

Dirt Town

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My siblings and I had already turned my mom's garden into a dinosaur excavation site, so when it changed again, my parents were prepped in a way, but we children weren't in the slightest. It seemed to happen overnight in the mind of a child. One day it wasn't there, and the next day it materialized before us.

I remember my siblings shrieking and squealing with excitement as I waddled out. As the piercing voices reverberated in my eardrums, they beckoned and pushed me out into our yard. Obliviously, I was ready for one of our adventures outside. I was ready to take up our stick swords and swashbuckle on our familiar island of grass surrounded by seas of wisping corn and country roads.

My parents watched through the kitchen window as their children braved the Midwestern yard on the journey there. Waving from the window, they knew that the adventure was set to begin and that we would not return for some time.

I could feel the sockets of my arms pulling as my sister, Carolotta, dragged me past our playset. My older brothers, Gabe and Nate, continued to bicker and chatter as I desperately squealed for answers. Hands gripped under my armpits and swung me forward like a puppet being staged up front. That's when I saw it towering over all of us.

It stood taller than our house, piling what seemed like miles into the air. This, this mound of dirt, was our new world. The earthy scent wafted all around us as it radiated from the deep brown mass. A cool draft danced off the edge of the mound. It offered a natural comfort on a sweltering day. It smelt like a fresh rain even as the ocean blue sky and sun bore down on us.

My parents didn't realize, when they were constructing an addition to the house, that under the ground of that old yard laid something far better than any tile room or porch. They could have dug up a new mansion to live in, and we still would have been more enthralled by the mound of dirt they left in our yard. What was once my mother's garden, then our excavation site, was now our very own mountain!

Beams of summer sun flooded into our eyes as we attempted to gaze upward to see it towering over our small bodies. Awestruck, I watch as my sister and brothers made the tentative first barefooted imprints onto the freshly pulled dirt. I took a breath, letting my lungs remain full with a puffed up toddler chest, and followed after. It felt like we were stepping onto the moon. Our feet sank as dirt wrapped around our heels. The chilled soil was foreign territory. We were stunned, nervous even, and yet boisterous glee followed. We raced to the top, and clumps of dirt flew through the air as our hands and feet dug deep with every step. I reached the summit shortly after the rest, smudging all the dirt they kicked into my face till it looked like I had kissed the dirt rather than climbed it. I turned

to face the yard and we could see everything. We could see all the possibilities from this mountaintop. It was anything we wanted it to be.

This dirt took us to faraway lands and shifted our world into something entirely different. With every different world we visited, the dirt changed, and we changed with it. We were kings. We were outlaws. We were superheroes. We were soldiers. We were builders. We were anything we needed to be, because we could be, and there was unadulterated freedom in that. Worlds and stories were crafted by simply beginning to climb.

In my mind, I never questioned whether the dirt would go anywhere. I had assumed it would eternally sit in the yard and forever be an escape from reality for my siblings and me. I know now that my parents hadn't originally planned on keeping it, but it was after day after day seeing us trail out and climb up that mound together that they changed their minds. They saw their oldest, Carolotta, helping pull up the youngest. They saw their sons Gabe and Nate wide-mouthed in laughter rather than insults. Inside the house things would turn sour fast, but out there it was different.

We spent countless days outside on top of that dirt. We would climb each day to find new stories. Where others saw a chore of digging holes, we found joy. Tunnels, caves, beds, castles, and even thrones that looked oddly closer to toilets were shaped. We all had nearly permanent dirt crescents resting under our fingernails. Over time, the name *Dirt Town* was coined. It was our own sanctuary; no one else had anything quite like this.

It seemed nothing stopped us from finding joy there. On sunny days, our bony hands would white-knuckle around a branch as we charged into battle. Our arms and legs would ferociously pump through the humid air as our army would press up towards the peak of *Dirt Town*. Even on rainy days, we found a way to enjoy it. We had dug our own holes in the top of *Dirt Town*, then we waited. The gray sky swirled into a deep, endless blue. The wind whistled through ears as a heavy drop of water plinked against my forehead.

Downpour ensued. Gabe gleefully hollered, squinting into the sky as each of our personal dirt bathtubs began to fill past our legs. We jumped from hole to hole, splashing each other, trying to catch our fleeting breath that left with every belly laugh. The mud filled each hole till the murky water bounced and rippled with every drop of rain. I remember plunging my head under, baptizing myself into the dirt. Sitting under the water, I could still hear Nate and Gabe, even through the pitter patter of rain. Joyous yelps and cackles pierced through water, dirt, all of it. *Dirt Town* made those moments louder than any bickering.

The wind then began to dry out the mud as it caked around our bodies and tightened up. The dirt cracked and split, leaving scale-like patterns riddled across our bodies. Why my parents let us take mud baths is beyond me. Maybe it was for the laughs they got as we comically shivered under the garden hose, cleaning us off with icy water drawing any breath out of our small lungs.

We had years going up and down that dirt. The worms got to know us on a personal level as we made our way out as frequently as possible. The soil packed down and was much lighter than before. The lumber-like brown was more desert-like, harsher. Time passed; Dirt Town eroded a bit after Carolotta eventually stopped adventuring out with us. Our mountain was a bit smaller now. The dirt was dryer, much tighter-packed into the ground around it. Dirt Town had changed, and so did we. My younger sister Mei had begun to journey out with us, and new games began!

There were days we dug for hours, building up our ever-changing world. Gabe led us on adventures fending off invaders from attacking Dirt Town. We'd stand as mightily as our kiddish builds could muster. "Charge!" Gabe would call out as we'd echo in suit. Stick sword in hand, we would charge down the mound, kicking clouds of dust high into the air behind us. Gabe was invigorated to keep playing, and it felt as if it would never end, but as we grew, he spent less and less time there. He then stopped all together. Nate loved it but didn't have the same zeal Gabe shared to fight for it; he pulled away soon after that.

The dirt was dry and cracked, but our much smaller group would venture out now and again. Our shoes would scrape and scratch against the beat-down ground, it seemed our shovels even had a hard time breaking it. The blade of the shovel found more rocks than dirt as metallic clangs rang out. Dust would kick up in the air and you could see it swept off into the yard aimlessly. Our time became dwindled out there. Slender weeds twisted through the breaks in the ground where footprints used to be; my siblings and I planted our feet elsewhere. Slowly, one by one, they left.

I later stepped outside and strolled towards the backyard. It was a walk I remember taking more time in younger days. There was no mass in the sky. I didn't have to look up at all anymore—it had been packed level with the rest of the yard surrounding it. Walking towards Dirt Town, it was harder to discern where grass gave way to our old escape. The lush grass and thick weeds hugged each other so tightly it was a struggle to see if any dirt was even left.

I remembered the eternal summer days spent with each other. Sweat beads would roll off our smudged faces, taking any worries racing away with them. My siblings and I would create worlds from literal dirt, the same dirt that is packed away now. It sometimes felt like I saw my siblings about as easily as I could still see our old dirt, not very much. Yet even though we didn't get to see each other much, conversation would always find its way to Dirt Town. Mud baths, battles, tunnels—whatever it was, it was joyful. Time with my siblings is more limited than ever. The pestering weeds of life have overgrown for each of us in different ways. But Dirt Town was a place where none of that mattered. Underneath all the weeds, that dirt is still there.