

It is odd what small incidents will do to our thoughts, how something that takes place in the present can trigger all kinds of memories of the past. That happened to me this forenoon as I left the barn after our morning chores.

I was halfway from the chicken coop to the sheep shed when I heard a noise that rattled my eardrums and sent chills up my back in spite of winter clothes. I turned around to look and saw the neighborhood cat, Black Kitty, high up in the sugar maple on the east side of the other house. Another cat was in the tree, too, and they were wrangling orally—no violence yet. But, I realized, of course, that these were two tomcats fighting their turf war.

It made me think back to when I slept in the Little East Bedroom in that house. One March night I was awakened by that same noise from two cats battling it out in that same tree. It is enough to make one's hair stand on end just to hear cats staking out their claims.

And that led to other thoughts about the upstairs of that house. There were really four bedrooms in the upper story—two very large ones and two small. The Little West Bedroom, though, was never completely finished, and instead, was the room that held the water tank that was filled by the windmill. The tank then sent its supply to the kitchen below by gravity. That was no longer in use in my memory. The Little West Bedroom was used for storage.

The Big East Bedroom, as I heard from my dad, was the boys' room. There is ample room for two double beds and probably even for a single bed, besides. There were seventeen years between the oldest boy in the family, Albert, and the youngest, Everett. So, it was not likely that all six boys would be at home at the same time once the youngest was old enough to be in a room with the big boys.

The Big West Bedroom was the girls' room. Nellie, Elsie, Hilda, and Constance would have had plenty of space in that room. There were eleven years between Nellie and Constance, so it couldn't have been many years that all of the girls were at home at one time, either. My sister and I shared that room for years.

The Little East Bedroom was, I think, Albert's as he was four years older than the next boy. I suppose it was his privilege to have a room of his own.

When we were growing up, the upstairs of the house was a good place to play. But, there were some memories of the room that

were a little more scary. I can still remember the big crib I slept in when I was little. Maybe, it would be called a “youth bed” now, but I know that it had some sort of railing. Our mother often sang to us after we went to bed, but I don’t recall any lullabies. We were sung to sleep by songs like The Streets of Laredo, Knickety-Knacity-Now-Now-Now, and Home on the Range. I don’t recall that any of these tunes hampered our sleep.

Something far more insidious gave me nightmares and brought my mother up the stairs in the night. There was a cleaning product that may still be in existence today called Dutch Cleanser. It was scouring powder used in the kitchen. As innocent as that seems, there was a problem. The picture on the outside of the can was of a woman in a white Dutch cap—her face could not be seen in the side view—with a stick in her hand. She was, I guess, chasing out dirt. But, in my dreams, she was chasing me around the bed. I don’t think it was her stick that scared me. Instead, it was the fact that she had no visible face. I hope that writing about the Dutch Cleanser woman doesn’t trigger a return to those nightmares.

In the Big West Bedroom was a simple grate—a register—that allowed heat from downstairs to rise up to somewhat warm the bedrooms. When there was adult company in the room below, we often sat by the register in our room and listened.

That was often entertaining, but one visitor scared me, and I retreated to a position by the register to keep track of him. This was a very nice man, an old neighbor who had moved away from this neighborhood long before I was born. But he, and later, he and his family, visited frequently from their home near Grand Rapids. Once, he said that he was going to take me home with them. This was perfectly innocent joking on his part, but it was definitely a very frightening prospect for me when I was little. I never told my mother or father about this, or I am sure either of them would have taken care of the problem by telling this friend to explain to me that he was fooling and also to never say it again. So, instead, when he came, I sat upstairs by the register to keep track of the conversation and ensure that no mention of my going away was made.

It must have been a couple of years before I realized that this nice man had not meant what he said, and that he had no intention of taking me home with him. After that, their visits were pleasant times to play with other children.

That was a great house for kids, and there were plenty of ways to get into trouble. Usually, I was able to avoid the worst calamities, but goaded by my brother, I did have one bad experience caused by that upper story. I was not even in the house at the time. I was in the front yard, playing. My brother, eight years older than I, was up in the Big East Bedroom. I suppose that was his room at the time. He was teasing me, calling down to me from the open window.

I don't really know what my intent was. I suppose, I had visions of throwing something up there and hitting him. That was way out of the realm of possibility considering my age and size at the time, but I imagine my own ideas of my ability were a little exaggerated. I had a big stick I was playing with, and finally, exasperated with my brother, I gave a mighty swing and threw it up at him.

I didn't have enough power for that. I did, though, have enough to pitch that stick through the big living room window straight down from the upstairs window. It shattered.

We were a family of indulged children, and I guess, once again, my folks figured my own distress at what I had done was enough punishment. But, I never forgot it.

So, I joined the lady cats, this morning, and tried to see who was challenging Black Kitty. But, I think the dispute ended just as I was arriving, and I soon headed home, thinking instead of the nice new heifer calf we found in the barn this morning.