

Where 13th Ave. Dead-Ends Into Eagle Street

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ON THE diamond-bright summer days, I was the little boy who got itchy heat rash in red blotches on his neck. Mom made me sit in the living room and watch an Errol Flynn movie on television. I like Errol Flynn though.

I lived in the red brick house at the bottom of the hill, where 13th Avenue dead-ended into Eagle Street, a gravelly intersection with a mailbox and a green-painted lamppole and a sewer cap with holes in it. I dropped pebbles into the holes and heard them plunk into the water, plop and echo.

North of 13th Avenue, Eagle Street ran straight downhill for two blocks, then curving upward to Schlesinger's ugly red house. We drove past Schlesinger's often on Sundays; "an ugly house" Mom always said.

Mr. Schlesinger was the cub scout leader, tall and gauky in his green suit and red neckerchief, and his wrists were tanned dark where they stuck out of his sleeves, and his fingers were bony, and big-jointed, and swung loose like bunches of empty banana skins when he gave the scout salute. He built a fort in the backyard for his kids, a wooden stockade with gates, and fences, and a blockhouse, and a trapdoor in the bottom of the blockhouse, and he painted it red.

South were the old houses: white frame houses and dark brick houses and the "forest" and the park with the birch trees. On a Saturday afternoon in autumn, in the wet and "you need a jacket" autumn, when the red sundown wind has cleaned the air of the smoke from burning leaves on the curb, Dad and I walked down Eagle Street to the park. I huffed and puffed, ran-a-step and walked-a-step to keep up with Dad. On the way to the park was the "forest," a vacant lot overgrown with thistle "stickers" and dry vines and saplings. I wanted to run through the "forest," just for

a minute. Dad waited on the sidewalk.

The only birch trees were in the park between the old houses and the railroad embankment, where there was a dusty baseball diamond and brittle bushes where spiders trapped caterpillars under the dry leaves. The birches weren't trees for climbing; the branches were too high. But Dad told me that Indians built canoes of birch bark; they tore off strips of bark and sewed them together. I tore off a strip of bark and balled it up in my pocket.

But the park and Schlesinger's fort were outside the circle, the neighborhood circle which I had drawn around the red brick house and the sewer cap and the gravelly corner of 13th Avenue. The neighborhood was Carman's white house next door, with the paint peeling off in ovals from the grey metal siding, so that the house looked polka-dotted from the street, and Wolniak's, with the green swing set in the backyard, and Miller's on 13th Avenue, with the concrete driveway and Paul Miller's homemade stilts hanging on the garage wall, and MacFurley's; Mom said that Mrs. MacFurley had painted her kitchen black; and Raganskys.

Raganskys lived right across the street, on 13th Avenue, in a two-story white house that they later painted yellow. There were three Ragansky boys—Nick, Ron, and Bobby—all older, and blonde, with round faces and avocado-shaped noses, and they wore tight white levis and "red ball jets."

Nick was in high school, plump in a grey mechanic's jacket, and he drove Ragansky's station wagon with the broken tailpipe, dragging and sparking on the asphalt. He and Terry Rudin sat in Ragansky's garage and talked. The garage had been white like the house, but had weathered grey like Mom's dustrags, and rough red rusty where the paint had flaked from the gutters. It was dark inside, with only one dusty window, and a grease-stained gravel floor, and musty, even with the overhead door open, from the leaves that had blown in and dried in piles between the spare tires in the corner. There were shelves of paint cans and a riding lawn mower and two racing bicycles and bent spokes and axles and a red tire-patching kit.

It was an early summer morning, cool, with a wheat-smelling west breeze thrashing through the leaves, and the sun cast fuzzy and spotted shadows on the gravel. Nick and Terry sat on apple crates in the garage and talked. I just wandered in and climbed onto the seat of a racing bike leaning against the wall. I couldn't touch the pedals with my toes.

"Get down off there and get out of the garage!" Nick Ragansky shouted and Terry smiled a fishhook curve of teeth that bent sharply around his thin face, and Nick drooled on his mechanic's jacket when he laughed. I decided that I would try to climb that tree with the funny-shaped leaves across the street.

Ron Ragansky was the general. When I was the messenger for the doughboys who held the trench behind Martin's house, firing small-arm wooden gasline stakes and fire-place-log machine guns into the German position sandbagged behind Martin's kitchen window, Ron was General Custer. When the Raganskys and Brewers from Webster Street played "army men" in Ragansky's sandbox, Ron always got the Americans, because the rubber soldiers were his. Ron dug lakes in the sand and filled them with the garden hose.

I sat on the edge of the sandbox and watched the waves of frozen-pose soldiers, and the rubber strategies, and scouts skirting the lakes, and battle lines, and "They're sneakin' up. Pretend you don't see 'em behind the dunes."

"Can I play?"

"No.—Or you can dig up buried guys so we don't lose 'em."

I didn't want to dig up buried guys, and I thought there might be an Errol Flynn movie on television.

On Sunday afternoons, cool, after ties and tall men in church, Ron and the Brewers and Tom Martin, who lived next door, played softball behind Martin's, and Ron was "alltime" pitcher and Terry was catcher and umpire. I watched from the back fence: "He maaaade it by a miibile;" "You missed the tag;" "It's a force-out, isn't it Ron?" "O.K., I'll ask Dad if it isn't. Yah, I'll bet it isn't!" The back fence

was a hurricane fence, but it was the deck rail where, through his spyglass, Captain Blood watched the pagan Aztecs guarding the treasurers of Darien, or where the bombardment had splintered the Alamo's squat wooden battlements. But it was our back fence and Ron was pitching a no-hitter in Martin's backyard.

Dad was filing pipes in the garage. The filing stone attached to the old washing machine motor lit fireworks of metal sparks off the pipe and exploded them on the floor. "What's wrong? Why aren't you playing ball?"

I shrugged.

"Why, won't they let you play?"

"No, I guess, it's . . ."

Dad pulled the plug on the washing machine motor, and walked out toward the back fence, and I heard him shout over the fence, and toward the baseball diamond, and I thought there might be movies on Sunday afternoons.

It was the end of a rainy afternoon, wringing itself out of clothes left on the line and whooshing itself down into the sewer, and I sat on the living room floor. Mom slammed the back door; her hair was wet and her neck was red. "Those Raganskys just threw tomatoes on our front porch." Her chin was red now. "And Mrs. Ragansky can clean it up." In the kitchen, she rattled and gonged through the pans stored under the stove. From the corner of the living room window behind the curtain, I watched her cleaning the porch, picking green and wrinkled tomatoes up like broken glass and loading them into a black-bottomed apple pie pan. She marked across Eagle Street with that stomping, stiff-legged march, the way she walked when I had stolen cookies, through Ragansky's front lawn to their cement porch. She turned the pan over on their doorstep and marched back.