge-packer. I didn't know what that meant so naturally, I asked my friend Traci - who seemed to know all of the "cool kid" terms, and upon learning its meaning, my fragile, closeted, homosexual heart had shattered.

We arrived at Mary's house in record time, and I basically shoved her out of the passenger door before grinding the Chevelle's transmission into reverse and speeding home. Outrageous fits of anger and rage pulsed through my veins, and all I could think about was

busting through my bedroom door, sobbing uncontrollably into my pillow, and doing whatever it took to somehow figure out how to make the pain of such an awful day go away.

As I pulled the big, blue Chevelle into our driveway, I couldn't help but wonder what Mom might think seeing me so upset. She would most certainly ask what was wrong, and truthfully, I didn't know what to tell her. As I parked the car and clicked it into "P", I decided that in order to avoid her questions and unsolicited advice, as well as be forced to talk about any of it, I should put on a happy face and pretend that I'd had a fantastic day. So that's exactly what I did.

I lugged my backpack from the car, and for whatever reason remembered the at-the-time popular movie "Holes" with Shia LaBeouf and Sigourney Weaver. It was a film portraying -amongst other things - young guys digging hole after hole while serving time as juveniles, and my Brother, Sister and I were obsessed with it. I'm not exactly sure why, but it was a scene from this movie that continued to play on repeat in my mind as I stepped out of the Chevelle. In the moment, I concluded that instead of having to talk to Mom about why I was upset about my day, I could give her whatever answer would please her and just go dig a hole. They did it angrily in the movie and it seemed to work, so why wouldn't it work for me?

After saying hi to Mom, I changed my clothes and headed towards the tool shed. We had a variety of shovels in there, and I chose the one that I felt would dig the best hole. I grabbed it and without having any real idea of where I was headed, began walking towards the large piece of land next to our property. Even though we knew as kids it was privately owned, we still played there all the time.

Our house sat in the middle of a large valley full of big sagebrush and gigantic juniper trees. We lived in an area known as the high desert which literally means a desert climate at a high elevation. The dramatic terrain surrounding our valley was beautiful in its own way, but very unforgiving. Dry, uninhabited, and full of critters like coyotes and rattlesnakes, it wasn't exactly the type of place a 12-year old should just be exploring on his own. Regardless, it was all that we knew and as I briskly walked away from our house, the only thought on my mind was where I could start digging.

I hadn't gone very far before I came upon the perfect spot: a small hill, located just about eight feet or so above a dry creek bed that, from what I could tell, contained soft, easy-to-dig earth just waiting to be excavated. We knew that the creek had ran a few times, but for the most part was totally dry. I decided on every account that this would be the best place to dig my hole and so I began.

As I plunged my shovel as hard into the ground as possible for my first scoop, I couldn't help but feel an instant release of tension. With each strike, more and more emotion spewed out

of my body like a geyser that had finally blown. Strike. I was tired of my parents fighting all the time. Strike. I was worried about my grandma because she was sick and they thought she might die. Strike. Cody had called me a fudge packer at school in front of my friends. Strike. Cody also seemed to know that I had a secret, one that nobody was supposed to find out about. Strike. Strike. Strike.

Within minutes, after releasing enough steam to power a small locomotive, a sizable hole had begun to form in the ground. Panting and totally out of breath, I stepped back to take a break and observe my work. Leaning on my shovel, a smile spread across my face as I stared into the hole and realized that this newfound activity had actually made me feel better. What if I could do this regularly? Knowing that this cathartic activity existed and could be accessed any time I had a bad day felt both transformational and revolutionary. I didn't need to have any more bad days.

For many weeks to come, I found myself shaking in anticipation and excitement during the long bus ride home to quickly change, grab my shovel, and keep digging. I could think of nothing else and became utterly obsessed with my after school project. Before long, I had created a hole so big that there was no question it should become something more. Something bigger.

One night, as my brother and I sat on the floor of the living room watching the Discovery Channel after dinner, my 12-year-old self wholeheartedly believed that God had delivered a gift to me. A vision. Right there on the screen, out of nowhere, was a show about subterranean living and the amazing underground homes these people had built. Oh my word, that was it! I wasn't going to build a house from my hole, that was unrealistic. Instead, I was going to build the coolest, underground fort the world had ever seen.

It was immediately obvious to me that such an endeavor would require more man power than I could give alone. After much consideration, I decided that my Sister and the two neighbor girls just down the road were worthy enough to join my team. They didn't need to know that I had used every emotion in the world to dig it as big as I had, only that I was over the moon excited to finally have their help. They were, of course, elated to build this fort with me and agreed to keep it secret. Within days we had planned our design, formalized our timeline, and divided the workload to bring our new hideaway to life.

For several weeks we would meet up after school and on the weekends working tirelessly to make our fort exactly the way we wanted it. The girls' grandma had taken them shopping for things like lanterns and other knick knacks, and Sister and I had dragged down from our house anything that might benefit our secret hangout. We had found an old recliner that nobody was using, a kitchen cart, and of course things like cups and plates in case we wanted to host our own

happy hour. It was coming together, and the excitement each of us felt was electric. This was our place.

As with any construction project, change orders frequently occur based on the wishes and wants of the client. Therefore, it wasn't too surprising that because there were now four of us making decisions that certain accommodations needed to be made in order for everyone to feel happy. The idea came up that we should expand our fort's footprint to provide space for both a seating area and a place for a table that the girls' grandma wanted to donate to us. We agreed that this was a good plan, and once again began excavating. However, the direction in which we had decided to expand quickly proved to possess much harder earth than we had dug through before. Being only 12, it didn't occur to me that perhaps we should try expanding in a different direction. What did occur to me, though, was that we did not need to keep working as hard as we were. The completion of our project could be accomplished much faster with the assistance of something I was shocked I hadn't thought of before.

Since the Industrial Revolution, humans have greatly benefitted from the invention of machines in a variety of ways. Rototillers, for example, use their engines to power sharp, blade-like tongs that dig deep into the earth breaking up all of the hard-packed dirt and rocks that make conventional digging so difficult. Much to my delight, my father happened to have one of these incredible contraptions sitting right next to the shed from which I had grabbed my shovel every day. Why I hadn't thought to use it before was beyond me, but it didn't matter now that I had recognized the very powerful contribution this beautiful garden tool was about to make to us.

Because we often helped Mom and Dad with yard work, I was highly familiar with the use and function of a variety of gas powered garden tools including the rototiller. All that I needed now was the perfect opportunity to borrow it for just a short while without anybody really knowing it was gone. This ideal window of time would most definitely need to be when my Dad was not home which immediately canceled weekends. Therefore, I concluded that I would use the two-hour window from when I got home from school to when Dad got home from work to enact my plan. I would maneuver the rototiller down to the fort, do my tilling, and be back before anybody noticed.

I decided to pursue my flawless scheme the very next day. As soon as I got home from school and changed into my work clothes, I went to the shed to ensure that all was well with my gorgeous groundbreaker. After a quick inspection, all seemed good. There was plenty of fuel in the tank, and it started on the very first pull without even using the choke! It felt as though Bertha - that's what I decided to call her - was just as ready as I was to make some magic. I stepped behind the controls, put her into drive, and off we went.

As I hummed along all I could think of was how amazing it was that our fort was really happening. Bringing it into existence had taken me away from so many of the turmoils I had been facing at school and in life, and I didn't have words enough to thank God for providing such a perfect outlet. I beamed and even laughed out loud as I made my way to the fort, not for one moment realizing that I was actually tilling the ground beneath me, leaving one very long, very traceable path in my wake.

The fuel tank on the rototiller wasn't very large which meant I needed to work swiftly. I reached our beautiful hideaway, followed the small path we had created down into the hole and began my job. It took much less time than I had anticipated and within minutes my task was complete. With so much extra time, I decided to go ahead and use Bertha to till a few flower beds around the perimeter of our underground getaway. Everything went just as planned, and upon completion I smiled and began the trek back to the house.

Making my way back seemed to be taking longer than it had to get to the fort. At first I thought this might just be in my head, but as time went on I was sure that Bertha just wasn't going as fast. Additionally, she seemed to be making noises that I hadn't noticed as I had worked on the hole or the flowerbeds. Not knowing what to do, I continued on and began speaking to my new friend with compassion and gratitude, asking her to please just make it back. She answered back with sputs and groans but kept going with all her might.

We finally rolled onto our property, and a huge wave of relief came over me as I confirmed that my Dad's car was not yet in the driveway. The shed was close, and with only a short distance to go I was sure we were going to be just fine. Bertha, however, obviously felt differently, and as we tilled our way past a large junk pile she let out her loudest grunt yet. Except it wasn't just a sound, it was a response. With the biggest bang I'd ever heard, Bertha blew and half of her engine manifold flew right off! Waves of smoke started billowing from her engine and I knew that I was about to be just as dead as she was.

Our dogs started barking in the distance, disturbed by the loud noise they'd just heard. My Mom had heard it, too, and yelled my name all the way from the front porch of the house asking if I was alright. I shouted back that I was fine and immediately began figuring out how on earth I was going to get Bertha back to her resting place. Dad was certainly going to find out one way or another, but it sure wasn't going to be because he saw his roto-tiller sitting in the middle of the property for no reason.

I had no choice but to get her back, so with all my might I began heaving, pushing and pulling any way I could to move her along. After about 20 minutes of struggling, I finally rolled her into place. Crying, I stared at her engine in total shock knowing that I was the reason she had died. But my tears weren't just for Bertha, they were also for me: Dad was going to kill me, too. I

went inside the house, and when I saw my Mom all she had to say was, "I hope your Dad doesn't find out." Great.

I was very quiet at dinner that night. Everybody had experienced some sort of difficulty during their day, and we ate almost in silence. After supper, I barricaded myself in my bedroom trying to figure out what I was going to tell Dad. Should I lie? Should I tell him the truth? I really had no idea. His temper was brutal, and the only thing I did know was that whatever ended up happening, it wasn't going to be pleasant.

And it wasn't.

It took about two weeks until my Dad had some need to use the roto-tiller. It was a Saturday and I remember my name being called by him from outside in a tone that said something was not good. I left the living room, went out to see what he needed and experienced my heart falling out of my chest as I saw him standing next to Bertha. He had found out.

"Your Mom says you were the last one to use this. Is that true?" His face was so red that I knew this was not the time to fabricate any kind of untruth.

"I'm sorry, Dad!" I screamed as I burst into tears just waiting for him to lunge at me.

"This thing isn't even mine you little bastard! It's your Papa's and you ran the son-of-a-bitch right out of oil!"

I sat down right there on the deck and just bawled. All I wanted was for him to get it over with.

"What the hell did you use it for?" he screamed.

No words came out of my mouth as he continued to question why I had blown up the engine. What happened next was out of the ordinary for my Dad, and instead of punishing me in some sort of physical form, he threw his hands down in disgust and uttered something I'll never forget.

"Well, you broke my thing, so I'm gonna break yours."

The question of where I had used Bertha and for what was not difficult to answer. Even two weeks later, the path which had been created as I tilled my way to the fort was highly visible, and could easily be followed. I watched as my Dad hopped onto his big red 3-wheeler, fired it up and peeled out on his way to wherever this mysterious roto-tilled path led him. What he was going to do once he had found it was unknown, but again, couldn't possibly be good.

Because our property lay in the bottom of a large valley, loud sounds could be clearly heard as they echoed off of nearby hills and rock formations. The engine of Dad's 3-wheeler screamed without ceasing as he tore through the high desert wilderness in search of the project that had ruined his roto-tiller. Soon the high pitched wail stopped, and it was clear he had found what he was looking for. Goosebumps covered my arms and legs as I sat there listening to rev after rev of destruction coming from what was very obviously our secret hideout. I instantly knew that the next time I saw it, it would not look the same.

Upon his return there were no words. From either of us. He knew that I knew and that was that. The rest of the day was filled with chores as well as many, many tears. Countless thoughts and emotions so powerfully consumed my mind that concentrating on any one task was nearly impossible. Overwhelmed and defeated, I completed every task given to me in complete silence until I was finally released from my duties. On any other Saturday, I would have gone straight into the house after our chores were over to call our neighbors and see if they wanted to get together. But today was not that day.

Making sure that nobody saw where I was going, I quickly slipped away from the family and began walking the familiar route my Dad had followed only hours prior with his 3-wheeler. My chest pounded as I drew closer and closer to what I had already determined was a total war zone and when I finally arrived, my predictions were totally confirmed. It turns out that not only are large holes excellent for subterranean habitats, they are also perfect for ATV's to use as riding pits ideal for motor-cross-like jumping. My eyes scanned back and forth between the caved in walls, shattered lanterns and busted up chair. I couldn't decide which mini-site of destruction hurt my heart worse. Months of work lay before me in devastation and worthlessness.

I turned around and walked towards the dry creek bed. Total overwhelm coupled with the inability to determine what I thought or felt left me totally numb. Endless, unanswerable questions flooded my fragile mind leaving me no choice but to sit down on the ground to try and breathe. I worked diligently to draw in as much air as possible but found myself gasping instead. Everything felt wrong, nothing made sense, and I had no idea what to do about any of it.

Labored gasps eventually transitioned to semi-normal breathing and finally a somewhat state of peace and calm. Attempting to work through the plethora of thoughts and emotions begging for an answer or explanation wasn't working. In order to process any of it, I knew that something needed to happen - and fast. I clenched random grasses and weeds with my fists as I stared at the high desert forest surrounding me searching for answers. Eventually, my gaze focused on a singular, large sagebrush only feet from me, and I began to fixate on the intricacy of its shape and structure. I'd seen sagebrush every day of my life, but somehow never this close up. Its unique beauty and familiar smell captivated my attention creating a space in my mind I

could finally use to think. My shoulders lowered as one thought in particular grew stronger and stronger: go dig.

After staring for what seemed like an eternity, I took several deep breaths before standing up to turn around and look at my fort. But instead of seeing destruction as I had before, my attention was drawn towards something else. There, wedged into a small pile of dirt stood my shovel, gleaming in the sun like a golden arrow. Without hesitation, I pulled it out of the ground, jumped into the hole and, like old times, and began throwing scoop after scoop of earth over my shoulder to the embankment above. As I worked, I thought only of two things. The first was a no-brainer - I was never going to borrow anything from Dad again without his express permission. The second was more ambiguous, but also more consuming:

I need to keep digging. And that's exactly what I did.