

22 Bellevue Avenue

I returned to the old neighborhood caught up in 30 years of murky childhood memories where I spent the first nine years of my life. I drove hypnotically through shady, tree-lined streets, turning when some memory fragment survived the progress of reality, remaining as some kind of relic, pointing me toward my final destination. My recollections lived in a dream-like dusk, defying recognition in the bright sunlight of a summer day. But instincts pulled me along. An inner excitement mounted, but at the same time, a peculiar fear gripped me as if I was being sucked backward in time. I turned to look at my teenage daughter assuring that she still sat beside me in the car—my safe anchor to the present.

"Look, the old movie theatre, it's still there," I pointed, directing her attention to the art deco structure. "We're almost there. This is the way we used to walk to school. See—over there, behind that church is the alley we cut through."

I could see her trying to imagine my life before her, as a small child in this big city, walking to school with my older sister. She looked eagerly to where I pointed. A faint shiver tingled on the back of my arms when I remembered when the two older boys and their sister bullied us, pulled our hair and banged our heads together. I never understood why they didn't like us.

"Oh, my God! That's their house—the one's I told you about who beat us up." Seeing the large, white two-story house with the beautiful wood and beveled glass door shook loose another memory. How could I ever forget that door that loomed so massive before us. Two small girls, 7 and 9, stood there before it, trembling with fear as it opened, stammering as we told the parents what their children had done to us. They stood safely behind their mother, sneering at us. I knew it would just make them do it again—only the next time it would hurt more. We didn't tell our parents when it happened again after that. I couldn't even remember the children's names anymore—just the fear.

I turned onto Bellevue Avenue, the street we lived on. Anticipation coursed through my veins. I saw a bright winter day with snow drifted high against the sloping front yards. My sister was throwing snowballs at me, and I was crying. I begged her to let me get home fast—I must get home fast. But the more I insisted, the more delight she had in detaining me. Then I felt the warm liquid saturate my woolen leggings even though I squeezed my legs together as tightly as I could. I cried harder—embarrassed and frightened to tell my mother. My sister pushed me down in the snow, laughing at me, and ran home.

The car inched its way down the street. And suddenly, there it was. I recognized it immediately. The old, two-story double house was much smaller than the child remembered it. We parked the car and walked up the front walkway. I stood there a moment staring at the rough stucco front porch and cracked steps. The front door was crudely boarded up. I was filled with disbelief—the house was uninhabited, surrounded by a make-shift wire fence. It was undergoing a few, long-neglected repairs. A ladder leaned up against the side and an assortment of paint cans and tools lay haphazardly on the ground. There was no fresh coat of new paint, though, on the peeling window frames or walls. I wondered how long the things had lain there and whether anyone was really fixing up the place. Something about it seemed like those things had been there a while.

My daughter wandered to the back and found an opening in the fence. She called to me. I hesitated, looking around to see if any neighbors were watching us. Even though this was a crowded urban street, and it was Sunday, I saw no one. I followed her through the opening in the wire fence and noted that there was no longer a garage at the end of the yard. The foundation was still there, exposed and open to the elements. Grasses and weeds had long since reclaimed their rightful ground, pushing through the cracks in the crumbling cement.

The ancient pear tree still stood in the middle of the back yard. I could see my sister teasing our pet cat, and my mother telling her to leave it alone. She twirled around, holding the cat by its tail, then let it go. When it hit the ground, the cat ran off. We never saw it again.

"Come on, Mom, let's see if the back door is unlocked."

"No—no, I can't." I was engulfed by something overwhelming. My daughter came over to me and gently took my arm.

"It's OK, Mom. No one's here. No workmen seemed to be around, maybe because it's Sunday."

Cautiously, I approached the back door. Timorously, my hand wrapped around the doorknob. A bead of sweat trickled down my side. I turned the knob slowly—it was unlocked. I wanted to rush away from there, but I seemed riveted. I pushed the door open a small crack and took a breath. I glanced back at my daughter. Her eyes were wide, ready for adventure. I pushed the door open further. Blood pulsed through the veins in my ears.

Entering the room, my foot passed over 30 years of shadows into a kitchen crowded with ghosts. My body drifted inside, taking me with it. My eyes blinked back brightness too freely flooding the room, illuminating only the present, shadowing the remnants of my past. I felt like a fossil suddenly given life. I stood there trying to grasp the surge of memories whiplashing my eyes from one ancient spot to another, a crushing weight of thoughts spilled out in every direction. Memory fragments forced images through my eyes—mother standing at the kitchen door talking to the ice man—my parents arguing with my uncle—he curses, hitting his fist on the table—mother bringing in a cake lighted with birthday candles, we are all singing happy birthday—mother throwing a cup of coffee and father angrily walking out and slamming the door—my baby sister crying while father tells my mother to take care of her—the neighbor lady opening the door and throwing a flowerpot full of dirt into the room—mother running after her—father sending me into the yard to find a fresh switch from the pear tree for spitting on my sister—mother sipping coffee by the window talking to someone in the alley.

I braced myself against the onslaught of memories and the possibility of seeing someone there—a place I clearly didn't belong. The peeling, garish paint of orange, yellow, and brown on the cupboards and walls repelled me. I wanted to strip it away, return them again to the dull white they had remained for 30 years until that perishing moment. The sun revealed layer after painted layer of bad taste, intensifying the crude, dandelion-stained paint job.

Then I saw the same multicolored linoleum floor, scared pathways laid bare from half a century of shuffling feet. My revulsion peaked. The room seemed to slant ever-so-slightly the way very old, neglected buildings do. Or, in the reeling moment, had my memories heaved me so rapidly backwards that my senses warped?

The unsettling atmosphere drew me to the cellar, the darkest of my memories. Zombie-like, I crossed the kitchen to the cellar door. My daughter followed me in breathless silence. She slipped her hand in mine and pushed opened the unlatched door. Haltingly, my foot descended slowly to the first step. A tremor passed through me remembering the horror of a three-year-old boy whose father locked him there for punishment. The small sister's brine welled up and stung my eyes hearing the piteous screams and sobs muffled behind the closed cellar door, and my father's voice violating the same air that carried the boy's broken pleadings to let him out of the dark. Only then did I realize he was too small to reach the light switch.

The noon-time sunlight streamed through the small cellar windows lining the far wall. The monstrous steel furnace with snaking arms thrust into the ceiling, and the empty, darkened coal bins consumed the musty-smelling room. An ancient fear thrust my hand to the doorknob to escape.

"No, Mom, don't go. I'm here with you," my daughter whispered from behind me. She nudged me gently on. I wrestled my fingers free and descended. She skipped lightly passed me down the stairs. Her excited sense of adventure and curiosity lured me as I followed her into the intestines of that desolate, childhood house.