

## TURTLE FARMING

Once I had a turtle farm ...

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Mr. Snapperhead was number thirty-three. Caught him creekside behind the house, dozing on a rock. Heavy head, thick shell, three scaly ridges given it the appearance of that plate dinosaur, the Ankylosaurus. And those scary, pointy jaws; Alligator snapping turtle - *Species: M. temminckii*; *Genus: Macrochelys*; *Phylum: Chordata*; of the family *Chelydridae*. Super long neck. Could stretch out upside down and backwards, grab ya – *SNAP!* – just like that. Would never let go. I knew my Mississipp' turtles.

I chalked my initials on the shell's tail end.

Thirty-two in the farm before the snapper, all shapes and sizes: your standard box turtles – three-toed, Gulf Coast, Eastern - with their gold-spotted shells, like some kid spray-painted snowflake cutouts on them; the muds – Mississipp', Eastern – have to dig for those 'cuz they liked to hide deep in the you-know-where; the musks: stripe necks, stinkpots (yep, they do stink when you rile 'em up!), one big-ass loggerhead ; the maps - commons, yellow-blotched, ringed, black

knobbed, Pearl River, ouachita – sometimes called sawbacks for their pointy shells; and the sliders - yellow bellies and red-eareds – flatter shells, mostly pond hanger outers. Even a gopher tortoise (hell tryin' to keep that dang thing from digging itself out), a softshell (squishy!) and a couple of super green river cooters.

Not a farm really, just what my best bud Farley and I called it. No farming happening there; just a lot of lettuce chomping (thanks, Ma!), cricket and dead fly munching, bathing and sunning. Spent some serious hot-n-humid afternoons planning out and putting it all together in a raggedy corner of my parent's backyard where a crumpled storage shed used to sit. "Borrowed" a bit of extra fencing Pops had been using to keep deer off Ma's prized beefsteak tomatoes, pushed dirt up and around to make hills, dug out and filled a monster pond complete with plastic dinosaurs, tossed in some pine straw for bedding, added a good-sized shale rock for sunbathing. Turtle heaven, right?

That morning after catching Mr. Snapperhead, Farley and I headed out on my orange Schwinn Stingray, with its banana seat and spokes outfitted with clothes-pinned baseball card duplicates. Up and down our neighborhood streets we rode, making a holy flapping racket, collecting other people's crap so we could build a fort in the empty wooded lot nearby. We hammered rusty nails into warped boards and sap-heavy, sticky Southern pines while fending off 'quitos the size of bumblebees; laughed at stupid jokes we'd heard before ("what has four eyes but can't see? MISSISSIPPI!"), wiped off sweat with stripped-off t-shirts, gulped down artesian well water at a neighbor's faucet, holding our noses against its sulfur stink. We finally collapsed mid-fort on a bed of pine straw, aimlessly flicking roly polys and the occasional stinkbug at each other.

“Hey, looka there!”

Farley was pointing at something scrambling out of the woods. Before I could get my brain to jumpstart my butt, Farley up and ran for it, ‘cuz that was who he was, a dummy maybe dumber than me. Grabbing ahold of the alligator snapping turtle’s shell, he realized too late he had it by the danger end.

Out popped that big ole head, its neck curling over and back.

*SNAP!*

Farley dropped the snapper on its head. “Yow!”

“Leave it, dumbass! Already got one---“

*SNAP!*

Farley yelped. The snapper had him by the left calf. Blood spurted everywhere.

I made a couple of stupid moves then: tried yanking the damn thing off, which only pissed off Farley more, then found a stick to use as a pry bar between its jaws. That just caused the snapper to bite down harder, Farley yelling enough bloody murder to wake up dormant cicadas.

A crazy thought popped into my head then. Ran to fetch my bike, Farley screaming “where the hell ya goin’?” after me. Now, seeing the bike, I wide-eyed me like I was some kinda alien, maybe like the one we thought might be in that flying saucer we saw land behind his house a couple summers back.

“Git on!”

I picked up the snapper by its butt end and pushed. Farley stumbled towards the bike, hopping on back like the town drunk.

“Now ya hold the damn thing!”

Being as delirious as he was, he didn't argue, almost tipping the bike over before I could even get on.

I stood on my pedals, pumping my butt hard, and off we went to the hospital (because going to our parents was out of the question), Farley howling like a hit dog, me trying to keep my balance. He had a one-handed death grip on snapper's backend, the other clutching a belt loop of my dungarees like a bamboo fishing line with a big catfish on the other end.

Past our junior high and across the boulevard I hauled ass, ignoring our favorites haunts – Zestos' ten-cent burgers and Squalee's snowball stand - all the while dodging screeching cars and random kids, before blasting up the drive to Emergency, before finally losing my balance and sliding with a bang into the glass door entrance. Farley's leg was now bubbling red and showing stuff under his skin I never thought I'd ever see, the snapper still flailing away, its feet pawing midair.

And that was when I saw my faded initials on its shell.

I got all woozy. Next thing I knew I was sitting on a chair, wet rag on my neck, a nurse hovering over me.

I called out for Farley.

The nurse patted my shoulder. “Your friend? Don't worry, son. Docs' taking good care of him”, nodding her head toward the room behind her.

I screamed out, “Where's the snapper?”

Her face scrunched up like she was biting into a spoiled persimmon.

I sprung up, stumbled. The nurse grabbed my elbow, steadied me. “Hold on there, son.”

“It’s *my* damn snapper! My fault!”

The nurse stood back, surely thinking I’d been too long in the sun.

“Well, that turtle wouldn’t let go of your friend’s leg, so ...”

I remember thinking: *did she just say what I thought she said.*

My feet jumped the gun, sending me darting past the nurse, banging through the doors separating me from Farley, and that damn snapper.

First thing I saw was the snapper’s headless body on the floor, blood seeping from its shell. I glanced up then, saw the backs of two docs struggling over something, their grunts echoing across the room, Farley’s head laying on the gurney, looking every bit of dead.

Somebody grabbed me by my belt loop, jerked me backwards. There was a crack like a bottle rocket, the docs fell backwards, and my snapper’s head came flying out between them, hitting the floor, wobbling around a bit before coming to a dead stop, its jaw split open, its dead black eyes staring up at me.

I puked right there.

Farley’s parents showed up then, hugged me. I don’t remember if I hugged them back. Heard them cry out. I ran

Jumped on my bike that someone had stood up off to the side of the emergency entrance, kicked the kickstand harder than I’d ever kicked a kickstand, ripping the skin off my ankle. I didn’t care. I had to get home.

Don’t remember actually arriving, just throwing down my bike in the driveway, hauling ass over to the turtle farm.

Part of the fence was down, all chewed up. All the turtles were in their shells, quiet, not moving.

I reached in, grabbed the closest one - my favorite, the loggerhead – and stared into its bloody shell where the head should have been.

All their heads were missing. Every single one.

I tore up the farm, snot and tears not slowing me down, until my hands were raw and bleeding, my dungarees soaked through and muddy.

Ma must have heard the racket I was making. She took one look at me, at the farm, and think she cried a little too. Told Ma what had happened. She pulled me to her, tight, whispered in my ear: “Dad will help you bury them”.

I pushed away, walked past her to the garage, grabbed a long-handled shovel, then spent the rest of the afternoon burying my turtles, each in their own grave, under the farm Farley and I had worked so hard on. Some of them I had to hold their cracked shells together, others I was able to bury whole, placing each carefully in their holes, deep, so the ants and other critters couldn't get at them too fast. I whispered a different prayer over each one. Through all this, Ma watched over me, silent. When I was finished, I dropped the shovel, leaned against her, palms apple-red, clay-smeared head to toe.

Ma guided me sniffling into the mudroom, shed my clothes down to my underwear, got me cleaned up as best she could (without the usual hosing me down out back), and started supper early so I could eat before Pop got home. I soaked in the tub, watching the remaining dirt fall away, forming a ring. I scrubbed and scrubbed until all Farley's blood, and my turtles' blood floated away spinning down the drain. On hands and knees, I wiped down the tub with my

washcloth cuz for once I didn't want Ma having to. Wrapped myself in a towel, dried off, Ma bringing me some fresh clothes. Ma and I ate in silence, country-style steaks and gravy with rice and green beans, and a slice of custard for dessert. All my favorites.

When Pa got home from work, I was already in bed. Pretended to be asleep when he came into my room. Pa hadn't been big on the turtle farm idea from the start but had let me be. You hear that about parents sometimes: Mom wore the pants, Dad just brought home the bacon. I could sense he was there, standing over me like Mom's garden statue. After a time, he patted the space on the bed beside my head and left, closing the door behind. I slept, hard.

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It was nearly a week before Farley showed up. His parents had told mine about the leg, that he might have a limp for the rest of his life but at least it was still attached. He struggled a bit to get around on the crutches. I tried not to stare, to let him see me do it. Being Farley, I knew he wanted to show me his scar cuz it was a lot groovier than my appendix one, but every time he hinted at it, I found myself turning away.

He and I slowly made our way over to the turtle cemetery, my arms steadying him. We stood over my creation for the longest time, not saying a word. Then he started mumbling about finishing up the fort, hitting the five-and-dime for some new baseball card and gum packs, swimming at the local watering hole.

Finally, he turned to me, said, "Got sumthing for ya".

I hadn't noticed his green army backpack until then. Letting one crutch drop, he flung the backpack off, unzipped the main pouch, and pulled out a burlap sack. Dried blood pooled at the bottom.

I blinked back a tear. “Give it to me.”

Farley hesitated.

I yanked the sack away from him so hard I almost fell backwards. I untied it, stared inside.

“Where’s the rest of him?”

“I-I don’t know. Maybe ... ah, maybe the docs tossed it.”

I had decorated each turtle grave with the things they loved - crickets, flies, roly polys, flowers, grass, anything that’d make them more comfortable knowing they all were headless – and had dug one last hole, the largest one, to hold the largest turtle I’d ever found. I dropped the sack in, filled it up with dirt, patted it down, taking my time, Farley hovering over me, wordless.

But I didn’t know what to put on Mr. Snapperhead’s grave.

When I had put on the finishing touches, Farley put his hand on my shoulder. I found myself leaning into him despite his one-crutch balancing act.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Sorry too, buddy”

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Later, I found the leg off a GI Joe doll, a Barbie head mounted on its foot, stuck into Mr. Snapperhead’s grave. I laughed until I cried.

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Once, I had a turtle farm.

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