

# The Sand Hill

By Steve Listopad

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Eric was my best friend. We did everything together: dreamed, lied, swashbuckled, conquered universes, cried, laughed, everything. We were soul mates. Just to hear the sound of his voice comforted me. We shared everything and left out nothing. There was one thing, however, that I never did share with him. Yet even then, it still seemed like he was with me.

It was summertime, 1983. First grade was over. We were six years old.

As all best friends do, we had a special place to hang out. It was a sand hill located in an otherwise empty lot behind our houses. This wasn't just a mound of sand and clay to us, though. It was our castle. And we were it's kings. We spent the majority of our summer afternoons on that hill either dreaming of the future or preparing to defend it from the evil machinations of a rival neighborhood gang.

On one occasion, we heard word that a rival neighborhood gang was mounting an offensive. We were outnumbered three to one. When they approached the bottom off the hill, Eric and I were armed with mud balls and our indomitable. Knowing that we had the high ground, they fled. That same glorious day, the heavens opened <sup>with</sup> ~~up and let~~ loose a mighty deluge. Eric and I danced in the rain and mud atop the hill, dismantling our "balls of death". We knew then that there was nothing we couldn't beat.

But then came an enemy we had no chance against: The City of Wahpeton. Outwitted and outnumbered, we resigned to <sup>our</sup> ~~the fate that was laid before us~~. They came with trucks and hauled our castle away. We followed the trucks down the street on our bikes, watching as streams of sand poured out of the tailgates. I had picked up a handful of it, grasped it tightly, and let it drain out the bottom of my fist. Eric kicked a pile at a receding truck, and we watched the sand explode into the atmosphere. <sup>A</sup> matter of moments later, the sand was all back on the ground; scattered to wherever fate had meant. The whole world seemed a sadder place to live in.

Soon the trucks returned. At first we thought they might return the hill to its rightful owners. They

No Time!

Good so far — But this is a book —

A—

didn't. In place of our hill, they began the construction of a building. It was ready to be populated by the first snow. We had watched the process the whole time fascinated to see what kind of wonderful creation could possibly be better than what was previously there.

And then it was wintertime.

One gray day a van pulled up next the building. Men and women in hospital clothing filed out of it and into the gaping maw of the dark structure. We asked our parents who these people were. They called the people "mentally handicapped individuals". Our parents said the people came from Grafton and that they lived in five other such buildings distributed throughout Wahpeton. What our parents couldn't explain was why the building was more important than our sand hill. With the coming of the snow we had yet another reason to hate the place. We didn't have anywhere to sled or play king of the hill.

Through a slip of the parental tongue we soon discovered the correct terminology for addressing our new neighbors: "retards". It was easier to pronounce than "mentally handicapped individuals" and it received more of a reaction from adults when we said it. Therefore the word "retard" in its many forms and uses stuck in our formative minds.

I occasionally liked to stroll by the building by myself when the weather would allow it. I was always curious to see signs of life. Eric would come with me, too, when he felt like it, but I was always nosier than he in matters that had nothing to do with us. My parents said it was a nice place and that I shouldn't be afraid of it. I wasn't afraid of it, but neither did I think it was a nice place. The windows were tiny compared to the solid brown and gray brick walls, and the light that escaped the windows was dull and lifeless. I never saw anyone outside and I wondered how they could breathe in the vault-like building that it was. I found myself wondering what it would be like to go inside. ~~Would there be old, rotting grandmothers rocking back and forth in their chairs. Decrepit, leprous grandfathers pacing back and forth with their brooms; eternally mopping up the filth and the stench.~~ I tried to convince myself that this was not so, and that the people on the inside were not death warmed over. I couldn't discard that image, however. Instead of the weather-beaten haunted house that harbors a sweet and innocent hermit, I was sure that this building was a respectable establishment for the damned.

Spring came and went, and soon summer was back again.

good!

S)

Denise

a bit much

Without our hill we were reduced to playing such childish games like hide-and-go-seek. On one gray, chilly day that was exactly the game we decided to play.

"I'll count to 20 and then start looking for you," Eric directed. He huddled up into a fetal position, covering his head in his arms, and began to count.

Because neither Eric nor I ever went close to the building anymore, I knew of a perfect place to hide. There was a garage not more than 30 feet from the building. Previously there had been a ferocious child-eating Doberman living in it that we were both scared of, but it had been hit by a car and was no longer a threat. The owner was always past out drunk, so I didn't worry about him at all. Eric, however, didn't know of the dog's demise so he would have never suspected that I would hide in there.

"1"

I took off running. I ran and ran and ran. This was our territory so I knew exactly how to get to the garage as quickly as possible.

"5"

I never was an athletic boy, but when it comes to a life and death matter such as hide-and-go-seek I had just enough adrenaline to make me fly.

"10"

That was the last number I heard called. I was too far away by the time he said "11".

I repeated the rest of the numbers to myself, "11...12...13...14...15..." I did this to know just where Eric was and how much time I had left. Knowing Eric, the last few numbers were probably called off in a blur, "1617181920". He was my best friend. I knew enough to compensate for that.

By the count of "20" I was at the garage. The orange paint was crumbling off the siding and the garage looked like it was ready to tip over with the next strong wind. It was perfect.

I went inside and crouched down in a dank corner. The garage door was open when I got there. I left it that way so the drunk wouldn't think someone was lurking on his premises if he ever woke up.

Maybe I faintly heard him scream it, or subconsciously I knew it was time, because all of a sudden "Come out, come out wherever you are!" reverberated through my skull. I tensed my body so I would be ready

for anything.

That is when I noticed him for the first time. It wasn't Eric. It was a retard. The garage door opened to expose the malevolent north wall of the building. And along that north wall was a man, slowly hobbling back and forth and staring at his feet the whole time. He never moved out of touching distance with the wall. The building seemed to be his only connection to this world. It was an unnerving experience. That was one of the first \_\_\_\_\_ I had seen outside since they arrived. And I had never seen one so close. It chilled me.

I huddled in that corner for what seemed like an eternity. The man was still there and it was making me nervous. I eventually conceded that Eric wouldn't find me and I slowly crept out of the door. I watched the man the whole time.

I remember every detail about him. He was tall yet he looked small because of his obvious frailty and the exaggerated hunch in his shoulders. His hair was black and stringy with a monk-like bald spot. His face was withered; his eyes were sunken and empty. He was pathetic.

I stepped out into the alley in front of the garage and began to briskly walk home. There was a hint of desperation in every step I took. The only thing that separated me from the man and the building was a ditch-turned-mote by an all night downpour. The worst part was that the building was between me and my house.

I watched the man suspiciously as I kept walking. There were no windows on this side of the building so no one could see him except God, myself, and the thousands of bricks that made up the wall. He seemed almost as nervous as I did. He knew and I knew that he was definitely beyond his leash, and all of a sudden I felt I had slipped mine.

Then he stopped moving. The whole world stopped with him. Eric was long forgotten. I just stared at the \_\_\_\_\_. He seemed so harmless and innocent... and lonely. Next to the building he was an angel. I had forgotten how nervous he made me feel before.

Finally, he saw me staring. He lifted his hand in a welcoming gesture. Then he opened his toothless mouth and uttered words too weak to reach me. Maybe I heard what he said, I just didn't want to listen.

I said, "Wait, I can't hear you." I walked around the mote and approached him. That's when the feeling really hit me. I had just leaped off the top of the world and what I felt was the ground rushing up to meet me.

shouldn't have been there. I thought "Oh God!" because those were the only words left in me.

He looked down into me with his dark, empty eyes. Dull, lifeless light reflecting off of them. I looked straight at him, but I could never recall what he looked like after the moment was over. I was too scared to take that souvenir.

He spoke his words again. "Can I touch your knee?"

I was so scared. I couldn't think straight.

But something inside me knew what was about to happen, and it screamed with all the fury of a hysterical six year old. *He didn't say knee!* cried the inner voice.

I just wanted to go home. I wanted nothing more than to find the shortest route home.

Desperately, pleadingly the voice cried again. *He didn't say knee!*

Working out the equation to get away, my mind was too busy to listen. The logical answer was obvious.

And again, though exasperated, the voice beseeched me. *He didn't say knee!*

But it was done. I whimpered a weak consent.

Disbelief and denial roused the voice. ***NO! He didn't say knee!*** Then it died forever. *He didn't...*

The man wasted no time. He reached down placing his left hand on my right shoulder. The other hand did not hesitate. He gently unclenched his fist, placed his open palm lovingly on my penis, only my Levi's and underpants separating his skin from mine, and clenched again.

I ripped away from him. My mind ripped away from my body. It seemed like my thoughts were at home before I was. I was unsure of what to do. I had finally seen, after all the talk about monsters under my bed and devils under the ground, a real, tangible evil. It was the building that touched me more than the man. He was empty. He was nothing. The grip was cold, like a concrete vice. His words were the door. His eyes were the windows.

Eric saw me bawling as I ran home. He had asked me what was wrong, but I didn't stop to answer him. I couldn't. I had to get home. I burst in our front door and wept by my mother's feet. I didn't want to move. I was empty. There was nothing left in me of any value. I couldn't foresee a future with out the pain in my loins and

Excellent!  
Power/boy

the scars in my mind. As far as I could see my life was over.

After I had cried myself dry and slept for many days, a whole new story began with adult affairs. A few matters were in need of my attention. "Would you like to see a counselor?" my parents asked. I said no. "Would you like to press charges?" my parents asked. I said no. I wanted the building destroyed and our sand hill back. They didn't ask me if I wanted that.

My parents said the management of the building was found negligible for letting a known child sex-offender wander around by himself. My parents said that they moved the man to another building. I found out on my own adventures a few years later that they moved him less than four blocks away.

I never told Eric exactly what happened to me that day. I was too young and easily embarrassed to talk about sexuality with a friend. I didn't think he would understand. I didn't understand. All that we both understood was carted off in trucks. In its place sat a dark and evil thing. He knew it. I knew it better.

A few weeks later, Eric and I began construction of a fort in my backyard. This was to be the beginning of a new life, I had hoped. We used a standing ping-pong table as the base and the north wall of a tin shed in my backyard as its south wall. We found scraps of wood and nails we didn't lose from the famous Mud Ball War to put it together. It took us exactly one month to build it. When it was done, the fort was three stories tall, with a hinged window in the ceiling for a sun roof/sniper tower, and equipped with plumbing and electricity.

We were kings once before. We were kings once again. Eric and I vowed we would defend our fortress to the death and we did. Rival gangs of neighborhood kids came and went. Others came and went. The years came and went. But Eric and I never broke our promise. The fortress stood. The sand hill was long forgotten.

Every once in a while I would hear something in Eric's voice that suggested he knew what happened that day. News such as that could get leaked out eventually, but I had my suspicions he had known that very day. Best friends do share everything.

*This is quite a  
potent story -  
A potential Go!  
for Headquarters -  
I'd still edit it  
down closer to the Bone  
Bones  
& pinned  
A2*

? ?