



Home Movies

By

Rochelle Distelheim

July. July so hot whole families escape the prison of their apartments to sleep in Grant Park near the lake. Whole families asleep, defenseless, out on the grass, in the open, and nobody afraid.

It is 1935. Lindbergh is my mother's hero because he did what he said he would do. I stand on the front porch of our second floor apartment and lean against the window, looking into the living room. I see my family sweating – my father in an undershirt and wrinkled work pants, my mother in a flowered housedress without the belt. I am seven years old and wearing puckered underpants. My sister, ten, has to wear a halter top with her puckered underpants. She is angry because I can go bare from the waist up.

We can't drive to Grant Park to sleep. We don't have a car I put my mouth close to the window and shout, "Use the Dodge!" Then I remember: we didn't buy the Dodge until 1945, with money my mother will earn during the war working in a defense plant -- money for a new car, money for the bank account that will swell and then shrink when I go to college. I want to wish the Dodge into our 1935 lives, but I don't know how. I want to offer them my 2003 Lexus sitting in my garage now. There is no way to reach them.

Hot is hottest of all for families who live on the top floor, under flat roofs, In apartments with tiny windows that decide not to open that day. Louis sleeps in the smallest room under the flat roof in 1935. Only three miles from my seven year-old life. I cross streets and backyards and alleys to watch him sleep. I want to invite him to sleep on our front porch, invite his whole family. But he doesn't know me then. We won't marry for 17 years.

We may pass on the street, sit in the same movie theater on Saturday afternoons, run in the same gravel playground, swim in the same public pool. Or, we may not. Nothing would signal to either of us, if we should brush past one another. He is 12, handsome. I am still in puckered underpants.

I stand outside his bedroom window, listen to him sleep; restless, twisting in his cocoon of damp sheets. His alarm clock rings. He wakes us slowly. He still does. He takes his clothes from a hook next to the bed, and goes into another room. "Make your bed!" I call to him through the window. He still doesn't.

My father-in-law gets up one morning the winter I'm ten, and tells his wife he has an itch that must be scratched in California. He doesn't have a job, and the Great Depression is less depressing in California in the sunshine, with oranges asking to be picked, and mountains instead of streetcar tracks. She says, "Go, I'm staying. Me and the children.

He goes. Alone, without money or much language. He packs a cardboard suitcase, and walks to the streetcar before it is light, so he will not have to say goodbye to his children. He waits at the corner stop.

Not far away, I'm asleep in my ten year-old body. I watch him in the weak circle of light from the street lamp: a not-young, not-old man who has already forgotten what it is he will never have. "Don't go," I say. "You'll be sorry." He ignores me. "How can the children eat if you leave them? He isn't listening. He looks past my face, and into the faces of people he hasn't met yet.

I try one last time. "You won't know your grandchildren if you go away." He will never know me, anyhow. I will see him only once more, in his coffin. I will be carrying my first child. I'm told that a pregnant woman must not look into an open coffin. It means bad luck. I look anyway, or how will I have a face to put to the memory of a man who is part of my husband, my children?

He knows he doesn't have to answer me. He gets on the red streetcar, and rides alone to the Greyhound Bus station downtown, where he waits five hours for the next bus west.

There's a postcard from California with a picture on one side of Santa Claus sweating in the sun in front of Grauman's Chinese Theater. And another card, and then nothing for a long time. My-mother-in-law takes in boarders to pay the rent. Louis moves out of his room, and sleeps in a double bed with his two brothers.

After school he delivers meat for the kosher butcher. He brings brisket and chicKens wrapped in waxy brown paper to our back door. I love watching him: serious, patient, while my mother searches for exactly the right change in her black leather purse with the torn lining. He takes two pink-and-crystal aggies out of his pocket, closes one eye, and turns them slowly, until they catch the sun. I see why I will love him.

This is the year I have whooping cough. I hear him at the back door, and try to hold my breath, so I won't cough until he's gone. I can't, and a cough sputters out. He shows no sign he's heard. It is a sound that has no connection to his life. Twenty years later, he and I will take turns moving out of our sleep, summoned down cold halls by other childhood coughs.

This is the spring I sit up nights choking. The doctor says the clean air off the lake will help me sleep. My father, exhausted from his rounds as a milkman, naps for a half hour after supper, then drives me to the lake in my uncle's new blue Essex. We sit in the car alone together on the deserted pier, through the long city night. We can hear the water. I sleep sitting up. My father plays the radio softly to stay awake, so he can watch me.

In the morning, before six o' clock, we go to Thompson's Cafeteria on Michigan Avenue for breakfast. We are the first customers. I bite my toast, and cough. I cough so hard, I spit my juice and mik all over the floor. My father takes a blue handkerchief out of his pocket, and wipes my face. I'm crying because the man and woman in white uniforms standing behind the counter are watching. My father kisses my cheek, and asks the manager for a broom and dustpan.

My mother-in-law is wheeling a baby buggy down the summer street. It is 1940. I watch her from the corner. "You don't have a baby anymore," I say to her when she passes. I follow just behind her on her right, so I can see into the buggy. I see a pink blanket and the tip of a baby's bonnet. I can't see the baby's face.

She's walking faster now, and looks over her shoulder with frightened eyes. She stops in front of a grocery store, opens the door, pushes the buggy through. A man comes out from behind the counter, wiping his hands on his dirty apron. He steps to the door, and looks out, first in one direction, and then in the other. He tells her that nobody is following her.

My mother-in-law folds the pink blanket back, and lifts something heavy out of the buggy. It is a half-gallon crockery jug, beige. The man takes it from her, and hands her a dollar bill. He puts the jug on the floor behind the counter. She looks at the dollar bill for a moment, folds it in half, and slips it inside the front of her cotton dress. Then,

She leaves quickly, almost bumping my leg with the wheel of the buggy. I wait, and watch the grocer pour a brown liquid from the jug into a paper cup, then drink. He smacks his lips and looks satisfied. *Schnapps!*

Years later, sitting over Passover wine at family Seders, long after she is dead, her children will tell my children how she made whiskey in a wash tub, and sold it to buy them food. I have questions to ask this woman in whose womb Louis gathered the strength to become who he is. But, when I am young, there is never enough time. When I am old enough to understand how important it is to ask her, she has gone, taking her answers with her.

We can go to the lake now, any time we want to. We can walk there, we live so close. Summer mornings, when the girls are home, I fix sandwiches, and we walk together, through streets shaded by oaks and dogwood. It's an easy walk, a beautiful one.

Usually, the streets are empty on these hot summer days. And quiet. It's a quiet that leaves room for me to hear other street sounds, sounds happening very far away, in the city, where the lake washes past concrete sidewalks and thirsting lawns. I hear a fire siren; a stick banging against a garbage can; hot, cranky children, cramped in their sticky bodies; women arguing on front stoops. Then, it's quiet again. And that's when I can hear behind me the lagging footsteps of a little girl. When I turn around very quickly, sometimes I can see her in her puckered underpants.