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C.J. Hribal 2015-07-07

1967. “The summer of love.” What did I know of love? I was 10. What I knew was what I saw on the TV screen, people in paisley shirts and Technicolor clothing and long hair and ecstatic grins. The hit song, “San Francisco (Be Sure to Wear Flowers in Your Hair),” which made me want to move to a town I’d never seen. (The movies *The Love Bug* and *Bullitt*, with their iconic chase scenes romanticizing the city, were still a year away.) I felt like something was happening there, something momentous. I wanted to be hip, I wanted to be cool, and heck, I already owned a paisley shirt. But I was 10, and I was pretty sure my parents weren’t going to allow me to move to San Francisco, with or without flowers.

What I got might have been better, but I didn’t know that at the time. My parents, after many hushed conversations at night that my siblings and I could only partially overhear, decided to move from an inner-ring suburb of Chicago to a farm in Wisconsin. Instead of being part of a groovy city that people sang songs about, we were about to become the living embodiment of a “Green Acres” episode.

There were many reasons for this – my father’s long-held dream to live in the country (born in Chicagoland’s Cicero, he was like many American midcentury city dwellers, extremely eager to get out), his frustrations at work, which had him contemplating changing jobs, his desire to plunk his children down in a place where there’d be “room to grow.” But there was also a dark thread running through those late-night conversations. The previous summer, Richard Speck had murdered eight student nurses in Chicago. It was miles away from where we lived in Elmhurst, but it helped convince them that the world they knew was no longer safe. I think they wanted to return us to Eden.

It wasn’t Eden, of course – what place is? – but the shift was seismic. I went from having a world defined by blocks and intersections to having 95 acres to run around in. It stretched nearly a half-mile from the house down the slope of the near fields to a creek and then up a steep rise to the top of a hill, where a huge lone oak marked one corner of our property. Midsummer, former neighbors visited, and their kids disappeared with us just before it was time to leave.

Eventually we were spotted, small dots against the lone tree way in back.

“We told the kids they could play in the backyard,” our parents’ friends said. “What are they doing back there?”

“That is the backyard,” said our parents.

We had space to wander, space to wonder. Ravines split the fields on both the east and west sides of our property, and intermittent streams wound through the limestone shelves. A woods with an owl, with skunks and fox and three different kinds of squirrel. Sometimes, you’d find tufts of exploded fur – owl or hawk? Deer came out of the creek’s willows at dawn and at twilight. They

would just stand there for many minutes before ambling along, aware of our presence, but also entirely themselves.

It was all rather amazing. Besides being introduced to the notion of hard work – fences needed to be put in, the house painted, brush cleared and a garden planted, filling a full acre and dwarfing the tiny plot that held a couple tomato plants in our Elmhurst backyard – we also had a different experience of leisure. We tried to scare up the pheasant in the lower field, we watched the crayfish scuttle about in the creek, we climbed around the ruined outbuildings, we listened to the hloo hloo of the pigeons high up in the silo. And we stared at the sky. A lot. During the day, clouds rushed over our heads. At night, we'd never seen so many stars. It was dark enough then that you could see the dust of the Milky Way, and early that fall, for the first time in my life, I witnessed an aurora borealis – shimmering curtains of green and purple and yellow light in the northern sky. It was magical, all of it, even when we were directed to the *Encyclopedia Britannica* to find out what it was we were seeing.

Even the weird stuff, like the 89-year-old woman who lived with her 60-something bachelor son next door, and who had a goiter of alarming proportions sprouting from her neck. She was actually very nice, offering us rhubarb pies, and apples from her orchard, and telling us where to find asparagus, and we tried, and failed spectacularly, at trying not to stare at that massive lump of flesh that caused her head to cock back so that she always seemed to be looking at us sideways. Mrs. Pullman – we did not do right by her.

A goiter was nothing compared to what was coming – assassinations, riots, cities torn asunder. *Life* magazine ran a picture that fall of a young blond man in a turtleneck putting carnations down the barrels of National Guard rifles. Soon enough, those rifles would fire anyway. I followed all that, and the world was suddenly a more complicated place.

Of course, the thing about innocence is that if you're writing about it, almost by definition, you're talking about its loss. In fiction, which is my trade, there's really only one plot line: the loss of illusions. The innocence is recalled more poignantly, felt more intensely, because it's an echo, and you're in a different, wiser place.

Still, I wonder if we aren't ushering our kids too quickly into that knowledge. My own kids learned irony fairly quickly in their lives, and there's a knowingness to kids these days that perhaps offers them some armor against the buffetings of a culture set on puree. Yet there's something to be said for what my parents did in the face of Richard Speck, the man who made it clear to us that unspeakable terror could find you any time, any place.

What my parents did was buy us time – time for us to stare at clouds, time for us to contemplate the stars, to wonder at a goiter, to gape open-mouthed at shimmering curtains of charged particles hitting the ionosphere. What it cost them can be written about another time. What I am grateful for is that summer of awe.

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