The Way It Was

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Looking back to the 40s I think my neighborhood on coastal South Georgia was sort of unique. The Jewish doctor's office was only a block away, on the corner of a paved street. Azaleas bloomed at the front door; sand surrounded the back entrance. I knew early-on which door to enter. Greek immigrants ran a mom and pop store across from the doctor; it smelled like sausages and everyone entered through the same door. Two other neighborhoods, the complete opposite of each other, stood close to my own dirt-bogging street. Though Mama never told me outright to stay away from them, I somehow knew they both were off limits.

One neighborhood was lined with century-old oaks standing guard over grand Victorian homes. Cars moseyed down Union Street, a paved, serene venue one block in front of our house. Flat-roofed garages, a whole lot sounder than the house I lived in, fortified the back entrances to what I believed were mansions. Sometimes, when the garage doors were left opened, I could see clear through to the manicured yards, catching a glimpse of a croquet set or a volley net, listening to the delighted squeals of children at play.

My shotgun house, neither grand nor guarded, squatted under a lone chinaberry tree. Pink periwinkles grew wild in the broom-swept yard but did little to brighten the house's metal-grey bleakness. Like most of our neighbors, Mama and I cleaned its four rooms—living room, bedroom, bedroom, kitchen—every Saturday. We'd scrub the

splintery pine-wood floors and give the furniture, what little there was, an oily dousing of Old English.

The toilet though, housed in a windowless cubby on the back porch, was a challenge: No matter how much we scoured, a faint urine-and-bleach odor always lingered. The water spigot, the only source of running water, was also on the back porch. The pipes often froze and burst in winter, but in the summer you could easily get scalded. A double-sided fireplace sat between the living room and first bedroom and a No.2 galvanized tub, placed in front of the hearth, and filled with water that had been heated on the kitchen stove, became a portable "bathtub".

Each room had one electric outlet in the middle of the ceiling to provide light. A bulb was screwed into the outlet and a string dangled from it to turn the lights on and off. Mama attached long ribbons to the strings so that I could control the lights, too. An attachment screwed into the ceiling outlet created extra plugs for the radio and ironing. Extension cords were a necessity; so were electric fuses, since they were frequently overloaded and blown.

There were two major kitchen appliances—a kerosene stove and an icebox. The stove always spewed acrid, eye-stinging smoke before setting into a suitable cooking flame. At times the kerosene ran out while Mama was cooking and I had to hurry to the Greek corner store, lugging a gallon jug of kerosene back home. On the days the iceman delivered, Mama placed a color-coded square cardboard on the front porch to indicate we wanted ice that day. The color showing how much we wanted was hung on the nail—red on the nail meant 25 pounds; white, 50; green 75; and black, 100. I learned those four

colors quickly, so putting out the card the evening before the iceman came was one of my chores.

Eventually a Kelvinator refrigerator replaced the icebox. It was before the age of credit cards and the store let my parents have the refrigerator, "on-time", paying $5.00 a month, a large sum in those days. If the payments weren't made, the refrigerator could be re-possessed. The process taught me a lot of things. To make the payments less painful, the store attached a locked tin box to the refrigerator and $1.25 in quarters was supposed to be inserted each week. We all knew how to jimmy the box and take out the quarters when money was short. Daddy managed to replace them most of the time before the payment was due at the end of the month. I loved inserting the coins, hearing the empty clunk of the metal during the first of the month and the filled, solid clink at the end. It wasn't long before I learned it took four quarters to make a dollar and how many quarters it took to make $5. I also learned patience as my parents worked toward the proud goal of owning that small fridge.

On the opposite end of my block, around the corner, where I wasn't supposed to go, sat a row of three-room, tumbledown shacks. Every two shacks shared an outhouse and a water spigot out in the yard. In order to reach them, the residents had to slosh through the mud when it rained and huddle in the cold outhouse during winter. The only thing that grew there in abundance were pot-bellied babies. The shanties overflowed with three-generational families: snuff-dipping grannies; sassy, mean-spirited women, and snotty-nose children. Cussing, rot-gut drinking men contributed to the ruckus, all jockeying for a space to call home. Mangy dogs that had names but no owners, sprawled

in the middle of the dirt road, too sick or too ornery to get out of the way of an infrequent car.

The vehicles on my block weren't infrequent; nor did they mosey as did those on Union Street. Vehicles on my street clamored! The produce man, jostling in a rickety wagon, came early each morning. "Ve-ge-TABLES! Fresh ve-ge-TABLES! Butter beans, okras, sweet potatoes…."

His high pitched song was soon replaced by the fish man's lusty shouts: "FISH MAN HERE! FISH MAN!" Neighbors clustered around the dilapidated truck.

"What kind you got?"

"Any kind you want!"

"You got shrimp-boat whiting?"

"All you want", said Fish Man, slapping the fish on his hanging chain-linked scale. He quick-wrapped the fish and other orders in old newspaper then chugged down the road, leaving a thin trail of melting ice.

Cousin George, a professional shirt-and-tie insurance man, always took time for a cold drink before collecting the weekly premiums. Mr. Red, the numbers man, drove a long convertible Cadillac, also red, but never tarried when he made his rounds.

My neighborhood was filled with sound—yowling feral cats, radios blasting rhythm and blues, raucous laughter, and the Shiloh Baptist Church's steeple bell, which, at times pealed a joyous call to worship, other times a plaintive funeral knell.

But my favorite sound was the ice cream man's cow bell. When we heard that bell, all play halted and we ran home to beg for nickels. We'd slurp our Popsicles under the shade of the chinaberry tree then compare tongues to see who had the reddest, bluest,

or purplest. If the day was really hot, the juice melted, trickling down our dirt-streaked arms.

After we re-energized, play got serious as we ran relays, hit kickball homeruns, and jumped hard and high on homemade springboards, cracking them in two. At dusk-dark, supper smells floated over the neighborhood—fried fish, hush puppies, pungent collards. We hurried home, each with the same prayer: "Lord, I hope that smell comin' from my house!"

I know now how much these contrasting neighborhoods influenced me. The stately Victorian homes represented hope, proof that a better life existed somewhere; my own shotgun house offered a safe haven, a place to dream, believing that a better life also existed for me. But it was the destitution around the corner that struck fear in my heart, a motivating force that propelled me to strive beyond such wretched poverty.

It was fifteen years after Mama died before I went back. The queenly Victorians still fronted Union Street, but the shot-gun houses and the shacks were now phantoms, mere apparitions fronting the now-paved street. I braked before a grassy lot, a space that was as empty as I felt. Even the chinaberry tree was gone. Thomas Wolfe was right. I put the car in gear, drove off, and never looked back.