Jane Snyder

Stadium Terrace

When we were little and my father went to graduate school on the G.I. Bill, we lived in Stadium Terrace, housing for married students with children. Two bedrooms, living room, kitchenette, fifty dollars a month, three units in a row, long and narrow, built as POW barracks for German soldiers, then moved to the university for housing to keep up with the postwar rise in enrollment. "You can tell people you grew up in a tar paper shack," our father said. Suzie and I liked seeing the mica in the tar paper glittering in the sun.

A black oil heater took up most of one living room wall. We called it the hearth, arranged our dolls around it.

Our first friends were Donny and Timmy Owens. They lived across the street, had a television set in a big wooden cabinet you saw as you came in the door. They shared a room with their big brother Johnny. Their older sister Joanna had her own room. Norma and John slept in on a hide-a-bed in the living room. We didn't have a TV. In the winter, if John, Mr. Owens, didn't sleep in, we watched Saturday morning cartoons there.

Mostly we played outside. You were supposed to go home when you had to use the bathroom. You never knew when a mother might be looking out her kitchen window, ready to yell or tell. I didn't mind. My mother was glad to see us.

Norma was pregnant and then, after the baby was born, he was colicky. Donny and Timmy stayed out of her way. They had a spot, behind a storage shed two blocks over. They took Suzie and me there. We said potty but they called it tinkling, like music. So pretty, each holding his little pink penis, the bright stream coming out.

In spring, after it rained, we played in the mud in the ditch at the end of our yard. When we saw a worm's head sticking up we would pull it out, cut it in half with plastic scissors. The top half would wiggle a little before going back into the dirt. The bottom half sank into the earth at once. We believed both halves would regrow. "Making worms," we called this.

The other mothers yelled out their doors for their children when it was time to go home but my mother came to get us, stood talking to us and our friends, admiring the tunnels we'd dug. She'd examine the dirt in the creases in our hands, say: "Look at the finger jam," making us laugh, have us all open our mouths so she could put Lifesavers in.

There was no bathtub and we were too dirty to be washed in the double kitchen sink so we took a shower together.

We stood under the tepid water, calling out that we were poor little orphans, lost in the rain.

My father said he and my mother were not obliged to feed orphans.

"Well, but it's spaghetti," my mother said. "You know how the orphans like that."

"More for us."

He relented, laughed at how hard we shook the bright green can of Parmesan.

We ate in our pajamas, weren't allowed out afterwards, though it was still light. We stood behind the screen door, yelled to Donny and Timmy that we were in jail. "Help, Roy Rogers," we cried. "Help us."

When they went inside to saddle up on their stick horses, Norma made them stay in. My mother invited us to stop being orphans and be her little girls instead, so we did that, and the three of played together. Sometimes our father played with our blocks. Once he used them to build a tower that would release an empty Coke bottle when you rolled four marbles down the slot. Several pieces had to be put back in place each time after we rolled but we enjoyed the racket it made.

Later we asked him to build another but he couldn't remember how.

Before bed my mother read to us. My father sometimes sat in, said things. The Bobbsey twins were spoiled. If they were his he'd settle their rich kid hash.

"Francis," my mother told him, "it's only a story."

In summer we went barefoot. Before we had our baths we would twist our legs up to examine the bottoms of our feet, compare how dark they were.

Little black ants built nests in the cracks in the sidewalk. We played with them, put sticks in their path for them to climb over. Timmy had a magnifying glass, a favor from a birthday party. We'd heard you could set an ant on fire by holding a magnifying glass over it but we never held the glass long enough. Johnny said it didn't have enough power.

When we wore shoes, we would stomp on the ants, pretending we were them. "Run! I hear the giant's thundering feet."

Other times we put a leaf under the sprinkler, let the ants suck the drops of water from it.

In September the runty maple trees in the front yards started dropping seedlings. My father said we should say samaras because that was their name, but Suzie and I called them helicopters as the other children did. Their two wings, each with its own seed, were joined together. If you threw them in the air, the wings would twirl like helicopter blades.

Donny stuck a helicopter by the stem that had attached it to the tree up one of his nostrils. The wings pointed downward, made a green handlebar mustache. Norma made him stop, said it was dirty.

The seed covering was full of juice. The taste was bitter and stayed in the mouth for a long time.

There was an older boy I played with earlier in the summer, Eric, already in second grade. He'd let me help him dig up prickly weeds. I would look for them, report to Eric when I'd found one. "A really big one," I'd say. "It could be dangerous."

He'd walk around it, examining it, whistle between his teeth before putting on the old kitchen gloves he used when he pulled. "You ain't kidding."

I didn't have gloves, picked up the weeds with a piece of cloth and took it to the trash. Eric would show me the roots first. "*That* won't be coming back."

"So the little ones won't fall on them and get scratched," I told my mother.

"Why, aren't you nice."

My father pointed out the maintenance department was supposed to take care of noxious weeds. "But you certainly sound important."

Later Eric found boys his own age to play with. When he saw me he'd bring me green helicopters fresh from the tree, tell me to suck the juice. "Sweet," he'd say. "Like Koolaid."

I knew better.

"Don't you believe me?"

I wanted to be his friend again, sucked.

"Every time," he said. "She does it every time. So stupid."

The last time I did this was just before the older children went back to school. Eric handed me another after he and his friends watched me suck the first one.

"I don't want to."

"But they're delicious."

I was biting into it when Eric's father came out of their apartment, called his name. While he waited for on the stoop he unbuckled his belt, pulled it from the loops, made it crack.

"Oh, no," Eric said. He'd left his bike outside overnight and his mom must have told his dad.

We could hear the sound of the belt from inside but nothing from Eric. He's holding it in, the other boys said, sounding grave.

I went home to my mother who washed my face in cool water, held me in her lap.

At bedtime that night we read from our copy of *The Bible in Pictures for Little Eyes*. The story of God testing Abraham by telling him to sacrifice his only son Isaac. In the picture Abraham's knife was big and curly-haired Isaac looked scared.

Suzie and I didn't like this. "It's a good story," my mother insisted. "Because Abraham loved God so much, God told him he didn't have to kill Isaac."

Suzie wanted to know if she'd kill us if God told her to.

But God has promised he'll never ask that of us, my mother said, putting her arms around us. So long as you love God above all others, she

said. More than your husband when you have one, more than your children, more than anything or anyone. She did.

"Do you love God more than me?" Suzie asked.

"Yes. Even more than I love you and I love you both very much."

We didn't believe her.