I SAW THE LIGHT

I was nine years old in 1960, and was living with my family on the South Side of Chicago. Our house was small – around 875 square feet, built of wood for my maternal grandparents in 1898 – with one area used as a bedroom by my two sisters, one bathroom, one bedroom for my parents, and one tiny bedroom for me. There was a kitchen, a dining room, a living room, and also a basement. We lived a few blocks from both the steel mills and Lake Michigan.

Our house was sold -- with all of its furniture and appliances, for $8500 – after my Father died in 1974. (My Mother died in 1966.) The house then had a few different owners until it burned to the ground in 2007 when the neighborhood became a drug- and crime-riddled ghetto. Today, it is a weed-choked vacant lot, a dangerous area only viewable quickly during daylight hours from one’s moving car, with its windows and doors locked. But back to my true tale.

Being the only boy in the family, I spent a lot of time either alone or with my school buddies. I sensed at an even earlier age that my family was largely dysfunctional, and that I was trapped in a bad situation. My parents argued like cats and dogs. Excessive alcohol didn’t help matters either. There was always fear among us three children whenever we were home, either day or night. What would the next hour bring? The answer was always unknown until it happened. There were beatings and cursing, doors slammed, threats made. Cigarette smoke choked our childhood lungs. As for love and affection from our parents, it was so sparse that I can hardly remember any. The same went with encouragement, or praise, or guidance towards any kind of potential future careers. Sadly, there were few books in our basically non-intellectual household. As a result of this environment, I spent as much time as possible away from the turmoil at home. I rode my bike far away to the beach, or to undeveloped areas where I explored wild grassy fields. I often begged to stay overnight at friend’s homes, where I was treated to refreshing glimpses of family normality. My dream, my goal was to get away and never come back. I had to get away, or my mind would shatter at the sad reality of the unfairness of my environmental circumstances. What had I done to deserve this? Why couldn’t I have been born into a different family? How could I escape, even at age nine?

Meanwhile, I worked hard at school and got good grades, and enjoyed going on my bicycle to the closest neighborhood public library branch every Saturday to load up on my weekly limit of ten books. I absorbed everything, especially picture books of faraway lands and different cultures and scenes from ancient history. I would pour over maps and globes. I began reading encyclopedias, starting in alphabetical order. But I was always forced to go back home for food and work chores and a place to sleep.

When I got especially frustrated with my home life, I would play alone --in good weather -- outside at the front of our house. We had a tall wooden staircase which led fifteen steps to our front door. At the bottom, to the left, was a clump of two green bushes. That was my secret kingdom. There, I observed insects, and played with my toy soldiers and toy dinosaurs for hours. I would dig into the dirt with sticks and old pieces of metal. Sometimes I would flood the whole area with cups of water, or make miniature cities out of stones or cardboard. It was a peaceful activity, akin to building plastic model airplanes, boats, cars, and army tanks indoors on winter evenings.

As always, though, my respite was short-lived, and soon I was thrown back into the hectic maelstrom of family dysfunctionality. Meal times were tense and unnatural. There was little meaningful conversation, just unhappy people staring around the table. Unimaginative menus. No fun or laughter. What was I doing here? Where was the simple joy of living? Not here. That was a phantom. Nowhere to be found in this place.

Of course I secretly cried at night, lost and alone. My sleep was tormented too. Headaches and stomachaches during the day, nightmares at night. Trapped.

I forget the exact date, but I am sure it was in late August of 1960, shortly after my ninth birthday. School would be starting up again after Labor Day, in about another week. The day was especially stressful, filled with yelling and face-slapping for ridiculous, minor transgressions that were beyond my tender realizations. I fled the house and stood between our small house and the tall three-story apartment building next door, to the north (or right) of our frontage.

It was the golden hour of light, when the sun seems to flare up in magnificent splendor just before it begins its descent over the western horizon. The rays warmed my face as I stood on a narrow strip of cement which separated our meager city lawn with that of our neighbors. I was barefoot, wearing worn blue jeans and a soiled t-shirt. The shaft of light poured down on me, seemingly magnified by being squeezed between the two structures. The air was calm, but with the typical smells of summer. It was quiet. There were no other people around, which was unusual because many folks sat out on their porches after dinner to relax and chat with neighborhood passersby. I was all alone.

My heart was wounded, my soul was suffering, my spirit was in despair. I was at the end of my rope.

“Dear God, help me!” I pleaded, my eyes burning as I stared into the nearly setting sun. “I’m lost. I can’t do this anymore. I don’t know what to do. Please help me. I can’t do it alone anymore.” In my soul, I was at the edge of an abyss.

It was then that I felt an overwhelming sense of peace and reassurance flood my entire being. I didn’t hear a voice as such, but I heard this thought clearly in my mind and in my heart: Don’t ever worry. I am with you. I will always protect you. You are never alone. I will help and guide you. Trust me. All will be well. Forever.

That experience was immediately followed by such a feeling of love that my eyes filled with tears of relief and recognition as I looked down from the golden light. I was in awe. Maybe some would call it a feeling of God’s grace or His blessing. Had something Divine happened? All I can attest was that it was so deep, rich, and beautiful! I – who was nothing but a kid, and undeserving – was now humbled beyond words. I stayed there in the same spot in mystified contemplation until the sun went down, then went back inside and slipped into my bedroom and closed the door. I felt I had been fully transformed by my encounter with The Light. I sensed that I was somehow reborn, and was perhaps touched by something Universal, something Infinite.

My interaction was so personal and intimate that I told no one about it until years later when I was an adult. Needless to say, my life changed at that point. I now had the support and confidence that I needed. I absolutely knew that I would survive. I was assured beyond any doubt that everything would be all right. Suddenly, my family life – though my parents were unchanged – was seen as something bearable, and as more of a temporary inconvenience rather than an endless tragedy. I could endure it and then transcend it. I then began to see my own parents as simply large, flawed children who were pathetically staggering through life, pretending they were mature adults. My anger and fear towards them gradually morphed into a kind of detached pity, a form of sympathetic understanding that they were in fact just lost and confused souls. Hence, I was now incapable of hating them. And as the years rolled by, I became a contented and successful adult, teacher, husband, and father. I am truly grateful for every day.

Whenever I remember that miraculous August moment, however, I wonder how it happened and why it happened. Did this phenomenon ever occur to other people? Does it still occur to those in need today? I hope it did, and I hope it still does…

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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