

It all starts with a slip, a tumble across an area smaller and smoother than the Ozarks, due to an anthill. Once he recovers, Rutgers Wood consults his mustard-blotted, Civil War-era map full of landmarks and sandwich crumbs. Realistically, the miniature residents of Missouri will not be included on his Junior Explorers map and he's partly sympathetic. When you're eight, you can't own property, and the treehouse he formerly occupied now belongs to some other boy who used it when his family moved into Rutgers' former house. Rutgers smooths the fallen dirt with his sneaker to try to make the hill easier for the ants to rebuild.

The weather is perfect for construction. Sunlight pokes through the clouds like a nosy neighbor already anticipating the rambunctious ways of the new occupants' children. The rays highlight the grounds of Katy Trail State Park for the twenty children in the city of Defiance's Junior Explorers. Their leader, Mrs. Greenleaf, paired them in two and now lets the breezes hit her arthritic ankles.

"Search diligently!" yells Ms. Greenleaf while flicking a fly off her shoulder. "This is how we build museums like the one in St. Louis!"

Fortunately for Rutgers, his field trip buddy Everett Combs happens to be a more polite person to insects. He was the first person to tell the rest of the Junior Explorers that female ants who weren't queens were cheated out of wings. His mother Annabel, the only black female in Defiance to earn every Explorer badge, told him that they weren't cheated and that God just had other plans. Everett adjusts the Daniel Boone cap his mother bought for him last week and crouches to the leveled hill. The queen ant is alive and so the colony will survive, explains Everett. He's resigned to like Rutgers because if it had been any other boy in their group, they would've simply walked away.

What's unearthed is a more interesting survivor. The boys take in a shiny copper circle the width of a bottle cap. Rutgers and Everett exchange shocked glances over the old copper-nickel. A forged, metallic man with a feather headdress is on one side, the year 1863 printed across the bottom. Everett gently flips the coin to the other side to reveal a wreath pattern with the coin's value of one cent in the center. They both reach for the historical bit of change.

"I found it," says Everett, taking off his hat to rub his shaved head.

"I found it before you," says Rutgers. "Do you even know how valuable this is?"

Everett does yet cannot explain immediately. He knows who fought in the war because a hero bloomed on his family tree. His great-great-grandfather Samuel was part of the march to Island Mound, his bayonet attached at the waist, a wooden comb and sewing kit from his wife hid secretly in a place where they could not be touched. Annabel narrated this account with much aplomb though Samuel himself never wrote his story down. He couldn't read or write, but he could fight. Armed with his Austrian musket, Samuel Combs followed his fellow soldiers into battle. The former slaves charged towards the Confederate army, their purposeful feet moving on the prairie grass of Toothman Farm. The name of their encampment "Fort Africa" almost sounded like a castle to Everett but he's certain that Samuel was not treated as a prince. Did Samuel return from victory with a cocked Union cap, the scent of gunpowder creeping into his nostrils, black bruises on his brown skin as he stood in veils of smoke? Did he drop the coin while fires smoldered and he closed the eyes of his dying comrade who would not see the dried ink of the Emancipation Proclamation? Sometimes Everett watches lightning bugs on summer nights as their tails light up and while they solely exist for the short span of two months, their shine stays in his memory for far longer, into the cold winter. He does his best not to forget. Maybe that is why his mother clings so voraciously to Samuel's story, one spark that lives in the dark.

"Course I do," insists Everett. "What's this worth to you? Besides the obvious."

Rutgers' life is occasionally less obvious. The Woods are in good-standing in the community, the benefit of being the top executives at the largest bank in Defiance. Rutgers profited from their profession as well. He could determine the date of any penny or dime by consulting coin collector books. With patience, he was able to identify counterfeit paper money with the use of a magnifying glass. His aunts helped fulfill his quest for all of the new quarters representing the fifty states. However, this rare coin would be prized by Rutgers for a different reason. Rutgers and his grandfather journeyed to Jerome every spring for a hike along the Trail

of Tears before he died last year. Nobody in school or in Junior Explorers knew about his Cherokee relations, and they certainly couldn't tell based on Rutgers' fair complexion. Rutgers secretly studied the trail his ancestors walked after his grandfather passed. The coordinate lines of his map are unclear when he looks at them in the dim bank vault Defiance no longer uses, Rutgers' tears trickling down the creases. Keeping a little of yourself buried is heart-breaking work, but this coin, this private token of pride he can carry in his pocket, could be a piece of his ancestors' history.

"My...my grandfather was...was Cherokee," stammers Rutgers.

"Really?" says Everett.

"The blonde hair throws people off, I guess," replies Rutgers.

He tugs on his gold locks as Everett scratches his nose.

"Well, my great-great-grandfather was one of the original black soldiers," says Everett.
"His name was Samuel Combs."

"That's cool," offers Rutgers.

Neither of them can argue against the other. How could they hold up memories to be measured?

"What are we going to do?" asks Everett finally.

"Here, we'll put the coin under a rock, and decide tomorrow," suggests Rutgers.

Everett nods slowly while Rutgers moves the coin to a spot under a speck of white quartz. The two boys disband, Rutgers walking to Ms. Greenleaf to ask what time they're coming tomorrow and Everett strolling to rescue a ladybug darting around his fellow discoverers.

Rutgers tosses and turns, and turns again. Under his Spider-man bedspread, beads of sweat drip on the skin below his comforter. He constantly recalls the conversation he had hours earlier, the confession that is ridding him of sleep. Did Everett think of him differently? Did he think of himself differently? Whenever the Explorers examined the occasional Native American artifacts, he mulled over the moccasins, admired the arrowheads, and praised the carefully designed pouches with the rest of his friends. They went one step further, pretending to be linked to the great warriors and tribes of the past as they played with the relics. Rutgers had no desire to say how alone he felt since he didn't have to pretend.

He feigns sleep now, the gleam of his nickel collection meeting his gaze before his eyes close. Truthfully, he has enough coins already. A glass case of silver dimes, including ones from two decades ago, sits between three gold Sacagawea dollars and a piggy bank shaped like an umpire full of buffalo nickels from his grandfather. He was genuinely surprised when Everett told him that African-American soldiers were fighting in Missouri during the war. Rutgers assumed they were all on the East Coast, fresh off the plantations. But by looking in the mirror, he can understand that the world was and continues to be not so confined. Rutgers stretches his legs to the very end of his bed and allows himself to surrender to sleep.

The long roll of a snare drum cuts through the silence as Rutgers rotates his body to the opposite side. Awaking with blurry vision, Rutgers barely makes out the leather braces on a drum before a boy of ten exits the tent. Why is he in a tent and who carried him here? Rutgers touches the woolen blanket underneath him, and raises his head, a hanging canteen hitting him in the forehead. A series of footsteps follows the racket. Rutgers thrusts off the blanket, revealing a Union frock coat with piping under a wide black belt, black boots, and a bugle lying by his side. He breathes in before staring at the odd outfit again. As the stranger's pace quickens, Rutgers gets a firm grip on the bugle, standing to face whatever enemy brought him to such a strange place.

Two hands the color of gingerbread part the tent folds. A smiling officer enters with his thumbs stroking the brim of a repaired cap. Rutgers watches wordlessly while the officer

situates the cap on the boy's head. Rubbing the smooth top, Rutgers narrows his brow in confusion.

"I'm not named Combs for nothing," says the officer. "I fixed what you needed to keep your hair and brain safe."

Combs? Rutgers takes a tentative step towards him to study the man by a wooden candle lantern. The man certainly has the same smile as Everett, with square teeth, and the same soft features, as silky as a sofa cushion. Officer Combs frowns as Rutgers drops his stare.

"You'd best be getting on your way," says Officer Combs.

Rutgers cast a nervous glance at the bouncing flame on the wick in the candle lantern. The trickling wax cannot compete with the water running down Rutgers' cheeks.

"But sir, I've...I haven't been to war," stammers Rutgers. "I've never played music either."

Fetching the bugle with both his hands, Officer Combs tenderly places the instrument into Rutgers' slippery grip. He tightens Rutgers' hold on the horn. Rutgers allows the warmth coming from the officer's hands to mingle with the clamminess of his palms.

"Many of us haven't gone to war, but we have to make sacrifices to set things right," says Officer Combs, patting Rutgers' shoulder. "Suck up all the courage you can, and just blow. Just do your best."

Officer Combs retrieves his bayonet and leaves the tent as speedily as he came. A moment after he's gone, Rutgers walks to the middle of the shelter. He lifts the bugle to his lips, his fingers trembling above the brass. A low note blossoms in his chest and with a fine amount of power, the note pierces through the trumpet into the air. To him, it sounded like the beautiful beginning of the well-practiced taps he's heard on camping grounds. He peers through the tent's slit as he straightens his body. New noises indicate that the battle has begun without him.

He can detect the discharge of muskets, the yells of young throats, and the clinks of steel bayonets. However, above all of this, he hears a single shout of triumph.

“To freedom!” cries Officer Combs over the clamor.

The echoes of his fervent exclamation are what Rutgers remembers as he shakes out of slumber. Shivering, he identifies the Spider-man sheets his mother purchased for him at Bed, Bath & Beyond. The copper-nickel flips repeatedly in Rutgers’ mind. Rutgers sighs as his throbbing heart pounds out a vigorous rhythm.

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Balancing a bottle of insect repellent on his belly, Everett stares at his ceiling. The glow-in-the-dark stars sticking to the surface seem to glimmer only for their observant owner. His mother Annabel loves astronomy, advocating for these stars during their trip to get the bug repellent. Everett embraces his bug bites, believing they are his badges of honor for protecting the crawling creatures of Katy Trail Park, but Annabel could not be convinced. She convinced him to join Junior Explorers too, though he’s received some rewards from her insistence. Thanks to the Explorer excursions, Everett witnessed hundreds of pretty chrysalises in the Butterfly House in Chesterfield, came across sphinx moths at the Lakeside Nature Center, and stalked a rare emerald dragonfly that made a habit of visiting Mrs. Greenleaf’s lavender Prius.

Nevertheless, the discovery he made today is an event that may only happen once a century. Everett envies the Combses who were the firsts of their peers, his great-great-grandfather and his mother. He does not foresee his knowledge of bugs paving the way for his own personal first, as much as he loves curling up with a good book on beetles.

He wonders if the copper-nickel Native American man, wearing his noble headdress, respects insects as much as he does. He also thinks about the silent respect Rutgers may or may not have for his roots. Keeping the piece of information about his grandfather threw Everett initially yet Rutgers craving the coin must mean something. Would the coin be a concealed

connection for him, a copper-nickel that he needed? Everett's sight freezes on the stoic stars until his eyelids shut completely.

The scent of pine on the winds plucking the hairs of his nose causes Everett to stir. He nearly resumes sleeping until he feels the grass of the knoll beneath his body. Spying bandages, maple splints, and tourniquets stretched across the south side of the knoll, Everett becomes queasy and stumbles as he stands. He surveys his surroundings. A caravan of carriages is gathered at the base. Rubbing his eyes to make sure they're really there, Everett stares at the tenants of the old-time vehicles. Two roan ponies raise their hindquarters as a five-year old girl in a fringe dress chases another boy with a struggling mouse in her clasp. Another older child puffs patiently on a campfire, embers nearly burning the beaded front of his moccasins.

A cough interrupts Everett's observations. He walks to the left, seeing a large section of land devoted to using the tools Everett noticed earlier. Dozens of tribe members lie on stretchers breathing heavily, closing their eyes to the sun. He spots a white female nurse working on a woman whose face is coated with tiny red bumps. The bumps show how scrawny his bug bites really are and Everett elects to wait patiently to question the one person who may know English.

"You should be down there with the other children," declares a deep voice behind him.

Everett spins around to view a dark-haired man in breechcloths, leather leggings under a long piece of animal hide.

"Bouts of dysentery...it's fairly bad," says the man.

He's positive diseases ran rampant during the war. That explains the odds and ends scattering the scene. Is this man a Cherokee like Rutgers' grandfather?

"Where's your headdress?" says Everett.

"I'm afraid I'm not a Sioux, if that's what you were expecting," replies the man with a laugh. "Name's Adahy. It means "lives in the woods" and we've been out of the woods and on this trail for a long while."

"You can't take these people to the hospital?" asks Everett.

"Who would have us?" replies Adahy. "Listen, if you're going to linger, can you help Ms. Lee with the dressings? There's a woman who's pulled through and could use a friendly face."

Adahy nods towards a woman who Everett can find no fault with, except for a markedly large cut on her brow. Ms. Lee smiles at Everett as he joins her at the woman's side.

"She's an Algonquin woman we found on the trail," says Ms. Lee. "You can hold her hand while I clean the wound. If I understand correctly, her name's Anna."

"Anna?" says Everett.

He brushes pieces of her grey hair away from the cut, this woman whose name is so close to his mother's. She places a soothing hand on Everett's cheek.

"Kind," says Anna, the only word she gives him before she winces.

Everett snuffles to draw energy to any area except his eyes, anything to stave off the wetness emerging underneath them. Anna's chest rises and falls as his chest does the same from weeping. He closes his eyes to delay crying, but sobs find him in the dark. They follow him when he opens his eyes again to his bedroom, tears coursing down his cheeks touched only by the moonlight.

"Last day, Explorers!" shouts Ms. Greenleaf. "Remember that you'll be reporting on your findings!"

The reminder of work results in a chorus of moans from the children. Meanwhile, Rutgers and Everett are doing their best not to yawn. While the boys saw that the other was tired, it did not dawn on them to ask why. Frankly, their minds are full of questions spawned by their unordinary dreams. Their sneakers mirror each other as they go to the spot.

“So?” says Everett.

“So,” says Rutgers. “So....I was thinking you should have it.”

Everett bites on his lip before Rutgers continues.

“What if it fell out of your grandfather’s uniform?” poses Rutgers.

“What if it didn’t?” says Everett. “And honestly? There would always be a part of me that would wonder if you should’ve had it.”

“Same,” says Rutgers. “What should we do? I mean, besides the obvious, which is leaving it here to rust.”

Everett grins slightly. “What’s not so obvious, of course.”

Removing the coin from under the rock, he gestures for Rutgers to follow him. They catch Ms. Greenleaf lecturing a late-coming pioneer about truancy. The dual explorers exchange a glance, a look that suggests they know time can be trapped while breathing anew and since Ms. Greenleaf’s comment yesterday, they can imagine no way in which to showcase this than to give the coin to a generous holder. Maybe there, its worth will dig out other memories and the amazement of many.

“Ms. Greenleaf, we’d like to donate this coin to the museum,” says Everett.

“We found it yesterday in the field,” says Rutgers.

Their instructor takes the copper-nickel, a slow smile appearing as she touches her chest.

“This is quite a treasure, boys,” says Ms. Greenleaf, putting her arms around each of them. “Do you know how big this gift is?”

“We knew yesterday,” says Everett.

Rutgers nods. “But now we really do.”