

The Cave

Egg Money. That's what they called him. Egg Money Gray. The story was, Egg Money's mama sent him to the store to sell eggs she'd gathered from the laying hens, but instead of bringing the money home like she told him to, he bought a sack full of rock candy. Egg Money was a man the boy's father grew up with at the end of the Great Depression, and the name stuck with him throughout his whole life. The boy wondered what it would be like to mess up like that and never have anybody forget about it. He wondered what it would be like to be a grown man and have everybody call you "Egg Money."

The boy always looked forward to getting to Egg Money's house, because from there things got a whole lot easier. He didn't have to be riding off into the ditch all the time, and he didn't have to always be looking over his shoulder. Egg Money's place was still on the main highway, but it was there the boy and his companions made a right turn onto the gravel road that bore off to the north. The turn represented a demarcation of sorts and brought with it a sense of relief and excitement ---relief that he didn't constantly have to worry about cars running up behind him, and sweet anticipation as to what an unsupervised day might hold.

The gravel lane ran straight along the western boundary of Egg Money's farm and was bordered on either side by thick entanglements of horseweed, dog fennel, and briar bushes. From there it snaked and forked across hills and hollows until it wound its way through Colored Town, which really wasn't a town at all, just a row of tidy two-room wooden shacks, and beyond that, to the fairgrounds which lay on the north edge of town. To bicycle the whole stretch was a major endeavor; the round trip took the better part of a day. The boys disliked riding through the loose knee-skinning gravel which tended to heap perilously around the outside perimeter of the curves, but they enjoyed the freedom granted them during their school summer vacation and kept good on promises to their mothers to stay off the main highway and out of danger of cars.

Bicycling to town involved a prescribed ritual. The first stop after exiting the gravel back road was to swing into the newly constructed shopping center just south of the fairgrounds. The shopping center, built by an out-of-state developer, was situated on a treeless expanse of asphalt a short distance from the center of town. Its removed location drew questioning comments from the townsfolk, who were accustomed to doing their shopping on Main Street. But to the boy, this was an exiguous concern. That

was because the shopping center housed the 'Big K' department store, a titillating experience for a lad used to only browsing Ben Franklin's Five & Dime, an ancient enterprise whose four dusty rows of shopworn inventory was handled, the boy suspected, by his own grandfather, and quite likely by Ben Franklin himself. Big K thrilled the imagination, with its fluorescent lights, glistening floors, and smell of new vinyl, plus aisle upon aisle of the most alluring and exotic merchandise a kid could ever hope to see.

The next stop on the itinerary was Main Street. This included a cursory visit to the Cozy Theater to inspect the marquee. There was seldom anything playing for which the boys had permission or money enough to see, but they liked looking at the playbill taped inside the ticket booth window. It usually depicted a scantily clad heroine with cow eyes, bouffant hair, puckered lips, and voluptuous bosom straining to burst free from its flimsy restraints.

From there they navigated quickly past the pool hall, crossing over to take the sidewalk on the opposite side of the street. The pool hall was an establishment of dubious reputation which the boy's mother had trained him and his brother to dutifully avoid. The boy had never seen the inside of it, but he could visualize its interior vividly, his mental image shaped by loving motherly care: its atmosphere dank and dark, smelling strongly of urine, lit by the glow of a single bare light bulb suspended by a wire stapled to a sagging mold-covered ceiling, cigar smoke undulating slowly in thick noxious layers above a pair of shabby puke-stained pool tables, puddles of odoriferous brown effluent pooling putridly around the bases of overflowing spittoons, shadowy figures leaning against the walls sneaking sips from brown paper bags pulled discretely from the bibs of manure-streaked overalls, the occasional crack of balls and vulgar explicative slurred through grizzled tobacco-stained lips, and little boys' dismembered penises strewn about the filthy vermin-infested floor.

Once past the pool hall they made their way through the alley to Joe's Dogs & Suds. Joe's was just off Main Street behind the courthouse, sandwiched between the jail and bail bondsman's office. Here, perched on stools at the chrome-rimmed counter, they enjoyed an ice-cold root beer served in a frosted mug. If it happened to be close to lunchtime, they might order one of Joe's slightly-rancid-tasting hot dogs which turned perpetually on the rollers of his grease-crusting wiener roasting machine. Then, if any of them happened to have an extra quarter, they played a game of pinball. Of the pair of pinball machines that Joe curated the boys had learned to steer clear of the one nearest

the door which only cost a dime. That one had a habit of stealing coins without releasing balls, or else it shot balls out so fast and straight that they whizzed between the flippers making it impossible to score. The machine in the rear of the shop that cost a quarter was more accommodating. On it, even the weakest player could accumulate enough points to win an extra ball. The more advanced could easily *trap* or *juggle* or execute the *dead flipper pass*, keeping balls in play for hours, winning multiple replays and earning record scores.

After pinballing it was back to Main Street for a visit to the Western Auto hardware store. Western Auto lacked the glitz and glamour of Big K, but the boys liked the smell of the place and the good-natured razzing they received from the proprietor, old Mr. Bagley. The store induced anxiety attacks among those who tended to be claustrophobic. Its small interior was overflowing with an esoteric assortment of farm-town paraphernalia, crowded to the point that, according to Mr. Bagley, you couldn't cuss a cat without getting fur in your mouth. Upon entering one was confronted not only by the mass of merchandise, but by a profusion of olfactory impressions that startled the senses, the combination of which was not unpleasing. Most notable was the smell of new rubber. This rose prominently from a rack of bicycle tires packed with every width and diameter the boy could imagine. The shelf beneath it held boxes of corresponding inner tubes, whose powder-dusted contents emitted the same distinctive smell. This blended harmoniously with the pungent aroma of new leather, which wafted generously from a stack of raw-hide work gloves, three pegs-full of dog leashes, a lone welder's apron, and row of lace-up work boots lined in size-ascending order on a shelf overhead. Interspersed among these was the muted odor of gun oil, whose acrid sharpness became pronounced when one stood near the rack of shiny single-shot shotguns and small-caliber rifles standing like soldiers at attention in the center of the store. Rounding out the medley was the spicy fragrance of red cleaning oil which Mr. Bagley applied liberally to the creaky floor boards, the smoky scent of last winter's ashes sitting un-shoveled in the woodstove, and the nutty aroma of Mr. Bagley's Eight O' Clock Coffee that brewed at regular intervals in a rusty percolator on a table near the back wall. After chatting awhile with Mr. Bagley, the boys would browse the various bins of pipe fittings, coal buckets, and varmint traps, and then, after determining that exactly nothing had changed since their last visit, it would be time to go home.

The ride home was not nearly as enjoyable as the ride into town. By that time everyone's legs would be tired, the afternoon sun would be glaring hot overhead, the winding gravel road would have lengthened to twice its morning distance, the

previously dew-dampened dust would kick up in choking tan-colored clouds, and the dogs that ignored them earlier would unexpectedly rise and give chase. Arriving home, sweaty, mud-streaked and exhausted, each would swear privately he would never do it again. Until next time...

Today the boys were not going to town, however. Today they were going on an ADVENTURE.

* * *

Spelunking. He couldn't remember where he first encountered the word. To explore underground; to crawl around in caves. The very thought of it sent shivers of excitement running up and down his spine. The boy imagined what it would be like to be an underground explorer, to wear one of those headlamps like coal miners wear. He had seen a miner's headlamp once. His uncle brought it while visiting from Pennsylvania. The boy was captivated by the operation of the device. His uncle placed a small amount of gravelly looking granules into the bottom of the lamp. He then filled the upper chamber with water. Next, he adjusted a knob that allowed the water to drip into the chamber below. Then, with the strike of a match, the lamp sprang to life, shrieking and hissing and emitting a brilliant blue flame. To the boy this was the most incredible thing he had ever seen: to mix water and rocks and produce fire. To him it was purely mystifying. To him it seemed like magic.

* * *

The cave was past Egg Money's house. It was somewhere about half a mile up the gravel road, behind the white house where the road makes a turn to the left, way back in the hollow. Lonnie supposedly had seen it. Lonnie had heard about it from Roger Giles. Roger was a boy older than the rest of them, a kid they didn't associate with much, but someone whom they secretly yet reluctantly admired. That was because Roger knew how to ride wheelies a hundred feet without falling over, and his mama didn't make him go to school except when he 'damn well felt like it,' and he could drink a whole Dr. Pepper in a single gulp without taking a breath. Roger also liked to throw rocks at cars. The adults called him the neighborhood hellion, saying he had a mean streak wider than Bertha's backside, but the boy wasn't sure about that. Roger didn't have a daddy, and the boy thought maybe that's why he acted the way he did. But for whatever the reason, Roger didn't seem to care what people thought about him. Roger

was bigger and older than the rest of the boys, and all Roger seemed to care about was having good time.

The four boys laid their bikes in the tangle of dusty weeds beside the gravel lane a little way past Egg Money's house. Ahead stood the white house where the road goes off to the left. Lonnie said the cave was directly behind the house, about half way over the hill, but they must be careful not to let the old woman in the house see them, because she was crazy, and they mustn't let her dogs see them either, because the dogs were mean and would chase you. Lonnie had relayed this reconnaissance the previous day as the group made their daily summer rendezvous at the kerosene pump in front of Minor's Country Store. The boy suspected the information originated from Roger Giles and wondered how much of it could be trusted. The boy knew nothing about who lived in the house, nor anything about them being crazy. On the other hand, he did know about the dogs that inhabited the property, and they were definitely mean, and they were fast as well. The entire pack had lain in sneaky ambush every time the boys had ridden by the house on their way home from town. The mangy one-eyed bulldog had once nearly wrestled his pants off when it latched onto his rolled-up cuff. He agreed it would be wise that they exercise caution.

The plan was to crawl through the weeds over the hill, then hike around the hillside out of sight of the house. Lonnie said that if they stayed about halfway down the hill and headed due east they would run smack into the cave. The mouth of the cave was hard to see because it wasn't very big, not much more than a crack in the ground, but they would know where to find it because it was in the middle of a little stand of cedars below an outcropping of rocks. After making sure nobody could see their bicycles from the road, the boys crawled over the hill through the weeds, single file on their bellies, like army recruits in boot camp. First went Lonnie, then the boy's cousin Terry, then the boy himself. Bringing up the rear was his younger brother, Michael. The boy felt ridiculous crawling through the weeds like that in broad daylight, with not a living soul around, dragging burlap sacks behind them, scooting nose-to-heel on their bellies with the dog fennel fronds swishing back and forth and dandelion seeds billowing overhead. He could imagine what this must have looked like if someone had been watching them. He could imagine what it looked like from God's perspective, gazing down on them from heaven.

Once over the hill, Lonnie rose to a crouching position and motioned for the rest of the troop to follow. He scampered off toward what appeared in the distance to be a dark

clump of evergreens. The others arrived a few minutes later at the little stand of cedars, out of breath, their hair and clothes matted with sticky green burs.

"This is it!" Lonnie whispered excitedly, pointing to a narrow crevice in the rocks. "I told you we would find it! Gentlemen, I present to you, The Cave!"

After picking burs for a while they untied their sacks and began checking their equipment, each inspecting the items he had been personally assigned to bring. Flashlights, check, rope, check, compass, check, candles, check, matches, check, pocket knives, check, canteen, check, emergency candy ration, check. Everything seemed in order ---everything except Terry's flashlight.

"It won't stay on," Terry complained. "The bulb keeps going out."

Terry liked to have everything just so, to achieve maximum effect. Lacking a miner's headlamp, Terry had taken apart his daddy's frog-gigging lantern and duct-taped the bulb and reflector to his forehead with a wire running under his shirt to the lantern's 6-volt battery which he tied with a string to the back of his belt. The rig's appearance was appealing but its operation left something to be desired.

"Jiggle the wires," said Lonnie. "You don't have a good connection." Terry jiggled, but to no avail.

"We're wasting time," said the boy. "Wouldn't it have been easier just to carry the flashlight without taking it apart?"

"Hush up, Phillip," Terry replied. "It might have been easier, but it wouldn't look nearly as cool." Lonnie, being more practical than theatrical, produced a pair of pliers and soon had the wires tightly secured.

At last all was ready. The anticipation was almost too much to bear. The boy could only imagine what they were going to find once they entered the cave. There might be a vein of gold, or gem stones, or maybe stolen treasure. His grandfather had found Indian bones inside a cave when he was a boy. The story was, his granddaddy was poking around under some ledges along the bluffs down on Robinson Creek, over by what they call the Sheep Shelter. The boy didn't know why they called it the Sheep Shelter, because he had never seen any sheep around there, but that's what they did, and underneath one of those ledges his granddaddy found a hole that ran back into the hillside. So, his granddaddy decided he would crawl in. When he got inside he found a human skeleton. It was lying in the dirt, curled up like a baby sleeping, wrapped in an animal skin. His granddaddy decided he would take the bones home with him, so he put them in a gunny sack and took them home and hid them under his bed. Not long

after that, his granddaddy was reading a book about this band of explorers who had crawled inside some pyramids in Egypt and found dried-up bones that belonged to Egyptian kings and rulers and the like, and the explorers hauled the bones out and put them in museums and carnival shows, and then, strange things started happening to the explorers, things like some of them got sick for no reason and died, and some got killed in freak accidents, and others disappeared mysteriously without even a trace, and before you knew it, every last one of them was gone. People said that those bad things were happening because the pyramids were tombs and the explorers were grave robbers, and the Egyptian kings didn't like having their tombs broken into, and the explorers dropping dead and disappearing like that was how the dead Egyptian kings got even. They called it the Mummy's Curse. Well, his granddaddy started thinking about those Indian bones. He started thinking how they might have belonged to some kind of Indian chief or something, and how that cave under the ledge at the Sheep Shelter might really be an Indian tomb, and, even though he hadn't put the bones in a museum or carnival or anything, it was like he was a grave robber, and what if that dead Indian might try to get even for having his bones robbed? What if there was an Indian's Curse? Well, his granddaddy decided the best thing to do would be to get rid of those bones as fast as he could. He decided to take them and put them back where they came from. So, that very day, he sacked those bones up and carried them back to the Sheep Shelter. He crawled under that ledge and stuffed them back in the hole where he found them, laying them out best he could, curled up like a baby sleeping. He then threw that piece of animal hide over them and high-tailed it out of there, lickety-split, and never went back again. And it must have worked. Because, as his granddaddy told it, nothing strange or bad ever happened after that, at least nothing he figured was caused by any dead Indian.

Lonnie was the first to crawl in, claiming the right as having been the first to hear about cave and the first one to see it. That was okay with the boy, because after remembering the story about his granddaddy and that dead Indian, he didn't want to go in first anyway. Next went Terry, because Terry liked to be first in everything, and would have been first this time had Lonnie not called dibs. Then went the boy, then went Michael. Squeezing in was a little harder than the boy anticipated. Lonnie and Terry had no trouble at all because they were both skinny as rails, but he and Michael were of larger frame, and, possessing a healthy appetite for mashed potatoes, a good deal thicker through the middle. After much squirming and wiggling they were able finally to inch their way in.

Once inside the boys discovered that the cave was not what they expected. There were no veins of gold, no gem stones, and not a speck of stolen treasure. All they found was a damp, low-ceilinged room, and leading off from it, a dark narrow tunnel that appeared to make a turn some thirty feet ahead.

"Okay," said Lonnie. "Everybody in? Ain't nothin' to do but see where this thing goes."

"I don't know," said Michael. "It might not be safe. Do you think we ought to try it?"

"Sure," said Lonnie. "What could go wrong? We brought plenty of safety gear."

The boys proceeded to drag themselves on their bellies into the tunnel. It was too low to get up on their hands and knees, and there wasn't room to turn around, so they snaked along in the order that they came in, first Lonnie, then Terry with his headlight that was flickering out again, then the boy, then Michael reluctantly bringing up the rear. Michael would probably not have gone any further because at this point he was starting to be afraid, but Lonnie had tied a rope around everyone's waist, so nobody would get lost, and the knot was too tight for Michael to get untied. After several minutes of scraping along, Lonnie reached the place where the tunnel made the turn.

"Look here y'all!" he yelled. "It runs off into a bigger room!"

"Good," the boy thought, straining to see past the soles of Terry's tennis shoes. "At least we'll be able to turn around." He was beginning to worry about having to scoot out of there backwards, because scooting in headfirst was difficult enough, and with Michael being liable to freeze up behind them, there was no telling how things might go.

Sure enough, the tunnel opened into a room that was about ten feet across and tall enough for them to stand up. The boys scooted through the opening and staggered to their feet, flashlights darting, their eyes scanning the walls. The walls were rough and jagged, and pocked at regular intervals with symmetrical shelf-like indentations.

"Light a couple of candles," said Lonnie, "And stick 'em in those potholes."

"I don't think I like it in here," said Michael, lingering near the tunnel opening.

"What's this?" said Terry, aiming his headlight at the floor. The bottom of the cave was covered with mud and flat, sharp-edged rocks. At Terry's feet lay little piles of what looked like chicken manure.

"Guano," said Lonnie.

"What?"

"Guano."

"What's that?"

"Bat shit, dipshit. Ain't you ever heard of guano before? Look up over your head."

Over Terry's head hung a small bat, upside down, clinging to the ceiling with its tiny hind feet.

"Oh, I think he's asleep," said Terry. "Cute little rascal, ain't he?"

"Don't wake him up," said the boy. "He might have rabies. They say bats are natural carriers."

"What's rabies?" Michael asked, with a quiver in his voice.

"It's a disease," said Lonnie. "It's what makes mad dogs mad. Makes 'em foam at the mouth. They go ape shit and start biting everything in sight."

"If you get bit," the boy continued, "You have to get shots in your belly. They give 'em to you in the belly because the needle's so long. You have to get 'em once a day for two whole weeks. They say it hurts like the dickens."

"Whoa, speak of devil," said Lonnie, shining his flashlight in the corner. "Look at those tracks."

In the mud the boy saw the footprints of some large pad-footed animal, crisscrossing randomly, falling one on top of another.

"That's too big for a dog," Terry said. "It's got to be a wolf. Or maybe even a bear."

"I didn't think we had any wolves or bears around here," said the boy, hoping he was correct in this assumption.

"I think it's time we get out of here," said Michael, his voice shaking even more.

"Not yet," Lonnie said. "Take a look at this!"

Lonnie was on his hands and knees shining his flashlight through a vertical crevice in the wall. The crevice was about two feet high and about a foot off the floor.

"Look up in there, I don't believe it!"

"Let's see!" Terry shouted. Terry and the boy joined Lonnie on their knees. Michael hovered next to the tunnel where he was hoping to soon make a retreat.

On the other side of the crevice soared a spacious cavern, some thirty feet high and thirty feet across. The walls were smooth and shiny and sparkled in the lamplight. They reminded the boy of the icing dripping down the sides of his mama's frosted bunt cake. Hanging from the ceiling were dozens of long stalagmites, like huge stone icicles, or in his wilder imagination, the teeth of an enormous dragon pointing menacingly towards

the floor. Out of the floor grew graceful stalactites, like slender stone ant hills, some of them several feet high. A few of the stalactites connected with the stalagmites overhead, forming thin, delicate columns. None of the boys had ever seen anything like it before. They had stumbled upon a spelunker's paradise, a strange and mysterious wonderland hidden deep under the crazy woman's farm.

"I think I can squeeze through," said Lonnie, untying the rope from his waist. Lonnie's head and shoulders disappeared quickly through the wall.

"Me too," said Terry, loosening the rope and squeezing through behind him.

The boy peered through the opening, wondering if he might possibly fit. Probably not, but he knew he had to try.

"Phillip, don't you leave me in here!" shouted Michael.

"Don't worry," said the boy. "I'll only be a few feet away."

"Don't you leave me in here all by myself! If we ever get out of here I'm going to kill you!"

"Don't be such a scaredy cat. I probably won't fit. I just want to get my head in there so I can get a better look."

The boy pushed his head and shoulders into the opening and tried to pull himself through. But, as he feared, his chest and abdomen were too big to squeeze through the small crevice.

Michael, having left his station by the tunnel opening, started pulling his brother's pant leg. "Listen!" he whispered. "Do you hear something?"

"No. What are you talking about?"

"That!" Michael said, "Listen!"

"I don't hear anything." Then the boy heard it, a low-pitched noise emanating from the tunnel. It sounded like growling. "That doesn't sound good," he said.

"What do you think it is?"

"I think it's whatever made those tracks."

"What are we going to do?!" shrieked Michael.

"We've got to get into that other room!"

The boy expelled the air from his lungs, hoping to shrink his ribcage enough to squeeze through the crevice. But it was no use. He wasn't going to fit. And to make matters worse, he found that in pushing himself forward he had actually gotten stuck. His body was at such an awkward angle he couldn't get traction with either his feet or his elbows.

"What's going on out there?" Lonnie hooted, oblivious to the danger.

"Hush!" the boy hissed. "Get yourself over here!"

Lonnie squatted next to the boy's trapped torso.

"Listen," he said. "There's something out there in the tunnel. It sounds like something growling. You need to pull me through this hole!"

"Something in the tunnel!" shrieked Terry. "What do you mean there's something in the tunnel! What's in the tunnel?!"

"I don't know!" the boy yelled. "It's probably whatever made those tracks! Me and Michael need to get in there with you two! I'm stuck! Help pull me through!"

Terry began dancing like a mad man, scratching and clawing, attempting to climb the slick walls. "Oh shit! Oh God! What are we going to do!"

Michael jerked frantically on the boy's pant leg. "Phillip! Somebody! Do something!!"

The growling grew louder and louder. Then came a blood-curdling howl.

"Aa Ooooo! Aa, Aa, Aa, Oooooooo!!!"

Whatever was in the tunnel was about to emerge into the room behind him. Lonnie pulled at the boy's shoulders with all his might.

"Oh God!" screamed Terry. Terry had now accomplished the impossible. He had scaled the slick wall and was clinging precariously six feet above the floor. "It's a wolf! It's going to eat Michael and Phillip and we're going to have to watch!!"

The boy felt his heart stop beating. His brother, curled on the ground behind him, was sobbing pathetic little sobs.

Then they heard it. Laughter.

"What are you boys up to?" cackled a voice that was all too familiar.

"Roger Giles!" yelled Terry, "You son of a bitch! You scared the shit out of us!"

"Didn't think anybody saw you slip in here, did you?" said the voice, speaking through the crack.

"Roger, you mother f***er! Don't you ever do anything like that again!"

Roger laughed so hard they thought he was going to piss. When he finally composed himself, he grabbed the boy by the ankles and yanked him backwards onto the muddy floor.

“I’ve been following y’all since you left Minor’s store,” Roger said. “Didn’t know anybody was watching you, did you? You little f***ers need to pay more attention.”

The boy knew Roger liked to have a good laugh, especially when it was at somebody else’s expense. He was beginning to agree with what the adults said about him, however. That business about him having a mean streak and all.