

A Walk in Autumn

His cousin called his name, so Jake looked up. If he didn't answer, Sam might ignore him. Besides, he'd heard enough local-boy boasting today. Near an oak tree, Sam poked through leaves with a stick. Jake touched his palm. The cut still throbbed, but stripping a branch as long and straight as the one he'd found couldn't wait. With the stick, he stood on the wet rocks. Away from the soft mud, he splashed the eddies. Cool water splattered his clothing. Jake smiled. He hadn't had this much fun in a long time.

"I know you heard me." Sam pointed at his feet. "Look!"

Jake turned, and Sam knelt. This discovery might be meaningful after all. Even though from where he stood, Jake couldn't see what captivated Sam's attention. He hesitated. "I'm trying to find the fish."

Both knees of Jake's khakis were circled in mud. Each sneaker toe matched. His mother would scold him for ruining his new pants and shoes, but he didn't care. In city neighborhoods, creek banks covered with with autumn leaves did not exist, nor did sticky, reddish-brown clay. Jake wasn't about to waste an opportunity like this.

Wiping both hands on his jeans first, Sam shoved his sweatshirt sleeves to his elbows. He pointed again. A wide grin spread across Sam's face. Jake stepped closer, gazing beyond his own feet. On the ground, a box turtle's hump rose above the decaying flora. Sam picked up the turtle. He rocked it several times. Using a twig, Sam pried the front flap until it snapped.

Jake stepped closer. "Don't do that."

Sam looked at him, his expression twisted. "I can if I want to."

"It's a real turtle?" Jake thought of the Ninjas. Donatello was his favorite.

“Yeah, look.” Sam knelt, and picked up a thicker twig.

Ignoring his cut, Jake grabbed it from Sam’s hand. He threw the twig as far as he could. It landed on the leaves, barely making a sound. “I said, ‘don’t hurt him’.”

“Get me another stick.” Sam straightened his stance. He stuck out his chest. “Now.”

Jake shook his head. He touched the shell. “He’s inside, isn’t he?”

“Yeah, that’s what turtles do. Are you stupid or something?”

Jake stuck out his tongue. “Shut up, jerk face. I’ve never seen a real one.”

Sam fingered a seam. He left a rust-colored smudge that matched the shell.

The forest floor rustled, inviting Jake to turn around. A squirrel sprinted to the base of a maple tree, and parted the leaves in its path. The squirrel reached the trunk; its gray body twisted upward, tail twitching. From a thick branch, the squirrel chattered.

“Look, Sam. He’s got a great place to live. Just like our turtle.” City squirrels had park benches, crumbling buildings, and vacant lots to call home. Would this squirrel feel as displaced in the city as Jake did in the forest? A nearby stand of hardwoods, barely able to mimic the buildings in his neighborhood, still filtered the sunset.

Sam tossed the turtle in the air. He caught it with one hand. “It’s good you’re here. To see turtles and other stuff.”

Jake’s voice softened. “Yep. Mom’s still upset Dad left. She wanted us to be in a new place for Thanksgiving.” He hesitated. “She’s been crying a lot.” He grabbed another stick, and threw it in the creek. It splashed, then swirled with the current until it disappeared. Jake wasn’t about to admit he’d been crying as much as his mother.

“Do you know why he left?”

First shrugging, Jake looked away next. His voice trembled. “Mom said he wasn’t happy anymore.”

“I hope he comes back,” Sam said. “My dad travels a lot. I always miss him.”

“If my dad was here, would you let him hold it?”

Sam drew the shell to his face. “I think so.” He tilted it, and turned it over.

Jake reached out, but Sam pulled the turtle against his chest. “C’mon, Sam. Let me hold him.” He stepped closer. “How can he breathe?”

“I don’t know, but he has to eat.” Sam set the turtle at his feet. He nudged it with his muddy boot. The boys stared, and the turtle remained motionless.

Jake tugged Sam’s sleeve. “Forget him.” Until now, he’d been too preoccupied with the mud and the water to notice his rumbling stomach. “I’m hungry.”

Nodding, Sam nudged the turtle again. “Yeah, our moms are gonna get worried.”

“Let’s go.”

Sam set the turtle beside the footpath. Jake stared for a moment. He wanted to touch the turtle one more time. But if he did that, Sam wouldn’t leave it alone. Sam threw leaves over the shell, and began the trek to the road. Jake darted ahead of him, and quickened their pace. If he made Sam hurry, the turtle would have time to find a safer place to live. Both boys kicked leaves, clearing the path as they walked. Before the hillcrest, Sam turned around. “I wanna take the turtle home.”

“Why? He’s happy in the woods.”

Sam laughed. “How do you know? You never even saw a real one before.”

“I know he’s happy,” Jake said. “We found him here.”

“I found him, not you!”

Jake felt his face flush. He wiped his forehead. “You know what I meant, jerk face!”

Without replying, Sam ran downhill, arms flaying wide. Jake sighed, and shook his head. Hopefully, the turtle had already moved far enough to stay hidden. But if Sam found it again, he’d convince him to leave it in the forest. With Sam still in sight, Jake cupped his hands around his mouth. “Come back! I’m hungry.”

By the time Jake joined him, Sam already cleared the spot where he’d left the turtle. As Sam moved nearby leaf bulges with his boot, Jake silently hoped he’d fail. After freezing in place, Sam bent down. He held the turtle above his head. Grinning, he extended his arms toward Jake. “Here he is!”

Jake shook his head. Bothering the turtle wasn’t his idea of fun. Earlier, he’d heard his mother crying in the bathroom. She’d asked him to go outside with Sam and explore the forest. Just as he wanted the turtle to be safe, Jake didn’t want his mother to worry and cry again. It was time to go back to his uncle’s house. Jake swung his arm, motioning toward the footpath. “C’mon, Sam. Let’s go.”

As the boys hiked toward the road, Sam declared any turtle would be happier living with him and his older brother than alone in the forest. Jake didn’t want to talk about the turtle anymore. Instead, he thought of the afternoon he’d walked beside his father in Lincoln Park. The winds off Lake Michigan were moist and warm, not like the cool, woody forest breezes surrounding him now.

As Sam muttered about feeding candy and pretzels to the turtle, Jake hoped his mother wasn’t too upset he’d been gone all day. Upon reaching the pavement, the boys

walked the white stripe, both arms out, as if on a tightrope. Sam wasn't swinging the turtle, which was fine with Jake.

“Sam?”

“Huh?”

“Let the turtle go.”

Sam shook his head. “He's my new pet. Everybody else has a dog or cat.”

Jake tugged on the back of Sam's sweatshirt. He waited for Sam to face him. “Stop. He's supposed to live here.” The turtle belonged in the forest along with the squirrels, trees, fish, and birds. The animals and trees made up a forest family. Even though it wasn't like a human family, the turtle needed them, too.

Sam held the turtle to his face. He squinted as though he were gazing through a telescope. “Let's watch him come out.”

Jake grabbed for the turtle, but Sam yanked it away. Jake shook his head. Fussing with him was too much like his parents' last days together. Their arguments about money and his father's drinking still haunted his midnight dreams. “C'mon, Sam. Let him go.”

Sam set the turtle beside the double yellow lines, near a gravel-filled gouge in the pavement. “He'll come out now. I bet he hates the hard road.”

Jake couldn't help envying the turtle's perfect shell and the protection it provided. But if he had a shell, it wouldn't be dull shades of orange and brown. It would be red and white—striped like a candy cane—the perfect hideout. No one could tease him about being a boring city boy. No one would ask rude questions about his father. No one would force him to do his algebra homework, or order him to keep his room clean.

When the new school year started, Jake's teachers asked every day how he felt. No wonder his mother decided to spend Thanksgiving with her brother's family. She must be tired of questions, too. There were other children of divorce in his classes, but his father wasn't like those fathers. He'd return by Christmas, because he knew it was Jake's favorite holiday. Under a brightly lit fir tree, decorated with gold and silver ornaments, there'd be a new baseball glove and Atari for him, and something pretty for his mother to wear.

The turtle hadn't moved. Jake tugged at Sam's sleeve. "Forget about the turtle."

Without looking up, Sam nodded.

The boys resumed their walk along the pavement's white line. Suddenly, Sam stopped, and ambled to the shoulder. Jake also heard the approaching vehicle, but he kept walking. The driver honked, and Jake jumped aside. A black Maverick with silver wheels sped past, blowing back Jake's hair. The car disappeared around a curve, wheels squealing. Sam pulled on Jake's arm. "Let's see if the turtle came out. I bet the car scared him."

"No. I'm hungry."

"Come on!" Sam sprinted past him.

Jake groaned, and ran after him. The autumn air chilled his face. On the horizon, the sunset's orange swirls matched the turtle's shell. By now, his mother had to be worried.

Sam was looking down, both hands on his knees, as Jake joined him. At Sam's feet, four legs, and a head poked out of the splintered shell. Red splatter surrounded the turtle. Chest pounding, Jake gasped for air. He turned, wanting to forget the sight of the

crushed shell. Already, he knew he never would. He shoved Sam's shoulder. When Sam regained his balance, Jake shoved him again. Sam stumbled, nearly falling. Jake wiped his nose with his cuff. "I told you to stop. He's dead because of you."

Sam sneered. "Shut up, jerk face!"

Jake said nothing, but his heart pounded as loud as his anger. He squeezed his eyes shut, hoping to delay his tears.

"Besides, there's more turtles in the woods."

After swallowing hard, Jake straightened his stance. "So?" He wiped his face with his sleeve. Right now, he didn't care about other turtles.

When Sam did not reply, Jake turned from the turtle's crushed body. He never wanted to see a turtle again—alive, dead, or even posted on his science class bulletin board. Not caring whether Sam followed him, or he lost his way; Jake sprinted toward his uncle's house. If he stayed ahead of Sam and ran faster than ever, he could blame his wet face on the chill from the cool autumn air.