

Catching Turtles

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It was late on a Friday afternoon and we were driving up to my grandparents' house at Lake Wawasee. I hummed to myself in the back seat, trying to ignore my parents' arguing. Every weekend in the summer we would drive up to my grandparents' lake house, and every time we made the trip my parents argued. There weren't tape players or CD players in cars in those days. The radio in Indiana in 1960 - if you were allowed to turn it on - probably wouldn't play anything but static or country music. I couldn't read in a moving car because it made me carsick, so there was really nothing to do. I wadded myself up in a ball with my back against the window handle in the big back seat, hummed, and counted cows in the fields the car passed, until it got too dark. Then I tried to imagine what the distant farmhouses we passed looked like on the inside, and made up stories about the people who lived in them.

The way to the lake took a well-traveled two-lane highway at first, and my dad would honk and cuss whenever we got stuck behind a slow-moving truck. In spite of his temper, he babied the pistachio-green Rambler, and always made sure there was plenty of open road before he would pass another car. Whenever he passed a truck he seemed to take delight in flashing his lights just like the truck drivers did to each other. The road took us through five or six little towns, each with at least one gasoline station, so that if I or my mother had to use the toilet there would be a place to stop. Most often we tried not to ask, though, because Dad would get mad when we asked him to stop. He wanted to get to the lake in a hurry. In fact, all the grown-ups acted like they were in a hurry all weekend long, which seemed odd to me, since they always said that the point of going to the lake was to relax.

When we got close to the lake, the road grew narrower and darker and there were fewer cars. I could always smell the lake before I could see it. It smelled like fish and gasoline and seaweed. The smell made me feel light, like my body was evaporating, or like I was floating on one of my grandma's inflatable rafts. The last few miles were a dirt road, too narrow for two cars to pass, with little bridges over the watery channels that wound back and forth like fat snakes under the road. One last bridge, and we were on a little island. A dozen or so vacation houses looked out over the lake, with boat-houses and docks facing the channel side. In the middle of the island there was an oval-shaped green meadow with long grass and little pathways worn in it. I loved to hide in the secret spaces under the long, dark skirts of the pine trees on the green.

On this particular trip, I was nine and a half years old. Usually, my two younger cousins and their parents would be there to play with, but this time they weren't coming. I would have to decide whether to play alone or to join with the two neighbor kids Linda and Richard, who, although much stranger than my cousins, seemed hungry for company and always made me feel like an important visitor.

It was very late when the car crunched through deep gravel to park. After a heartbeat of silence, the night filled up again with sounds - crickets' chirping, water lapping against the dock, boats groaning inside their boathouses. Linda and Richard's porchlight was off. It was too late for lightning bugs. The yard was dark, but there was a light on in our kitchen. I could see my Grandma in there, dozing over her crocheting in a chair at the kitchen table.

As we climbed the back steps, Mother whispered urgently not to let the screen door slam because it would wake up Grandma, which I thought was pretty dumb because Grandma always woke up, and who would want to sleep all night at the kitchen table anyway?

My grandma was my favorite person, and I couldn't stand the idea of going off to bed without a hug from her. After Mother and Dad sneaked in with their armloads of clothes and beach towels, I let the screen door slam just a little, and Grandma woke up and gave me a big warm hug. That was all I needed to become overwhelmingly sleepy. I creaked across the old wood floor to the kids' room. The heavy, starched sheets and handmade quilts kept me from floating up from the bed and out over the lake.

In the morning I woke up just at dawn. I would have slept 'til noon at home just to avoid the day, but the lake made me a morning person. I slithered into my swimsuit and sneaked out through the front door, crossed the screened-in porch, and walked out to the water's edge. My grandpa and my dad always put the pier in the water in the spring and took it out in the fall, so it wouldn't be ruined by the winter freeze. It stuck out into the lake with a little "L" at the end. The shore was defined by a mossy old sea-wall, about waist high. The water there was only a few inches deep, but you had to watch out for leeches. I walked down to the end of the pier. If you jumped in there, you could still touch the bottom, but only barely. I slipped into the cold water and paddled a few feet to where the seaweed wasn't so thick on the bottom. Then I turned to float on my back to watch the sky brighten.

The screen door slammed. "Brenda Kay!" Mom always caught me. "How many times do I have to tell you not to swim alone? Now get in here. Right now." I climbed up the wooden ladder, trailing bright green seaweed, and ran up to the lawn where Mom had left me a beach towel to dry off.

I went inside and sat on a stool in the kitchen until breakfast was ready, and we all ate on the screened-in porch. After breakfast, Mom and Grandma went off to clean up the kitchen. Grandpa and Daddy were soon gone off to the golf course. They always went golfing on the weekends, at least on Saturdays. When my uncle was there the three of them would disappear together both days in a row. Before or after the golf trip, there might be time for a ride in Grandpa's little yellow fiberglass Scotty-Craft boat. I didn't how to water-ski yet, although I would learn the next summer.

Everybody was busy with something. I changed into shorts and walked out the back door and down the cold concrete steps. There was a spring house there – just about the size of a big cooler. It was metal and there were always roly-polys around it. I poked at them with my finger to watch them curl up. The sidewalk there was always wet and cool. Big maple trees and a couple of pines shaded the stoop. Once when I was very little Grandma had tried to plant vegetables in the back yard, but since we were only there once a week, the weeds and rabbits soon took over. She didn't try that again. Still the occasional cabbage popped up, and squash plants snaked through the grass.

I walked across the green to the boathouse we shared with a neighbor. Each family had a speedboat, and ours also had a little aluminum rowboat with wooden oars. The boathouse seemed ancient. The wood looked charred and you could see daylight between the boards. The boats slipped into a little parking space of water surrounded by concrete, covered over

by that little house, with two hinged wooden doors on the water side. Inside, the boats were floating in their places and little waves slapped at them whenever a boat went through the channel outside. Sunlight streaked through the green water under the doors. At the edge of the light shadowy minnows swarmed like underwater bees. Watery green reflections on the ceiling revealed intricate architectures of spiderwebs.

I sat down on the edge of concrete wall that framed the floating boats. I stuck my feet in the water and watched the minnows. The rowboat looked inviting. I knew how to use it and had become quite good at snaking the boat through green water channels clogged with branches and lily-pads. I decided to take the boat out and look for turtles. An old rope that dangled through a pulley let me unlatch and open the doors. Sunlight glared in and the little boats rocked. I untied the rowboat and climbed in, then rowed it out into the channel.

As soon as I got clear of the row of boathouses I steered the rowboat into a smaller, older channel that gave way to quiet pools. That's where you'd find turtles, sunning themselves on stumps and old branches and rocks near the water's edge. You had to be really quiet to catch one. If they sensed movement or heard the oars creak, they would slide silently into the green water and be gone.

The best way to catch turtles was to aim the rowboat into a pool and glide in with the oars up. I was an expert. The first turtle I caught was a little one, about the size of my palm, with a dark olive-green shell and tiny orange stripes around its throat. As soon as I touched it, it pulled its head and legs inside its shell. I placed it carefully on the bottom of the boat where it started trying to walk around. Its little feet scraped on the aluminum. Two or three other turtles heard the noise and launched themselves off their roosts into the shadowy water. I put the noisy turtle in my pocket where it continued to squirm.

Another pool, and another, and my pockets were stuffed with about ten small turtles. They were crawling over each other in there, trying to escape. I turned the boat and headed back to the boathouse with noisy splashing pulls. As I clambered off the rowboat, one turtle escaped and rolled around on the concrete. I scooped it up while its head and legs were still pulled inside its shell, then closed the boathouse doors and wound the old rope around two nails. I ran back to the house hugging my pockets to show Mother and Grandma my haul.

In a rare moment of "relaxation," the women were out on the pier, lying on beach towels. Mother was sitting up, pointing her toenails. She had kleenex wound between her toes to keep them apart as she applied bright red lacquer. Grandma was dozing in the sun. I walked down the pier and dropped a turtle down the back of Mother's bathing suit. "Oh my *God*, Brenda *Kay*!" She acted mad but she was laughing. While she wiggled I scooped the turtle out and held it up for her to see. By this time Grandma was sitting up too. "I caught 'em! Ten or twenty of 'em!"

Grandma started to laugh. "Well, what are you going to do with ten or twenty turtles?" I hadn't thought about that. I was simply the mighty hunter. I remembered seeing turtles for sale at the dime store in North Webster. "Maybe I can sell them to the dime store. They have to get those turtles they sell from somewhere." I could make some money! I didn't feel bad about it. The turtles weren't bound for a soup bowl, but for the loving care of children who would buy them little plastic ponds with palm trees and coral painted on them. Turtles

would be good pets. You fed them flies, I knew, and bits of hamburger. They would live fine lives with their fawning child-parents.

“Time to fix dinner first,” Grandma said, “then we’ll go into town.” The angle of the sun told me it was just about noon. Dinner in Indiana happened at 2 or 3 in the afternoon and it was the big meal of the day. Supper was later, near dark, and usually just leftovers or cheese and crackers and soup.

“Where should I put the turtles?” They were squirming like mad in my pockets. Grandma took me out back and found me a galvanized bucket back by the spring house. I dumped the turtles into it and let water drip from the spring house until they were good and wet. Then I covered the bucket with a board to keep them from climbing out.

Grandma and I went into the kitchen while Mother hobbled in from the pier with her kleenex-wound feet. I could smell meat already roasting in the oven. Eggs had been boiled in the morning and I was allowed to peel them. Then Grandma cut them in half and scooped out the yolks all into a bowl. She mixed them with mayonnaise and paprika, salt and pepper and a little sweet pickle juice, whipped them up with a fork, then scooped the fluffy yellow stuff back into the empty whites. Somehow she managed to make a little yellow curl on the top of each egg. Then we peeled potatoes to boil them for salad.

I got the job of pulling the green tops off of a quart of strawberries, a fruit that I truly hated. Grandma sliced them into a big glass bowl and poured a cup of sugar over them. She stirred them with a big wooden spoon until they were all coated and their juice combined with the sugar to make a watery pink sauce. I remember sitting on one of the kitchen chairs, watching her standing there in her bathing suit stirring the strawberries, and the loose skin under her arm jiggled with every stroke. Later in life, my dislike of strawberries would be intensified by that memory. I got to stir the heavy batter for the shortcake and was rewarded with a bowl and spoon to lick. “You shouldn’t eat raw batter,” Mother said. She always said that. Grandma rolled her eyes. We had an understanding, Grandma and I, that Mother was what Grandpa called “a worry wart.” I finished off the batter with a guilty look and put the bowl in the sink where Grandma ran water into it.

About two o’clock, when the potatoes had cooled and celery was chopped for the potato salad, the men rolled in from their golfing. I set the table with heavy Fiesta ware plates, all different colors. I always gave myself the green one, because it was my favorite color. Mother got the church-key and opened bottles of Pabst Blue Ribbon beer for the men while Grandma made iced tea for the rest of us. We sat down to eat – pot roast, potato salad, canned peas, and deviled eggs. The men talked about their golf game. Finally Dad asked what we’d been doing. I told him about the turtles and my plan to take them to the dime store and try to sell them. The men laughed and laughed. “That girl’s going to make something of her life,” Dad said. Grandpa, who rarely spoke, smiled and shook his head. “Turtles,” he said.

I helped with clean-up because I was in a hurry to get to the dime store before it closed. When the last dish was dried, I said to Grandma, “let’s go into town now. Please?” We walked down the back steps to look at the turtles. I took the board off the bucket. They were still in there, but they had calmed down. One or two of them were sitting on top of the

others. The water had gotten warm. "Let's put them in some jars," I suggested. Grandma got some big Ball jars and we put the turtles in with a little water, three or four to a jar. "They can't breathe if we put the lids on," Grandma told me. So we cut waxed paper squares and secured them to the tops of the jars with rubber bands, then Grandma poked holes in the paper with an ice pick. I carried the jars out to her big Oldsmobile and wedged them against each other on the front seat. Grandma drove and I held onto the jars from the other side as we bumped down the dirt road and onto the highway to North Webster.

The turtles were subdued in the car. We parked at the dime store and Grandma and I went inside to find the owner. I remember that he was skinny and old with a white mustache. I explained that I had turtles to sell him. We walked back to the old aquarium where he kept his turtles to sell. There was only one left, and it didn't look very good. Its shell was turning white around the edges and its eyes were rheumy. It didn't move around and it didn't retract its head and legs, either. It just sat there in on a rock in the bottom of the aquarium. "This one needs company," the owner said. "Let me see what you've got."

We brought the jars in and he offered me a dime apiece for the turtles. He would sell them for fifty cents. I took the deal – a dollar was a lot of money! We dumped the turtles into the aquarium where they started crawling around again. He poured some more water over them. They scrambled to climb up onto the rock, but it was too small to hold all of them. "There's not much room on that rock," I said. "They'll be all right," he answered. "I'll sell most of them this weekend, I reckon." He went to the cash register and gave me my dollar. I was ecstatic. Grandma gave me a pat and we headed back to the house.

The next day – Sunday – was the day that the adults did "maintenance." They cleaned up everything, mowed the grass, washed the windows, changed the beds, brushed cobwebs off of the screens. There was a thunderstorm in the morning and the afternoon was gray and drizzly. There would be no speedboat ride that weekend. At about 4:00 we all piled into our cars for the long drive home. I slept in the back seat. It was dark by the time we got back to Indianapolis. Mom and Dad and I watched TV and ate supper on our TV trays. Dad and I crumbled up saltines and put them in big glasses of buttermilk with lots of pepper and salt. After that we had some ice cream and I went to bed.

That night I dreamed about the turtles. In my dream they all looked like the one that had been in the store. Their shells were white around the edges and they didn't move around much. I felt sick. In the morning I asked Mother, would the turtles be O.K.? She said we should ask my Dad when he came home from work. Over supper at the kitchen table, I told Dad I was worried that there wasn't a big enough rock in that aquarium at the dime store. I told him I was afraid the turtles would get sick. He explained that turtles couldn't stay in water too long. They needed to breathe sometimes, and sometimes they needed to dry off. Their shells might get soft, he said, but I shouldn't worry about that because they would take turns getting up onto the rock, and besides, kids would buy them and they'd be well taken care of.

All week I thought about the turtles and I kept dreaming about them. I started to feel guilty about taking them away from their homes. I remembered that one of my school friends had a turtle with one of those plastic turtle-houses, and it had died. Its shell had turned white and it had stopped eating, then it died. I started thinking I needed to put those turtles back in the

lake. I was worried that the old man had sold them all to kids who wouldn't take care of them. What if they all died?

The next weekend when we started out for the lake again, I asked if we could go to the dime store first thing Saturday morning and see about the turtles. "The turtles are O.K.," Dad said in an exasperated voice. "The turtles are all sold by now," Mother said. I looked out the window and thought about what I was going to do. When we got to the lake house, I found Grandma in the kitchen and told her about my worries for the turtles. All of a sudden I was crying. "I bet I killed them," I said. "I bet they all turned white and died." My Grandma held me on her lap even though I was much too big for that. "We'll get up real early," she said, "and we'll go to the dime store and see about those turtles." I went to my bedroom and put my pajamas on over my clothes. I wanted to be on the way to the dime store in a hurry as soon as I woke up.

In the morning I heard Grandma in the kitchen. I stripped off the pajamas and ran out of my room. "We have to go," I said. "NOW." Grandma paused over the waffle batter she was making, but then she unplugged the waffle maker and got her car keys and her purse. "Let's go," she said.

The dime store was still closed when we got there so we waited in the car for ten minutes that seemed like hours. Finally the old man drove up and got out of his truck. I jumped out and ran to him as he was unlocking the door. "Did you sell the turtles?" "Not all of them," he said. "Why, do you want one? You'll have to buy it, you know. A deal's a deal." I followed him into the store and ran back to the tank.

Two turtles were left. They were humped up on the rock with their heads and legs inside their shells. My evil heart shriveled in my chest. Eight other turtles – nine if you counted the sad one that was already there – had been sold to kids who wouldn't take care of them. And it was all my fault. "I'll take both of them," I told him. He gave my Grandma an exasperated look, but she shook her head slightly. They reached a silent agreement. I fished the same dollar he'd given me last week out of my pocket. He reached in and picked up the turtles and dropped them into a cardboard box. "O.K.," he said.

Grandma and I drove back to the lake house. I kept looking inside the box. The turtles weren't crawling around. As soon as we pulled in to the driveway I jumped out of the car and ran to the boathouse with the turtle box under my arm. I put the box in the rowboat and opened the doors. Mist was still rising from the water as I rowed out into the channel. I took them back to the first pool and dropped them carefully into the water. They sank. I sat there in the little rocking boat and cried. After a few minutes I saw a little snout break the water near the shore, then another. Two turtles lumbered up onto a branch. I thought, these must be my turtles, and they are O.K. The relief of it made me weak. I just sat there and watched them as they positioned themselves in spots of sunlight among the leafy shadows. They were beautiful like that.

Finally I decided to go back home. As my oars sliced into the water I heard a splash from the other side of the pool. A big old turtle was making its way off of a rock into the water. I could see it there, just under the surface. There was something white on its shell. Before I knew what I was doing, I grabbed it and plopped it into the boat. It was about seven inches

across and it had seaweed growing on its neck and legs. I picked it up. The white spots were decorated, I saw, in what looked like a calico pattern. Each quarter-sized section of the big turtle's shell had a little bit of that pattern on it. I figured out what had happened. Somebody had caught it when it was little and had painted a design on its back. Evidently they'd put it back into the lake, where it had grown old and big, and as its shell got larger over the years the little painted parts had grown apart.

I put the elderly turtle back into the pool. Immediately its head and legs came out and it swam down into the underwater shadows, out of sight. A turtle really can survive a person's meddling, I thought. But I resolved quite firmly that I would never catch a turtle again.

And I never did.

