

Digging a Hole to the China Sea

by Ray Nessly

On the street where I lived as a boy was a vacant lot. Dirt in the summer and mud in the winter, it was a rare patch of city earth, barren but for weeds and blackberry bushes. Patches of wild sorrel would pop up after a good rain, an herb that we kids learned to love for its sour taste. Who would've thought boys practically raised on sugar could love such a thing?

The vacant lot was on a corner across from our elementary school. After school and on countless weekends, there we played, because, like an all-purpose Hollywood set, it could sub for anything. A jungle, a spaceship. An African savannah, somehow overrun with slugs. A battleship, a fort. Anywhere that was not here. The players: kids, hopped-up on sugar and imagination.

One day, one of the boys (I like to think it was me) said we should dig a hole. To China, of course. Where else? And so we dug, in the middle of the lot, my two brothers and I taking turns with our dad's shovel, and Red, our friend, hacking away at the rocks with a pick.

Frequent breaks interrupted the progress, to admire uncovered treasure or poke at black beetles, and sometimes burn ants alive with Red's magnifying glass held between the sun and the ever-opening earth. Stuff some wild sorrel in our mouths and suddenly we were famous baseball players, chewing tobacco. Mantle, Maris, Yogi Berra, and the Babe, tormenting beetles and ants, digging a hole to the bottom of the world. Somebody's got to do it.

By the fifth day, the hole was about three feet wide and so deep that only Red, the tallest of us, could see out. Ears pressed to the dirt, we could hear the chatter of odd languages. Begging us to stop before it was too late, we imagined. Could sampans fall upward, sailing from the bottom of the Earth? If so, which way would their sails bend—up, or down? And would the strange China Sea follow

suit? Would salt water geysers spurt from the hole we dug, flooding the streets of Seattle? And when the oriental waters receded, would two-headed sea creatures be left stranded on our sidewalks, gasping for life, flopping their multiple tails against the curbs?

That would be cool! Keep digging, everybody!

By the seventh day of labor, according to my rough calculations, we'd dug one-billionth of the way to China. "Close enough," my brother Rolf said. Little Dirk, for his part, was afraid of yellow men and communism. Red was worried enough as is. His dad would surely spank him when he saw the pick. The bent blade, the big crack he'd made in the handle. "Let's stop," he said, "before things get even worse for me."

I, of course, wanted to keep on digging. But I'd been out-voted three to one. So we rode our bikes a mile to the bluff overlooking the bay, the view framed with madrona trees. Roots exposed, the madronas clung to the cliff, their papery bark sloughing in red sheets at the slightest touch of a boy's hand, falling to the rocky beach below. Somewhere, beyond Puget Sound, over the Olympic Mountains in the distance ever-crowned with eternal snow, somewhere beyond the receding curve of the Earth, lay the Orient. Because we'd put down our shovels and Red's pick, China was for now safe, and the streets of Seattle, dry, tainted with not one drop of the China Sea.

