

## **What Might Have Been an Exciting Story Had it Not Been for Mrs. Murphy**

I was wandering the neighborhood, stepping on all the cracks in the sidewalk because my mother had shooed me out to play and there was absolutely nothing to do. It was that awful time of day just after lunch when everyone hides from the sun. Even shadows scrunch up as tight as they can under trees. Even colors suck into the siding so all the houses look bleached. The birds can't be bothered to twitter and only the buzziest of bugs are dumb enough to keep working.

All the bigger kids were still at school and the little ones were napping in their cribs. Dogs who usually greeted me with wagging tails for friendly petting sessions were holed up indoors or under porches. The only other person outside was old Mrs. Murphy across the street clipping her roses, holding the stems away from her so the thorns wouldn't snag her silky dress. She wasn't someone I visited on my usual rounds, but sometimes the aroma of her homemade cookies drew me to her door. I thought of the cookie jar shaped like a teddy bear setting on her kitchen counter and crossed the wide brick road to investigate.

I was reminding myself to stay on the sidewalk until reaching her paved walkway and not take the shortcut over her low hedge as I much preferred to do, when I caught a whiff -- not of cookies but smoke. Who would have a fire in their fireplace on a day like this? I turned in a circle to find the source and there, down at the end of the dead end street that ran along side our yard, I saw flames licking the window frame of our garage.

If I hadn't bothered to look both ways before heading back across the street, I would have been able to race over to get close enough to watch. I could even have been the one to run in my house to tell my mother that our garage was on fire. I could have helped to save it. "If it hadn't been for Steffie..." I could hear my mother say.

But just as my foot was stepping off the curb, Mrs. Murphy swooped in and grabbed my hand in her silky smooth grip.

"No dear! You stay here." Now Mrs. Murphy was neither my mother nor my babysitter, so really she had no right whatsoever to deny me attendance at this freak drama unfolding on my very own property. I strained to free myself, but I was no match for the strength of her fist clamped firmly around my little wrist. Besides, in her other hand she still held thorny roses and scissors, so I thought better of struggling.

Instead I whined and pleaded with my captor, looking on in frustration as the flames grew and mothers down the street left their houses and rushed up the hill towards our corner with perambulators and small children in tow as if they were off to the circus. It was certainly the most exciting thing I could remember ever happening on Malvern Road in Akron, Ohio in 1952.

Perhaps the neighbors on our side of the street were not as excited as they were concerned that the fire could spread to the field behind the garage, a field that bordered the backs of all their homes. The only thing that separated the field from all our yards was a narrow bumpy dirt trail we kids called Bouncing Betsy that started behind our house and ran down the hill. In the winter, after the first real snow fall, it earned its name as we all flew on our sleds down Bouncing Betsy over and over again.

This fire was a very different kind of thrill, and I needed to be over there witnessing what was after all my story to tell! Wouldn't it be wonderful to tell my brother John about it? And the older girls down the street who thought I knew nothing? But I could hardly see it at all from this distance because of Mrs. Murphy whom I had now decided was the meanest woman in all of Akron.

"No, Steffie, you stay with me," she answered my pleading. "Your parents wouldn't want you going over there."

How did she know what my parents would want? I fumed. My parents weren't like her. They weren't like anyone else on Malvern Road! They were like visitors from a more imaginative and lively planet who, no matter how long they stayed, would never make the effort to belong.

I loved my parents and felt a fierce pride in their specialness, and when the neighbors talked about them, I would hold my breath for fear of being hurt on their behalf.

Sometimes words were spoken with a certain regard: "Oh, the director of the Akron Art Institute. My! Isn't that something!" But it was respect said with a tight mouth, because the kind of art they showed at the Art Institute was, well...different.

As my parents were different, I suppose they were saying as well.

Though we lived in a simple two-story gray clapboard house with a regularly mowed lawn that was indistinguishable from others, the neighbors sensed that difference. Small things spoke volumes.

At the spot where our front walk met the sidewalk, for example, there was a permanent piece of modern art -- smooth rivers of lemon yellow, orange, violet and red set in the pocked concrete. Did passersby think Dad had created it? 'Well, he is no Picasso!' I can imagine them saying. "My three year old could have done that!"

A three year old did. That square of sidewalk was my chosen spot to sit hunched over my drawing pad, my left hand scribbling away. It was a perfect vantage point for all that might occur in my house and down in the neighborhood. I forgot to bring my crayons inside one day and they melted into waxy puddles. I am sure it was considered a permanent stain on public property.

Did they condemn my parents for being too lax when they would spot my brother John reading comics on the little roof of the front porch beneath his bedroom window? Did they fret he might fall or just feel that a roof is not for sitting? Certainly no one else sat on their roof.

Did we ever bother to explain our ever changing menagerie of family pets? It wasn't our fault that lost dogs tended to find our porch the most inviting. It was the one you see in front of you as the road widens and before you turn down to the rest of Malvern Road.

We kept the dogs until their owners would find our ad in the paper or we would find theirs. Those for whom no ad worked became, each in their own time, beloved members of our household. There was a spaniel named Champ, a beagle named Scoots, and a beautiful Irish setter who was claimed within a few days but made a lasting impression.

But perhaps the rapid turnover was disconcerting to the neighbors, not knowing where these dogs came from and where they went once gone. What did our family do with these dogs?

Is that why so few of my friends came to eat at our house? Their mothers would say, “Why don’t you just stay here for lunch, Steffie? I’m sure your mother won’t mind.”

The last of the keepers was Cinders, a black sheepdog mix with a clipped tail and gentlemanly manners. Had the neighbors only known that he would be a part of our family for fifteen happy years, perhaps they might have warmed to us a bit more. But we moved away not long after he arrived at our doorstep.

Maybe it wasn’t only stray dogs whose eyes were drawn to our house. It was after all in sight line of all our neighbors as they came home, making it a stage set for them to observe my parents’ elegant but raucous cocktail parties to which no neighbors were invited. My parent’s friends were painters, potters, architects, writers, designers -- exotic creative fascinating people, the likes of which our little neighborhood may well have found distressingly loose and leftist. At least one party I recall required thematic costumes – and it probably wasn’t even Halloween. I remember bare arms decorated with grease paint leaves and vines. Oh yes, that might have made an impression!

Was the organ music wafting from our house disquieting? Dad had rigged a vacuum cleaner in the basement through a hole he cut in the living room floor to pipe air in to pump the organ without pedaling. In his repertoire were turn-of-the-century ballads like *She Is More to Be Pitied than Censored*, about a young woman pregnant out of wedlock, something not usually talked about in our neck of the woods. Dad played and sang extra loud to hear himself over the drone of the vacuum.

Maybe the neighbors thought an organ should be reserved for sacred music. As the son of a minister, commandeered into teaching Sunday school throughout his adolescence, Dad certainly knew all the appropriate hymns. But in spite of his ability to quote scripture, he was by then a full fledged atheist and not prone to recreate the soundtrack of his church bound youth.

The neighbors no doubt noticed that my parents didn’t go to church, that our pale green Plymouth station wagon sat idle on Sunday mornings. Could they hear Dad yelling from their bedroom? “John! Stephanie! Would you two pipe down? It’s Sunday morning, for Christ’s sake!”

We always tried to be quiet because we really didn’t want to have him tearing downstairs to spank us for roughhousing and for having turned the living room upside down, rearranging the furniture to create forts. But construction is noisy business.

John actually did sing in the choir at the Church of Our Savior. Dad did not forbid us to go, and Mom subtly encouraged it, though she herself never went in some wifely act of solidarity. So John went with his friends, and I would occasionally go with mine, just out of curiosity to see if the God I knew could really be contained in a building.

Perhaps I added to the neighbors consternation when I would stand by myself on my special spot on the sidewalk, repeating “I am in God and God is in me” over and over again until that conundrum began to make sense, at which point I would fall on the grass giggling uncontrollably. A little Holy Roller church of one could well have been viewed with concern through any number of neighboring windows.

And why, they might have wondered, did I seem to spend so little time at home? Since they weren’t invited into our house, their imaginations could run wild, but it really was quite simple: I was bored. I was lonely. I even once ran away to school so desperate was I for companionship.

The elementary school was up the hill and across a bridge. Crossing that bridge only a block away was considered running away, but I was free to roam much further from home in other directions. Why wasn't the end of our street off limits where it came to an abrupt end and the earth gave way? Perched on the edge of a sandstone cliff, I would shiver with thoughts of hobo encampments in the bushes by the train tracks far below. I envisioned them, shambling and shiftless, with dead eyes and slaving mouths, like the boogiemens of my nightmares. Did these hobos really exist? Or was that just a tale told to neighborhood children to keep us from climbing down the cliff?

I was also allowed to cross the field behind our house to play on the huge old elm tree with its limber appendage known far and wide as Swinging Limb. It could hold a whole passle of kids at one time, and the more of us there were, the more movement the Limb would make up and down, forcing us to hang on tight or fall.

Beyond the tree was an old farm house, its inhabitants mysterious and vaguely threatening, and I had no desire to visit. Thus it seems my animal instincts circumscribed my territory more effectively than any threats from Mom could have done.

Like any other animal, I had no conception of the word trespassing. I traversed through backyards, clambered over stone walls and opened garden gates without a concern that anyone might take offense at my presence. I found hidden spots of fascination -- a copse of wilderness or a picture book little garden -- that I wanted to show Mom. But on the day I finally brought her along, pulling her hand through streets she'd never walked on, chattering happily with great anticipation, I was disappointed that she refused to trespass, let alone climb. Just because she was a grown up and I was child, she couldn't share my deepest pleasures. I felt so sorry for her!

The only playmates I had in the neighborhood were boys: Robert Ibarra, who accidentally hit me with the baseball bat I brought as a gift to his birthday party; Larry Jesinski who was a year younger and begged me to marry him, claiming that when we grew up he would be older than me by nature of his gender; and Bobby George, who smelled of peanut butter and irritated me no end.

Then the most wondrous thing happened: a girl just my age moved in a few doors down: Barbie Ness. I was over the top happy to have a girl friend at last! There had been older girls in the neighborhood, but for them I was just a doll to practice dressing up or a miniature model on whom they could do manicures. They would shoo me away when they grew tired of me, and they never let me join them at their private tea parties in the little circle of colorfully painted orange crates tucked back in a matted down patch of wild grasses in a cluster of maple trees across the way.

But now I had my own friend, just my size, and I spent as much time at Barbie's house as I possibly could. For me it seemed an exquisitely normal home, warm and inviting with brown and beige patterned fabrics, wall to wall carpeting and colonial furniture. It made my own house seem just okay. The hardwood floors were admittedly great for running around in stocking feet, especially since our living room, dining room, kitchen and hall were arranged so you could run forever in a circle, chasing each other endlessly, much to our parents' dismay. It had a sliding glass door out to the backyard, such an early innovation that the birds were constantly crashing into it, and John set up an elaborate fenced in animal cemetery in the field behind the garage.

My father had constructed a long low couch made of a foam slab upholstered in strong colored duck fabric set on plywood perched on iron pipe legs. They added modern

pieces as they could, replacing the hand-me-down furnishings from earlier in their marriage. But the overall effect just could not compare with the Ness's house.

Mrs. Ness sewed so beautifully that I still admire her handiwork every December when I pull out the red felt Christmas stocking she made me all those years ago, so carefully adorned with little trees, deer, bears, and a little pig with a slit to hold a quarter, all of them with beaded eyes and embroidered detailing.

Mom was concerned that this phenomenal Christmas stocking made my brother's limp flannel one look pathetic. So on the next Christmas Eve John was presented with a matching red felt stocking. To make it Mom had had to purchase her first pair of pinking shears, which stayed unused in our sewing box for years to come.

It was hard not to laugh when John and I laid the stockings side by side, mine perfect in every detail, his spotted with strangely shaped animals barely attached with clumsy stitches. My mother was not a woman who had much patience for embroidery or beading. Fortunately my brother was not a boy who cared what the outside of his Christmas stocking looked like, only how much it could hold.

I think that was the Christmas that Dad was also creating a special surprise. In our friends' the Hornbeins' basement workshop he labored every evening and weekend, and when I asked what he was making he would say, "A wooden Christmas tree."

My brother told me, "Dad just says that because you can't be trusted to keep a secret, you're such a blabbermouth." I could hardly take offense at something so true.

The 'wooden Christmas tree' turned out to be another couch with pale wooden legs and navy blue cotton upholstery, a light and elegant contrast to his previous effort. It replaced the ratty old pair of love seats that Dad and John pushed and pulled down the basement stairs. Mom had the idea of arranging them in an L shape on a 12' x 12' square of concrete painted a deep red meant to mimic a rug in the darkest corner of the basement. She thought this was a perfect spot for John and me to spend the evening watching our family's long awaited first television set. Certainly she knew that this was the very place where my recurring nightmares ended, with my hands clinging to the bars on the high windows as the giant spider, weaving steel webs behind it to prevent my return upstairs, closed in on me. Did she really think I would come down here at night?

Maybe it was the same Christmas that Mom had Dad make flocked footprints on the hearth. John only wanted me to believe in the things he told me, like that the J.C. in the J.C. Penney Co. sign that we passed on the way to visit our grandmother in Cleveland, stood for his name, John Culler. Believing in Santa Claus and the Easter bunny was for suckers. Mom however was determined that I have the fleeting childhood gift of belief. Unfortunately, it was too late for me, especially after John showed me the can of flocking in the cupboard, but I was deeply touched by her effort.

But enough about my boring family! Back to that miraculous Mrs. Ness who fixed Barbie and me deviled ham sandwiches for lunch. I had never before had this delicious canned concoction and begged my mother to buy some. But somehow at home it didn't taste the same, and I couldn't understand how Mom could fail to duplicate the experience to my satisfaction. She was a good if overly creative cook, but she lacked the magic glow of all things Ness.

In the summers Barbie and I practically lived out on the Ness' big screened porch fitted with carefully chosen cushioned outdoor furniture. At our house the room that had once been a screened porch had been glassed in. It served as my mother's office and was

littered with stacks of books and papers from all her various committees and involvements, the United World Federalists primary among them. She would peck away at the heavy black Underwood typewriter, a cup of black coffee and a pack of Chesterfield cigarettes ever at her side.

But it was the phone that made me feel so lonely. Made of heavy dull black metal, it may have been identical to everyone else's in the neighborhood but no one else seemed to make it so central to their lives.

For me it was only a way to call Tarbaby, the black cat who had been my garden nanny when I was a toddler, leading me up and down the rows of vegetables, never letting me wander too far from the house. Now Tarbaby had d-i-s-a-p-p-e-a-r-e-d, the first big word I ever knew, and was reachable, according to my all-knowing brother, by dialing random numbers in some obscure sequence until the phone would give out a siren sound, up and down in waves that did sound a bit like the meowing of our lost cat. "Where are you Tarbaby?" I would whisper into the phone. "I miss you Tarbaby."

But for Mom the phone was a lifeline. She would talk on it for endless hours, caught up in a dizzying whirl of words, while I tugged on the folds of her wide peasant skirt, begging attention.

I didn't have to beg at Barbie's. Mrs. Ness was as attentive to me as she was to her two daughters. Her home and children were her focus. I don't remember her ever not being there, or ever having other women friends over. And when Mr. Ness, an insurance agent, arrived home in the late afternoon, he would delight us by getting down on his hands and knees and giving us horsy rides around the carpeted living room.

This was a far cry from anything I could ever imagine my father doing. When Dad arrived home he settled into his Saarinen easy chair with his evening cocktail in one hand and his pipe in the other. I loved the smell of his pipe tobacco and the silky feel of his thin brown hair as I stroked it tenderly, sitting on the wide arm of his chair, while he relayed to my mother his day at work at the museum and she would tell of her conversations with friends, quoting verbatim in a way that seemed impossible to me.

While he did not give horsy rides, Dad did have other talents. He could on occasion be coaxed into entertaining us with his delightfully macabre recitations of the "The Cremation of Sam McGee" or stories like "Cecil the Sea Lion."

Cecil, pronounced Theethil, had an unusual appetite for a sea lion, and every day when the narrator comes home from school and his mother meets him at the garden gate, she has to tell him that 'Cecil has eaten your sister (brother, father, etc.). Each death is met with a shake of the head, a shrug of the shoulders, and a sigh, saying, "But what can we do? Cecil is the family pet."

Ultimately, with all family members except the narrator eaten, the story ended with "But what can you do? Cecil is the family graveyard."

I imagine now that these recitations had originally been crafted to entertain girls in high school and college, for they certainly weren't typical children's fare. But I enjoyed the treat of being the audience for my father's astonishing skills as a raconteur.

But still, Dad's performances were few and far between while Mr. Ness was on call as a raring to go bucking bronco every night.

And as if that was not enough, Barbie Ness had a little sister named Nicky who was perfect in every way. I begged my mother for a sister too, and she actually tried, but miscarried and named the baby Shelley because she cremated her in the fireplace. This is

what she told me, and I knew it was for me that she had done this because my father felt that one of each gender was plenty when it came to children, whom he considered ‘vocal vegetables’ until they reached an intelligible age. I was broken hearted but was comforted by Mom who said, “You’ll always be my baby now.”

She was wonderful, my mother, and it grieves me to think that the neighbors didn’t understand her. Living as we did at the top of the street, she might have remained a relative mystery, except that one of her dearest friends, Erianna Hornbein, happened to live toward the other end of Malvern Road. What did our closer neighbors think of this little girl they knew maybe all too well and her rather wild looking mother with a halo of frizzy red hair. Did such an unmanageable coif suggest an untamed character as well? I hope they could see from my behavior when I entered their homes that she was quite scrupulous about teaching us our table manners and other niceties. I even knew how to curtsy, though that seemed quite lost on the neighbors.

Mom didn’t believe in dressing up to clean house as so many of the women of that era did. Instead she wore cotton dirndls, peasant blouses and espadrilles not often seen let alone worn by other women along our street.

The most normal outfit she had was a navy blue sailor dress that she bought in a mother-daughter set. She liked me in mine, but would only wear hers if I insisted. What a relief when I outgrew mine! Anyway, I didn’t like it half so much as my red dress with the license plate under-slip. I was quite the bomb with the little boys in dancing school. The teacher would call out across the room, “Stephanie, please lower your skirt!”

Mom was quite near sighted but was determined to make her eyeglasses a fashion accessory. She wore every possible style, shape and color, leaning heavily toward patterns of leopard print or stripes. One pair came with a little case of changeable plastic color strips that could be attached to the glasses to match her outfits. When outdoors, she wore prescription sunglasses that made her seem more movie star than an Akron housewife.

But even the most elegant glasses would ruin the effect of an evening gown, so she would stash them in her purse and let the night become a blur that she claimed enhanced her pleasure in the mad whirl of a social occasion. She would focus on the person she was talking with so intently that the rest of the affair would fade away.

She may have looked more like Lucille Ball but she was as ravishing as Marilyn Monroe when she dressed to go out in the evening in strapless dresses that rustled or shimmered. I loved to lounge across my parents’ bed and watch her apply her mascara from the slender red plastic Maybelline drawer box. She would wet the tiny brush with her mouth, then rub it back and forth in the black mascara. Then she would brush up, up, up, with a flick of the wrist, extending her pale lashes outward. After a light application of cake make-up, just to even out her few freckles, she would put on red lipstick, making faces at herself in the mirror and creating mouth prints on tissues. The finishing touch was Madame Rochas perfume dabbed on her pulse points. To see her and especially smell her as she was leaving was almost worth the missing.

I didn’t like being stuck with a babysitter. None of them could tell me any of the stories about me that only my mother knew: How I had gotten my head stuck in a picket fence and how hard it was to extricate me. “But how did I get it in?” I would ask at every telling. Or the one about how I had sipped from a can of turpentine in our garage, the one

now burning, and how she heard my screams all the way from the house, and had raced me to the emergency room to have my stomach pumped out.

All of the drama in my short life was in the form of stories told to me by my mother, not in my own memory. And here was a drama, a story I could tell, but I wouldn't be able to tell it because of Mrs. Murphy's hold on me. That hold was probably at least as much about saving my soul from the fires of the special hell she envisioned for atheist, leftist, cocktail swilling artists, as it was about keeping me safe from our garage fire.

As I stood on the curb, defeated, I could see my miserable future mapped out before me, one in which small children would say, "Wow, that was some fire! I could feel the heat! And this charred piece of wood landed right by my feet! And the sparks were flying everywhere! Where were you that day anyway?"

I resigned myself to living my boring life empty of any exciting stories of my own to tell.

### *Epilogue*

I called my brother John at his home in Maui the other night. Though he hadn't been there when the fire started, I thought because he is five years older that he might remember the facts more clearly. Did the garage burn to the ground? Did fire engines come? What started the fire?

"What fire?" he asked.

So it must not have been much of a story after all.

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