

Wilderness House Literary Review 19/2

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STAMFORD, CONNECTICUT, 1950. The Victorian-era manse, across the driveway from the old stone Presbyterian church. I'm five; Margaret is three; and there's a new boy around who is cute but useless because he's one and can't do anything. But Margaret and I—whooo!

When we open the door to the attic stairs and begin climbing—18, we count loudly, clomping—we ascend into a fragrant world of wood, heat, 1875, other people, timelessness.

The attic, with its collection of little closets off a big room, brown cupboards shut up with silver padlocks, dusty windows above our heads, a couple of hanging light bulbs—and two trikes. Dad is at the church typing, and Mother is three floors below with the blond kid. Today our friend Gilbert Donnelly is home with tonsillitis, so we are on the Race Course by ourselves.

Start your engines. Pedal as fast as you can over the warped floorboards that dip and rise and dip and rise, and watch the turn near the stack of trunks and the curve near the clothes rack and the other corner near the bathroom—with the toilet stained brown—ewww!—and the final turn near the collapsing bookcase. Trade trikes. Pedal backwards. Wear a fur hat from a blue box hiding under the dresses on the rack. Roll a tennis ball over the humps. Bounce a tennis ball off the doors and giggle when it sails down into the stairwell! Poke a big dead moth.

This haven from the netherworld, where dumb sleep is and kindergarten and the strange woman in a black raincoat who picks dandelions in our large side yard to make soup—ewww!—and the Sunday ritual with all of those people who pat my head...

Then it's 2000. I am 55, a new adjunct at The College of Saint Rose, all of us grown up, Mother dear dead, that house and the church torn down in 1956.

I stroll over to the library to look for the plays of Clifford Odets, unpack my book bag on a table in the reading room, straighten my tie, and head for the stacks.

And there—there in that stairwell—the fragrance of the vanished attic, unmistakably! I'm stunned, unable to climb—uninterested in climbing, really. I stand in a corner at the foot of the steps and breathe, again and again, going deeper into that long-ago arrangement of my cells, to the wondrous time of "boy," before work, effort, loss, decision-making, growth, love, decline. I am giddy, yet I am crying.

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A Friend of Dorothy

CAMBRIDGE, MASS. FALL, 1969. I was in grad school at Harvard, living with three buddies, taking courses half-heartedly, acting in college plays--and desperate to come out, whatever that meant. I only knew that I liked guys. I only knew I was lonely. In December I went, yet again, to a shrink, who, after listening to me pour out everything I could think of in that opening session, said, "Well, no matter what you are, you're going to need a lot of help."

I left the office and stood shivering on the sidewalk as the rest of the world rushed by on their way to class or work or a smart restaurant in Harvard Square.

"Fuck you, Doc," I thought, in a moment of psychological bravado.

About two weeks later I picked up a copy of *The Phoenix*, a Boston underground newspaper, where I spotted an ad for a gay liberation meeting at Boston University.

Now or never. Do it.

So one frigid Friday night in January of 1970 I took the subway across the Charles River--mighty Mississippi or Rubicon or Styx, I mused, my stomach rumbling along with the train--found the right BU building, and arrived on the 10th floor.

I stood by the elevator and surveyed the scene: four doors. The elevator disappeared and returned. I was still in the same spot. People must have gotten on and off over the next couple of minutes, and I must have pretended to be doing something every time someone came into the hallway. I was good at acting in real life even if I wasn't so believable on the stage. One learns. One learns to anticipate danger and feign cooperation or interest or defer even when deference is unwarranted. It's safer that way.

Which door?

The one with the sign taped to it. To the right.

Who might see me looking at it? Who cares?

I'll use the Dorothy trope to describe the next moment--you know, when the house lands in Oz and the screen goes from black-and-white to color?

I reached for the handle and opened the door to the rest of my life, more vivid than ever.

I saw a bunch of guys in a smoke-filled lounge, dressed in the political drag of male college students back in the day: blue work shirt, jeans, and boots. The myopic--like yours truly---also wore wire-rimmed glasses. And don't forget the untamed hair.

Captains of a newly emerging industry that I was ready to buy into.

No room at the table, so I stood against the wall with a few other guys, avoiding eye contact.

But soon I looked up. Scruffy dudes were talking passionately over

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and at each other. It was intellectual. It was political. It was funny. It was lively! Good-bye to the dead life. Hello, strangers and brothers.

When the meeting wrapped up, the guy running the meeting said, "Everybody to Sporters!"

"What's that?" I asked someone next to me.

"It's a bar on Cambridge Street."

I followed the crowd, guys in denim jackets, hands in pockets, smoking and talking and gently pushing each other or throwing an arm around a shoulder.

Another door to go through once we arrived at the bar, but this time I had company.

Dorothy flew home to Kansas.

Not me.

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