

Sunflowers | Brandon Robak

There were salt mines under Scout's hometown. She never thought about how far they reached; she lived on the north side of Hutchinson, but they could span the city. No one really knew. She learned about them in elementary school and like everyone else in town pretty much forgot about them. But it's not like there was anything else interesting about Hutchinson. Sunflowers, cattle, a community college. The same as any city in Kansas. She wished she was from Wichita, the home of America's airplanes and legendary frontiersmen. People from Wichita probably wished they had salt mines under their city so what good did it do to wish.

Scout's younger brothers thought about the mines more than her. They were in that unit of school now. Brady was determined to find one in the backyard. He dug holes all around the property. Sometimes in the neighbors' backyards. Dad had to go to every house on Random Road and apologize. No one really minded. Kids will be kids or something like that. Scout was never like that but she found herself wondering what would happen if Brady actually found one.

Brady was working on a new hole by the Fairgrounds. It was bigger than any he had dug before. He said he had a sense. A vision. A prophecy. He was an eight-year-old with an active imagination, but Scout wouldn't be the one to stop him. She wondered if he'd ever find a mine. She hoped so. What a story it would be to tell at school the next day. Not as cool as if she'd been the one to find it.

Scout stood out in the field by the Fairgrounds with Brady to her left and Carson to her right. All three had shovels with red handles. The boys continued digging while Scout stood with her right foot planted on the shovel's head in the ground. She wanted to give them orders, it was only natural with her being the oldest sibling. She restrained.

She dug. And dug. She worried about powerlines but saw them overhead. She dug.

The boys dug too. And nothing happened.

That night at dinner Brady couldn't stop talking about the hole. It was getting bigger now. It was wide enough that you couldn't jump over it and deep enough for Brady or Carson to hide in. Scout was still too tall for it.

Her friends at school asked her about the hole. Not so much asked as teased, she felt. They didn't see the vision.

She stopped talking about it to anyone outside of her brothers. The deeper it got, the less she'd say about it. Until she could stand in it and not be seen. She at least told her parents then.

They thought it was interesting but stop digging on the Fairgrounds or the cops will get you. What really was the worst that they could do? Sure, maybe she knew better but her brothers were young. They were just kids. They didn't know any better or something like that.

Scout kept digging. Even when Brady and Carson started to lose interest, Scout kept digging. It felt like her life's mission to dig that hole. Something would turn up if she kept going, she just wasn't sure what.

The sun started going to bed later. It sent fire through the sky. That was her favorite time to work. No one bothered her because no one knew she was there. There was one time when Mrs. King walked her dogs nearby, but she didn't question it. That was the good part about being weird, Scout thought. No one would bat an eye if she did something out of the ordinary.

She liked digging. It cleared her head. The leaves started changing colors and she kept going, now making a cubby on the side. The earth was cold when the sun wasn't shining directly on it. Besides the ladder she borrowed from her parents, she started taking smaller items down with her. Eventually there was a table and two chairs, a cloth, a kerosene lamp from her grandpa's chest. She made a bookshelf with plywood and brought down her favorite adventure stories. She liked decorating the hole. It became her very own escape. An underground treehouse.

The snow started melting and Scout started feeling older. Brady and Carson celebrated their ninth birthday over winter break and Scout her thirteenth by the time the ground got softer. No one came to her party. She started digging again that spring, searching for something, but she didn't know what. Someone must have seen her out in the field because rumors started swirling around school. She was trying to dig up graves to use in her satanic rituals. She lost a bet to some upperclassmen, and this was her punishment. She was slowly going insane, and this was the only way to keep her from murdering everyone in the town. She didn't mind what they said.

Brady and Carson came to visit her one day that spring and they were there to witness it. If they weren't, it was unlikely anyone would've believed her. Scout had found a salt mine.

She made the boys run back to the house for flashlights, and by the time they came back she had dug a space wide enough for them to get through. She led the way in, light filling each crevice of the tunnel and exposing the grey tint of everything. It was remarkably cool and dry in the old mine. Brady asked to lead the way; it was his idea after all. Carson suggested they split up and report back to each other. Scout ignored them both and kept exploring.

The kids were late for dinner. It wasn't like them to be late. They came home a few minutes after six, each covered in a white dust. Mom figured out it was from the hole and forbade Brady and Carson from going anywhere near it. Scout just got a stern talking-to, but it was enough for her to leave it alone for a few weeks.

She returned after she found out that Brady and Carson began telling their classmates about what they had found. There was a little boy there standing on the edge and peering down into the darkness. He had to be younger than her brothers, maybe a second grader. She asked what he was doing, and he just said that he was looking. He heard about Brady's vision, something she hadn't heard since last year. It was her vision now. It had consumed her. It was her life's mission to find what secrets lie in the hole.

She told him that and he understood. It still made her angry that Brady thought it was his idea. Maybe it was once, but he couldn't claim it anymore.

The little kid left and Scout went into the hole. She made it to the mine entrance and rubbed the little bit of dirt off her t-shirt. She was about to enter when she noticed a boy in the tunnel. His back was turned to her but he looked to be about her age. Scout didn't know what to do. How did he get down here? How did he find out about this place?

"Hello?"

The boy whipped around, a terrified look in his eyes. "How did you get down here?"

"What do you mean? I dug this hole..."

"You're Scout?"

"Yeah."

"I've heard so much about you."

The boy motioned for her to follow him deeper into the mine and took off without seeing if she was coming or not. She followed closely behind. He started by telling her what everyone was saying about her. A mix of stuff she heard before and things she was certain that Brady or Carson started. She asked where the boy went to school. Trinity was his answer. No wonder she didn't recognize him. He turned down an off-shoot of the main tunnel and settled down in the space. Scout followed his lead and sat down on the salty floor.

"How long have you been coming down here?"

She thought for a moment. "I could ask you that same thing."

"A week."

"How come I've never seen you?"

The boy shrugged. "Good at blending in, I guess."

She made a noise somewhere between a scoff and a laugh. "Me too." They caught each other's eyes for a split-second. He looked away first. "What's your name? You know mine."

"Benedict. Most people call me Benji and I don't know why."

"I won't, don't worry. Ben okay?"

"Hm, yeah."

They sat in silence like that for what seemed like hours.

Scout was the first to break the silence. "Why do you come down here?" Apparently that took a lot of thought for him. When he finally did get the courage to speak, it was not what Scout expected.

"I should go."

"Did I say something?"

"No, I just need to go." Ben stood up. "Can you find your way out of here?"

"Uh... probably."

"Okay, cool." He walked towards the exit. "Same time tomorrow?"

Scout followed his movements unsure what to say.

"Uh... yeah."

"Bye, Scout," and he was gone.

Scout scolded her brothers for starting rumors about her, but they pretended to play dumb. Plus, they were

starting to die down anyway. A new family would move to Hutchinson, or some high schooler would be busted for putting vodka in their water bottle and that's what everyone would talk about. Scout was old news and she liked it that way. Each day after school she would go directly to the hole and meet Ben there. It became a routine and Scout liked routines. Her parents thought it was part of her weirdness.

He started bringing his favorite adventure novels to add to Scout's collection. Sometimes they would pick out books for each other, venture deep into the mine with the kerosene lamp, and read for hours. These were Scout's favorite days.

The schoolyear ended but the arrangement with Ben continued on through the summer. Scout felt closer to him than anyone before. Every day when she walked up to the hole she saw Ben in the distance surveying the sunflowers. She asked him why one day when they were in the mine. He said he thought they were pretty and asked if she knew that they can absorb radiation. They'd be helpful for the nuclear fallout. They shared a laugh about that. He asked what her favorite flowers were, but she wouldn't say.

The next day when she arrived at the hole Ben was nowhere to be found. She descended the ladder and went into the cubby to pick out a book for the day when she noticed two large sunflowers waiting on top of the makeshift shelf. She grabbed them and called for Ben as she entered the mine. She found him in their usual spot and he was excited that she found the flowers.

"Did you pick these for me?"

"Yeah. They're on public property, though, so don't tell the State of Kansas."

"My lips are sealed."

Scout settled in and opened her book but found herself rereading the same paragraph over and over. She readjusted herself so she could watch Ben and pretend to read. His brows furrowed, he gasped, he couldn't turn the pages fast enough.

The day after there were more sunflowers waiting for her. It continued on like this for a week until Scout finally asked him to stop or he'd accidentally kill all of them.

August was always the hottest month on the plains. Scout and Ben would meet at the hole just as the sun began peeking over the grain silos and mid-century ranches that made up the Hutchinson skyline. They would spend the whole day in the mine; it always seemed to stay a cool 65 degrees no matter how hard the sun was shining.

Eventually they ran out of books but neither of them minded. It gave more time for Scout to ask invasive questions and Ben's palms to get sweaty as he tried to wriggle his way out of answers. She would tell him not to fight it and eventually she began to crack his shell. Occasionally he would ask a question back. Like today:

"Have you ever been in love?"

It was Scout's turn to try and avoid the question. "I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know? You have to know. I know."

"Well, have you ever been in love?"

"I'm not telling. I asked first, Scout."

Scout looked down at her shoes against the white salty floor. She tried to dig a hole with her heel. "Maybe." She looked up at him and his eyes were on her. She looked down at her shoes again.

"That's not an answer."

"That's the best answer I have."

The next day when Scout arrived at the hole, she found two sunflowers on the bookshelf. She smiled and grabbed them before running into the tunnel calling for Ben.

She made it to their special hideout, but he wasn't

there.

“Ben?” Scout called frantically, searching around the abandoned mine for any signs of life. All she found was a moth. Maybe he was just running late.

She waited in the tunnel for hours. She refused to read her book until he was there; it just didn't feel right. She didn't go home for dinner. She would wait as long as it took for him to show up. He could always just be running late. Eventually she fell asleep. When she woke the kerosene lamp had run out. She grabbed the backup flashlight out of her backpack and set off towards the exit of the mine. She needed food and they had begun to build a stash in the hole in case of emergencies.

She reached the exit of the mine and before she was out, she noticed it. A letter where the sunflowers were left yesterday. She rushed over to it and tore it out of the envelope. She read it. And reread it. And reread it again. And finally put it back on the shelf where she found it. She grabbed a granola bar out of the stash and her shovel out of the corner. She walked back towards the salt mine and ate the granola bar as she stared up at the sky. She took the sunflowers out of her backpack and carefully studied them. They were dying, but still beautiful, she thought. When she was done eating, she picked up her shovel and began digging. She dug. And dug. For what seemed like hours. The hole was getting deeper but she didn't care about that anymore. All she wanted was to close up the entrance to the salt mine. That's what she did.