

The treasure was literally a '50's kid's heaven. Everything we worked on--every hobby, every collection--was in this one bedroom. Not all of our possessions combined could've touched the display's completeness or the astounding condition of the items. I could only wonder what pride such a trove must've evoked.

A complete set of Hardy Boys books stood neatly on the top shelf of an oaken bookcase. Their beige covers with the brown silhouette of Frank and Joe were caressed by the books colorful jackets. On the bottom shelf sat five cigar boxes, each containing a different year of Topp's baseball cards. Every AMT model car from '58 and '59, flawlessly spray painted, sat parked on the two middle shelves.

Across the room a matching bookcase held a nearly complete American coin collection from 1856 to present. Hundreds of coins were pressed into slotted blue folding booklets, like we all had, but which were in our case mostly empty holes. Unlike Eddie and me, who visited the dumpsters behind the businesses in the industrial park and tore cancelled stamps from letters and later soaked them off, the stamp album we gazed upon here was nearly complete with hundreds of U.S. commemoratives, all unused. Model ships, Lionel train sets, and model planes lined other shelves. Even stuff that came in cereal boxes like plastic frogmen and soldiers from Kellogg's, or small tin state flags from Nabisco, was there, every last one of them.

Surprised at being asked to perform a somber task, we were in Russ Pemberton's room. Grace Pemberton had seen Eddie and me throwing a baseball in the dusty field behind their property, the field where we all played baseball every summer day, seemingly all day, stopping only on the days we had Little League practice.

“I wonder if you boys might help me this morning. I saw you were here early and I thought maybe your friends could get by without you for a couple of hours,” she had said somewhat shakily. Having rarely seen her up close before, I noticed how pretty she was despite her grimness.

“As you may know we’re moving today and, oh my,” she exhaled, “I thought you might box-up the things up in Russell’s room for me. It’s too difficult a task for a mom. I’ll pay you ten dollars each.”

Ten bucks? For maybe an hours work? It was a fortune to an eleven-year-old in 1959. “Yes, ma’am,” I replied without checking with Eddie. “We’ll help.”

Russell had passed away a month before. He too had been eleven. We had attended his funeral but hadn’t known him. He had been a sickly kid born with hemophilia and defective kidneys. When he was five, he contracted polio. The Pembertons had moved to Louisville six years before. Russ couldn’t go to school; he had tutors. He always seemed to have pneumonia or hepatitis whenever we heard anything of him. When we played baseball we would frequently look up and see him sitting at his window. After what seemed like several summers, I began to wave each day, a gesture he seemed only too anxious to return.

We never saw him at the shopping center, or at any games, or even in church. Yet we always thought because the Pembertons--living in the storied house on the hill at the end of Gheens and Cumberland Streets--were rich, while the rest of us barely cracked the middle class, that Russell was some sort of prince gazing down at us. Perhaps, I had allowed myself, he sat scrutinizing, making mental notes of our silly faults and stained clothes, and tracking our endless mistakes on the diamond.

As I examined the complete set of Big Ten and SEC pennants Russ had hung in rows on his slate blue walls, I blurted, “Geez, Edward, what a deal, old Russell here had everything.”

“Talk about a silver spoon in your mouth.” Eddie agreed.

“Man,” I went on smirking, “no wonder he never came out, ‘R. Pemberton,’ the richest kid in the world. The pampered boy-king of Kentucky.”

Panic abruptly seized me as I realized my words had been overheard. Mrs. Pemberton walked in trembling like she might collapse. I had been slapped before, by my dad and a couple of teachers, and I prepared to take a good shot. Of course, nothing that easy happened.

She stopped, her eyes full of tears, less than arm’s length from me. Indoors, I became instantly aware of her femininity, perfect clothing and delicate scent. For the first time, I realized she was suffering terribly and I felt awful about how badly I must’ve hurt her on top of how bad she was already hurting. Her jaw quivered but she managed not to break down. Whatever angst she had felt seemingly waned enough for her to speak wistfully but without wrath.

“I am going to tell you boys something. My sweet Russell was a wonderful son. I guess Blake and I like to think he was as happy as he could be, given the circumstances. But you absolutely must understand he really had so . . . little.” I nodded, feeling as guilty as I possibly could and not even faintly clinging to a single tenet of the idiot observation I had just vocalized. “These things you’re packing,” she continued, “might have given him some comfort, some distraction, but to him you were the richest kids in the world.

“I can tell you, Charlie--it never dawned on me that she knew my name--that there was nothing he wanted more than to be like you. Not to sit here watching from this museum, this prison, but to have his shirt soaked in sweat, and the knees long torn out of his pants. To carry a worn out glove and a broken bat nailed together and taped. To daringly yell forbidden words when the ball got past him. Just . . .” her voice cracked, “just to be one of you.

“So I ask you to . . . try to understand, to be respectful about what he went through. And because it was all he ever wanted, to give him some credit for his desires and his judgment. And to be thankful, thankful to God for the beautiful life He has given you.”

I noticed that Eddie had begun to sob which was some solace because tears were already streaking my dust caked face.

Then she too began to cry and she took us both in her slender arms, this elegant, beautiful lady that we used to make fun of, and we all held one another for a time.

“I’m so sorry, Mrs. Pemberton,” I finally managed, feeling rotten not only about my comments but by the fact that none of us had ever visited Russell.

“It’s okay,” she said nearly whispering. “We all say things we don’t think about beforehand, just try to remember that you--that we, have the terrible power to wound others with our words.

Later, we sat in her kitchen having lemonade. I began to feel like I could almost love this person. “Perspective is everything,” she said softly and with the faintest smile, “I imagine you boys will remember this day for a long time.”

“Yes ma’am,” I answered respectfully, having no idea just how hauntingly accurate her words would prove to be.