

TREASURES

The hinge on the screen door was too tight, causing it to swing back quickly. It was old, inexpensive and had mesh stapled around the frame that easily could become detached. The young boy had developed a trick of beating the quick door by placing his stick between it and the frame, and masterfully diving underneath without knocking his magical wand out. This little game sometimes captivated him for hours. It seemed anything could, as long as it kept him away from his annoying older brother. On his fifth dive through to the kitchen linoleum the screen door abruptly snapped back, catching his bare legs. He quickly turned around to see how he could have messed up, and saw his big brother towering over him, cigarette in the mouth of a face not old enough to be shaved, remorseless, piercing eyes.

Eddie felt the sharp pain of the cuts on his calves. Colin pressed his hand on the door, preventing Eddie from wiggling out. He bit his lower lip as the tears rolled down his cheek. "Aw. All my friends were right about you Eddie. You're nothing but a sissy girl and a loser kid. That's what Dad always called you too."

"You're lying," Eddie cried. "You don't remember Dad. And he wouldn't call me that. Ma said he really loved me." The older boy glared at the younger one, jealousy trickling across his face. He let go of the frame, spat out his cigarette, and was gone. Eddie slowly stood up, holding his legs, whispering, 'I'm not a loser. Dad did love me. It's not my fault you weren't wanted.'

Angry and hurt, Eddie dried his face and cleaned his scrapes. He did some exploring to pass the afternoon. Eddie dragged an old ladder from the spare room and set it under the loft. He carefully climbed the steps and heaved the heavy attic door over. Once up inside, he relaxed. This is where he always escaped from Colin. Hidden under heavy wool blankets in the corner lay his secret project: an old Hope chest. He ran over, uncovered it and started twisting the lock. The little boy wrestled with it, jamming an old screwdriver through the handle, and after what seems like a lifetime of grunts and moans, the rusty lock fell apart. Eddie sat back in astonishment. This was a long project for him, one that had him dreaming of its contents for hours. Eddie struggled to open the dusty wooden lid. He sighed. There wasn't much

there, except old yellowed papers. He gazed through the ones on top, not making much sense of the handwriting, until he noticed an elasticized bundle jammed in the corner. Eddie stretched the old elastic and stared at what he had found— a dozen or so hand drawn cartoon caricatures. To a young boy, this was sheer joy. Eddie ran around the floorboards, making voices and stories for each character. Hours passed before he finally climbed down the ladder, a thick bulge under his shirt. His quiet life away from Colin had taken on a new dimension. For the first time he felt superior—he had found a magical treasure!

The young boy said cross legged on the floor of his play tent amusing himself with the drawings. "Edgar smiled to himself, as he knew he was a tougher and stronger cat than the others," he stated in a deep authoritative voice, falling back in the tent laughing. The floor was covered in the drawings, along with some of his own that he tried to copy. As he was gathering up the old ones to hide, Colin burst into his tent. "Who are you talking to in here, you loser, your imaginary friends? And what are all these stupid drawings doing all over the floor, and on Ma's good paper? Boy are you ever gonna get it." Colin picked up a few drawings and laughed. "You don't honestly think you are any good, do ya?" He ripped them down the middle, watching them fall onto Eddie's legs. Eddie sat in the middle of the ripped up drawings, breathing in the cloudy secondhand smoke, feeling the anger build up inside him, watching his fists clench, and feeling his face burn. He was sick of him. "You're the loser Colin. Just wait till I'm a famous artist," he muttered to himself.

The little boy skateboarded down Main Street, drawings shoved in his back pocket. He was on his way to the variety store, and couldn't help notice the older man sitting alone on the park bench. He was beginning to look familiar to him. The stranger never approached him, and Eddie never felt unsafe, just curious. He lacked a father figure in his life. Eddie purposely skated close, hoping he would speak.

Many years passed with Eddie regularly seeing the elderly man sitting on the bench observing him, never speaking. On his 15th birthday Eddie was walking through the park. The usual occurrence of seeing the old man did not take place. Eddie sat on the roundabout, wondering where he was. He had recently entered a local art contest run by the town newspaper. Eddie

knew in his heart that this was how he wanted to spend his life. He was about to rise when the roundabout started moving. The old man appeared in front of him, looking thoughtfully into his eyes. "Don't give up on your dreams, no matter who criticizes you. This is your life, not theirs. Follow your own path," he quietly said and left. Eddie ran after him. "You spoke to me after all these years? Who are you?" he asked excitedly. The old man kept walking, but glanced over. "What's important is you heed what I say." Eddie stopped. He stood there, and watched him walk away.

Eddie's older brother had become a rebellious young adult, hanging around a fast crowd. He lived at home one week per month, and didn't do much when he was there, except hassle Eddie. Colin was sitting at the kitchen table, cigarette dangling from swollen lips. "Hey cartoon loser." Eddie ignored him and walked into the living room. "Hey Ma, how would you feel if I took off out west for a bit, you know, look up Uncle Mark in Alberta? He mentioned good art schools out there." His mother took off her glasses and looked up at him. She knew he was too good for this little town. "Eddie, you're only 15. I know you have big dreams, but at least wait a few more years, you're not even done high school. Stay and keep me company a little bit longer sweetheart," she replied.

"It's not good for me to be here Ma. I won't live there long, I promise. I'll be back. I know you don't like being alone here with all your memories of Dad," he said. His mother dropped her head. His father was rarely mentioned. All Eddie had gathered over the years was that he had died when he was an infant, and that things weren't good between them.

Over the next few months Eddie tirelessly argued with his mother. He eventually convinced her to allow him to live with her brother. It was 45 minutes from a small college that housed a very good arts program. He was delighted when she finally agreed. They both knew a fresh start with a father figure was what he needed. At the end of school term, Eddie packed his leather bag, stuffing a few articles of clothing on top of the drawings. As he waved good-bye from the bus, he yelled, "Don't cry Ma. I'll be back soon. You'll be real proud of me, you'll see."

The handsomely dressed man grabbed the handle of the screen door and opened it, struggling to pass himself and his suitcase through before the hinge snapped back. Once inside, he dropped his bags and quietly crept into

the living room where an older lady was dozing, knitting spilling from her lap. With tears in his eyes, he watched her sleep. It had been 6 years since he had last seen her. Her curly hair was now white and her plump hands rested on her belly, rising slowly with her breathing. He leaned forward and whispered, "Ma, your baby's home, all grown up." The older lady opened her tired eyes and shrieked with excitement. "Eddie, my darling!" she cried, wrapping her arms around his neck. "My baby's home, after all these years. Oh, aren't you handsome!" The tall lean man held his mother for many minutes, rocking and crying with her. "Ma, I am so sorry I stayed away all this time, but I've been having such a beautiful life. Did you get my last letter?" The old lady smiled and reached under her chair. She pulled out a shoebox stuffed with letters. "Yes. I've saved every one and read them at least four times, Colin and I."

"Colin read them?" Eddie asked in surprise.

"Yes. You don't know how proud he is of you. He's also green with envy. He's home you know, I'm sure he'd really like to see you."

Eddie turned and walked towards the bedrooms. He peeked in them, finding them both empty. He noticed the old ladder resting against the wall. Eddie climbed up into the loft. All his childhood memories came flooding back. His brother was sitting in the corner, on the old chest, in a thick cloud of smoke. "Now I know why you always hung out up here," Colin said without looking up. "It's very safe from the world, isn't it? Quiet, freeing. You always did your own thing, exploring up here, figuring yourself out. Now look at you—a great success, doing what makes you happy. Now I'm the loser brother." Eddie didn't know what to say. He bit his lip, looking down at his tired brother, thinking of all the things he'd wanted to say over the years.

"Colin...what happened to you?"

Colin put out his cigarette and stared up at the ceiling. "When you left I had to deal with a lot—life, the truth. See, through you I hid who I was and what frightened me. I used you as a scapegoat, I guess." Eddie sat down beside him. "What or who were you afraid of? You always seemed so indestructible to me."

Colin kept his head down and quietly answered, "Dad." Eddie looked at him for a while, this fragile man with more skeletons than he had ever knew.

"Huh?"

"I lied to you about Dad," Colin began, "and I'm not proud of it. He *is* alive. He left when you were an infant. Ma told you he died because it was easier for her to handle it that way. It was a very dark time for her. I don't know

the full story, but I do remember him. I was almost 7 when he left and I remember the horrible fight they had. I also remember how much he adored you. Maybe he saw himself in you, I don't know."

Eddie's face turned red. His eyes stung. He couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"He's in a nursing home in Nairn and isn't doing well. We should go up and visit him soon. I try to go once a week. Sometimes he recognizes me, sometimes he doesn't. Ma's been up once or twice." Colin lit another cigarette and squinted out the attic window.

Eddie climbed down the ladder and stared out the kitchen window. 'My father's alive. My God,' he whispered. 'I can't believe he's been alive all this time! And he really *did* love me.' The quiet gentlemen stood there for a long time, not wanting to leave this memory, this moment, this feeling. He looked out at the old trees on the lawn, watching them dance in the wind.

The brothers walked up the steps and along the hallway of the nursing home. The younger brother was beside himself with excitement and nerves. They turned the corner together and stood outside a closed yellow door. The younger one held onto the handle, squeezing it open. There were two beds. The first one was empty. An old man lay in the second, his back facing them. Eddie walked over and sat down. The old man struggled to turn around. Eddie braced himself, biting his lip, his emotions running high. When the old man finally faced him, Eddie cried out, the noise filling the still room. The old man with the pale watery eyes was the same man he had encountered in the park year after year, the same man that was his inspiration for his trip out west. His father smiled and nodded.

"Your mother forbade me from visiting you, but I was damn sure I wasn't going to miss seeing you growing up," he breathed, "so in my own way I watched you without her ever knowing." He slowly held out his hand.

Eddie let the tears freely fall. "I can't believe that was you all these years. I truly thought you were dead!" He squeezed his father's hand. All that time trying to figure out the quiet stranger were quickly fitting together. "What did you mean when you told me years ago about following my dreams? How did you know what they were?"

The old man smiled at him as he answered. "Your cartoon strip. I've been following it all these years. Thanks for bringing my dreams to life." He closed

his eyes and rested his head on his pillow. "That fat cat was my childhood friend, but your mother didn't want me to do anything with it," he continued. "Those were *your* drawings?" Eddie asked incredulously, standing up. "I had no idea whose they were or why they were in our attic. You don't know how many hours of pleasure they gave me!" he said.

"Oh I know. I used to watch you talk to yourself on the roundabout. You didn't realize I was there as much as I was. I knew what you were doing and what you saw in those old drawings of mine," he struggled.

Eddie sat back down again and smiled through his tears. He hugged his dad and rocked with him, holding onto a lifetime of love and dreams and memories. He held and rocked his father for a very long time, not ever wishing to let go—of his Dad, of the present, or of the past.

Now his life was just going to keep getting better. He finally has a chance to make amends with his brother, to build a relationship that they never really had. Life is full of treasures.