

The Good Sport

So long, daring young man

I lost something three days ago. It used to belong to me, but I never owned it. It's something that I cherished, equally taking for granted.

Gone is my youth.

Honestly, I'm not one to go wandering aimlessly down memory's footpath. I am usually careful not to tread on sullen thoughts. On those backroads, I follow the "Turn Around, Don't Drown" credo.

But memories are tricky. Sometimes what triggers a good memory is something really bad.

I lost a childhood friend this week. Jack had health issues. Nevertheless, his death was abrupt, unexpected, and brutal.

Jack has been my friend and neighbor for fifty-seven years. We both returned to our childhood homes to care for ailing Mothers. We fell out of touch for a while when adulthood stepped between us, but you'd be right in saying we were life-long friends. In fact, Jack owns a place in my life that even closer friends can't claim.

He was my very *first* friend.

I can actually take you to the spot in my backyard where we first met. I still recall the amazement I had when Jack told me that he was also three years old. Astonishing! When you are three years old, no one is the same age you are.

I guess I shouldn't be surprised that, when I learned of Jack's passing, I was flooded by memories. What did surprise me, however, was that nearly all the memories were of our early childhood. After all, we spent our entire primary school and high school years together. We waved at each other in passing nearly every day. Yet, all I can think about is the kids' stuff.

Kids' stuff was different back then! Sometimes dangerous. No one was more courageous, more daring than Jack. He led, and I followed.

We rode bikes on streets everywhere. We played muddy football in the cornfield runoff. We gigged frogs. Jack hunted and we both fished. Jack ran muskrat traps all winter long in the two hours before each school day.

We carried pocket knives.

We climbed monkey bars, and big trees — all the way to the top. We played Jarts™, which was akin to throwing kitchen knives at each other for points.

Yes, we played organized sports, too — mainly in the summer, mainly minor league baseball. He was the pitcher, and I was his catcher. Not just "the" catcher, but "his" catcher, an honor I hold even higher now.

Jack hated to be left out, and he couldn't stand losing.

Once when much older kids wouldn't let us join them drag racing gravity racers down the hill in front of our homes, Jack fumed. "We'll show them! We're building our own! And it's going to fly!"

With a mighty push from me, our 2 x 4 and lawn mower-wheeled rocket ship shot down the hill, whizzing past all the others. I can still see the sandy-haired pilot holding tightly to steering rope, fighting inertia to keep both feet off the pavement and his bottom in the careening seat.

"I knew it! I knew it would fly!" he howled. Fly it did.

And this week, so again did Jack.

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