

A Now Twice Stolen Memory

Every human being I knew lived in an identical 1,322-square-foot, white-paneled, 3-bedroom ranch. Each edifice is spaced exactly 52 feet from the previous. At the age of eight, long before I knew anything of post-war America, I resented our neighborhood, because it reduced the people living there to dolls. The only person I knew who hated our neighborhood as much as I did was Riley Brannigan.

Riley and I used to ride our bikes down to the high school and hide under the bleachers to watch the teens practice track. We gave each other makeovers with my mom's expensive cosmetics. In fourth grade, Riley and I organized a formal protest against the use of mystery meat in our cafeteria, a substance that would later be banned from Michigan schools in 2007, so we claim our protest was effective. Once, we stole Riley's third older sister's Polly Pocket. We hid the doll and her little plastic pink pumps in a ventilation duct, just to be little shits! We used to lay flat on our backs and giggle until we made ourselves choke, and then laugh more.

Even if Riley technically lived in an identical house, Riley shared hers with eight other people: all girls except for her youngest sibling, Charlie. She was number five. Riley's mom was often exasperated when she saw me because I was just one extra body that didn't have to be there.

In 2008, Riley and I broke the family's water heater playing "war" and Mrs. Brannigan told me I couldn't come back. I understood why she was upset: the family couldn't afford to fix our mishap. Whatever meager savings the family had accumulated had dried with the stock market crash; and their only financial asset, this Levittown ranch, had lost half its value in the real estate burst.

Riley assured her mother that if she wanted to banish me, she'd half to banish Riley too. Even if Riley didn't win that argument, I wasn't permanently exiled, because Riley's father ensured my welcome.

Riley had a deep connection with her father because he made her feel special—never treated her as a member of a litter. Riley spent much of her childhood imitating her father; she'd repeat idioms he used to perfect the intonation. She liked to wear glasses and walk with her hands in her pockets like he did. When we played house, she pretended to be secretary of the union chapter, too.

Riley was almost as close to her dad as I was to my mom, but not quite. My mom and I lived alone.

Mom worked from 7:00 in the morning until 5:00 at night, and she wouldn't get home until 6:00 if the traffic up Woodward was bad. When she did come home, Mom walked through the garage door bent-backed and brow-beaten. She'd lay on the living room floor to try to pop her vertebrae back into place. Through gritted teeth Mom would ask how my day was, and would listen as I reported every minute detail.

I never understood why mom had to work so long. She said as a manager she had to be present during first shift because that's when the union leaders worked, but she also told me she wasn't paid by the hour, so she had to stay until the day's work was done. Her hours kept lengthening the less cars they sold.

Well, on February 1, 2009, my mom came home at 2:45 in the afternoon. She walked in groaning, and when I asked her what was wrong she bent over and hunched. She laid on the floor like she always did, trying to stretch her broken back, but this time, instead of asking me about my day, she asked me if she could please have some time alone.

Deeply disturbed by my mom's behavior, I raced to Riley's house. The garage door was open, and as I approached I saw Riley's gangly father sitting in a lawn chair crying. Tears seeped from his impassive face like condensation on a cold pop glass.

I turned and shouted, "Riley! Riley!" in a desperate attempt to find a familiar face. If he did hear me, Mr. Brannigan didn't flinch.

Riley came through her front door, marching up to me with the sternness of her own Grandmother. She squared her shoulders, looked me in the eyes, and pushed me to the concrete driveway. I landed flat on my ass, looking up at her.

"You're mom fired my Dad and half the plant today!" She bellowed, livid. "My older sister told me! Your mom got faxed from headquarters and terminated¹ half the workers! You're not really my friend!"

Riley turned around and stormed back into her house, which was my house, because every house in our neighborhood was the same. I managed to get up and walk away, although I was disoriented and blinded my tears. My abdomen shook with an overwhelming feeling of injustice and disdain. I directed my anger at the houses on my street. These undistinguishable living cells claimed that everyone in our neighborhood was the same, and that's a lie.

I'm sure Riley and I would have made up if we were given the chance, but three days after the mass layoffs, Riley's family got in their van and drove away, and I don't know where they went. I spent a good portion of my childhood longing for the best friend I had lost.

When I saw a U-Haul truck in Riley's driveway, I ran into the house without the new owner's consent. In the third bedroom, I lifted the plate of grate over the ventilation duct and stuck my hand down into the airways. Sure enough, I pulled out a little blonde doll wearing plastic pumps.

The only souvenir I have to remember my first best friend is a now twice-stolen Polly Pocket.

¹ SIC