

“Before Streetlights”

When I was a little girl, I lived with my mom and dad and my four older siblings in a big two-story house. The wood in the house was once part of the original one-room schoolhouse in town, so our house was very old. The orange groves were being torn out and piled for burning and new houses were gradually being built. To us, moving to this rural countryside from the suburbs, it was a wilderness of yea-high weeds slithering with snakes and coyotes.

It was 1962 and mothers stayed home, so kids ran in packs and, because there were no leash laws, the dogs did, too. We built forts out of tumbleweeds to play war, using rubber band guns or pea shooters we filled with grass foxtails. We hauled junk from the dump in our wagons, mindful of the junkyard dogs. Even rusted cans were collected to line the shelves in our pretend stores. We jumped off the railroad trestle into the dry wash below. We climbed trees and made treehouses and rope swings, and whatever else our mothers would surely be yelling at us for doing. We dug tunnels luckily no one was buried in when they collapsed. In winter, when the rains came and the wash was full of water, we trekked out to see the big river it had become. Our mother made us wear our pajamas under our clothes, like thermal underwear, and packed us big lunches with hot chocolate in our thermoses for our expedition. Lace-up boots were a necessity. In summer, however, shoes were a definite hindrance to this life we loved, so once school was out, off went the shoes.

One of the things I remember well about living in that area, was the knowledge we all had of any secret goings-on. There were mysterious things that happened once the sun went down and the stars came out, people running down the street and guns firing, cars abandoned at the street corner to later be demolished, and women crying in the kitchen downstairs late into the night. Some were even sheltered in our home.

That was before streetlights, when night was so dark, if someone came to the door and made inquiries, you were unable to see them. Lying in bed with the sheets thrown back, because it was too hot, we'd watch the lights from cars travel across the walls. Men's voices hushed in the yard outside became something to pay attention to, to wonder about and wait until morning for answers. Until then, my sister and I would lay on the floor and listen with our ears to the old, cracked linoleum, hearing muffled conversation and my father suddenly shouting, “Get back in bed!” The next morning, all would be normal and no one would talk about the mysterious happenings.

The headlines in the newspaper were bold, telling of monsters on the loose and young women being kidnapped while walking home. Sheriff's deputies roamed the levee looking for clues, for signs, for whatever it was that was so frightening. But, then, the stories would end and the newspapers would go back to politics and such. We yet roamed the night ourselves, miles from home, watching and spying, looking for clues, and loving the excitement in that little town with only a country store down the street, two churches, and the elementary school.

Mornings began with a quick bowl of cereal, followed by a dash out the door for that day's adventure. Maybe a hobo had camped nearby and we could sit and watch him toast a hot dog over his campfire. Maybe someone's barn was piled with hay or flattened cardboard boxes. We would repeatedly jump off the loft onto the pile. Someone's dog might have had puppies, their cat might have had kittens, or fruit orchards might be ripe with fruit!

We had become wild in that place that never made it on the county map. Though there were secrets, all we needed to know for sure was that, when our mother's yell carried across the fields, it meant it was time to go home. Once settled around the table, hands washed and manners restored, the wild things we had become out in the fields, retreated back into hiding. The monsters out in the night receded into tall tales told only amongst friends. The tame life seated in front of the television or quietly doing homework belied the truth we all knew, regarding what went on in the late hours of life in that rural town long ago.