The Old Neighborhood

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I'd just been sitting up on the back of one of those green park benches thinking about the old neighborhood when Mr. Wright, the club manager, came over and asked if I knew anything about the gas being stole. I said I'd heard about it but that's all, and he said if I heard anything else would I tell him and I said sure. I wasn't looking at him when I said it though so he stood there watching me for a minute and then left 'cause I was busy staring at a kid up on high dive.

The gas he'd been talking about was stole out of a boat down at the other end of the lake around the bend. A whole can was taken and there'd been quite a bit of talk about it among the guys, but nobody seemed to know who did it. Some of them had even camped out down that way around the time it was stole, but they acted real surprised when they heard about it. I was kind of suspicious about them, but they hadn't ever said anything. In fact they hardly even talked about it so I didn't say anything either. Besides, I was new around here and kind of had to watch my step. I didn't want to get into anything I didn't know much about.

Nothing like this had ever happened in the old neighborhood. I mean the guys would never think of stealing anything, unless you called snitching apples from the Brightwieser's tree stealing, and we all knew they really didn't care, except our folks. Nobody ever watched you in the old neighborhood the way they do here.

We had the run of that whole end of town mostly. We hardly ever went across Grand Avenue, though, because all the colored people lived over there. Grand Avenue was one block behind us. And we used to never go past Robertson because a new addition was being built over there, lots
of new houses and everything. Robertson was a block in front of us. We were kind of in the middle of everything. The whole gang lived around here. Archie lived at one end of the street and I lived at the other end, about four blocks down. The other guys lived all in between. They used to call us the East End Kids.

Almost every day we'd meet in the old field on the corner down behind Pat's house. Every kid in the neighborhood had a baseball glove, an army gun, and a bicycle. We mostly just played baseball or army, but sometimes we'd get tired of these and we'd sit around and think up things to do.

One day we took Inky, Steve's big black dog, got some wood clubs, and decided to clean the rats out from under the old trash cans that Pat's folks used and an old dog house that Pepper had lived in before he ran away. We'd sneak up to the cans and surround one of them. One guy would go up and tilt the can toward himself and another would beat on the side of it with his club. When a rat came out we'd clobber him. Inky would be running around sniffing and barking, and we'd all be shouting and screaming and jumping around, but we managed to get nine of them. We took them over behind a used car lot on Grand Avenue and buried them. On the way back we cut through Mrs. Schroeder's back yard to see if her pears were ripe yet, but they weren't.

We used to get in dirt clod fights every once in a while too. The road crews worked a lot on the street down on the corner from the field. Once they had it all dug up and somehow we got into a dirt clod fight. All the baseball we'd played we were pretty good throwers, but we were just as good dodgers, and nobody ever got hurt, except once Mike wasn't looking and caught one on the forehead. Mike was like that though. He never paid enough attention, and he used to get pretty excited. Once I remember we'd been throwing a knife at a tree, and it bounced back and sure enough, Mike had his back turned and was too close anyway, but it got him on the back of the head. You knew it couldn't have hurt 'cause he started playing again, but then he felt where it'd hit and his hand came away with blood on
Sketch

it and he got all excited and ran inside screaming and yelling like he was dying. Mike was like that.

Sometimes guys from other neighborhoods would come down and want to play ball or something with us, but usually we'd only let them if we needed some more guys because they weren't too good of sports. I mean if you said one of them was out, usually he'd argue and get all mad. One kid hit Pat in the back with a baseball and chased me home with a ball bat once when he got mad. He was pretty slow, though, and everybody got away. We hardly ever let him play after that, at least not for a long time.

We never fought much, really. Sometimes the Conrad boys would want to play, and we always had to be careful then. They lived across from Pat, and even though they were in the neighborhood, they kept pretty much to themselves. They worked a lot, I guess, and were pretty mean and tough and talked pretty loud and tough. They used to always pick on Danny because he'd mouth off to them, and then we'd have to stick up for him. I lost two fights to Loren that way, but I really gave Owen a good licking one time. The second fight with Loren I went home with a cut lip. Nobody said anything 'cause I told them I got hit with a ball.

We were a pretty scrappy bunch, I guess, but like I said, we never would steal anything or lie to anybody. Once a real police detective came over to the field and asked us if we knew anything about some windows being shot out with BB guns anywhere around here and was all surprised 'cause we hadn't heard about it. He asked if we had any BB guns, and we told him no, but that we thought the Conrad boys had one, and he left but nothing ever happened. The Conrad boys never went to jail or anything.

We sure used to have quite a time back there. Everyone pretty much knew us so we had the run of the place. And then all of a sudden I had to leave 'cause my mom came and took me to live with her out at this country club. I'd been living with my grandparents ever since the divorce. Mom worked in town and had been so busy that she'd thought it might be best if I lived with them so I stayed there a couple
of years. Then Mom saved enough money to buy her own house out here at this lake, and she took me out to live with her 'cause she didn't like to live alone.

It's pretty nice, with a lake and nice houses and a clubhouse and swimming and boating and everything, but still everybody seems to be watching you, waiting for you to do something wrong. I began to feel bad just sitting there on the back of that park bench by the clubhouse. It was getting dark anyway so I jumped down and started walking home, wondering who could have stole the gas, because most of the guys I knew out here could pretty much have all the gas they needed, their folks having so much money and everything. I couldn't figure it out.

The Lilies of the Field

by Rick Atkinson

Fish and Wildlife Biology, Soph.

G'MORNING, Peaches," the man called to him.

"Hey, Mr. Wilson, morning to you, nice day huh?"

"Shit," the other replied.

This exchange had been standard for over a year now as the two began their daily tasks. The day was fair with blue sky showing through the clouds. A bit brisk though. Mr. Wilson had seen fit to wear his moth-eaten topcoat and Peaches' wife had pinned a blanket across her man's shoulders. He would keep an eye open for something more suitable as he worked.