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Introduction



While sitting at the desk in my home office, I glanced over the top of my computer monitor and out the window. As usual, it was raining. There was no activity on the street in my quiet neighborhood, and I could see that the lawn needed mowing. Some things never change.

Then, over the sounds of rain outside, I heard the patter of tiny feet making their way down the hall. “Hey,” I called through the half-open door. “What’s happening?”

“So, how many, Grampa Dick?” she asked impatiently. “And here, you can fix this,” handing me a pile bricks and a bent wheel from a broken Lego wagon that appeared beyond repair.

“How many *who*? What?” I replied.

“How many islands are there?”

“Where?”

“In the lake.”

“You mean Lake Washington?” I replied, now stalling and searching for a legitimate response as well as a way to steer the subject away from something I knew nothing about. I wondered where she had come up with such a question. Her queries were always thought-provoking and many were bizarre. This was maybe the wackiest. Left field. I guess that’s where it came from.

“Like, how many islands? That’s what I want to know. Mom said there were some.”

I was baffled. “Well,” I pondered in my deep voice as if I really knew, “I know there’s one big one. It’s tied to a floating bridge.”

“Is that the only one?” she asked without pause.

“No. There’s another little one, tied to the other floating bridge,” I responded.
“The floating bridges keep the islands from floating away?”

If this were the Olympics, her questions would rate a perfect score. Wish I could say the same for my replies which required much thought. “I suppose. We haven’t lost one yet”

“An island?”

“No, a bridge. Well, neither. Hmm. On second thought, I think we have lost some bridges. Maybe some islands too.”

“Where’d they go?”

“Uh—”

“So, two?”

“Two what?”

“Two islands?”

I scratched my head. I know about floating bridges. What’s not to know? They float. Well, most of the time at least. I even remembered something about a floating island. I think it’s called a dirtberg. Not an iceberg but a dirtberg. But I was pretty sure she wasn’t talking about one of those. “Yeah, two,” I said finally.

“What are their names?” she probed.

“The big one is called Mercer. The other one is Foster, I think.”

“How’d they get those names?” she asked without missing a beat.

This cross-examination had swiftly exhausted my knowledge. I whistled softly, defeated again. I think I was lost after *how many who, what*. I was now stuck. And I knew she wouldn’t accept my guessing. She could tell in an instant when I was unsure of myself. I was now beyond unsure. She felt it like a wild animal senses fear in its prey. I think she got it from her mother whom with just a quick glance in my direction, could thrash any argument I happened to be making at the time. Just a glance. Didn’t have to say a word but the eyes spoke volumes. The implicit message was something like, “Come on fool, you’re old enough to know better than that.” I think my granddaughter has those same eyes.

I did not know how many islands there were in the lake. But not only that, I had no idea where they were, what their names were, where the names came from or even if they were floating. As I contemplated my meager knowledge, her attention began to waver. Responding to my painfully slow answers, she sighed. I had exhausted her already short attention span, my opportunity passed. Turning

her attention inward, she gazed intently at the broken rubber tire, slowly rotating it in her small hand. Then, without another word, she climbed down from the chair and walked out of my office.

And so it started. The next day I hit the library and started reading. Day after day, week after week, I researched the question. I shared my stories with her. And finally, when my findings seemed to satisfy her curiosity, I wrote it all down.