

Primetime

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All that remains is a perfectly manicured soccer field. But I remember the neighborhood that was there in the 70s. The neat row of duplexes subsidized by the college who owned the property and referred to by the students as "the ghetto". Our unit had a tiny side porch already crowded with a small hibachi grill and a single metal trashcan. It was shaded by a large canopy of hackberry trees and served as the staging area for my father's nightly weight lifting ritual. Carefully arranged, there was enough room for him to hook up the reel-to-reel and do his military presses. In the late afternoon, I would sit and watch from the comforts of a cool patch of clover. No dolls or coloring books necessary, I watched in childish awe. It was an odd sort of entertainment watching the contortions on my father's face as he lifted the weights. I remember watching shades of pink building into red then purple as the lines in his forehead expanded and contracted like an accordion and wondering whether the pack of Marlboros rolled neatly in the sleeve of his t-shirt would pop out during a bicep curl. Perhaps even more curious than the ritual, were the lyrics of the Beatles and Dylan tunes that played from the 7 inch spinning reels. At age 5, I knew all the words to *Come Together* but it made about as much sense to me as the weight lifting. Strange as it all was, my patience frequently paid off. When the ritual was complete, my dad would drive me and my sister, Anne, to the corner market where he'd buy more cigarettes and sometimes, we'd get an Icee – cherry if they had it. Daddy was never short on entertainment. One night, he took brown paper grocery sacks and cut out holes for eyes and a mouth. We wore them over our heads into the market, convinced we were mysterious and that Bill, who worked the counter, would never guess who we were. That we could sip our Icees with a straw through

the mouth hole added to the “cool” factor. Entertainment was cheap – mostly free, but we didn’t care.

It’s hard to say whether time passed us, or we passed it, but whatever the case, the years went by and there was always plenty of amusement when my father was around. He had my sister and I convinced he was magic. Sitting in the car, he’d wave his hands at the light on the ceiling. “Abra cadabra” – the light would come on. “Hocus pocus” – the light would go off. My sister and I were amazed! We never saw him pressing the sensor inside the doorjamb. Once, when I asked where “U.S.A.” was, he told me it was “somewhere in Michigan”. Sometimes his “revelations” backfired. Like the time he told us about the embalming process on the way to my great aunt Margaret’s funeral. “They sew the eyes and lips shut,” he told us. We hung on his every detail...*the fluids, the stuffing, the sewing*... Kneeling before the casket, we tested this theory. We tugged at her eyelids and then her mouth waiting for either to burst open with cotton balls. Turns out, they sewed hers pretty damn tight. Looking back, it’s hard to say whether he amused us, or we amused him...but whatever the case, we were – all of us – always entertained.

“Why do we celebrate St. Patrick’s Day?” I asked. It was a perfectly fine homework assignment for a Catholic school. My sister, bored with the question, picked at her meatloaf. My father lit up with recognition – the “oh I know this!” kind of recognition. He replied, “St. Patrick drove the chickens out of Rhode Island.” Sounded reasonable enough to me. The next day when the question was posed to the class, my hand shot up. Called upon, I repeated my father’s answer. The classroom exploded with laughter. I could hear Clifton Dunn and Mario Stitt howling. Sister Mary Ann Francis was not amused. In fact, she was angry – *really* angry. Her eyes narrowed – as narrow as they could get through the jelly-bottom jar glasses she wore.

“Who told you that?” she hissed. “My dad” I replied quietly. How could he have been mistaken? He knows everything. Besides that, he’s magic.

It was sometime in my early thirties when my dad called to tell me about a large, aggressive spider. He’d read about it in Reader’s Digest. It had an abdomen the size of a golf ball and was extremely aggressive. “They live in Australia and have been known to come at people! This thing’s got three-quarter inch-long fangs!” I just laughed. “Yeah, right...” “No, I’m serious. This is in Reader’s Digest”. “Uh-huh”. According to my dad, there was even a photo of one “peeping out from behind a chair” at the human prey across the room. Jaded, I wasn’t buying it. Two years later, my husband and I traveled to D.C. where we visited the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History. There, in the section where they have the insects, was a spider – an Australian spider. The largest spider we’d ever seen. It had an enormous abdomen and its fangs were clearly visible – no magnifying glass needed. The sign on the tank warned, “*Do not tap. Spider is aggressive*”.