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Last Days of Northside

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"When I was seven years old, I was happy to be me. I went to grade school in Falconer, NY and my parents were actually told I was too chatty which was a far cry from when I was voted 'The Quietest' in high school. One report card even said, 'Mikey is a good student but likes to chitchat too much.' I just remember getting along with all the kids in school then; and since it was a small school, you knew everyone. Most, if not all, the kids lived within a few blocks of Northside Elementary. I lived close enough to trot my towheaded self to school every day."

Cover Page Footnote

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When I was seven years old, I was happy to be me. I went to grade school in Falconer, NY and my parents were actually told I was too chatty which was a far cry from when I was voted “The Quietest” in high school. One report card even said, “Mikey is a good student but likes to chitchat too much.” I just remember getting along with all the kids in school then; and since it was a small school, you knew everyone. Most, if not all, the kids lived within a few blocks of Northside Elementary. I lived close enough to trot my towheaded self to school every day.

Halfway through second grade, I came home to our upstairs apartment which was in my grandmother’s house. My mother stood in the kitchen, wearing her favorite yellow canary bell bottom pants with the waist almost to her armpits. I always thought she looked like a blond Cher, with her long hair, parted in the middle that went almost to her thighs and the snow white eye shadow that went from lid to brow. Usually, she always greeted me with her big warm smile, but that day it was different. She had this look on her face like someone had kicked her in the shin but gave her a wad of cash right after.

“What’s wrong, Mommy?” I asked.

“Nothing’s wrong, Mikey, but I have to tell you something,” she said as she pushed her long blond hair behind her ear.

“What?”

My mother guided me to one of the rainbow sherbet colored kitchen chairs. I just hoped she wouldn’t tell me that “The Muppet Show” had been cancelled. She poured me a large class of whole milk and sat in the chair next to me.

“You dad is being transferred,” she said, looking into my eyes.

“What’s that mean?”

“It means that we have to move to a new town.”

“But what about everyone here? Are they coming too?”

“No. It’s just us. You, me, your daddy and Susanne.”

I felt as though I was under water. I continued to listen to my mother talk about how my father was going to make more money and that we’d have a house of our own but all I could think about was “who was I going to talk to” and “who would I play with?” It felt like the end to my seven-year-old life. I wouldn’t even be able to finish out the second grade. I was going to have to transfer in the middle of the school year. All I could think was of the horrors that awaited me in this place called Olean. Would it be a wild, she-beast teacher with hair like mangled roadkill and breath that melted metal? Or would it be little gremlin students who would chant bizarre songs and speak in ridiculous rhymes. Or maybe this new house would hold the ghost of a dead seven-year-old who died from his heart breaking into a zillion pieces.

I remember the day we moved; it was warm and sunny. It felt like the world was sticking its tongue out at me; although by this time, I was a little more excited. I was anxious to have a yard the size of a football field and a big forest behind it. That day I got to go to school for half the day, mainly to see my friends one last time. Everyone in the class had made me going away cards out of construction paper, glitter and noodles, all the standard grade school fare. Nowhere else can you make works of art out of old food and mismatched ripped up paper and have people proclaim it as “works of art.” Well, maybe in Manhattan.

As I waved goodbye to my adoring fans, my mother led me down the hallway of
Northside past my second grade classroom and then past Mrs. Bowling’s first grade classroom. She glanced out her room and stared down her librarian spectacles at me, her pinched lips held firmly in place. I always thought she looked like the old maid on my deck of “Old Maid” playing cards.

My mother and I walked by the boys’ lavatory and I thought of the time last year when my friend Corey and I hid in the stalls to scare chubby Martin as he walked into the bathroom. As we jumped out and yelled, we looked down the long corridor of the lavatory and there was Mrs. Bowling in the doorway, waiting. I knew what was coming next. Everyone whispered about the notorious Bowling Spank Machine.

Corey walked out before me as I began to wash my hands. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her hand grab his arm, like the claw in a crane game clamped onto a stuffed panda bear, while her other arm went high up in the air and smacked down on his butt with the gusto of a pro golfer driving from the tee. It sounded as if she had broken his bones or hers. I imagined her bones to be very brittle; since at the time, I thought she was older than dirt. I washed my hands so much that they began to look like pieces of raw meat. I tried to walk as slow as I could manage to the paper towel dispenser. I dried my hands until the paper felt like sandpaper scraping the rest of my skin away. I put my head down and I began to walk the walk of shame to take my turn in the dreaded machine. The hand of doom went up and in a split second cracked on target. It felt like someone had just burned me with a cigarette the size of a grapefruit. I quickly walked back to the classroom and sat down, making sure to sit on the unbruised cheek.

“You know I’d hate to get one of Mrs. Bowling’s spankings,” said know-it-all Norman. “I heard they really hurt.”

“Yeah,” I said, “I’d hate it too.”

I don’t think it was the first time I had ever lied, but it was when I realized that it was much better to save face. It’s better to lie than to admit your shameful moments. I never spoke of my spanking to anyone, especially not my mother.

Now, we continued walking down the hallway and we walked past the gymnasium where I had my special gym class. I was only in it for a short time, and I know I was in either kindergarten or first grade when I got put in there. I’ve always thought of myself as athletically declined, but I don’t know if I’d go as far as saying I needed a special needs Phys. Ed. class. The whole gym thing never made much sense to me. I guess I never really understood the point of taking a large textured rubber ball and whipping it as hard as you can at someone’s face. Maybe I never saw the point because it was usually my face. I don’t remember the specifics of the class, just that I was in it. I can’t even begin to imagine what the hell we actually did. Would we have jump-roped without the rope or the jumping? Or instead of “Duck, Duck, Goose” would we have played “Duck, Duck” because they didn’t want to strain you by actually making you run?

The gymnasium also doubled as the school auditorium, where I had my stage debut in a Christmas concert. I was part of the chorus singing along to one of the ten standard Christmas songs. According to my mother, who sat proudly in the audience, along with my father, my aunt, my grandmother and baby sister, I began to sing along with my fellow classmates and suddenly I began to slowly slink down to the floor. I remained on the floor until the concert was over and then I stood up and walked off with the rest of my class. I don’t remember this at all, but perhaps, I purposely blocked it out of my memory. I later redeemed myself in the Christmas play the following year, where I was to play the Easter Bunny.

The day I got the part, I rushed home from school and cheered, “Mommy, I’m going to be in the Christmas play!”

“Oh, that’s nice, dear,” she said with a soft smile. “What are you playing?”

“I’m going to be the Easter Bunny.”

My mother stared blankly at me for a moment, perhaps desperately seeking
something to say.

"That’s nice," she finally said, her standard reply when she had no clue what to say or if she got a gift she hated. “But Mikey, why is there an Easter Bunny in a play about Christmas?”

I sat there for a second, with a glazed look in my eyes and said, “I dunno.”

Apparently, the bunny got confused as to which holiday it was and ended up coming down the chimney or something to that effect. Either way, I had my first major role. Fittingly, it was a bunny, my favorite animal. At age five, my first pet had been my rabbit Buttercup, named because she was similar in color. I used to draw pictures of her and one of my drawings won the first prize in a contest and was going to be sold as an Easter greeting card. The picture I drew was a boy (well, actually it was a red box with some resemblance to a square head and two black dot eyes and a black line smile) who had a rabbit (or a big yellow blob, also with black dot eyes and a black line smile) on a leash. This was a self-portrait and yes, I did walk Buttercup on a little leash around our backyard. The card read on the outside “Get in the Easter Habit…” and on the inside it said, “Go out and walk your rabbit!” I only did the artwork, not the moving poetry that accompanied the card. I also got my name and picture in the local paper. For this incarnation of my rabbit habit, my mom made my full bunny costume (which I wore for Halloween the following year and then when my sister was old enough, she wore it). This time I actually said my lines and remained standing for the duration of the performance.

When we reached the entrance of the school, our Creamsicle colored Chevy Oldsmobile was parked in front. My father sat in the driver’s seat smoking a cigarette and drinking a beer. My little sister sat in the back of the car. She pointed her stubby finger at me and cried out, “Mikey!”

Susanne was just at the age of discovering the wonders of speech. I like to say her first word was “Mikey,” but I know it was something like “dada” or “mama.” I do however know that her first full sentence was, “I go ask Mikey.”

One night my mother said to my sister, “Susanne, you need to put your toys away because it’s bedtime.”

“You sure? I go ask Mikey.”

“I am sure. I am your mother. I know when it’s bedtime.”

“No, I go ask Mikey.”

That was the time I had power. I had a little disciple who would listen to me above her own mother. I wish I could say I never used it to my advantage, but that would be lying. Of course, I can’t lie because pictures don’t lie. I had taught my sister when people told her to “smile pretty,” what they meant for her to do was to crinkle her nose and squint her eyes and breathe quickly through her nose. So, every time my mother would say, “Smile pretty, Susanne,” that’s what she got and with that, photographic evidence of my deviance.

My father beeped the horn and yelled some indecipherable obscenity. My mother looked down at me and grabbed my hand.

“It’ll be ok, Mikey. We’ll be better off.”

“Okay, Mommy.”

I don’t know if she was trying to convince me or to reassure herself, but either way we climbed into the orange monster we called a car. We were off to this place called Olean, which sounded to me like some town where they played banjo with their toes and you were expected to marry your first cousin. I didn’t have much of a choice though, being seven and all. I thought maybe I could join the circus and be a carny for the rest of my life, either cleaning up piles of elephant poop taller than I was or getting shot out of a cannon. For a fleeting moment, I actually considered it, but then I thought it was probably best to just go with my family. Besides, clowns scared the crap out of me.