

Two

Daydreaming and Piddling



The “new” Ellis Avenue School, built in the early 1930s; I attended the first through third grades here.

After Yaya married a farmer from Cordova, South Carolina (and looked so pretty we forgot to cry at her wedding), MaMa Spahr took a turn for the worse and had to be placed in a nursing home. She died soon after that. Daddy Spahr got lung cancer and had to move in with Mama’s older sister Sue. We moved into a small apartment in town near the Ellis Avenue School, where I had completed first grade and would enter the second. Daddy Spahr died, and Mama put glow-in-the-dark stars and moons all over the ceiling in the bedroom I shared with Marty. If I got to missing the farm and Daddy Spahr, I could sometimes look at those moons and stars in the dark of a summer night with the windows letting in dog barks and grass smells, and I wouldn’t feel so bad.

Our tiny apartment was part of a whole block of attached tiny apartments, with a green space and sidewalks that ran behind everyone’s back door. Laundry flapped from what seemed to be one continuous clothesline. There were other kids to play with—to whom we were not related! We rode bikes and conspired to build clubhouses. We watched *Howdy Doody* and *Pinky Lee* on the first TV set we’d ever seen—at our friend Tommy Smith’s apartment.

Mama got a job at the bank because she said she was tired of us watching everybody else’s TV, and she wanted to get one for us—but I think it was because she really liked to work. She enjoyed being out in the working world; she was good at it. We even got a couch and a chair for the living room with the extra money she brought in. The couch had three cushions on the seat and on the back. Daddy decided that those back cushions would serve nicely as the strike zone

for his pitching practice. He had played some baseball in high school, and he loved the game. The “practice” he devised started with oranges. He would position himself on the “mound” for each pitch; after checking the first-base runner, he’d go into a full windup—complete with the high kick—and hurl the orange at a spot between two back cushions, hoping to wedge the orange between them. That was a strike. Whenever this happened, he’d call the whole family into the tiny living room to view the perfection of his pitch. He almost always hit the target, but sometimes he hit it too hard, and the orange flew between the back slats of the couch, bursting against the living room wall. (After one too many oranges splatted against the wall, he switched to throwing matchboxes—the small, rectangular kind with the little red-tipped matches inside. Once he’d compensated for their lighter weight relative to oranges, he became quite adept at wedging them between the cushions.)

By the time Mama finally got our first TV, a year or so after we moved to the apartment, I had become addicted to *Howdy Doody*. It broke my heart when the Republican National Convention preempted *Howdy* the whole first week we had our own TV. Our parents found the convention fascinating, but Marty, Margaret, and I were inconsolable.

My father delivered Coburg milk in a truck packed with clear ice from the ice plant. At the end of each day, the truck would have some of that ice left over. In the summer, after he’d made his deliveries, Daddy would drive his milk truck to our place, and all the kids would run out to get a chunk of the clear, smooth ice that the milk bottles had been packed in.

We kids also looked forward to playing after work with Mr. Lee Cowling, our next-door neighbor, who was a Cherokee from Oklahoma. He was really big and strong, and he would sling us kids around until we were woozy. His daughter, Sharon, was my best friend in those days. Mr. Cowling had a brother, Bruce Cowling, who was a real movie star. One night Mr. Cowling knocked on our screen door to tell us to turn on the TV—his brother was on *I Love Lucy*! (Just recently, Mama called me from Orangeburg to tell me that Bruce Cowling had a really big part in a Thin Man movie—*Song of the Thin Man*—that she was watching on one of the classic movie channels!)

When I was in the second or third grade, I had my tonsils out. I can still recall the scary spinning sensation of going under ether (the cheesy pinwheel effect in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* actually captures that feeling quite accurately).

Relatives, young and old, had reassured me that “they give you all the ice cream you want” after the surgery, but they forgot to mention the unceasing nausea. (Anesthesia always makes me ill; it’s probably connected somehow to my lifelong motion sickness problem.) I feared the shots, too, which, in those days of torture-chamber syringes, were quite painful.

Mama’s brother Herman was visiting one day when a nurse approached me with one of those awful instruments, aiming to give me a shot. While I was still crying, Herman picked up a syringe she had laid on a towel-covered tray next to him, and every time she bent over, he pretended to stick her in the butt with it. That really made me laugh. While I was out of school, my class wrote letters. My cousin Jim—Herman’s son—wrote that they had seen a helicopter, which was a big deal then, and that Martin Becker, a classmate of ours, had fallen two stories down the stairwell in the old-fashioned school building and landed on his head. Everyone in the class mentioned Martin. He apparently has a hard head, though—he spent some time in the hospital, but he came through fine. He even became famous, sort of; his picture appeared in the paper when he left the hospital. Now a successful businessman, Martin recently told me that he believes he’s alive today because he landed on two of the larger members of our class—future football players Jimmy Wells and Keith Brickelmeyer. (I expressed my disappointment at having missed seeing all the blood on the steps.)

In those days, I walked to and from school, which was only about three blocks from our

apartment, but I was always late. Once I finally made it to school, I was inclined to daydream in class. “Stop daydreaming in school!” Mama would say. “Okay,” I would answer, fully intending to do so. Then the very next day, I’d return from some adventure in my head to find the class laughing and the teacher staring at me impatiently—and know I’d done it again.

(*You* try to stop daydreaming sometime!)

Mama also got notes from the teacher about my tardiness, urging her to see to it that I got to school on time. “How could you be tardy?” Mama would ask. “You start out in plenty of time!” She was right. I did start out in plenty of time. “Why can’t you get to school before the bell rings? Are you piddling on the way?”

Well, yes, I was piddling. And piddling is even harder to kick than daydreaming.

Between our home and the school were endless diversions for an easily diverted child like me. There was a “shortcut” that led through some vacant lots, fields of wildflowers and tall weeds that got brown and crunchy in the wintertime and grew back lush and green in the spring. In the winter you could find things like pennies, used combs, or rocks that looked like diamonds. I could look for roly-poly bugs, crickets, and caterpillars. I’d lose myself just watching ants carry stuff into their mounds. Mama would get me out the door on time, but I was always late.

In the spring, I found red-topped sourweed to chew on and a groundcover that I knew would feel good on bare feet. It bore the most delicate purple flowers that looked like tiny jack-in-the-pulpits. I loved a long-stemmed weed which appeared only at a certain time each year, boasting one fragrant tiny blue flower right on the tip. The delicate smell of those flowers will forever mean “school’s almost out” to me.

There were lots of green tangled vines that bore small pods which, in the early spring, gave forth green pebbles which were okay to eat, if you were in an adventurous mood. Ah, but by the time school was *really* ready to let out, those peas were black and hard as BBs. We used them as ammunition for our pea-shooters, which we made out of hollowed-out grapevine stems or, in a pinch, straws from the lunchroom.

When I wasn’t daydreaming or piddling, apparently, I was showing off.

“Kate,” my mother would sigh in exasperation, “why must you *always* be the center of attention?” (The way Mama said it made it sound like a *bad* thing.)

I can’t blame her for being exasperated. She suffered for my proclivities. More than one teacher diagnosed my tendency to clown around in class as a symptom of insufficient attention at home. This was, of course, untrue; as the oldest child, I had been performing for delighted and receptive adult audiences for years. My recitations and songs were very popular at Christmastime, “The Night Before Christmas” and “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” being two of my more frequently requested numbers.

My classroom antics led to frequent banishments to *the hall* for a large part of my elementary school tenure. I didn’t know it then, but I was already a pioneer: not many girls were singled out for such punishment. You really had to be *annoying* to be sent to the hall if you were a girl. Somehow, I don’t think Mama would have been comforted to know that I was in training to be a cartoonist.



My own self—third-grade photo.



Arnold Roth's portrait of me.