The Boy in the Compost

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Abstract

"You there! What are you doing in my compost heap?" There’s never any honest answer to such questions, not at age nine, not when the truth is more embarrassing than a lie, particularly not when the old lady’s glasses-magnified eyes were that huge and that impaling blue...
“YOU THERE! What are you doing in my compost heap?”

There's never any honest answer to such questions, not at age nine, not when the truth is more embarrassing than
a lie, particularly not when the old lady's glasses-magnified eyes were that huge and that impaling blue. She was stern as any geometry teacher, looking down at me over the edge of the compost bin. I tried to get up and run somewhere but my hands and knees just sank in other parts of the pile, letting loose odors of leaf-mold and damp decay. Besides, you can't run anywhere in a compost bin.

"Well?" she demanded to know.

So I lied. "I'm looking for my sister's lost diamond."

I don't think she smiled. "Well," she said, "when you find it, I'm certain she'll thank you, but there have been no diamonds in my compost for thirteen years. Of that, I'm quite sure!"

"It's here somewhere," I said. I squinted at the compost and picked at it on my hands and knees, seriously, burrowing a little and letting it fall slowly between my fingers.

"You look for it then, and when you're ready, call and I'll let you out again."

"I can get out by myself!" But I whispered that.

She was gone. Fairly soon, a cat came along the top of the bin and looked down at me, then yawned and went away. One old elm and a couple of shaggy bushes crowded out the sky, and the bin was full of green shade.

Naturally, there was no way out. I found my feet and tried to climb out on the boards, which were nailed sideways, but they were fitted too tightly together. I got a splinter. Trying to pile the compost in one corner wasn't any good because it just slid down again when you stepped on it. I laid down in the stuff and found out it was warm down below, where it was most rotten.

The morning was getting later, and pretty soon I found out I had to go to the bathroom. Later and later. I danced around a little in the compost, trying not to cry, and then suddenly my pants leg turned hot and wet and I couldn't work the zipper. Then I hoped she wouldn't come back for a long time.

"Old lady," I sobbed, "I hope you get another wart!"

I sat down and buried myself to the waist in compost, just in case she came back or was looking through a chink
or something. She was that kind, but I hoped she had a conscience about it. My jeans got cold.

She probably had servants too, I thought.

"Keep a sharp ear, James. There's a boy in the compost and he'll probably want out pretty soon now. Betty, did you know there's a boy in the compost? Listen carefully and you can hear him moving."

Which was a lie, because I wasn't moving at all.

"Good morning, mailman! No mail today? No matter, there's a boy in the compost. It always brightens up a day when there's no mail to have a boy sitting in your compost. I'll have luncheon on the terrace, Betty, just this once. Of course, it's because of the boy in the compost. I don't do this sort of thing every day, you know. Will you go see if he's still moving?"

But no one came.

There were other kids' voices in the wind now and then, far away, down the wrong end of a telescope. There was a bluejay on one of the elm branches for a while, and I tried to figure out what it was doing. The bones and feathers of a dead sparrow were in plain sight, and there were a few brown and gray slugs glittering in a sunbeam at the base of one stained wooden wall. Spiders... I found a white worm under my hand, and then I got out of the compost pretty quick. My jeans were a mess, and stank, and I almost bit my fingernail but caught myself.

It got into my shoes and cuffs, and stuck under my fingernails and between my stomach and belt, and itched. The top of it was wet, brown leaves lying sheets of soggy cardboard, and the leaves were stuck together with something like white cotton. There was a bunch of dead ferns and a few chucked-out marigold plants. Bits of flower pots, empty black acorn-shells, elm-wings all over. She probably dumped the kitty-box in there too. I wasn't sure, but I coughed anyway.

Suppose I called now? I found a small rock on the bottom, a couple of feet down, and dug it out of the dirt with a twig.

"Is that the boy in the compost? Yes, I believe it is!
Hurry everybody, bring ladders and ropes!

"Yes, mailman, the boy in the compost finally came out late yesterday afternoon. We were worried because we couldn't hear him moving, but he's safe and sound now.

"James, will you please build a lid for my compost? Never again will there ever be a boy in there, not in a million years.

"Hello? Aren't you the boy who fell into my compost last year? You gave us quite a scare, you know! We couldn't hear anything for the longest time! Usually when there's a boy in the compost you can hear him moving around.

"Yes, I believe an axe would be best, James. Hack right through the wall! You can't take a boy out of the compost too quickly, you know.

"Betty, make a cup of tea for this young man! He's the one who fell into the compost, you know. What an experience he's had!"

I smiled and dropped the pebble into her cup of tea, and she sat there like stone. Her nostrils pinched and her face drained white with shock, and then she collapsed in tears and begged forgiveness.

I smiled and said I'd found my sister's diamond, showing her the pebble, and she asked to have it for something to remember me by, but I wouldn't give it to her and she ran into the house in tears.

I smiled and gave her the pebble, but she saw that it was only a dirty rock and a tear fell down her cheek. Why don't you put a lid on your compost, I said cruelly, and she whispered that she was sorry.

A dog barked somewhere.

"Hey, lady, I found the diamond!"

I called three or four more times, until she finally came and undid the latch to one side. It swung open and I stepped out, clutching my rock.

"Just look at you!" she said, trying to brush me off. I slipped away from her. "I found the diamond," I said. "Then there was a diamond after all!" She smiled.

"Yes!" I shouted. I started to cry and threw the rock as hard as I could at the compost bin. Then I ran home.