"keep out" had meant keep out!

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In the summer of 1955, my seventeen-year-old aunt, Rosemary, convinced my mother to let me get a work permit so I could work in the fruit packing sheds. I was more than willing; a dollar an hour was a lot of money to a fourteen year old. The packing sheds were pleasantly cool during our scorching mid-June weather and they had a deliciously spicy aroma, like that of winter apples packed in straw. Our work days were regulated by a loud whistle: it blew to start our day; it blew to release us for lunch; it blew to call us back after lunch; it blew to let us go at the end of the day. There were probably only three or four hundred women working in the packing shed, but to me it seemed as though there were thousands of us standing in long rows with constantly replenished boxes of cherries in front of us. Our job was to create "fancy pack" boxes of fruit. A fancy pack meant that the fruit in each box was to be unblemished and of equal size. The cherries were gently placed, rounded side down, into a purple cherry sized egg-carton-like form in the bottom of the box. As I packed, I daydreamed that my carefully packed, beautiful rich dark red Washington Bing Cherries would be purchased and served by some wealthy, appreciative New York hostess.

On our lunch breaks, it was difficult to find a shady place to eat, and the hot sun only felt good for about five minutes after the coolness of the shed. It seemed that every patch of shade was filled before one of our group could race out and claim it. During our Thursday lunch break, my second week on the job, Rosemary, Sharon, Peggy, and I went exploring. The packing sheds were all on dead-end streets close to the Columbia River and alongside the railroad tracks. This was Rosemary's second year at the packing sheds. She told us about an old boarded-up building that she had glimpsed last year. It was about a hundred yards to the northeast, beyond the shed where we worked, and behind some outbuildings. We walked between two of the packing shed outbuildings and waded through thigh high ripening wild rye to reach the building. It was almost

on the riverbank. "KEEP OUT" was an invitation to enter, and access was easy for young agile girls. We simply walked up the splintering decaying loading ramp and climbed between the boards that were loosely nailed over the wide, open loading door.

It took our eyes a moment to adjust to the dim light of the interior. We were in an old, old warehouse. It somehow felt as though it should be treated with reverent quiet as though we were trespassing on something otherworldly. Close by we found some long abandoned, beat-up, old wooden boxes and dragged them into a circle for seats so we could eat in reasonable comfort. At first, that warehouse seemed like the answer to a young girl's prayer. It was cool, out of the hot sun, and private. Gradually I became decidedly uncomfortable. I kept thinking that I heard and felt a subdued thud, thud, thud through the floor. The longer I was in that place, the colder I became, until I was wearing sleeves of goose bumps on that hot summer day. I tried to get the others, Rosemary and Sharon and Peggy, to hush for just a moment or two and listen to the thud, thud, thud, or at least try to feel the slight vibration in the floor.

But Rosemary, who knew that my favorite author was Edgar Allen Poe, quipped, "Hey, Jute-box, what was the last story of Poe's that you read."

I somewhat sheepishly admitted that it was "The Tell-Tale Heart." Rosemary and the others laughed, not with me, but at me.

Rosemary remarked, "I have never quite figured out how such a scaredy-cat could enjoy Poe for bedtime reading."

They all exploded into renewed raucous laughter, and I blushed to my toes and shut my mouth. While the older girls, who had a habit of talking over and around me, finished their lunch, I took the opportunity to wander around the warehouse as I munched my sandwich. Dust motes danced in musty air that had a damp decaying odor. In the distance, I could see a few shadowy hulks of tables or benches canting in crazy broken angles. Several battered wooden boxes, like the ones we had used for seats, were scattered about, and one wide shelf had nearly completed its descent off the wall to join others heaped upon the floor. And I was positive that something was thumping beneath my feet.

I rejoined the others just as they were finishing lunch. They made the

decision that we would treat ourselves to the pleasure of eating in this cool warehouse frequently. We began walking around investigating 'our' warehouse. I can still see the interior of that building, a vast shadowy, echoing, windowless cavern that I thought was cold, even with bright slashes of golden sunlight stabbing between the ill-fitting rough grey board siding and the holey roof to lie in slanting radiance across the dust covered floor. The central area was interrupted at regular intervals by huge wooden support pillars. I could see two pillars that had fallen to the floor and others seemed to lean at drunken angles. As we walked about the immense space, our thunderous footsteps reverberated on the ancient wooden plank flooring and left erratic happy girl footprints in the previously undisturbed thick dust; our loud words and high pitched girlish giggles echoed back from every distant corner to be absorbed by the soaring roof. Beneath the roof there were enormous crisscrossing naked beams festooned with an elaborate system of ancient wood-and-metal pulleys and massive rusty chains that spread like a giant spider web and took the place of a regular ceiling.

I did not like that place, and despite their laughing at me, I think that some of my unease had rubbed off on the others. While we walked, the floor continually creaked and groaned. Occasionally I had a vertiginous sensation that the whole building swayed. Suddenly we all felt the floor quake and tilt beneath our feet. There were involuntary startled gasps of, "Oh!" "Did you feel that?" "What?" "Huh?" "What happened?" "Oh my God!" And then, as the reality of what had happened registered, we started running, pounding across the room as though the "Hounds of the Baskervilles" were in hot pursuit. The light-rimmed door to safety seemed to be an immeasurable distance away. We had only taken about twenty running steps when we were stopped in our tracks by the wildly quaking tilting floor; the walls and roof threatened to fall in on us. The entire building was noisily shaking on its foundation like an unsteady edifice built of tinker-toys. The floor gave a final enormous groan, followed by a thunderously loud boom as a distant support pillar crashed to the floor, and then Peggy, who had been one step slower to stop than the rest of us, had one leg dangling beneath the floor while the rest of her was sprawled across the top. At first, from the discordant clanking of the chains high overhead until the groaning and tremors of the floor died away,

we just stood where we were on trembling legs, trying to breathe through our fear with our thudding hearts pounding almost audibly in our chests. We slowly pivoted around and looked at each other for some kind of reassurance that what had just happened hadn't. We finally, reluctantly, focused in riveted horror on Peggy who was both in-and-on the floor. Then, without a word being said, we collectively, stealthily, edged away; we wanted to be in a safer place, away from Peggy with her leg through the floor.

Then Peggy, who had had the air knocked out of her, began sobbing, moaning, wiggling, and scrabbling at the floor, in an effort to get free; the terrible groaning and moving renewed, and Peggy's body began to slide further to her right until her entire right leg was in the steadily widening hole.

Rosemary hissed at Peggy, "Hush and be still while we try to think about what we can do."

To give Peggy credit, she subsided into rigid stillness and nearly silent weeping. It was agreed that since we were where we had absolutely no business being, going for an adult to help was out of the question. Anyway, we didn't think that Peggy could wait that long. It was decided that I would have to be the one to rescue her.

Wondering what explanation I could give my mother for my filthy clothes, I laid my elected and reluctant self down on the dusty, creaking, groaning floor. I slowly wiggled and squiggled my way out to Peggy. Creeping along, spread out almost flat on the floor, I could feel the rhythmic vibration that occurred with every subdued thump I heard. I feared with every wiggle that the floor would vanish beneath me. When I reached Peggy, I extended my hands and arms to her. Peggy was scared; she convulsively grasped my hands and crawled up my arms drawing me to her rather than her coming with me. Peggy was pudgy; she weighed a ton. It felt as though we were playing a very serious, silent, life or death version of tug-of-war on a floor that continued to creak and groan with the least tiny movement. Small portions of the floor around the hole fell to make a nearly silent splash below, and the hole grew.

I yelled at Peggy, "Stop yanking and pulling on me or I will leave you here to fall the rest of the way through the floor."

And the floor quaked.

She must have seen the resolve in my eyes because she calmed enough to unquestioningly follow my instructions and explanations. Holding onto her hands, I helped her roll over onto her back so that she could later lift her leg out of the hole, then we slowly pivoted to the left as far away from the hole as we could get. Peggy moved only when I said and how I said. She spread-eagled herself so that her weight was evenly dispersed over as much of the floor as possible. Eons later, by doing a weird mated crawling crabwalk, I had inched a scared and shaking Peggy out of the hole and onto seemingly solid floor. Aside from being covered in ancient dust, the right leg of her slacks a bit torn and a little bit bloody, Peggy was in remarkably good condition. Her white tennis shoe had even stayed on her foot.

Once Peggy was out of the hole and on solid flooring, she lay sobbing with relief. Flushed with the triumph of my successful "rescue" operation, and filled with the ignorant overconfidence of youth, I turned my back on Peggy and without thinking twice I crept back to peek through the hole she had punched in the floor. I remember wondering, "What in the world caused that tiny splash I heard?" While the rescue had been going on, I continually told myself, "If the whole floor gives way, at the most, we may fall six or so feet to solid ground. We might be hurt but we will be rescued." Instead, when I crawled back to look down into the hole through three inch thick flooring planks that had rotted black from the bottom up, I looked down, down, down, and down.

Underneath the floor where I lay, seen with the aid of rays of sunlight piercing the broken foundation, there was a black oily sheen of water, not still stagnate water but alive and moving water, and then I could hear it, the swish, swish, swish of the Columbia River in a place where it should not have been. The river's hungry maw was waiting for me. It wanted to swallow me whole, suck me under and maybe disgorge my drowned and water soaked body miles downstream, if ever. I found the solution to the subdued thump, thump, thump I had heard and felt. A huge water-logged timber was floating in the water, bumping against the other support timbers, and shaking the entire building with every thump. My horror-struck eyes saw that the river filled the entire area beneath that warehouse floor. Then I realized that the whole building upon whose floor I was lying was standing in an unstable Jell-O-like sea of mud.

We slowly, quietly, cautiously tip-toed out of "our" old boarded-up warehouse and abandoned it.

The return from lunch whistle had long since blown, and lengthening shadows told us it had grown late. We never returned to work that day. Rosemary frequently asked me what I had seen in that hole that had turned my normally rosy complexion to a pasty grey; I never told. We never again ventured anyplace close to that boarded up warehouse, but I was constantly aware of it. We found a small shady niche at the north end of our packing shed where we ate our lunches. Sometimes I thought I could feel a faint thump, thump, thump through the ground beneath my feet.

Later, I discovered the story connected to the warehouse. When the warehouse was built, they dug a pit beneath the warehouse and a channel to the Columbia River about forty feet away; loads were lowered through the warehouse floor onto barges and then shipped via the river. In anticipation of the completion of the first stage of Rock Island Dam in 1933,* and the higher river levels it would bring, the channel from the warehouse to the river was filled in and the warehouse, with the pit still beneath it, was boarded up and abandoned. Over time, the river eroded a tunnel through the soft fill dirt and then it flowed into the pit beneath the warehouse, filling it to the new higher river level while leaving a thick, solid, twenty foot long land bridge on top of the tunnel.

That single horrified frozen glimpse by my girlish eyes through a hole in a floor, in a place I should not have been, at a river where it should not have been, was the most frightening thing that I, a water lover, have ever seen or heard. "KEEP OUT" had meant **KEEP OUT!**

*Rock Island Dam was the first dam to span the Columbia River.