



THE RED-BRICK HOUSE

Age 10 to adulthood

If you stand outside the front door of our office building and look directly across the street and across the empty lot, you will see the back of a red brick house. That house

looks very much like my grandparents' Peoria, Illinois home where I spent every summer until I was 19.

Apparently, there were many similar houses built around the country just after the Depression. I wonder how many of them had those marvelous laundry shoots extending from the second floor bathroom all the way to the basement? My favorite pastime was to lure unsuspecting visitors into putting their heads into the first floor shoot on the pretext of telling them something and then dropping a wet wash rag on their heads from the second floor bathroom. (I laughed out loud to my brother's response to this paragraph which was, "And you wonder why you had so few friends!")

You can see a small second story window on the house across the street, which on our house was replaced by a door and a rickety porch. It was on this porch that my cousin Margaret taught me to kiss when I was 10. That was the same year Grandfather tried to teach me to drive. Unfortunately, the driving wasn't as much fun as the kissing. My spastic legs so limited my control over the foot pedals that Grandfather gave up the first time I almost hit the church next to the parking lot where I was practicing. It was another 15 years before I discovered that I could drive with hand controls, something which I enjoyed until my neck bones began wearing out.

Driving a car wasn't the only form of mobility I tried during my summers in that house. When I was 12, I learned to ride a boy's bicycle with training wheels. The emphasis is on the word "boy's," as my sixth-grade macho image forced me every day to heave my leg over the high rod between the

handle bars and the seat rather than more easily mounting Mom's old "girl's" bike, which lay unused in the back of the garage. My bicycling career ended abruptly the next year when I fell off the damn thing and hit my head while I was trying to simultaneously cross a sloping driveway and look at a pretty girl. Grandfather said that I needed my brains to make enough money to support him in his old age, and he wasn't about to let me damage them in a cycling accident. He never let me ride a bike again.

Grandfather had strong opinions about nearly everything, or so it seemed to me at age 12, sitting and listening to him in the living room of that red brick house. He liked to sit in his easy chair in his clean, checkered, boxer shorts and tank-type undershirt and discuss politics.

In those early days of the Eisenhower Administration, this formerly penniless immigrant would sit in his upper-middle class home a mile from his thriving clothing store and proclaim the evils of capitalism and the glories of socialism. Grandfather's socialism embarrassed me because I confused it with Soviet style communism. I didn't understand that up until World War II; it was acceptable to be an American socialist.

I liked listening to Grandfather on those lazy summer afternoons, except of course, when my young friends would come to visit. Then my mood would suddenly turn from fascination to embarrassment as he would bid them welcome and return to sipping his high ball and advocating socialism without bothering to don trousers.

So, next time you have had a rough day and you drive by one of those fine old red brick houses, think about your grandfather in his undershorts, smile, and enjoy your evening.

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