

## Home Grown

I enjoyed a charmed childhood, nurtured in the Mississippi mud of America's heartland. St. Louis was a lovely mid-western city, with museums and public libraries to wow any child. Wide, tree-lined avenues still hosted street cars...and childhood dreams. Both exterior and interior neighborhoods thrived in this remarkable time and place.

For a young girl, it was all play. During timeless and agile afternoons I jumped rope and hop scotched and hung upside-down from elm branches hanging over our front porch. My brothers and I played hide 'n seek and kick the can, and on wilting summer days the Good Humor man would come around, ringing that bell we knew so well, and we'd gather our pennies and see how far they'd go.

During my childhood we lived in a huge pre-civil war stone mansion, retrofitted as faculty housing for the private school where dad worked. My room had a turret and curved windows and a balcony that looked out over my daydream world. The kitchen was cavernous, with floor to ceiling glass-encased cabinets, a walk-in pantry and bulky breakfast nook; a sizeable formal dining room was adjacent, framed by leaded and beveled windows. Seven fireplaces warmed three levels. There were two living rooms plus a third on the second floor. Another was turned into a playroom on the top story and held books and games and the infamous pool table. The third floor also held an ancient and enormous claw-footed tub. It sat right in the middle of an immense, square bathroom with black and white tiled floors and French windows looking out over rooftops. It was here I once left a bloodbath when the night before leaving for summer camp on Lake Michigan, I first shaved my legs with Dad's single-edge razor. Are all firsts so traumatic?

On lazy Saturday afternoons, Mom took us to the museum where we'd pose with sculptures, make up names for the paintings, eat strawberry ice cream in the museum cafeteria, and then afterwards roll down the grassy knoll across the parking lot. In winter we'd button up and sled down that same hill, making snow angels and having snowball wars.

I loved the squirrel that dad brought home one day in his pocket. He took it to his office for weeks, and I would visit him after school to see the furry creature – which when not pocketed lived out on the ledge. I guess mom wouldn't let him keep it at home. I loved my dad's office, up the grand circular stairway in the administration house on campus. I loved its panoramic view and how it smelled and how neat it was and how whenever I was there I was daddy's little girl and got all his attention. I've had offices I loved almost as much.

Summers were the best, with sunny Huck Finn adventures along the banks of the river or painting the white picket fence that framed our old Victorian. I'm not sure if it was the city, my family, or my own wondrous world that nurtured my sense of adventure, maybe a combination, but I have been forever grateful.

I used to ride the bus to the public library downtown, and often to my dance or piano classes, but almost more than having my own library card or practicing Chopin, I loved the adventure of going somewhere. Still do. Watching people and daydreaming, I'd recite poems and songs, playing word games with myself. My imagination was enormous when I was young, so I had many fantasy friends. I hung out with pretend animals and a certain Indian boy named 'little Eaglefeather'. Together we sat on a mountain ledge, high above the canyon, and while cumulous puffs floated by, we would take on eagle vision and soar.

After a spring shower, when rainbows pooled up around the circular driveway, my neighbor, Timmy, would look for worms and eat them live. Once he ate my brother's goldfish. He just put peanut butter on it, and it swam down his throat. Timmy at nine read the Congressional Record and wrote his congressman every week, but I built leaf forts and hid away

for hours in the quiet of my own thoughts...unless there was a baseball game. In our family alone we almost had a team, and it didn't really matter because there were always enough for a game. I was bright and fearless then and only came in when mom called us for supper or the last pitch got lost in a soft dusk.

My second grade boyfriend, Johnny, taught me to ride a two-wheeler, and I used to do acrobatics, gliding down the street to his house, standing on the handlebars, wind catching my hair. It felt like flying. His sister, Sally, was the sister I never had, and Janie, his mom, made the best lemonade in the neighborhood.

Mostly I remember my swing – watching filtered light and shadows of leaves play on the purple ground as I hung upside-down, suspended by knees and heels, clinging to ropes and a home-made wooden seat. My brothers and I later morphed the swing into our neighborhood's first skateboard by adding the wheels from my roller skates. Still, for a while that backyard swing was a haven for passing aimless moments and provided a rich diversion for hours on dappled days.

One quiet afternoon my friend, Martha, and I were putting our bikes away in the basement when we saw a strange, sinister-looking man outside our house, peeking in the windows. Thoroughly scared, we hid breathless behind the coal furnace until he left. I don't remember ever going down there again until about a year later when Dad showed me a place on the wall which had been bricked over and told me stories about the slaves who had lived on the plantation and the tunnel they dug for over seven miles – from our basement to the Mississippi River.

The wildest storm I'll ever remember came later that year in the humid air of an early spring evening, turning the sky a strange pea green. Wind howled and windows rattled, and by morning the twister had passed, and the huge elm lay uprooted across the driveway, ripped out by its roots. For blocks, homes lay in rubble. Developers rebuilt the whole section over the next couple of years, creating a few blocks of jazz clubs and cafés they called 'Gaslight Square'. I couldn't wait to be old enough to have a boy take me there for dinner and hot music.

One twilight in seventh grade, I climbed the oak outside the kitchen window and heard my neighbor practicing his saxophone. I fell in love right then – with him, with my solitude and the music, with fireflies, dancing their magic in an early summer's nightfall. It was a child's love, full of fantasy and delight.

This piece was written as part of a memoir, the early years.