

Treasure Hunt

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You drag your net from the water and stick your hand inside. Pond sludge squishes underneath your nails, and your hands come away smelling like prehistoric waste. You are ten years old; it's about time that you had some treasure of your own. Your friend Izzi crows from a few feet away, shoes and socks missing as she wades ankle-deep in the muck. She shows you her net. Two tadpoles, fat as drumsticks, writhe at the bottom in a bed of algae and leaves. Something about their greasy, black tails and squirming bodies remind you of soft kindergarten fingers dipped in paint. You recall a lesson about frog development from second grade. Tadpoles are just baby frogs. The thought makes you dizzy.

Put them back, you order. The net's mesh shakes as they flounder inside.

Why? Izzi moves to dump them inside a large plastic flower pot. *We just got them.*

You seize the net and try to rip it away. *They're gonna die.*

She tugs back, almost hard enough to pull you into the greening shallows with her. Breathing heavily, you reach forward, grab the mesh, and overturn it with a swing. The tadpoles splash back into the water. You watch their shadows disappear beneath the ripples and into the thick, platish lily pads beyond, your heart pounding in your ears.

You find the glass and bones first. They're everywhere in the woods behind your house, a heap of broken bottles by the creek, a complete deer skull underneath some leaves. Treasure. You drag your haul back to a chair you found, elevated against a tree ten feet from the ground with a rusty metal ladder. You climb up and sit, one arm wrapped around the tree trunk just in case, and survey your realm. A flash of silver deep in the woods catches your eye, thirty feet from the bank of the creek. More treasure. Fascinated, you jump down to explore.

It turns out to be a steel trash can. You lift the lid to discover that it's half filled with dried corn kernels, gold like tiny doubloons. You place a handful in your pocket. A little ways off, a black tarp is stretched over the ground, strewn with more. You crouch by the tarp and shake the end, sending the kernels bouncing into the underbrush.

The crunch of footsteps makes you freeze. You look up to see a line of young adults dressed in camouflage marching through the woods. Sunlight gleams off the sides of their guns.

Guns. Your breath leaves your lungs like a bird. Time catches up to you in an instant, snapping tight like the slap of a rubber band. You leap to your feet and scream the first thing that comes to your mind—*Bambi-killers!*—followed by a line of insults and childish barbs as you picture your treasures, lined up like evidence by your chair. The image sears your brain. You hear laughter.

Then, you turn tail and run.