

The War

by
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There is a wrought iron fence around the outside cellar steps of the house. They are the only steps and the only fence like this left on the street. Once all the houses had them. The steps are steep and the bottom one is cracked. I am not supposed to use them unless my shoes or boots are dirty or covered with snow or something else that I should not bring into the main portion of the house. The door at the bottom of the steps leads to the coal cellar. There is a little window into it and the coal truck comes and puts a long chute over the fence and down into that little window and it fills the cellar with coal. Beyond this cellar there is a door to a basement which has in it a toilet, bathtub, sink, and a coal furnace. The sink is all the way across the room from the toilet and the bathtub which are next to each other. It is a big room, the size of the whole house. The furnace is convenient to the coal cellar, right by the door to it. My father comes each morning in the winter and fills it and each night before he comes to have his supper he does that, too.

A door leads from this basement/bathroom/laundry room/furnace room to a storage shed that backs onto the garden. Oh, yes, the washer is in this big room, too. It has a wringer that you have to roll by hand to put the clothes through. My mother uses the bathtub as a laundry tub. We never call it a garden, that green space beyond the shed. We call it the yard. There is an old outhouse in it near the shed. My mother hangs her gardening tools there. There is a huge and wonderful tree in the yard and an alleyway behind it. We are the only yard with a tree among these four little houses that stand next to one another in a row. Someone once told me that the servants who worked in the big houses further along the street used to live in these little houses. In the summer masses of old fashioned blue flags hide the yard from the alley way until they die.

Every Monday before he goes to work my father goes into the yard and puts up the clothesline. There are hooks at both ends of the yard for the line. He makes the line very, very, very tight so that my mother doesn't have to use too many clothes props. My mother tries to get her wash up first before anybody else does. She hangs everything in a special place and she hides the underwear in the middle of it all. When it's too cold my father puts up the clothesline in the basement and then we have to walk through the clothes to use the toilet and the room smells all sweet and soapy and is moist. My mother says the soap is not what it used to be before the war. She uses some kind of brown soap called Fels Naptha and she grates it and then puts it into the wash.

Two of the four houses have little banners in their front windows. They are red, white, and blue banners with gold cord and tassels. They have a star on them and it means that someone in the house is in the war. My father says that if that person dies they change the colour of the star. It gets to be a gold one. One day I walk up and down the street looking at windows to see if there are any gold stars in any windows at all but there aren't. When I mention that to my father he says that's good. I think about that because gold stars at school are supposed to be very good. I like getting gold stars. I have lots of them for my work and for being neat and tidy and behaving well. Then how can it be good not to have a gold star in your window? I guess I'll understand more when I grow up.

Steve, my classmate, and his parents and brother, live on one side of us. Anne, another classmate, her father, mother, and eleven brothers and sisters live on the other side. I often wonder where they all sleep, those fourteen people in this little house, but some of her brothers are in the war. They have that banner hanging in their window.

Next to Anne and her family live Harry and his family. He is our classmate, too. Imagine four of us in the same class living in the same four houses all in a row? But we never walk to school together. I walk with Charley and Buddy and Billy. Billy's father is the undertaker. He's supposed to be the smartest boy in our class, but sometimes Joey Slawek beats him out from being top boy the way sometimes Carolyn beats me out from being top girl. Joey lives on the hill, not anywhere near us. Carolyn lives on the hill, too.

Harry has a younger sister Marianne who is away from school more than she is there. My mother says she's "odd" but that I should never say that to anyone. Their older sister is named Helen. She has married a divorced man "outside the Church". She gives me her cast off clothing and I like her. We aren't supposed to approve of divorced people but I think it's very nice of Helen to give me her clothes. My mother thinks they're too grown up for me but I don't care. I wear them anyway. There's also a brother Francis in the family but he's off in the army or navy or something and that's why they have one of those little banners in their window.

We call them Father, Son, and Holy Ghost houses, these four places in which my classmates and I live. The steps in them are all circular to save space. Actually there are four levels because they all have an attic, too, part storage room and part my bedroom in my house. I used to sleep in another room until my brother got too big to continue sleeping in the crib in my parents' bedroom. Now I sleep in half the attic.

The front room on the first floor is parlour and dining room. It has one window that faces east. The window is sunny, bright, and very wide, and filled with my mother's house plants, especially English ivy. In the summers I always bring home the plants from my classroom at school. My mother says she doesn't like that but I do it anyway. I bring the plants home one at a time over the weeks before school finishes. Most of them we put in the back yard and a few we squeeze into the window with the English ivy. Then I carry them back to school once the sisters come back from their summer school. I carry one or two each day and I help to decorate the classroom. Sometimes I help to decorate the one I have been in. Sometimes I help to decorate the one I am going to go into that year. We use crepe paper to cover the pots of the plants. We put pictures and words on the bulletin boards, like "My Lord and my God." I like to paint sayings on the blackboards most of all. We put them high up on the blackboard in Old English letters and in white paint and put flowers around them in coloured paint but the war makes it hard to get this coloured paint now.

There is a complete dining room set in our front room. I do my homework at this table usually as soon as I come home from school before I am allowed to go out to play. I have to take off my school clothes and then put on my play clothes and then sit down and do my homework. My mother rolls away a part of the fake lace table cover that is over the mats that cover the top of the table to save its surface. I call it fake lace because we have a large white hand crocheted table cover which my mother made but which we never use except for holidays. That's a real lace tablecloth, I think. We never eat at this table except on holidays. There is a China cabinet in the room and I like to look at the Japanese tea set in it. It has all kinds of birds and women in kimonos and flowers and they are raised over the blue background of the pieces. We never drink tea from it. My mother says it was a wedding present. The special dishes are there. We use those at Christmas and Easter only. My grandmother gave those to my mother for a wedding present. They were bought on South Street. I don't know much about this South Street but it sounds like you can buy anything there. My mother's wedding gown came from South Street and so did her bridesmaids' dresses. I like looking at the wedding picture which hangs over the buffet. My mother and father look so young and her flowers are so beautiful and all the baskets of flowers and bouquets from the bridesmaids are there. In a box in the attic my mother has the pictures of all the wedding party. My aunts are on it and my cousins Betty and Gussie are the flower girls. . They all look very happy. The groomsmen look happy, too.

Once my mother showed me her wedding dress. It is also up in the storage space which is part of my bedroom. It is so plain but it has something called leg o' mutton sleeves, all puffy and shiny satin. "The veil was everything," my mother said as she lifted it from the box where she keeps it. The flowers on the veil which she wears down almost over one eye in the picture are like the dress, the same material. She looks very special and very happy in all the wedding pictures. She looked very happy when she showed me her wedding dress. I don't see my mother look happy very often.

In three corners of this front room there are arm chairs. I am allowed to sit in one in the winter evenings to read my books. In the summer I like to go outside to read. I especially like to sit with my back against the big tree but I have to put a blanket under my bottom so I don't get a cold. My father sits in another chair near the front door and reads his paper. There is a floor lamp that gives him light. He watches the clock on the buffet and knows just when to turn on the radio for "Fibber McGee and Molly" and "George Burns and Gracie Allen" and "The Shadow" and "The Green Hornet". Sometimes he takes his newspaper downstairs to read it on the toilet. We're not allowed to go down there when he's doing that. It's supposed to be a private time.

I think it's a silly place to have a bathroom because sometimes there's somebody there, like when my mother and Aunt Elizabeth do the wash on a Monday and I have to use it or wet myself. My father leaves for work very early in the morning. He belongs to a car pool and they come by to pick him up at 5 o'clock every morning, sometimes even on Sundays. He has to work on Sundays because of the war. Maybe he leaves too early to empty his bowels in the morning. That's what my mother calls it, either that or a major movement. So maybe that's why he sometimes goes downstairs with his paper at night, because he's too rushed earlier.

I like listening to the radio in the living room. On Saturdays I come in from playing outside to hear "Let's Pretend" and "Grand Central Station" which is the "crossroad of a million private lives, gigantic stage on which are played a thousand dramas daily." "Let's Pretend" is all fairy tales. After I eat lunch I listen to "Larry Noble", matinee idol, and "Helen Trent", who has a lot of men after her. I wonder if a lot of men will be after me when I grow up. And if I get my homework done fast enough, and if it's too cold to go out to play I listen to "Stella Dallas, who in young womanhood" got into some kind of trouble or another. She doesn't have a husband but she does have a daughter. I wonder how that can be. My brother likes to listen to "Tom Mix" but I don't, maybe because I don't like Wheaties, the breakfast of champions who sponsor Tom. I do like to listen to "Captain

Midnight" because I have a secret decoder ring and I like to figure out the messages he gives at the end of the program.

Sometimes I would rather stay inside and listen to these soap operas than go outside and play. I don't jump rope very well. I've tried double dutch and I keep falling down and scraping my knees and sometimes ripping my brown lyle stockings. I hate brown lyle stockings. Most of the girls in my class wear rayon ones but my mother thinks they're too cold and that I'm not old enough for them. She also says it's part of the war effort not to wear silk or nylon stockings, or even rayon ones. They need them for parachutes, the silk and the nylon. She says maybe when I'm in Grade 8 I can have one pair of rayon stockings for Sundays. I have Sunday clothes in addition to my school clothes and play clothes but no Sunday stockings, just the brown lyle ones. In the summer I wear white lyle ones. I keep them up with a funny thing called a garter belt. Some of the girls use a kind of rubber roller to keep their stockings up by my mother says that hurts circulation, whatever that is.

I asked my mother why they're called soap operas and she says it's because so many of the shows are sponsored by soap makers. I guess that's as good a reason as any. Sometimes if I'm very good and not too sleepy I can stay up on Monday nights to hear the "Lux Radio Theater". Lux is a soap company, too, of course, but we don't use it. My mother uses Camay, the "soap of beautiful women". She buys Ivory for us. It's a wonderful program, the Lux Theater. But sometimes I get so excited by the stories I find it hard to sleep and then my mother gets mad at my father for saying it was all right for me to stay up. Sometimes I wonder what my mother and father do agree on. It doesn't seem like much. I know they agree that I have to help them keep the fact that there really isn't a Santa Claus except for them from my little brother who still believes in him. I know they agree on where to put the Christmas tree in the front room each year. And I know they agreed last Christmas to make it a patriotic tree because it had all red balls at the top and silver in the middle and blue at the bottom. They had a fight last Christmas when my father saved some of his cigarette money to buy me a doll I wanted and my brother electric trains. Why would they fight about this, I wonder?

I look at my father sometimes and think that maybe he does want to go to the war. I was so scared when he went for his physical. When he came back he said he was 4F. I don't know what that means except that he doesn't have to go to the war. But he is an air raid warden. He has a steel helmet and a flashlight and he has to go out sometimes and tell people to put out their lights. We have these shades on the windows that are black on the outside and brown on the inside and we have to pull them every night on every window just as soon as it gets dark. It's to keep the Germans away, my mother says. I really don't understand that because we are half-German, at least my little brother and I are, because my mother is German and my father is Irish. The Italians aren't so good either my mother says, but Charley is Italian, and so are his grandparents. He lives with them. They like me and his grandmother gives me funny kinds of cookies now and again and they taste of licorice or something and Charley has lots of toys to play with and lets me play with them, too.

Behind this front room which we call the living room is the kitchen, and it's long and narrow, with a table and four chairs, a sink, and a gas stove that you have to light with a match. There's an ice box and a couple of times a week a man comes and chops off a block of ice and carries it through the living room really fast with huge tongs and puts it into the top of the ice box. There's an enamel basin on the floor under the ice box to catch the water as the ice melts. We're never supposed to leave the ice box door open and we're supposed to think before we open it so that we can get everything out from it at once and fast. There's a window in the kitchen that looks out on the yard and I like looking at the tree from this window because the tree looks so different from here.

We eat a lot of hot dogs and baked beans in this kitchen and a lot of baked macaroni. Sometimes for a treat my father sends me out to buy hand-dipped ice cream from the local store for dessert. He likes butter pecan most. I like chocolate. My brother has to have vanilla because my mother says anything else isn't good for little kids. She likes cherry vanilla most. We get some of each when I go to the hand-dipped place.

When I was littler my mother used to make me soft-boiled eggs with dunkers in the kitchen every morning. The dunkers come from a piece of toast cut up into strips. I was supposed to dunk the toast into the egg and eat it. My little brother still does this. He's really very cute although I pretend most of the time not to like him. He has really curly hair and wears white baby shoes which my mother keeps polishing, polishing, polishing. The shoes go up over his ankles. My mother says I once tried to kill him which is a terrible lie. She used to want me to pat his bottom until he fell asleep and one time I wanted to go out to play and he just wouldn't fall asleep so I pushed his head into the pillow and said, "Sleep, kid." My grandfather saw me and told her. That was when we lived with my father's mother for just a year after we couldn't afford to buy the other house we used to live in when the landlord wanted to sell it. I liked that house better than this one and so did my father. He cried when we had to leave the other house. I used to stand at the bottom of the stairs there and call, "Pal?" And my father would come and say, "I'm here" and come down and pick me up and put me over his head almost like he would if I had been a boy. My mother said it was o.k. to do that when I had my overalls on but not when I had a dress on. I wonder why.

In this kitchen my mother makes a lot of baloney sandwiches for my lunch. They are on white bread with yellow, yellow margarine. My father takes the margarine after we bring it home from the store on Saturday when we shop and squeezes a little button in the middle of it and then works it, works it, works it, until it gets this colour and then he puts it back into the ice box to go into the shape of real butter. On Saturdays and Sundays my father makes Cream of Wheat for breakfast. Sometimes on a Sunday he makes bacon and eggs but not very often. That has something to do with the war, too.

So the basement is the Holy Ghost floor, and the living room and kitchen are the Son floor, and over this is the Father floor. The Father floor has two rooms that are bedrooms. My parents have the front one. It has their bedroom suite in it. It's about three colours of wood and it has all kinds of curlicues on it. I have to dust it every once in a while and then I hate all the curlicues because I have to put one finger into the duster and go over every one of them and then crawl under the bed and do the same things to the legs and the legs of all the other furniture. There's a vanity, and a chest of drawers, and a padded chair, and a bench in front of the vanity, and that matches the padding on the chair, and my mother's comb and brush set that she never uses is there, too. It's made of some kind of brown stuff that feels like bones and it has all sorts of files and things that go along with it. Once my mother showed me something that she does use and it's for her cuticles. I watched her push them back on her fingers but she said it didn't hurt. There's a closet in this room and all my parents' clothes are there except in winter the summer clothes are down in a brown cabinet in the basement and in summer the winter ones are there. My brother's clothes and mine get put into boxes with mothballs when we don't wear them and they get stored in the other part of my bedroom. There are linen doilies with hand crocheted edges on everything in my mother's bedroom. There are two big windows in the front bedroom. One of them looks out on a gaslight which my mother says will be lighted again once the war is over and we don't have to have the blackout. I wonder what that light will be like. Since we've lived here the war has been on and it's never been lighted at night. My mother says a man comes and lights it and then comes back in the morning and puts it out.

When I was little and slept in the back bedroom I liked to look at the tree from the window there. Summer or winter it was so beautiful. I could always find something about it to enjoy. I had to have a potty under my bed then because I couldn't make it downstairs but now my brother has that and my mother says I'm big enough to go downstairs on my own if I have to but I shouldn't have to if I don't drink anything after supper. Sometimes I drink a black cow and then I have to go down the stairs. My father likes to make black cows. It's vanilla ice cream in Hires root beer. It has to be Hires my father says. He takes a tall glass and fills it half with Hires root beer and then puts a big scoop of ice cream in it and stirs it and it gets all pretty beige and so good. My mother doesn't like me to drink black cows unless it's the summer and I'm staying up until 9 o'clock at night which is my bedtime then. If I have the black cow early enough I don't have to go down to the toilet at night.

My brother has the bedroom furniture I used to use. It's pale yellow and it has decals all over it, those kinds of things that you put into water and then they slide off and you have to hurry to put them where you want them for decorations and you have to do it very fast and be very careful or they stick and you can't move them. My brother has pink and blue bears and flowers all over his furniture. I now have a plain bed and a funny chest of drawers. There's a rack for my clothes and my mother has an old sheet hanging over the top of them to keep the dust off the clothes. They bought it all at the Salvation Army. They had a hard time getting it up those winding stairs. I think I heard my father say a bad word while he was doing that.

I like my new bedroom, sort of. I can't see the tree from here but I can see the lamp which will one day be lighted if Hitler doesn't win the war, or maybe if he does. I don't know. He's supposed to be a very, very bad man even though he's a German and so are we half-German and I go to a German school and parish. But we aren't allowed to sing German hymns any more because of the war. We did sing one for my First Holy Communion because the pastor said we had to. It was something called a tradition that had gone on for centuries in every German place. So we did. I don't understand this. If Hitler comes and does take over wouldn't it be good if we all know German. Adults are funny sometimes. One time I got so scared when I was little that I knelt at the chair in my parents' bedroom and asked God to help me to live if Hitler comes. I told God I thought I ought to learn German so that I could speak to him and I told the sisters the same thing at school the next day but Sr. Stephanie told me never to say anything like that again.

Once I had to get undressed behind something called a screen when we went downtown to see a specialist because my tonsils and adenoids have grown back in again. They were taken out when I was five but now they're back. I liked that screen and asked my mother if I could have one for the part of my bedroom that isn't my bedroom but is the storage area but she said no. She said she had never heard of anything so silly. I thought it would be nice. I could put it in front of the brown boxes and maybe cut out flowers or something from magazines or old wallpaper and put them on the white screen and make my room a little prettier. The walls aren't painted in the attic and my mother says she won't do that until we own the house. Now we're renting. I hope we buy it soon. I hate the gray walls. My friend Nancy has a bedroom with all kinds of flowers on the wall. She calls me "Cherry Pie" because once her mother took us both to a big restaurant downtown called Kugler's and

I ordered cherry pie for dessert and she said she had never seen anybody eat anything so fast. What I never told her was that I ate it fast because I hated the cherry pie because my father's mother makes cherry pie that is so much better.

Nancy lives up the hill in the Protestant part of the town. Most of the Catholics live where I live. But Nancy is a Catholic. My mother says that people who live there are mostly "putting on airs". But I like walking to Nancy's house after school sometimes. Carolyn and Joey live on the hill, too, and they're o.k. We're thinking about having a little club, just six of us girls. The other five all live up the hill. I go to Nancy's sometimes after I go to the library to get my books every week. The library is half-way up the hill. My mother will probably think I'm getting above myself if I tell her about the club.

I like to play "Sister" in my room. I shut the door and dress up. I have a full habit, that's the uniform the sisters wear. I made it from an old nightgown and some cardboard for my collar and some black material one of my aunts gave me. She used to give me her curtains to play bride when I lived in the other house and was little. I pretend I'm a nursing sister and I take care of the pope. He needs a lot of taking care of because the Germans are in Rome. My father showed me a picture of him in the newspaper walking around parts of Rome that were bombed. He looked so very, very sad.

I spend hours comforting him and I sleep on one side of the bed so he isn't disturbed since there's only one bed in the room. I thought about sleeping on the floor because it's a narrow bed and tried it but there's an awful draft there and I'm afraid of getting sick again. I don't like being sick. Once when I was sick the doctor had to come and they boiled water in the kitchen and they used these funny scissors and opened up the side of my neck three times and all this gunky pus came out and I screamed and screamed and screamed. My father brought me chocolate-covered cherries to cheer me up. I was in the back bedroom then.

I don't like going down those three flights of stairs to get to the toilet at night. The bathroom in the other house we couldn't afford to buy was on the same floor with the bedrooms. That was nice even when I was very little. It had trees, too, in the front and the back. I miss those trees. I love my tree here but I wish I could see it from this bedroom. I like the window here, though. It is kind of slanted, like the roof of the room is, and is wide, wide so that I can sit in it and look at the light that isn't lighted. When all my lights are out, I can pull open the shade and look out. Sometimes I see stars.

I hope this war is soon over. I don't mind taking the ration book and red tokens to the store to buy things but I think it will be fun when I can sit at the window in my bedroom and use the light from the gas lamp to read. It will be fun to go downtown and have all the sugar in my hot chocolate that I want, not just two spoonfuls, when we go to Horn & Hardart's for beef pie and then afterwards to Kresge's for the drink you eat with a spoon.

When that light comes on again, I can sit with my back to the brown boxes and look at that gas lamp and think I'm in a real bedroom not half an attic. When I can do that, the war will be over, and I think I'll be happy.