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A Child's Treasure, Real and Imagined

When I was 7 or 8, "Treasure Island" and my own imagined variations on the theme, became my world. For the first time, I strayed from my eternal pictorial theme of cats, horses, and bears and struggled to draw people as I populated reams of paper with sailors and pirates.

When people seemed too difficult, Pirate Cat and Sailor Cat began their long battle in the flat, Crayola-tinted sailing ships. My little sister, Amanda, shipped out with me. She had to. It was the only thing happening. We yelled, "Storm at sea!" and jumped up and down on the ship - our parents' bed - until they told us to walk the plank before we broke the springs.

My knowledge of sailors included a lot of mythology and not much fact. I imagined the life of an honest sailor to be an endless battle to protect treasure chests from peg-legged pirates on deserted islands. When I finally obtained my own treasure chest, I felt I was a captain in my own right.

The treasure chest was actually an apple box. We bought apples in bulk, and they came in a large cardboard box decorated with designs like the swirling woodgrain patterns of a treasure chest. The box even had a picture of a heavy padlock on the front, which gave it, I thought, an air of value and secrecy. "Treasure Chest Apples," it said in flowing writing.

My mom said I could have the box when we had used all the apples. Suddenly I developed a taste for apples, or I tried to. Amanda helped. So did every unsuspecting relative who dropped by.

Only the most precious objects could go in the treasure chest, which still smelled like apples. At first, these objects included the brightest rocks from my collection, glass jewelry, and the treasure maps Amanda and I drew: all the things the pirates wanted so desperately to steal from me. Our friend Willie sat on the treasure chest and made a crack in the lid. Willie, who was younger than we were and therefore always had to be the cabin boy, scrubbed the aft deck as penance. Later, the glass bead necklace (pretending to be amber) seemed tacky. I took the "jewels" out of the treasure chest and stored my sailor stories and illustrations in it instead.

Over the years, I never threw away a story or a picture. Everything went into the treasure chest. By the time I was 12, the treasure chest was full. To

anyone else, this mass of crayon drawings, paintings, and story fragments, arranged into two stacks that slumped under their own weight, would seem chaotic. But to me, when I had my 12-year-old cleaning frenzy and sorted through the entire box, it was like digging through my mind to find all the memories of each year.

Amanda was excited. She said, "You're sorting the treasure chest? Can I watch?" As she sat beside me, we could tell each other long stories we remembered about each picture.

On top was an advertisement showing Mr. Spock on a collector's edition plate, cut from a magazine, reminding us of our Star Trek phase, when our old barn turned into the starship Enterprise.

Under that, we found a raggedy envelope that contained a whole village of characters. We had always wanted to make toys, and since we didn't have a factory, we drew our toys on paper, glued them to cardboard, and wrote their names on their backs. The special ones - the wizard king, the blue cat named Sapphire - we glued onto gold cardboard.

Farther down, we dug up the horse stories, and pictures of my imaginary champions, Black Storm and Avalanche. Here also were love notes back and forth between Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere, who had once, somehow, been trapped in the playroom of our little church.

We found more notes, this time between Sherlock Holmes and Watson. I remembered how resolutely they had tried to solve that murder, while the whole time my cousin, who was visiting us for a week, talked so loudly that the great detective found it distracting. Holmes hid his notes in a knothole in the ancient wall of our cabin, and our cousin kept asking what all those top-secret notes were about, little suspecting that she was on the scene of a ghastly crime.

Digging down to the bottom of the box, we found the sailor pictures that had started the whole thing. The sailors' faces now seemed flat and unrealistic, and the ships usually had only one mast, but we could still feel the drama as pirates swarmed aboard and sword fights raged on the deck.

Sorting through the box took us several hours. In the evening, we carefully replaced all the brawling pirates and galloping horses and slid the cardboard lid over the box.

The picture of a padlock protected a treasure more valuable to us than pirate gold.