

Inside and Out

by

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The memories of the distinct grime of my youngest childhood summers leave a grubby, filmy ring around my mind. My three older brothers and I spent our playtime outdoors, back when asphalt was mostly the stuff of parking lots and not the roads near our house. A trip across the street threatened the white of socks, though, from May through September we were barefooted, and also sweaty with matted hair and filth in our skin folds. We yanked wild green onions from our front yard and played Running Bases in our neighbors'. We caught bumble bees in empty Maxwell House cans, put the plastic lids on, shook 'em up and let 'em out to see if the little buggers would fly. We played 1-2-3... *REDLIGHT!* on the driveway across the street. And well before the common luxury of professional landscaping, blowing dandelions in the yards lining our street could keep us busy for hours at a time, probably due to the self-defeating cycle we'd begun by

doing it. We swam in our pool to cool off, probably to clean off as well. But the grime - the worms, grass stains, splinters, sticky milkweeds, dead bumblebees - and the collective of we *four* was the fun most of all.

Along our street, we enjoyed mostly agreeable living, all of us welcome at each other's dinner tables. That is, save for a few occasions of discord, such as when my oldest brother threw (thereby injecting) a metal lawn dart into Kenny Mhar's right ass-cheek, or when one girl bit said oldest brother in the arm, inciting my mother to bite her back. The homes were close enough to one another that I could stand at my brothers' bedroom window while the neighbor boy stood at his, and we would toss a Slinky between the two. I did notice he stopped playing with me 'round about the same time my brother threw that lawn dart at his ass.

Keyport, New Jersey is generously a mile square - you can walk from any one point to any other within it and have traveled less than a dozen blocks. Our house on West 1st Street was a block away by crow from the Matawan Creek or the Raritan Bay, depending upon which direction that crow's flying. The scrub pine laden swamp situated behind our property blocked any view of either. Low tide put the "reek" in creek bed - the stench of it resembled crabby sewage seething with mildew - and became familiar enough to ignore. So, too, did the shrieking of gulls, hot on the hunt for crab leg feasts. Throughout summer, we'd breathe through our noses so as not to snack on the ever-present mosquitoes and the

no-see'ems. All summer long my brothers and I, we were inseparable. At least that's how I choose to remember it.

At the end of Washington Street, on the far side of the house adjacent to ours, there stood a gate made of wood and painted white. Washington extended about thirty feet north beyond that intersection at West 1st and became a dead end. The gate was an indicator of 'no passage beyond this point', though I don't think it was posted. Beyond the gate were the scrub pines and honeysuckles and Virginia creepers; colonies of frogs; hives of bees; God knows what else. I'm sure it was soft, swampy ground; most of the grounds near the creek were. It was Forbidden Ground, which - obviously - begged our attention. I don't know that we were specifically disallowed to venture back there - any rules I was given were handed down through the ranks of the three elders, likely distilled to some degree. At any rate and by whatever means the gate and that land were *verboten*.

Approaching it, we four were prepared with sure knowledge that the ghouls, or armies of men, or alien forces - whatever we'd pretended that day - were awaiting our arrival with sharp objects/guns/lasers. Surely, they would defeat us! But as we reached the gate, there was no ambush. There was no shooting, or bludgeoning; not a bit of fan fare. There was nothing. *Aha!* They must've been surprised by our advance! There was still a chance for a sneak attack!

One brother shimmied up and straddled the gate. Then another. There were the two of them, defiantly scaling Forbidden Gate! Breaching Forbidden Ground! Rules were getting broken! They couldn't do that; what would happen to them on the other side? Whichever brother was left straggling on the ground, to his credit, did try to help me up this enormous gate. But I was too scared - to break the rules, to see what was on the other side, to climb so high. With that, one brother from atop the fence jumped off to the beyond of the other side, while the other waited for the straggler to shimmy up. In no time, they, all three, were out of sight. Only just beyond the gate, they hadn't left me altogether.

On that day a cord was cut. More than ever, I feared the unscalable, impassible gate, yet, I needed to conquer it and the beyond that it secured. For the first time in memory, I was separate now from my only protectors - my brothers, who were conspicuously unfazed. I was wounded, damaged by their flagrant indifference. I'm sure I told on them, too.

Several times since, my brothers left me behind. They may have been trying to lose me all along and I had just previously proven too persistent. I didn't make it over the gate that or any other day. I was able to fit under it a few times, which had that deflating effect that missing the point often does. Before I began school at age five, we had moved away from that house on West 1st Street to the town I live in still. I've memories of

countless minutia of my brief and young life in Keyport, but that gate became lost among them.

In 1995, my grandmother died of Pancreatic Cancer. Since a year after her husband died of Lung Cancer, she'd lived alone in an apartment on Beers Street, less than a half mile from our old West 1st Street house. With the Funeral Service there in town, and the packing-up of her things from her apartment for several days after, I had opportunity to peel off from the pack for a quick drive by the old place.

The yard looked tiny now. The house appeared taller than I'd remembered it, but I could see it hadn't been structurally changed. I could see the window of my old room, and I could make out the edge of the Slinky window between the houses. I didn't remember that fence being there. The house was yellow - *had it always been yellow?* - and the sun shone on it brighter than I ever remember the sun shining when I was a kid. The street was wider now, I guessed since they'd paved it.

It took all of about a minute and a half to survey the area, but quite honestly, I didn't know what I was doing there. It was not as if it had been my first marital house, or some historic monument. It didn't hold any secrets, or conjure repressed memories of a childhood of abuse. There was none of that. My

visit there bored me. It was anticlimactic, really. *Nothing to see here.*

As I continued west toward Washington Street and approached the stop sign at the corner there, I was all at once overcome with an awareness of the dead end to my right. I actually gasped. It occurred to me then why I had come after all.

Alas, my gate.

I pulled right onto Washington, parked my car. I sat there, genuinely puzzled as I stared it down. Here I was: simultaneously twenty-three, concerned with etiquette issues, and three, with some conquering to do.

The first thing I noticed was how unimposing it was. How is it that *this* is the gate I had feared? Had it been replaced? The white paint was peeling, and probably had received several fresh coats over the years, but I got the impression it was the same gate. Only it was no more of a gargantuan guardian of the Forbidden Ground beyond it than my closet door turned out to be. The gate of my memory was nothing more than a simple gate, of the sort you might find on a horse fence at a ranch. It stood, perhaps, four feet high.

Upon getting out of my car, I made the obligatory site check. There was a sign now that read *No Trespassing*, but I was more concerned with my looking like a fool than any legal

ramifications of what I was doing. "It is easier to ask forgiveness than permission," daddy often said, and I did keep that in mind as I approached the beast. Oh, despite appearances, it was indeed a beast. It was my first obstacle of memory. I may as well have been Ahab - this was my Great White gate. Conveniently, it was my first real tryst with metaphor, as well.

I proudly straddled my gate on Washington Street, then pushed-off to the other side. After I extricated my shoe from the sticker bush into which it had fallen on my way over, I surveyed the grounds. Not at all a place I would consider fun now. It wasn't as overrun with scrub pines as I'd remembered, though honeysuckles and Virginia creepers were about. I didn't sink into the mucky ground, nor was I ambushed by ghouls, aliens or armies of men. The smell was abhorrent; no longer familiar enough to ignore. This place, though: it wasn't frightening. Its intrigue for me had been long evaporated, and supplanted by my more grown-up interests.

I'd seen enough to convince myself the beast was now tame. The Forbidden Ground, loosed. I was satisfied. The other side - the outside now - appeared every bit as bright and inviting as the inside had appeared dark and foreboding and had appealed to me as a small child. And I stood there very still looking out for several minutes, enjoying this scene, and my courage to change the ending of an otherwise stunted episode in my life; hoping

that guy getting his mail three doors down wouldn't catch me lingering there and approach me.

My first memories are from that house on West 1st Street in Keyport. I can surmise that I was not yet in school because I began Kindergarten here in the town I live still. My memories, they are vividly distinguishable as authentic, and muddy enough to blur out extraneous details. They are the potential instruments with which I may teach my own children, and from which I learn still.

Through the many lenses, though, the gate of my childhood greatly differs from the one of a chance encounter nearly twenty years later, and upon revisiting the memory nearly thirteen years still since then. The significance of the gate has skewed. Though the images remain the same, my perspective of them has developed from that of a child (outside) through my maturity (inside) to that of a mother, with lessons to teach (beyond).

I can only hope that my superior recall can offer me a practical perspective on the many gates my children will encounter in their lives - one that enables me to see them for what they really are (the gates, and the children); that they come to us for help scaling them. In the end, I can only hope for a better than average record of success raising them up or of learning from my own history. I can hope that we provide access to the right

answers even *most* of the time. In the end, the middle's what matters.

And, Lord, that I don't fail them miserably in my interpretation of the secret language with which they ask the questions, come what may.