

Crinkles

Nate Benson

The Little Kids—a simple classification for an uncomplicated time—is what the Big Kids, my older cousins and sisters, called us. The Little Kids consisted of me, my cousins Matt, PJ, Russ, Paulie, and my brother Jon. We ranged from six to ten years old. Despite our youth, we were large in our minds, full of a sense of purpose as we gathered on the small sand patch at the south end of The Pond.

The Pond was an oval, about 50 yards long and 30 yards wide. I am not sure of the origins of this small scooped-out body of water. It may have been a remnant from the old mill pond that caught the flow of the mighty Onion River and powered the grist mill, pushing the millstones' scissoring action to crush and grind the hardened wheat kernels to flour softness. Or Uncle Dave may have created it to irrigate the fields for his dairy farm. Regardless of its origin, for us, The Pond was a place to escape the Wisconsin-humid summer afternoon heat after finishing our morning chores.

The large over-inflated, multiple-patched rear-wheel inner tube—a legacy from Uncle Dave's trustworthy John Deere tractor—usually overnigheted on the spit of sand, pulled out of The Pond after a day of play. Sometimes it was forgotten, left to drift; a lonesome bump on The Pond's placid surface. After two of us grabbed the tube, we all waded into the water. As the water deepened, our feet could no longer bounce off The Pond's bottom and we started swimming, pushing the tube forward like an otter with a ball, until we reached The Pond's deeper center. The game could now begin.

The first step was to climb onto the tube. We would each reach an arm up and around the curved ballooned surface. The black synthetic rubber was hot from the radiant afternoon sun. Splashes of water evaporated off the tube's fading darkness as we vigorously treaded water. Then, using the lift generated from our scissoring kicks, we extended both arms over the bloated latex doughnut and tried to pull ourselves up. However, without the proper counterweight of a fellow Little Kid on the other side, the tube would flip, and we would have to start over again.

Once we achieved symmetry, it was easier for the rest of us to climb onto the tube. When we all made it, we sat with our legs dangling into the center hole. Then we wrapped our slender dairy calf-like legs around the tube to establish a tentative grip on the distended surface while our hands clung to the inside. "Crinkle!" one of us shouted out. We all leaned back at the same time towards the water, struggling not to slide off. Crinkles formed in the tube from the air displaced as we tilted back. We wedged our hands into the creases like a rock climber executing a finger jam into a narrow crack while our spindly legs fought for purchase around the inner side of the tube.

Back we leaned, establishing an illusionary equilibrium. We hung on. Tiring, our hands and legs slowly slipped. The squeaking of hands sliding off rubber was quickly punctuated by a splash as

one of us fell into the broth, upsetting the balance, causing the tube to flip suddenly and propelling the rest of us into the water. Occasionally, the tube's toss happened in slow motion, sending it arcing up towards the summer sky blue, beads of water dripping off its high point. Each time we were launched and scattered into the water, dog paddling and circling like tadpoles as we tried to regain our breath to start the scramble onto the tube again.

Sometimes while we floundered in the water, one of us would plunge down the nine feet to touch the silty sediment at The Pond's bottom. The water was olive drab, an organic murk with visibility of less than a couple of feet. The path down to the bottom was full of obscured unknowns. Thoughts of potential encounters with the mythical Big Snapper and its powerful turtle jaws fueled our imagination as we scooped up a handful of mud and kicked our way back to the surface. Other times we dove to the bottom hoping to meet the mythical Lady Lahue, but I'll leave that adolescent topic for another time.

Occasionally, we would take this deep-bottom mud and apply it to ourselves. We didn't use it as warpaint. Instead, we treated it as a delicacy, like a spa treatment. We didn't think about the herbicides, pesticides, and dairy cow effluent accumulated in the mud as we bathed in its smooth silkiness. Our minds thought of it as old, ancient—special. If Egyptians had inhabited Wisconsin, they would have used this mud to relax, heal, or as part of a ritual before mummification.

When we played in The Pond, my cousins, brother, and I wore fringed, gashed cut-off jeans with threadbare butts. Over the winter, our legs had grown faster than our waists. Our moms haphazardly scissored our winter jeans and they became our all-purpose summer attire. In their cut-offs and without shirts, my cousins and brother were wiry, sinewed, flat-chested, and tanned. I was a big, heavy-set eight-year-old. I had a chest of softness, and my stomach had rolls visible during the shirtless summer days. White creases in my stomach provided a stark contrast to the sunburned red rolls, accentuating them as tube-like bulges. My older cousin Andy christened them crinkles, and I had a new nickname.

Nicknames, often describing one's physical appearance, are the norm on my mom's side of the family: Mom was Bones, her sister was Cork, and her brothers were Hokie, Jug Head, Banana Head, Juice, and Bing. I am not sure if Crinkles was an improvement from Dough Boy, a prior name given by Uncle Bing after gently poking my stomach. Bing was a World War II seaman and worked as a cook in the tight galley of the destroyer escort, U.S.S Price. His soft, affectionate nudges were not a reference to the doughboys of World War I, but about my indulgence in Wisconsin summer delights: double brats, German potato salad, rhubarb and black raspberry pie a la mode, and strawberry shortcake chased down with A&W root beer.

My heftiness was short-lived. During my thirteenth year, I sprouted 7 inches to reach 6'2" and became long-armed, awkwardly tall, and gangly thin. But three crinkles persisted. I continue to carry the venerable three as I age into my 60s. I embrace them as a pleasant reminder of crinkled time: curved recollections of Little Kids slipping grips, splashes, muddied creative play, and a formative bond with my cousins and brother.