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Protecting Cole

Emily Ricketson
Gettysburg College

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Protecting Cole

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Protecting Cole

The frogs are dyin'. That water is gettin' too mucky. I guess people just don't care enough about those frogs to stop putting bad stuff in the water. My little brother picked up a Styrofoam cup from the creek once and asked me how it got there. I didn't have a great explanation and he's only seven, so I told him people were just too lazy to find a trashcan. I really didn't know if that was true, but I was happy when, for just one little second, he wasn't asking me about Mom and Dad.

That's the burden of being an older brother—six years older, to be exact—he's always asking me questions. "Why does Daddy yell? Why does Mommy cry? Why doesn't Daddy take us campin' anymore?" I never know the answers. I just tell him, "Things aren't always perfect, Cole." That never satisfies him. He wants to hear, "You just need to hug him more and he'll love you again." But, I can't tell him lies. So I'll talk about the dyin' frogs all he wants.

Last Friday, when Dad came home, Mom sent us outside to play in the itchy grass, like always. She had been fixing up a hole in one of my shirts on her sewing machine. And as soon as she heard footsteps on the old wooden porch, she shot up from her chair and scooted Cole and me out of the room. So, as soon as Dad was inside and yellin' about something—whatever he'd picked that day—I led Cole out past the broken screen door. We walked away from the house through the green grass that was almost taller than Cole. His grip on my hand was tight until we came to the marshy creek. He immediately took to playing with the frogs and drawing in the mud with a stick. I squatted and stared ahead into the woods that stood across the creek.

"Hey look, Garrett. This little guy is still pretty lively!" I looked to the right and saw Cole's bright face nearly pressed up against a small, greenish frog. The frog was still, except for the in-out motion of the white underbelly. Cole reached out his pale finger to pet the frog, but it jumped off the rock it was sitting on and plopped right into the water. The tiny splash brought Cole's attention to the creek and his shoulders slumped when he spotted a ripple of water carrying a lifeless, upside-down frog down the creek. His head turned to continue watching it and he reached out his hand toward the dead frog.

"Why does that happen?" Cole asked me when he pulled his hand into his chest. His voice was shaking a bit.

"I told you yesterday, Cole, it just happens. Sometimes things die." My voice remained flat and cold.

We both heard a sound like glass breaking and turned our heads back to the house. We didn't say anything. I just turned back around. Cole hesitated for about ten seconds before doing the same.

The dead frog floated slowly down the creek and, eventually, it was too far away for us to see. We sat in silence. The summer mugginess was bad that day and the clouds lingered over our heads. The clouds were still—still and gray. I glanced up, but looked away, fearing that my movement would make the clouds drop the water on my face. So, I watched the creek and the bugs and, after a while, Cole stood up. He exhaled and wiped his hands on his army green shorts.

"Do you think the yellin' is ever gonna stop?" Cole looked down at me when he spoke. I just stared at the trees.

"Don't ask me that, Cole. You know I don't know." I still sat, my knees up to my

chest and my arms wrapped around 'em real tight. Cole looked away and then I looked at him to see if he was mad at my response. He just slowly nodded his head up and down. Keeping the same rhythm, he started to shake his head to the right and to the left. Then, he stood still.

"I'm gonna go for a walk in the woods," he declared in a soft voice. He still didn't look at me when he said it or even when he hopped from rock to rock across the creek.

When he reached the closest tree, I yelled after him, "Don't go too far! Better be back by dinner! That's only a half hour!"

He disappeared so fast that he was well out of earshot by the time I finished yellin'. I should have known. Panic was the first feeling that crept into my stomach. But, I still waited. I should have known.

Cole had always looked up to me. In fact, he had never voluntarily left my side before that day. Even when Cole was learning to walk, he would just trail along behind me, wherever I went. Four years after that, when he had started kindergarten, he wouldn't go inside until I walked him in. I was late to school that day, the first day of school, because he didn't want me to leave. After I explained to him that his teacher would take care of him just fine, he finally let me go. He won't try new foods until I try them first. He won't go on rides at the summer fair unless I go on them with him. This is just how it's always been with us. At least, until a few months ago, when he inevitably started wantin' answers.

The breeze is always the best time marker during the summer months. When the wind starts blowing, that's when I know it's time to go in for dinner. Well, the air started to breathe on my legs, and Cole hadn't come back yet. There was gonna be barely any light left to guide me through the woods, but it didn't much matter. It was either find him myself or get a beating and an order to go find him anyway. I tiptoed across three big rocks and, before I stepped into the woods, I looked up to the sky and hoped that the clouds would hold the rain just long enough. I couldn't believe Cole would do this.

"Cole! Come on now, it's time to go inside!" I had stopped at the edge of the woods just in case he was nearby. But there was no answer. I continued to yell, but I knew I would have to go deeper into the woods to find him.

I walked about ten feet and said to myself, "I'm never gonna find him." I wondered how it had ever come to this.

When I was ten and Cole was four, the worry at the top of our minds had been if Dad was gonna bring us our treat on Fridays. He would bring home a chocolate telephone every Friday for the two of us- a solid milk chocolate chunk shaped just like an old-fashioned telephone. He had worked for Telecorp as a telephone installer and said he had gotten the phones for being a hard worker. When he came home, he would always let the screen door slam hard to make a big entrance. Cole and I would look at each other and take off from the kitchen where we'd be watching Mom cook dinner and dart into the living room. Always the same routine. Dad would pretend he didn't have the treat that day, and we would pretend to believe him. He would say "Gotcha!" and we would squeal and grab for the brown paper bag behind his back. The phone looked so huge to me and Mom usually threw it away half-eaten. We had never been allowed to have so much sugar, but Mom said Fridays were the exception. Of course, every week, she would regret that rule as Cole and I would run around the house, sugar-filled. Mom would act annoyed, but after fifteen minutes she and Dad would corral the two of us and set up a game of charades. It had sort of become a Friday tradition.

That was before Dad was fired for not showing up to work. A while back I started to think about those telephones again and how they hadn't been so wonderfully big after all. I suppose I could even eat a whole one myself these days.

The thought of the telephones made my stomach grumble. Then I knew for sure

it was time to go in for dinner. Two mosquitoes attacked my right arm at the same time. I flung my left hand around to get them away and I felt a wet drop on my arm. I looked up to the sky and could only see a dark grey splotch through the thick tree tops.

"It can't rain right now," I said out loud. "I've gotta find Cole. COLE!!!"

No answer.

I started to think that I couldn't blame him for running away. He hadn't exactly been receiving much attention from anyone. I was the one who spent the most time with him, and I usually spent that time avoiding his questions. Then I thought of last fall.

An hour and a half after school had let out, Mom had pulled up in the truck and parked outside of Cole's classroom. He had been waiting there the whole time and only he and the teacher were left. I knew because he told me once that he was afraid of that teacher—she was mean and picked on him, because he was quiet. I can only imagine how traumatized Cole had been when Mom finally came. I remember how I had stayed home that day, because my throat hurt real bad. At 4:15 my bedroom door swung open and Cole came charging straight into my room. He hadn't said a word to Mom the whole ride home, but as soon as he walked through the door, he had run right to my germ-filled bed. He asked me about ten annoying questions. I pretended to be sicker than I was and too sick to answer.

"Did you hear what happened today?" he had asked me.

"Uh-uh."

"I was left. I stayed at school all by myself. It was just me and Mrs. W. Mommy didn't come until after Mrs. W. called five times. She said that she was home taking care of you and must have forgotten."

"Well, I bet that was it." I didn't want the responsibility of telling him that Dad was supposed to pick him up that day. Mom and I had thought that Dad had already picked him up and taken him maybe to get ice cream. But he was passed out in the backyard and laying in the grass next to our red wagon. He'd been there since the night before and had completely missed his work interview. He'd also forgotten to pick up his youngest son. Dad never mentioned a word about it. Mom also advised me not to tell Cole because it would crush him.

"He's just too young to know some things," she had said.

"What about me?" I wanted to know.

Mom's eyes stared down at me and the wrinkles around her brow were more visible than ever. "It's a little too late for you."

A few more drops landed on my skin and I wished that I had been wearing my jacket. I had run out of ideas. I didn't know what else to do to find my brother. The only thing was to keep walking, yelling for Cole, walking, yelling, occasionally slipping in the mud, walking some more. With no other distractions but the darkening sky and the noises of a humid summer, my mind was filled with thoughts of the recent past.

Back in January, my Grampy died. It happened at the end of the month, right after my thirteenth birthday. Dad was on a trip, overseeing an installation job for a big company a few hours away. He came home in a great mood, excited to see us all.

The door opened and he yelled, "I'm home!" But Cole and I were in our room, where Mom had sent us for the night. She said she was going to talk to Dad and that he might need his space to be sad. Itching with curiosity, Cole and I snuck into the hallway to hear what was said in the kitchen. As we left our room, we heard screaming. I saw the fear on Cole's face because screaming was not a sound we were used to.

"Why didn't you call me when you found out?" Dad's voice yelled in anger.

Mom tried to calm him down. "I didn't want you to have to come home early from your trip. I thought it would be okay to tell you a few days later."

"You had no right to do that!"

"Dear, please. I just did what I thought was best."

Dad must have pushed her out of the way because I heard her voice yell, "Ouch," and the sound of a body bumping into the pantry door. From the hallway, we saw Dad march out of the house through the front door. He didn't see us, but I saw the tears on his face. I don't know where he went, but he came home drunk that night.

The rain was starting to come down hard now. I tried to shield myself from it, but it was no use. Drops were going into my shirt and falling down my back. The wind was warm, but sent a chill through my body when it hit my wet skin. I heard thunder over my head and my heart began to beat faster and faster. The wind carried the smell of the trees and the dirt. I turned around to look behind me, but the number of trees had erased my tracks. It had been at least an hour and a half since Cole took off. He could have been anywhere by that time. I almost gave up, but I was lost and the thought of walking through that screen door terrified me into continuing my search.

A month ago, the sound of that screen door had been like a shotgun fired in the air. The sound wasn't like a "hey, I'm home with chocolate phones" sound. It was a mix of carelessness and rage. It had been swung open so hard that it had hit the side of the house, and when it closed, it didn't line up with the frame anymore. Cole and I had been playing in our room for the past half hour. Cole had been constructing a robot with his blocks and I was reading my comic books. We both froze when we heard noises because we knew everything that had been going on was leading up to something. Cole's robot's head fell on the floor into a pile of other blocks. Cole crawled slowly to the door and reached for the handle. But I stopped him short.

"Don't do that!" I surprised myself when I spoke, so I tried something different.

"Keep it closed, okay?"

"But I just wanna hear what's goin' on. No one will know."

"You don't need to know what's goin' on. Just finish your robot." It didn't matter if the door was open or shut. The yellin' voices had carried through the wood just the same.

I had been walking for nearly three hours. My feet were so wet and I was so confused and lost that I almost turned around. But the thought of facing Dad's anger and Mom's tears was more terrible than ever.

Water dripped into my eyes as I turned my head to look towards home. I could see almost nothing. The trees in front of my face were barely visible in the darkness. But I could hear the faint sound of the frogs. *This time I will protect you better, Cole*, I thought. *That's my job*. I whispered under my breath a prayer for Cole to be safe. I tried once again to call out to him.

"Cole! Cole?"

"Garrett?" A small squeak emerged to the right of me. I took a few steps toward the voice.

"Cole? Cole, where are you? I can't see anythin' out here."

"I'm right here." A cold, wet hand wiped my ankle and I jumped.

"Cole! What are you doing?" I spoke into nothing.

"I'm sittin' by this tree."

"Why? Why did you run off?"

"Because." He paused for a moment. "I don't wanna go home anymore. I don't like it."

"But, I've been walking around for hours lookin' for you."

"Hours? The creek's right there, Garrett. You've been lookin' for me all this time?"

"Yes! Why didn't you answer when I called for you hours ago?" My hands flew in the air, but I put them down when I remembered that he couldn't see me anyway.

"I just didn't want to go home." Cole sniffed.

"Well, I don't blame you. I don't want to go home either."

"Why not?" Even though it was dark, I could see Cole's face in my mind. His eyebrows would be raised and his whole body would turn toward me. He would look up in my direction even if I refused to look back.

"Because Daddy's always drunk and they're always yellin'. I'm scared of him now." I had tried to sound brave, but now my voice sounded so weak.

"Oh." Cole's voice was a whisper.

"Yeah." I felt ashamed, like I had let a deep, dark secret slip out that I couldn't take back.

"I'm scared, too. And they forget me. I just know it." I shifted my body in Cole's direction as he continued. "I think Mom tries to remember that I'm there, but she's so scared of Daddy that she forgets me too."

"I'm sorry, Cole." My voice stuttered on the word sorry and lowered to a whisper at the end.

"Why did our family change, Garrett? We were fine before. Weren't we?"

"Sometimes things just change." I wiped the rain off my face with the back of my hand and felt my way to the dirt-turned-mud and sat down next to Cole. Suddenly, a light shone into the woods from far away.

"Garrett! Cole!" The voice was deep and raspy and could have been heard for miles. It seemed to shake the silence, then faded away, to be replaced by the soothing ribbit of the frogs. Cole cowered close into my side.

"It'll be okay," I said. "We'll stick together. Come on, let's go." Together, we walked toward the voice.