

Stories from My
Memory-Shelf

Fiction and Essays
from My Past

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GIRL IN PINK, SEEING RED

She kept walking. Dizzy with rage, she tossed her head to rearrange the stray locks of hair that had tumbled onto her forehead.

“Hey!” she heard the crossing-guard shout. “Who’s that girl in the pink shirt?”

She clenched her teeth. Why had her mom chosen today of all days to dress her in this ridiculous getup, the pants an even more hideous shade of pink than the ruffled shirt? She gripped her lunch-box tighter and kept walking.

He deserved it, she thought fiercely, raising the aluminum case to her chest and examining it closely. The face of the cartoon character on its lid was dented.

Too bad his head wasn’t dented, she said savagely to herself. But at least she’d made him cry. He wouldn’t be picking on her best friend again anytime soon; she could guarantee that. No one would.

“Hey! You there!” someone shouted. She kept walking.

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I don't recall who he was or precisely what he did, that unfortunate young boy who had insulted or perhaps even assaulted my best friend. I don't recall, either, exactly how I hit him – although I know at some point my lunchbox made contact. But what I do remember quite vividly are the emotions. The intense anger over being provoked into having to defend my friend. The nascent pride over having bested a boy in a blatantly physical contest. And the acute embarrassment over having to march away from the scene, with the whole schoolyard watching, in that stupid ruffled pink shirt.



TWO FATHERS

He is holding up a clean and empty jelly-glass; bright, colorful cartoon characters chasing merrily around its rim, my long-anticipated reward earned with weeks of peanut-butter sandwiches.

He is hiding behind his dense, secretive mustache, handing me a can of cheap warmish beer, laughing at me tentatively tasting it; spitting it vehemently out.

He is clasping my hand and leading me down the street to the local bar; propping me up on a barstool so all his friends can see, can joke with me and about me while I twirl about on the red vinyl, tall and proud to be out with Daddy.

He is standing at the wire fence, watching me playing in the dirt of our yard, asking, “Is your mother home?” Perhaps not realizing that I don’t recognize him anymore; will have to ask Mom later who that man was, the mysterious stranger who visited her that afternoon and called me by name. Perhaps not knowing that all of my

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memories of him have already been boiled down to these simple four.

And then he is gone.

He sits by himself in the green-painted barn, back of their house, listening to the Italian radio station, smoking his pipe and reading a newspaper, its foreign words and syllables impenetrable runes, like his shadowy face in the dark and tobacco-filled haze.

He defies approach, inspires timidity; despises interruption and declines conversation. They shake to address him; quiver in apprehension, dare only when driven by direst need.

“Bubba? Bubba, can I have five dollars?” the youngest son inquires, cowering, backing slowly away even as he speaks.

Harsh mumbling ensues; the status of the request indeterminable to those waiting anxiously outside.

“To go to the movies? Please, Bubba?”

The mumble metamorphoses into a shout; sends the child scurrying away from the barn, out underneath the clutching, hanging vines of the wine-grape trellis, back into the house where his mother waits, her lips pursed, her head shaking sadly.

“Mangia,” she commands kindly, pointing to the table laid with salad and bread and pasta while she fixes a plate for her husband, who will eat, by himself, in the green-painted barn at the back of their house.

I originally wrote this piece in an effort to create an ultra-short of one hundred and fifty words or less for a contest. I don't recall what prompted it, but somehow I got to thinking of my biological father and the very few memories

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I have of him, which, interestingly enough, taken all together, came out to about a hundred and fifty words!

The second segment is about the father of the best friend I had from the time I was four or five until I was twelve. In the hundreds of times I visited my friend's house – which, except for the year we spent living in Connecticut, was just across the street from ours – I don't believe I actually saw the man face-to-face more than a dozen times, and never once in all those years did he speak to me. Of course, most days he was busy working at the factory to support their five children, and I'm sure in his heart he loved his family very much. But as a kid I was only cognizant of the fear.

I also wrote a third segment of this piece about my “main” stepfather – that's the one I had the longest – but I didn't really care for the way it turned out so I omitted it. I still wonder if perhaps I should have included it after all. It certainly would have put a different spin on the story as a whole, because it was a fairly flattering portrayal of a man who, without being anyone's biological father, was nonetheless the best father I ever had. The problem was that in the end, when the marriage dissolves, the stepdad moves away and is never heard from again, and my intent was to make the story evocative rather than melancholy. And at bottom, I think it makes for a better “vignette” without coming to such a resounding conclusion, and that's what *Vine Leaves* does best.



YELLOW WAGON

“Right on Orange, left on Revere,” Debra repeated to herself for the dozenth time, kicking away the crisp dead leaves that snapped at her feet like so many untrained puppies. First grade wasn’t like kindergarten; the teachers got mad if you were late. Her mom would be mad, too, if she got lost along the way.

She reached the end of her street and hung a hard right, ignoring the noise of the engine she heard revving behind her. It was only a block more to the light, and when she reached it she stopped dead, waiting cautiously for the green, both feet planted firmly on the sidewalk, not even touching the curb. When her turn came she looked both ways, repeating and exaggerating the motion, and catching in consequence a glimpse of a yellow station wagon with wood paneling that had drawn to a seemingly casual halt on the side of the road behind her.

She crossed hurriedly, shifting the schoolbag in her left hand while gripping the lunchbox more tightly in her right, swinging both in steady rhythm as she walked. Halfway

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down the block she knelt suddenly and fiddled with her shoelaces. Peeking over her shoulder as she bent forward, she spotted it again, the yellow wagon, which had rounded the corner after her and was still following at a respectful distance.

With grim determination she pressed on, on towards the schoolyard, now only a few blocks away. She could hear the cries of the kids on the playground, see the bright orange sash of the crossing-guard directing traffic, smell the exhaust of the ancient school buses that brought the children who lived on the far side of town. And then suddenly she was on the last block and she was running, running towards the final intersection, the one guarded by the gentle white-haired man with the threatening crimson sign, and then she had flown across it and was vanishing safely into the thick crowd of students and teachers. She turned, breathless, and witnessed the yellow wagon retreating cautiously down the street, crawling silently away as if at last losing interest in the subject of its persistent pursuit.

She remained alert that afternoon; negotiated the crosswalks with care and kept watch for the stealthy wagon, but discerned no sign of it. She sighed with relief as she at last climbed the steps of the porch on which her mother stood happily waving her home.

“How was your day, sweetheart?” she inquired cheerfully. “Were you scared walking to school by yourself?”

“Nope,” Debra replied without hesitation.

“Did you remember to look both ways and cross with the light?”

“Yes, Mom,” she said, smiling, confident that her mother already knew the answer to that question.

“So you’ll be all right walking, then, if I take the car to

my new job tomorrow?”

“Of course,” Debra answered. She glanced appreciatively at it, the familiar yellow station wagon with the wood paneling, parked, as always, comfortably in front of their house.

HOW MANY TIMES DO I HAVE TO REWRITE THIS %\$^&# THING?! The “Yellow Wagon” Saga

What a journey this story has taken! The final published version of this piece (reproduced following this essay) ended up being twice the length of the original. The editors at *Every Day Fiction* were possibly interested in publishing it, except that they didn’t like the idea of “misleading” the reader about the wagon, which is precisely what the original version did. In fact, that was the essence of the story. In addition, they thought the premise itself was unbelievable because I had made Debra a first-grader and the argument was that no parent would permit a child that young to walk to school by herself.

Naturally, this threw me for a loop, because, of course, the child in the story was me, and I was not a first-grader but a kindergartner when it happened. Where I grew up in small-town New England, lots of kids walked to school by themselves. There was no such thing as blue-collar flex time so you could drive your kids to school – and many parents took the bus to work because they didn’t have a car, anyway. However, I was certainly willing to grant that we live in a different time, and that perhaps the premise would seem implausible to modern readers, so I re-wrote it to include details that would make it obvious that the story took place in an earlier era.

They still didn’t like it. The issue remained of Debra not

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appearing to recognize the wagon, which naturally made little sense in their interpretation of the story. I frankly had no idea what to do about this, because my intention for the piece was entirely at odds with their reading of it. I had been attempting to convey the thoughts and emotions of a little girl who has been given a great new responsibility and is trying very hard to behave herself as her mother would wish. It's not that she doesn't recognize the wagon – she merely pretends not to because she doesn't want her mother to think she's only being careful because she knows she's being watched. The whole story development – where she keeps looking anxiously over her shoulder to see if the wagon is still following, how she exaggerates her caution in crossing the street, even her final sprint at the end when the pressure becomes too much for her – centers around this concept. What I thought was clever about it was not the fact that it draws the reader down a false path, but that if you reach the end and look back on it, it turns out that the story details were true and accurate all along. The tension was real – except its source was not the wagon, but the feelings of the little girl.

Anyway, they asked for another rewrite, and suggested that I make the story more about Debra and her mother. I'll admit that this caused me considerable consternation. On the one hand, it was a challenge, and I'm certainly not one to run from a battle. On the other hand, I had no particular interest in writing the story that way. It just didn't feel like me. It took me longer to transform this simple vignette into heartwarming family fiction than the original story took to write! I'm not disappointed in the way it turned out, although it is a bit on the sentimental side. But I do still believe the original version has its charms – although I'm willing to concede that I may be the only one who thinks so!

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It was, however, an interesting lesson. First, because sometimes it's easy to forget that what I think is obvious as a writer doesn't necessarily come across to a reader the way I intended it. Editors are usually right, and if these ones weren't getting it, chances are pretty good lots of other people would have misread my original story, too. And second, because it was my first real experience writing to someone else's specifications. I mean, sure, I've had to write papers on topics that haven't particularly interested me – but no one has ever told me how to write them. And ultimately, I feel that this is something I should be able to do, even if I don't enjoy it very much. As wonderful as it is to exercise total control over my fiction, a writer who knows their craft should have the capacity to create work that someone else defines. So I suppose you might say that I, too, took a journey of transformation – and it's to be hoped that I came out a better writer at the end of it.

YELLOW WAGON (Published Version)

“You remember the way, sweetheart?” Debra’s mother said. She was leaning against a battered yellow station wagon with old-fashioned wood paneling adorning its sides. Clutching a child’s lunchbox and schoolbag, she stood before her daughter, fresh and crisp in her starched navy blue uniform, her habitually disobedient hair stuffed into a bun at the top of her head. Her ugly black work shoes tap-danced nervously over the asphalt and her cheeks were flush with excitement. It was a big day for both of them.

Debra smiled. Her sneakers were engaged in a jittery tap-dance of their own. They didn’t know how determined she was not to let on she was scared.

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“Right on Orange, left on Revere,” she recited. It was a song she knew by heart. Her mother had begun teaching it to her the day the factory called to tell her they were finally hiring again.

“That’s my good girl,” her mother beamed. She handed Debra her things. “Peanut butter and jelly again,” she apologized. “Next week, when I get paid...”

“It’s fine, Mom,” Debra interrupted. “I don’t mind.”

Peanut butter sandwiches were okay. But she’d had one every day since Dad had gone away.

Debra’s mother knelt and zipped up Debra’s jacket, running her hands along the too-short sleeves. “We’ll get you a new winter jacket, too,” she promised.

“It’s all right,” Debra answered quickly, tugging the sleeves down over her wrists. “Aren’t you going to be late?”

“I got permission to be late today so I could see you off. Tomorrow you’ll be on your own.”

Debra swallowed the painful lump in her throat and forced a cheerful nod.

Her mother’s eyes were very bright. “You will be careful, won’t you, dear?”

“Don’t worry,” Debra said. “I walk to my friend’s house by myself, right?”

“But that’s just down the block! This has turns, and a traffic light...”

She broke off suddenly and reeled Debra into her arms. The lump rose again in Debra’s throat and she was afraid she might cry. “I’d better go,” she said, wiggling her way out of the embrace.

Her mother sighed and clambered to her feet, using the wagon’s bumper for support. “You’re right,” she said, straightening her collar. “Just remember what I told you, okay? Goodbye, Debra.”

Debra glanced down the long street that stretched out before her, dim with the early-morning fog. It was six blocks until the first turn. She couldn't even see it from here.

"Bye, Mom," she croaked. It seemed to stick in her throat.

She stepped backwards as her mother climbed into the car. Its horn honked playfully.

"Bye to you, too, wagon!"

Debra waved, then turned away and didn't look back.

"Right on Orange, left on Revere," she repeated. Her feet were leaden but she forced them along the sidewalk, kicking away the crisp dead leaves that snapped at her ankles like so many untrained puppies. Her mom would be upset if she missed the bell.

At last she reached the end of her street. She held her breath as she turned right. A car engine revved somewhere behind her, and she jumped even though she wasn't crossing yet. She felt dizzy. Her mother's advice was swimming through her head like sums on a math test. What if she got lost? What if she got hit? What if a stranger spoke to her?

It was another block to the light, and when she reached it she stopped dead, waiting cautiously for the green, both feet planted firmly on the sidewalk, not even touching the curb. When her turn came she looked both ways, repeating and exaggerating the motion, and through the fog she thought she caught a glimpse of a yellow station wagon on the side of the road behind her.

She rigidly faced forward, pretending not to notice. The road ahead was cleaner, brighter; the sun was peeking through the clouds on the horizon. Her feet grew lighter, too, as she crossed, shifting the schoolbag in her left hand and gripping the lunchbox tightly in her right, swinging

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both in steady rhythm as she walked. Halfway down the block she knelt and fiddled with her shoelaces. Peeking over her shoulder as she bent forward, she spotted it again, the yellow wagon, which had rounded the corner after her and was still following at a respectful distance.

There was a skip in her step as she pressed on, on towards the schoolyard, now only a few blocks away. She could hear the cries of the kids on the playground, see the sash of the crossing-guard directing traffic, smell the exhaust of the buses that brought the children who lived on the far side of town. And suddenly she was on the last block and she was running, running towards the final intersection, the one guarded by the gentle white-haired man with the threatening crimson sign, and then she had flown across it and was vanishing into the thick crowd of students and teachers. She turned, breathless, and caught the full view of it at last: a yellow station wagon trimmed with brown wooden panels, its driver dressed in navy blue.

It was four o'clock when Debra's mother returned home, looking tired but pleased, her hair and clothes no longer so tidy. She smiled when she found Debra sitting quietly at the kitchen table, poring over her sums, also looking tired but pleased.

"How was your day, sweetheart?" she inquired cheerfully, enfolding her daughter in a grateful hug. "Were you scared walking to school by yourself?"

"Nope," Debra replied without hesitation.

"Did you remember to look both ways and cross with the light?"

"Yes, Mom," she said, smiling, glad her mother already knew the answer to that question.

"You'll be all right walking, then, when I take the car to work tomorrow?"

"Of course!" Debra answered. She went over to the

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window and looked appreciatively at it, the familiar yellow station wagon with the wood paneling, parked, once again, comfortably in front of their house.

