

Home

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Here in the Fort Wayne Marriott, life is good. Air conditioning humming a soft white noise, and the room cool enough for blankets up to my neck or for me a return to my beloved blue jeans. My feet are dotted with mosquito bites, sores scabbed over since I scratched them with a vengeance just like when I was a child, some to the point of bleeding. I have calluses on my hands from driving so much every day. There's a throbbing blister on my right instep from wearing sandals yesterday. I am not a hot August Indiana girl. I am a bundled up against a damp chill Northwest girl. I'm a cool breeze across my bed at night girl. I'm a "don't like the weather, just wait a minute and it will change" girl. The weather in Indiana hasn't changed. It's been around 90 degrees and humid since the morning I stepped outside at the Indianapolis airport and felt heavy oppressive air descend on me. No storms, no breeze, little night cooling. There is some formula now for a heat index that the weather people use to convey the feel of this hot humid air. That has been around 105 degrees. What this means is people should stay inside with the air conditioning running, windows closed, doors closed. Cabin fever sets in fast. Cigarette smoke is trapped inside people's homes. Outside there is a breathless heat, mosquitoes, and sweat.

I've been trapped in people's homes for a week. When I planned this trip to clean out my mother's house it didn't dawn on me that I didn't have a place to unpack. The large family home had been vacated several months earlier when Mom moved to Fort Wayne and into an assisted living apartment. She is settled in there now, likes the meals they make and the cleaning lady every week. She is ready to sell the house and my trip was a mission to empty the house. My brother Shane came from South Carolina with his wife Pam. My brother Paul came from Kentucky with his wife Lesa and their children Heather and Monica. My sister Marilyn lives near Mom, and she invited me to stay in her son's room. He is a college junior home for the summer and working construction. His room is full of baskets of clothes, the dresser stacked with boxes from college. The windows are kept closed so the air conditioning can keep the house tolerable. Because I was there, he ended up sleeping on the couch.

The days were spent 25 miles away from Fort Wayne in the tiny town of Antwerp, Ohio where my parents' home had been for nearly 30 years. We emptied every closet and drawer bringing everything out to a central spot. The dining room table was covered with the possessions of a lifetime. No one remembered where the

Kansas City mug came from or the carved wooden tray. Mom or Dad might have been able to tell us but Mom wanted no part of this process, and Dad was buried outside of town. My memories were with daily items, the stained turquoise melmac bowl that held the vegetables at every meal when I was a child. Or those few pieces of “nice dishes” we had used only on holidays. Or the big aluminum spaghetti strainer, cone-shaped like the tin man’s head. Dad always made the spaghetti sauce and used that strainer to toss the pasta dry.

After three days of sorting, we assembled in the dining room and began dividing. We took turns. No one thing was valued any more than the rest; just take whatever you want when it was your turn. I was keeping in mind the distance I flew to get here. Take small things...easy to pack. I passed on pieces of Grandma’s china and the designer Christmas plates my Aunt Dorothy sent for a while. Instead for my first choice, I picked my dad’s big spaghetti strainer. Too bulky to pack, I told myself, but I took it just the same. Shane caught my eye with a look that said he remembered too and gave me thumbs up. He and Marilyn were picking small appliances for my nieces and nephews who were setting up their own apartments, the can opener, blender, and crock-pot. Paul’s wife was taking the antique pieces, never very valuable but perhaps age has bestowed that on them. Most of it was just pieces of a lifetime passed. I missed my dad. Way down deep. The jokes he would have made. The stories he would have told. Several times people said how glad we all are that we weren’t doing this after a funeral. Mom’s health has stabilized with her cancer in remission. But it still felt like a wake for my childhood home.

I’d had places of my own but never a place I needed to be for the holidays or longed for when I went through tough times. That place remained my parents’ house. Sometimes I found joy and love there. Sometimes Dad was silent, Mom on a rampage and it was far from soothing, but it was home. I would toss the suitcase in an empty room, open the fridge for a soda and settle in. Later, my children would run with cousins, learn card games from Grandpa and get piggyback rides from doting uncles.

I complained about the place because the yucky water made terrible coffee and tooth brushing was a horrible experience. But the little town was lazy and benign. There was a noon whistle and another at 5:00 p.m. The grandchildren loved it all. The post office needed to be visited everyday to pick up the mail. Also there was a bank, a grocery store, a hardware store, a drug store and two gas stations. On the corner with the stoplight was the Pop & Brew, a drive-through store for soda,

beer and snacks, all of this just a few blocks from Grandma's house. Children who were seldom allowed to go out alone in the town where they lived could walk to town five times a day in Antwerp. Usually they would come back with stories about having to identify themselves wherever they went. "You John Starr's grandkids?"

On this trip we tried to have a great time. We usually do when we are all together, but there was a sadness about it. A "last time" feeling permeated us. After we had divided up all that anyone wanted, we boxed the rest for the Goodwill. Then I drove the 25 miles back to my sister's house. The next day I drove back and cleaned. I admit I did it lovingly, like preparing a body for burial. I scrubbed down the kitchen counters that had witnessed all those holiday turkeys. Swept the screened-in porch where we would play cards long into the night. Dusted the mantle where my children's baby pictures once sat. "Good old house." I was tired and weepy within. I walked through that empty house the way we do, checking that windows were locked and blinds pulled down, but really saying goodbye. From the driveway, I took a picture of the house. I drove to the outside of town, to the cemetery where Dad is buried. I took a picture of his grave marker with his name and my mother's. Only her date of death is missing. I drove past the cornfields and the Amish farms back to Fort Wayne.

But this time I went to the Marriott Hotel and I checked in. I dragged my suitcase up the steps to a room of my own, cranked up the air conditioner and collapsed. That was yesterday afternoon. Since then I soaked in the tub, swam in the pool, ordered room service, and slept my deepest sleep in a week under a soft blanket pulled up to my chin.

Sitting here in this lovely room with a comfy chair pulled up to the table, I have the soft blanket draped around me. I am going to put on another pot of coffee. I've decided not to check out but to stay here another night. I cannot drive today or sleep in someone else's bed again. Or wake to some other family going about their business. It's only one more night. So I'm staying here with a coffee pot, a good writing chair, and a lovely cool artificial breeze. As close to peace as I have found on this trip.

Tomorrow I'll drive back to Indianapolis and turn in my rental car. I'll take another plane ride, spend a couple of hours in Las Vegas and then finally fly to Seattle. I am missing my husband, my children, my pets, and my home.