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Excavations

Immediately after all this happened to me, I wanted to tell anyone, someone, everyone I knew or even didn't know, what had happened. Bad, bad idea, as I quickly learned. For as I began telling my tale, the listener thought weirdo, geek, or git. I mean, what happened to me turns out to have been one of those stories you read on the front of those tabloids—you know, the ones at the grocery checkout lane that you read while your mother is packing the groceries, using her debit card, and telling you for the four-millionth time that she will never bring you shopping with her again.

Now don't get me wrong. I am sort of a geek. I get good grades in school, not great, but good. I speak English and German (we once lived there), and I play a lot of computer games, like Minecraft. I like Minecraft. You can build things while axing to death Creepers and Zombies. I also like Halo and Guild Wars 2, when my friends or my Dad are playing. But, back to the geek part. I hang out with my Mom a lot, and well, she's different from most moms. Besides, my Dad's gone most of the time. I really can't explain him to you, if I did I think I'd have to kill you, or at least someone would.

Also, I talk. I talk to myself, to the computer, the dog, my hamster, to anyone around . . . you get the idea. It started when I was three. I just started talking and didn't shut up. Mom and Dad, well at first they listened to me, then they just tuned me out. I think they pretended that I was talking to God as he was obviously the only one willing to listen after a few years of incessant one-sided conversations. Anyway, I have learned to be quiet when necessary—usually around strangers, and, well, girls.

Back to what happened, it definitely wasn't the type of thing one would expect a twelve-year-old boy to be telling. These days I only discuss my adventure with Mom, she believes me, and my computer (yes, I talk to the computer—told you that already). You see, I'm writing it all down in

Word Perfect (Mom hates Word), so in the future when someone else believes me, all the details will be there in living color, actually in blue on my computer screen, for all to read. I mean, it may be years before anyone except Mom, and maybe Dad, believes me. Now for my story. Perhaps I shouldn't call it a story, but an autobiographical sketch—not an autobiography—I'm only 12.

It all happened last summer. First you have to know, my Mom is an archaeologist. That's not *normal* for Moms. I mean all of my friends' moms are teachers, doctors, lawyers, work at the mall, or just stay at home. Not my mom. She studies ancient people by digging up the stuff they left behind in the dirt. Yes, yes, I know, *soil*, as she would say (she's a real stickler for using the correct name for things).

First, Mom got a degree in history and taught for a while. Then off she went, back to school, got a second, and then a third degree, and started living her *dream*. Right now she works at a small archaeological site called Cresaptown. It is on the edge of the Potomac River in Maryland, just across the river is West Virginia. Not that you need to know that. When the archaeologists finish their excavations, it will become a county ballpark. Imagine playing baseball on top of an ancient burial ground.

Don't you think that's weird? I do.

I personally found it hard to imagine people had lived on that land for thousands of years. We're talking prehistoric man! Indians! All I could see there was a bunch of junk, artifacts, things they left behind. It was just too much to imagine people walking around in deerskin clothes, hunting big game, raising families, and dying right there. I guess Mom's imagination is better than mine.

So, all of that is how I came to be digging a large hole in the middle of an Archaic Indian site in late August instead of swimming, fishing, riding my bike, getting in a few hours of *Minecraft* or *Halo*, or just plain goofing off. Personally, but don't tell anyone, Mom's dream isn't too bad. I mean we really do find lots of neat stuff. Oh, yeah, better tell you, archaeologists recognize four periods of prehistoric (that means before writing) man. Mom says the four periods are called Paleoindian, Archaic, Woodland, and Mississippian. They can actually recognize how long ago the people lived on a site simply by looking at a few artifacts. Weird.

My personal archaeologist, better known as Mom, works at the dig or "excavations" all summer and does research and analyzes her finds during the rest of the year. Now on this particular summer day, she was calling me her "assistant." Several screens,

wooden boxes with heavy screen mesh bottoms, hung from tripods, you know, three-legged stands. Plus, Mom always has an abundance of shovels (square and round), root cutters, string, and other equipment for volunteers. Eleven ten-year-olds were visiting the site, to “learn the basics of archaeology.” It was part of some kind of history camp. My job was to make sure they learned how to screen the soil and looked carefully for any artifacts.

We had been at it ALL morning. I mean those kids couldn’t tell the difference between a piece of plastic lid someone had thrown from a car window and a piece of bone. All I heard all morning was, “Greg, what’s this?” and “Greg, should we keep this?” and “Greg, he shook dirt all over my new tennis shoes!” MAN! No matter how many times we told them to wear old clothes, the girls still showed up looking like an ad out of *Seventeen*. Weird!

I was happy to see lunch time come, thinking I could stretch out beneath a tree with my sandwich and a Cherry Coke and hope all of the girls at the pool across the street had on small bikinis. I mean, I do notice girls, I just don’t talk around them.

But it wasn’t happening.

Right before lunch, Mom uncovered a *feature*. I guess I’d better explain that the top layer

of soil is called the *plow zone*. That is the layer most people would call the topsoil. In most of the eastern United States, and especially in Maryland where Mom was working, the land has been farmed at some time. You see when the farmers plowed the land that top level, the plow zone, got all mixed up. That mixing caused the artifacts, the things the Indians left behind, like bones from food, projectile points (arrowheads to you novices), the pieces of stone from which they were made, and fragments of pottery—if they had pottery—to be move about. So we shoveled this layer off into the screens and sifted through it carefully for the artifacts.

Underneath this level is the subsoil. Archaeologists use trowels, a hand-held triangular steel blade with a wooden handle, to carefully scrape the top of the subsoil clean of all the plow zone soil. Mom can do this so neatly that the unit walls are perfectly straight, the corners are ninety degree angles, and the floor is even and smooth. She doesn't do this just to be neat, since occasionally in the subsoil, an archaeologist will find what is called a *feature*. That's what she's looking for—features.

Features are places where the prehistoric people carried out different tasks, like cooking, tool and pottery making, butchering animals, and even burying their dead. These tasks often leave a dark stain in the soil because of rotting organic

material, or if it was a hearth, it may be red from burning or black from the ash. A feature can tell an archaeologist a lot about how the people of the area lived. As for me, it just meant that we, Mom and I, would WORK through lunch. I mean, no way was she going to let those ten-year-old jerks mess up her research.

Now understand, Mom has several trowels. She is particularly fond of the first one she ever bought. Over the years, she has sharpened it so many times that it is much smaller than when it was new. It's like a baby trowel, actually it is older, but you get my meaning. Anyway, she uses a fairly new one for most of her work, but always digs out her favorite for excavating features. She says it works better because it is smaller.

On this day, she had decided I should excavate the feature, claiming it would be “good experience” for me. Experience for what? Who needs that skill in their adult life? It really didn't look half as exciting as watching the girls at the pool, but I couldn't—WOULD NOT—explain that to Mom.

So I stripped off my old tee (maybe the girls would notice my buff—okay, skinny—body) and tennis shoes, so that the tread wouldn't leave a design in her nice clean unit floor, and got busy. The first bit was extremely boring, just a lot of small, I mean tiny,

old bones that Mom said were probably rabbit. Then all of the excitement started. Well, it was exciting to me. Everyone else was oblivious.

As I carefully troweled away the dirt from the bones in order to expose them for a photograph (don't I sound professional), I uncovered a projectile point.

Now for all you readers that know nothing about archaeology, a projectile point is what most people call an arrowhead. But since bows and arrows were not all that widely used and spears were certainly more common back in prehistoric times, all archaeologists insist these stone tools be called *projectile points*. First off, this projectile point was just lying there—smack dab in the middle of those bones—unbroken and glittering in the sun. It was made of quartz, a stone which has lots of crystals to catch the sunlight and not found naturally in this area. Even though we were working under a canopy, the sun really made this one glitter. I should let you know, I had been talking all this time, just to myself, no big deal, no one listens.

“Hey! Come look at this point right in the middle of these bones.”

Mom jumped.

“Greg, please don’t address me by yelling ‘Hey!’ Especially when I am only a foot away,” she corrected me instantly.

I keep forgetting that she is my mother not my best buddy, which is how she seems when we work together like this.

“Ahhhh, Mom, not now! Just crawl over here and take a look. I mean this is really neat.”

I remember we discussed what a super fantastic photo it would make and then she told me to carefully lift the point out of the bones and wipe it clean so it would show up better in the shot. (She used the words “photograph more clearly.”) Then I had to carefully place it back where I found it. I was being really careful. Those bones were old and crumbly, and I knew she would be upset if they were disturbed before she got her photo. I, on the other hand, had already captured the image with my phone when she wasn’t looking. I could send it off later to Dad—where ever he was.

Dad and I keep in touch by phone. We are always sending photos of cool stuff back and forth. Some of these we do not share with Mom. But more on Dad later.

Anyway, I carefully fitted the end of her baby trowel under the edge of the point and gently lifted it from among the bones. As I stood up, trying not to drop the point or step on anything, ALL HELL BROKE LOOSE! Yes, I know I said Hell. If you keep reading you'll understand why.

Anyway, a huge brown rabbit flew through the air straight into Mom's neat excavation unit and landed in the plastic zip lock bag holding the artifacts. Mom screeched (she was startled not scared), and I jumped so high I hit the overhead canopy. It quickly started falling in around my head. My arm flew up, the projectile point and mom's trowel shot through the air and landed right on top of that poor frightened rabbit at the exact instant he had recovered his head from the artifact bag.

Now all of this takes much longer to tell than it took to happen, but the next few seconds seemed to take years. As I reached for the trowel and the point, the rabbit jumped sky high and all three landed on my hand.

Then my world changed.

Suddenly, I stood in the middle of a dappled green forest filled with huge oak, chestnut, and hickory trees on the edge of the river, the Potomac, I think. I held a scared, shaking rabbit, a trowel,

and a projectile point. Only now the point was attached to a wooden shaft and deeply embedded in the bleeding rabbit—which was dying. The canopy, screens, tripods, the excavations, and even Mom had disappeared.

I was sure it was all a dream, like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz (I kept thinking please don't let there be flying monkeys, I hate those monkeys!). That was it, I had hit my head and was unconscious, please just let me be unconscious. Unconscious, yeah, that's it, unconscious. Better than this being real.

Nope. Not unconscious. Not dreaming. Still awake.

As I stared, the rabbit stopped shaking and lay bleeding in my hand while only five feet away stood a small, darkly tanned boy dressed in these bizarre leather britches and holding another spear exactly like the one I was holding, except it didn't have a bloody rabbit attached. He kept his spear pointed right at me. Right at my heart. Nope, not a dream. *Definitely not a dream.*

At first, I just stood there, shaking. I was befuddled for sure. I mean, who does this happen to? Not me. At least it had never happened before. I soon figured out he wanted his rabbit. I sure as

heck didn't want it. By the way, I wasn't talking—dumbstruck for the first time in my life.

Slowly, I pulled the spear point from the rabbit, a really gross, I mean really, really gross experience, and laid the rabbit on the ground. I held onto the trowel and the spear, for some unknown reason, and said, "Take it, it's yours," while pointing to the rabbit, which was now quite dead. The boy just stood there staring and pointing that huge spear at me. Never even blinked.

I thought about running. I am pretty good at running, but not much else as far as athletics. I'm tall for my age, a blue-eyed blonde, just like good ol' Dad. But something of a geek, I think I told you that already. I mean, what chance did I have against a spear throwing Indian! Yes, I knew he was an Indian, didn't know what period, but I should have from the type of projectile point. But no time to think about such details now.

It looked longer and sharper each time I looked at it, the spear that is. It was impossible not to look at it. I tried. But every time I decided to concentrate on his face instead of that spear point, my mind shouted "WHY IS HE POINTING THAT THING AT ME?" I wanted to cry "MOM." But if I was unconscious, and those girls in tiny bikinis had come over from the pool to see what

all the excitement was about, I didn't want to sound like some scared babbling crybaby. I was still hoping for unconscious. Much less scary than what was happening.

For what seemed like ages, we both stood there facing each other. He holding a spear pointed at me, and me holding a spear covered in blood and Mom's trowel, with a dead rabbit on the forest floor at my feet. We must have been quite a sight, since by now both of us were shaking. Finally, I decided to try offering him the rabbit again. After all, I was quite sure he had killed it. Besides, he looked hungry and more than a little threatening with that gigantic spear in his hand.

So, I carefully lifted the rabbit from the ground while keeping my eyes directly on his. My karate sensei always told us to keep your eyes on your opponent. The rabbit was still warm, but had stopped bleeding. I held it out in his direction and whispered, "Here it's yours."

It seemed strange that such tiny words could have overcome his fear so quickly. But he smiled, laid his spear on the ground, and took the rabbit, being very careful not to touch my hand. Then he grasped the small dark stone hung around his neck and spoke several words in a language I had never heard. Though the sounds were foreign, I instantly

understood their meaning. How was that possible? I mean, I understood an ancient language! This was some freaky weird dream. Not real. Really, not real. Right? Couldn't be real, could it?

He said, "God of the Stone, thank you for this rabbit."

In my mind, I was thinking *now go away so I can wake up and get some sympathy from those girls*. But reality seemed to be right there in that forest with the dead rabbit and the quite real Indian.

"God of the Stone, you may keep my spear in exchange for the rabbit you have provided. Do you wish to share in my meal?"

I hesitantly answered in his language, searching my memory for the right words (again, really, really far out). "Are you speaking to me?" I don't know why I was speaking so properly, I think it was fear. Maybe I would just give up talking altogether—probably not.

"Yes, God of the Stone, since your rabbit is to be my meal and you have appeared before me, I offer you the best parts. After all, only the tales of my grandmother speak of you appearing to us to share in the bounty of the hunt. Her tales are of a time out of mind."

All of this he said while standing very still, with his hand clasped around the dark stone hanging against his chest. But he had lowered the spear.

“Yes, I’ll share the rabbit with you, ah, but only if you cook it first.”

“Grandmother says the God of the Stone likes a good joke, but I must use two hands to skin and cook the rabbit. Will you remain if I release my hold on your spirit or will you go, taking the rabbit with you?”

Now I wasn’t sure exactly what he was talking about. I mean, was he holding my spirit in this dream? If, I said yes, would he release it so I could wake up? Why did he call me God of the Stone? How could I understand him? A million questions ran helter-skelter through my mind. At least they didn’t spill out of my mouth. Besides, I didn’t even know if I liked rabbit. Never had it before.

Out of desperation and hunger, (I hadn’t finished my sandwich) I whispered, “Let’s eat.”