

When I Was the Heroine

All six pounds seven ounces of me came home from the hospital to the same bungalow-turned-rambling-old-house where my kids visit their grandma and grandpa. There are still six steps up to the front porch. The eight-paned door I came through as an infant is the same too, though the deadbolt lock has been repaired until what looks like locked is actually unlocked, and vice versa.

But the old neighbors are gone, even Ray Berber and his wife across the street. The evergreen hedge in front of the house is gone, too. Fr. Art helped mom to replace it with hostas, cedar mulch, and various concrete frogs. On St. Patrick's day, the frogs all wear leprechaun hats and secretly practice step dancing, but I miss the bushes. I never knew who I would become when I emerged from those bushes, since it changed every day. I was Princess Leia. I was the savior of *Black Beauty*. I was a fierce pioneer lady, settling the prairie.

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I had to chase our cat, Spuffy, behind the hedge after she snuck out the front door. I shone a flashlight under the porch, desperately trying to discern her sleek browns and creams in the dark. *Maybe Spuffy is an Ewok*, I thought.

"She looks like an Ewok" Chewbacca-from-down-the-street would grumble, pushing his stringy bangs back from his forehead.

"Go get some wet food," I said to my bother, looking for our scared little creature, hoping to woo her from the bushes and into the house.

She crept toward me slowly and began slicking at the can of Tender Beef Feast with her scratchy tongue, purring contentedly. "It's okay. You can escape behind bushes again tomorrow," I said as I brought the conquered in through the front door.

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I scampered down the steps with my brother, slowing down as soon as our feet hit the grass. I trailed my hand over the hedge as we walked to the edge of our yard, and then carefully performed the hopscotch painted on our little pathway before stepping onto the sidewalk.

We met David Posegay one block over, and by the time we got to the end of Prairie Avenue, we began one-upping each other's stories all the way to school. Luckily, I had seen a naked lady at the lava hot springs in Oregon. From the two seconds I had glanced at that woman floating in the stone pool, I spun an epic tale that spanned three mornings.

On the fourth day, we rode our bikes—or at least the other kids did. I rode horseback. My white banana seat had a wide rainbow the middle that served as a saddle, and the blue-jelly covered chain lock gripped the handlebars easily enough that I could steer using them as reins. I rode in the grass as much as possible, and though it was too bumpy to promote conversation with the others, it seemed to protect her hooves quite nicely. When I secured her at the bike racks, I gave her a little lump of sugar and apologized that I didn't have time to rub her down properly. Then I skipped into room 12 to gaze worshipfully at Mrs. Larabee.

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In winter, the shin-deep snow our parents had shoveled so easily in the morning came up to my first-grade thighs, making for an exhausting walk. Still, I kept a snowball locked and loaded in the event of fifth graders attacking us. I carried my snowball carefully, a little crumble of it slipping between my mittens and the cuff of my coat, melting at my wrist. Sometimes I pressed the snowball to my forehead, a compress.

When we reached the edge of the soccer fields, I cut through the thicket along the south fence, and faced the uncertain future bravely. I scavenged for winter berries and marked my path on the trees with my mom's old Girl-Scout pocket knife. When Brian Novak invaded my woodland territory, the snowball that had gradually turned to ice in my mittens landed squarely on his perfect nose.

My brother and David Posegay celebrated my heroism with me on the way back home, and I slapped the evergreen bushes a high five when I got there.