

Left Alone

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My eighth birthday approached, and I wanted to do one thing: walk to the 7-Eleven store by myself. This was June 1982. Kids walked alone. But I'd have to walk down a street without a sidewalk and cross five lanes of John-R Road. My parents said no, but I wouldn't give up.

We lived in a sprawling apartment complex called Lexington Village in Madison Heights, a working-class suburb of Detroit. My neighbors were immigrants and just-getting-by whites. No blacks. Leasing agents may have counted me as integration if they knew enough light-skinned blacks to peg my heritage. But if they were the concerned types, they wouldn't have let my German mother and Filipino stepfather through the door.

We used to live in the city. My parents and I lived downtown in Indian Village, down Jefferson Avenue and off W. Grand Boulevard. Those old neighborhoods knew grandeur, the memory of full employment. We knew instability. When we lived in The Parkcrest and The Madison, they crumbled and needed exterminators. My mother worked and went to school fulltime. My father drank. He died by age 31.

I biked past Lexington Village's swimming pool and forgot those days. The apartment complex sheltered us. People like us. The kind who came there to start over.



My stepfather told me to stay away from Concord Drive. “But what about 7-Eleven?” I asked. “No,” he said. “Play here.”

My friends were Russian, Filipina, and Turkish. Sometimes the white grandkids of Southerners drawn North. We rode bikes. We hunted snakes in the grass near the highway fence. We tried to build igloos out of six-inch snowfalls and got mad when we failed. No adults ever came out to guide us. Outside, we were on our own.

The school bus carried us out to Hiller Elementary. After the driver picked us up, we passed the bungalowed streets off of Concord Drive in the direction of 7-Eleven and stopped. A tomboyish girl climbed aboard. Starr. Or was that the name of the street? I liked her. But she never invited me home, and I never invited her home. Years later, and her home no longer existed. They demolished her neighborhood to build a huge strip mall with a Target, Party City, and Fuji Buffet.

My physician stepfather had emigrated from the Philippines. He lost his father early. Suddenly “man” of the house, he sold newspapers in the Manila morning streets. After school each day, he helped run the family store. I imagine the stoicism of a boy suddenly turned breadwinner, forced to engage the world as if grown. My mother grew up on a Kansas farm. She evaded a father who returned angry and drunk from World War II, played eldest sister to so many siblings that I’m not sure she had any space to call her own. Maybe solace doing solitary chores, or walking alone through wheat-tufted fields. She fled to the US Army, where she met my father. He eventually brought her to Detroit, where as a young woman she navigated a new city, often alone.

My stepfather and mother knew what it was like to negotiate landscapes fraught with danger. Yet, it was 1982. A



year later, I would lay on the living room floor, transfixed by the film *Adam*. The story of the kidnapping and decapitation of Adam John Walsh, a boy born in 1974, same as me. This was the first time I understood kidnapping. The horror that could wait behind a stranger's call. Before then, I didn't know. Not like that.

In 1982, my parents warned me about cars in the parking lot, how drivers might not see me on my bike. When we moved to Grand Blanc for nine months in 1983, I would be able to walk to school. By myself. On a major road. The thinking had not yet shifted. If they worried about my abduction, they never said so out loud.

One day, my mother cut my mixed-girl hair short. Too hard to handle, she said. She worked midnights. She cared for me by day. Every day is triage for a mother or a nurse, and she was both.

I looked like a brown Orphan Annie. An in-between person, set apart.

Boys called me mophead. Some pushed, but most stuck to name-calling. I recall those scenes and hear Van Halen's *Jump*. An adult played music once during recess, and now the song dubs itself over playground memories and obliterates pain. David Lee Roth singing a white boys' anthem yet kicking my bullies to the grass.

Inside, teachers kept a calm order with stickers on worksheets and stars on charts. I lived for the library. I started with Beverly Clearly and moved to Laura Ingalls Wilder. My stomach turned as I, too, crossed the prairie, anxious to survive a frontier both indifferent and hostile to my presence. Other days I nestled with Shel Silverstein. He drew kids that really looked like mopheads. I laughed at the honest jokes that kids' books rarely told, at least not then. Silverstein was



so popular that he was kept on the “resource” shelf—not to be checked out unless by a teacher. At the library, to be set apart was a mark of popularity—and worth.

Helen Keller’s story plunged me into fears of permanent night. I memorized the hand signs drawn on the back inside cover, taught myself S T A C Y. Daydreams featured the choice: if forced, which of the five senses would I give up? None. I could give up none. I feared that isolation. I didn’t understand, not fully, that night did not equal death.

At bedtime, I listened to adult radio. Alan Almond’s “Pillow Talk.” I closed my eyes to Steve Perry. Lou Gramm. The power male vocalists who promised devotion and made you believe.

Alan told us that a man in Sterling Heights had a special request for a girl in Warren. Then, the misty opening bars of “Waiting for a Girl Like You.” I felt swaddled by perfect heat.

Now when I hear the song, I forget the Lexington Village bedroom. I think of Concord Drive and a two-story cape cod that stands near the bus stop. From upstairs, a man fills the house with his presence. He’s a man I’ve never met but have always known. He calls for me and the feeling is like sinking through a trapdoor, but I am held.

We wanted out, right? We wanted out of Detroit, and decrepit apartments, and the chance to start over, right? We weren’t looking back. That’s what I remember. Did my Lexington Village neighbors agree? Take the Russian family. I played with their youngest daughter, V, the one with the reddish-brown bob and a lust for giving orders. I soon learned the word “bossy” and asked her not to be that way. With V and her older sister, I learned that girls needed



to weigh themselves often and that you weighed less after you went to the bathroom. Slim and bald, V's father looked like a tired professor. Somehow I knew that the father and mother got into fights, even fistfights, but it wasn't clear who won. Sometimes V shared memories of back home when she played in a room filled with beds, a room I imagine as out of Catherine's Palace, with gilded everything. She could bounce from one bed to another and no one told her to stop. Her back home sounded like heaven.

A white teenaged girl lived downstairs with a closet full of black-armed concert tees and AC/DC albums. And her Ouija board. "Let's play, let's play," I'd whine when she babysat me, though I never asked to seek anyone in particular in the afterlife. There was an obvious choice. But I never asked for my father as we finger-tipped the planchette. The Ouija board made promises I feared, and soon I'd beg her to hide it in her closet. When the girl's brother set our building on fire while burning grass with a magnifying glass—a fire doused by the fire department but not before charring the front entry—my mother stopped hiring her.

At Lexington Village, no kid looked like any other kid. So many kinds of us, a whole world of us there in that complex.

I think of the landscape of these years and see white plains. I turn a slow circle and see prairie all around me. I circle again, and there is something like snow that blows, but it is not snow, and it's not always cold. I wonder if my Russian neighbors felt like this. By the look in the father's eyes, I knew one thing: exile was no paradise. We had moved on up, they say, with this move up I-75 out of Detroit, but there was absence here.

Left alone hurt.



At home I was fine. My parents worked long hours and I read and taped songs off of the radio. The searing memory comes from school.

Gifted and Talented enrichment worked like this: once a week, they pulled us from our classrooms and bussed us to a different school. In a glassed-off room, I worked with kids and teachers I'd never met before. I liked it.

One day, our lead teacher announced a special project. We could choose exactly what we wanted to do—anything at all, within reason. They would secure the materials for us for the next session.

The thrill of possibility! I dreamt of wild Mustangs. Little Misties swimming from Chincoteague to Assateague, Secretariats that raced from behind and won. When I drew, I drew horses. Over and over. To this day, a horse is the only thing I can instantly draw. That year, one of my drawings made the district-wide calendar.

When the teacher asked me what I wanted to do, I said: “sculpt a horse.” The teacher didn't ask me if I had ever sculpted before. Instead, she smiled and promised that when we returned we would have what we needed.

One week later, on my desk, rested a mass of earth on spread newspaper.

Have at it. I had no sculpture background. I didn't even have the benefit of a ten-minute lesson from an art teacher. I would not be creating a horse's body that day. I settled on a head. A horsehead. Maybe I could shape the clay into something recognizable. I tried. I kept trying.

I'm sure my teachers thought they were doing something magical for us: asking us our dream, giving us the materials and getting out of the way. I tried. But all I created was a mashed-looking lump that only kind of looked like a horsehead, smushed. With a black eye painted on each side.



And it was this that the teacher wrapped in plastic bags, loaded into my arms, and sent with me on my way.

I walked past several garbage cans without throwing it away. I walked towards my Filipina friend's house. My mother was going to pick me up later. I walked with her down the sidewalk on that neighborhood grid, past the bungalows and small colonials. At some sidewalk crack, I caught the concrete's edge and tripped. My horsehead crashed into a hundred rust-colored pieces.

One summer day after my eighth birthday, my parents said yes, I could walk to 7-Eleven by myself.

What could be sweeter: a cherry Slurpee or the anticipation of getting what I wanted by myself? Maybe half Coke and half Cherry. Or just Coke. And maybe a Hostess lemon pie. I could sit on the parking lot curb and sip and eat and watch the world drive by. I don't recall much departure fanfare beyond *be careful*.

I passed the unoccupied gatehouse and curved eastward on Concord Drive. The sidewalk ended, but I kept going, sticking to the pitted grass along the curb, then the dirt line as if dug by bike tires. I passed the athletic fields for Lamphere High. No teams out there yet. Just vastness. To my left, across the grassy divide, stood the bungalows. Some brick, some with siding. I have a memory of someone calling those neighbors "white trash," hate words that were never spoken in our home. I cringe at the memory. How dare anyone declare another person so less that they can be thrown away?

I can only imagine what people called us who lived in Lexington Village.

I walked past the streets that led into the grid. No one called out to me. No one was even there. No porch-sitters. If people sat outside at all, I didn't see them. Maybe just



one guy working beneath his Trans-Am. I was a little brown girl walking alone, and for ten minutes, no one noticed. The cars passed me and nobody honked. The world kept going about its business. In those moments, I lived the paradox: I could feel both befriended and shunned in Madison Heights. I didn't want to be ignored. But when I was ignored, no one bothered me. The way so many kids were bothered. The way I was spared.

At the corner, I waited. When the light turned green, I rush-walked towards my Cherry Slurpee, already seeing myself sitting on the concrete apron outside of the store. I may have been alone, but I was happy.

