Now that They Are Us

It was a warm and breezy day when we set out for “the adventure.” It was the first good day for walking after a bitterly cold spell. So cold it had been, so very cold.

The weather had something to do with that.

I knew that this warmth might not be ours to keep, that it might be cold tomorrow again, but when Evan suggested that we take a walk like we used to, it felt good.

It felt warm.

“It’s a beautiful day, Mom. Let’s take a walk.”

That it was Evan that asked for it, after all this mourning and moaning, made the ache in my legs vanish. Of course I wanted for us to resume our Saturday walks.

Evan grabbed his jacket. It made me wonder if it wasn’t all that warm after all, but the idea that maybe I should get my sweater was dispelled by the thought that Evan would probably wear his last birthday present from his dad till the summer heat forced it off of him.

We stepped out into a late-winter-on-the-edge-of-spring day. “Let’s go this way,” Evan said, pointing up the hill, away from the noise of the jackhammers of the men working on the street between us and his school, the shops that we frequent, and the rest of our little world. He pointed up to where our block ends and the warehouses begin, where those who live in any kind of house at all live in a way we didn’t recognize as living. I was really quite unfamiliar with that area where he pointed.

“We can cut through there,” he pointed, “and come out around on the street that looks down on the school. C’mon, Mom,” he said about my hesitation. “Where’s your sense of adventure?”

I turned up the hill, smiling at his having picked up the line his beloved fourth-grade teacher would say whenever the children balked at a new activity.

We crossed our street and walked up through the last of the prettiness that was our neighborhood. I followed him through the yard at the end of the block and then stopped in the alley. From there we could look down the alley and see the buildings he passes walking to his school.

But Evan was looking up the alley.

“Let’s explore, Mom.” And he started walking up.

It wasn't unlike the alley in back of our home. But there was a certain foreboding walking that direction, a sense we would soon be trespassing on other people's neighborhood, people who didn't look like us and some who didn't even speak English.

Still he pressed on.

I began a conversation about what he did in school yesterday, how the game at recess went, how he felt about turning in his science report. Evan answered all my questions, but his mind was clearly elsewhere.

Before we turned the corner, I heard people calling out to each other in words that were incomprehensibly Spanish. I came to a complete stop. Evan glanced back at me, and his face became stern, as I might have looked at him when he refused my command.

"Fine, then, Mom," he said. "Wait there; I'll be right back."

He rounded the corner and I followed. Suddenly I knew where we were: at the end of the block that we were approaching, facing us so as to force the attention of all who looked up the street, was the old house that the squatters had burned down.

I only glanced that way as I followed my son around the corner, just long enough to see that old still-burned-out building facing us. Then I turned to see Evan's gaze at the empty porch of one particular house. A neighbor said something to him, a sentence or two in Spanish.

Evan nodded, disappointed. "Bueno," he replied. "Está bien."

There was a time when his disappointments could be treated as those "roll with the punches; life's like that" events. But since his dad's accident, all of Evan's hurts stabbed at me. I didn't know what was happening right now and I felt helpless. I looked up past him, puzzling over something the image of which was making its way toward my consciousness through the fog of confusion. Evan turned to me and then followed my gaze. He saw it.

Though we had no idea, our lives began to change at that moment.

The building at the end of the block was still the old house that some homeless people had squatted in. The dark marks of the flames still colored the gray walls, but it looked different. There were curtains again in the windows. But what Evan was looking at was the double-swing set in front. "Let's go check it out!" Evan suggested. "Please, Mom."

I nodded and he took off.

I walked quickly after him. My running is no match for a ten-year-old's, but I wanted to be with him as soon as possible – and out of here, past the few houses with old Mexican and Salvadoran men and women, past the mostly boarded-up shops, and past the long two-story building which had once been a factory.

When I approached the end of the block, I saw plants. When I arrived there, I saw that some of them were actually food. But what I had seen from a ways back was my son sitting on one of the swings, trying to make it go.

Evan used to like to go to the swings at a neighborhood park with either his daddy or me. That was before another park opened up a bit nearer to us, but smaller and with no swings, a perfect place for us to teach him and his friends baseball.

As I saw Evan trying to swing, I realized that he had never learned how, that we had taken him away from them before he learned. It angered me now, because I knew he really wanted to, and that his dad's insistence on his son being too old for swings was really a disguise of his true feelings about "those Mexicans" and "those Negroes" moving into the neighborhood where the bigger park was.

"Push me, Mom," he yelled gleefully. "Please!"

I wasn't sure if we were allowed to be there. We were in the front of a burned-out building on an abandoned lot in a deteriorating neighborhood, but the swing set and garden told me it had become private property.

But the joy on my son's face gave me no choice other than running behind him to push him into the air. As I turned my back to the building, I saw people at a shop down the street laughing with us, cheering us on.

Perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised that he was so much heavier to push than the last time; it had been at least two, maybe three, years since the last time at the park which had become off-limits to us. But as I began to get him some height, I heard a window open behind me. I only hoped no one would shoo us away before he had gotten his fill of this renewed pleasure. I looked over and saw a woman at the window. She looked like a white woman to me, the first I had seen since we crossed that invisible line this morning.

"Are you going to be here for awhile?" she asked. "My son wants to come out and join you."

"Sure!" I called back.

Moments later, a door opened and out came a burst of energy that was, as it turned out, an eight-year-old boy. He jumped onto the empty swing beside Evan and began pumping himself up in the air.

This boy was one of those people that used to be called “Negro” and is now called “African American” or “Black.” And not fair-skinned, as I have seen before in sons of women like the one at the window. If he was her son, I thought, his daddy must be dark. Like African-dark.

“I’m Daniel,” the boy called. “And no, before you ask, that’s not ‘Dan’ or ‘Danny.’ It’s ‘Daniel.’ What’s yours?”

“Evan.”

I had already exhausted my arm strength and was now only pushing Evan when he seemed near to coasting to a halt. But Daniel was already as high as he was.

“Can you pump?” Daniel asked.

Evan was trying to copy Daniel’s actions, but his lack of verbal response told me he was ashamed to tell a kid two years younger that his knowledge of such important stuff lagged behind.

“Put your legs forward and lean back when you go forward. Streamlined. Then tuck your feet under you and lean forward, balling yourself up, when you go back.”

Evan was happy. He was catching on and no longer needed to have his mommy push him like when he was little. He was flying on his own.

“Hi, I’m Mae,” said a voice behind me. I turned to see the woman coming out with two plastic patio chairs.

“Mae?” I chuckled. “June.”

“Mama,” Daniel called, “This is Evan.”

Mae and I sat and told each other our name stories (yes, we were both named for the months of our births) and talked about the weather – anything but raise the subject of my curiosity.

And we listened to our boys at play. At one point they both coasted to a stop and just talked. “Daddy John found it,” I heard Daniel tell Evan. He proceeded to tell him about the construction company that was going to throw out the old swing set, and how “Daddy John” and a few friends dug big holes, poured in concrete, anchored the poles, and covered the concrete with dirt.

I knew parents who let their kids call them by their first name instead of “Daddy and Mommy,” but “Daddy John” was unique. At least to me.

“Daniel has two sisters.” Mae told me. “He does play with them, but he’s really wanted to have a boy to play with. I hope you both come back often.”

“I’m sure he’d like that.” I pointed out where we lived. The boys began swinging again. I watched.

“You are full of sad thoughts,” Mae commented.

I smiled. I didn’t want to tell about how our family had been on the edge of divorce until my husband crashed our car and I decided I couldn’t leave him in that state. I didn’t want to speak of his bitter convalescence, with his blaming the other driver even after he himself was proven to be at fault.

And I certainly didn’t want to speak of his suicide.

“We’ve had difficulties,” I said. “But it’s good to see Evan so happy, to see him with a friend.”

It suddenly occurred to me that this family was not squatting. Squatters don’t sit in patio chairs watching their children swing in the front yard.

“Is this your place?” I asked.

“We’re buying it. After the fire, the absentee owners wanted to get rid of it, having owned it for years without having developed it as rentable real estate. Actually, when they had bought it, that factory was employing hundreds of people and this was a real neighborhood.”

“It all seemed pretty boarded up when we came through.”

“Mm hmm. The factory closed, the young got out, and the elders stayed to die where they were born.”

“So after the fire, the company just wanted to sell the house?”

“Right; really cheap. So we...”

Suddenly from mid-air, Daniel jumped to the ground calling, “Daddy Pete’s home!” He ran to greet a man approaching in a truck.

“Daddy Pete?” I asked, aloud but not loudly enough for Mae to think I was talking to anyone but myself. She didn’t answer.

The man who stepped out of the truck and caught Daniel in his arms had distinctively Asian features. “How’s my boy?” he asked, swinging him around. “It looks like you have a friend over.” He carried him over to meet Evan, who now was dragging his feet to a stop.

“This is Evan, Daddy. Evan, meet Daddy Pete.”

“Hi,” Evan greeted him. Then he turned to his new friend. “How many dads do you have?”

“Just two. And these are my sisters.”

Daddy Pete put Daniel down and turned to the two girls who were getting out of the truck. One shared his features; the other looked more like Mae. The two ran to Mae’s embrace, excitedly telling “Mommy” about the lizard they saw in the bushes outside their school. Then Daddy Pete took all the children, including Evan, into the house to “look for lemonade.”

“OK,” I finally asked Mae. “How are all of you related?”

Mae smiled. “By blood? One of the girls you just saw is my daughter by birth, but all of us, we’re all family. Daniel’s mommy died when he was six, but Pete had been

John's best friend since childhood, so he helped look after Daniel. Pete's divorced. My husband's in prison. So why don't we go in and see about that lemonade?"

I agreed. We stood and carried in the chairs.

"We were all living in the same apartment building with this most unpleasant landlord when Pete came home and suggested we see if we could buy this building and fix it up to live in. So here we are."

Here they were, laughing and hugging each other. Evan laughed with them, but I could see the hurt, the sense of being among children with two daddies when he had none.

The building inside was quite remarkably made into a home, not with a lot of money but a whole lot of love. No two piece of furniture matched – second-hand-store and scavenged pieces they seemed to be – with children's artwork gracing the walls. The girls took me on a tour of the rooms: Mommy's computer desk under a handmade bunk bed left much of the space open, as if waiting for another bed to be added. The girls' room had two small unmatching beds, Daniel's had another, and the daddies' room had two cots.

"Tonight is Daddy John's turn to make lunch," Pete said when we returned to the living room, "but I'm going to take the liberty of asking you two if you want to join us."

I looked to Evan. He smiled. He nodded. “We’d love to,” I answered.

The children settled down to paint pictures while the adults talked and occasionally assisted in the kitchen. Daddy John arrived a bit later with two cloth bags full of groceries and more hugs and kisses.

As I watched the children, I suddenly remembered a certain “Señor Rodríguez.” I looked over at Evan, who sat there trying to decide what to paint, watching the other children.

Sr. Rodríguez. Evan had met him during those difficult months of slowly losing his dad to depression and alcohol. The growing void in their relationship started to be filled when a very sympathetic Santa Claus at a neighborhood store took the time to listen to this boy who wasn’t wanting toys for Christmas. Evan got to be Santa’s helper, but it was Santa who was helping the boy.

If I had known back then what I was discovering here, I would have resisted the pressure from my convalescing husband, his family, and some of mine. I would have countered their comments about “that Mexican” with “Evan needs a father now more than ever.” And certainly after my husband’s death I would have told my brother and sister-in-law, “Tomás Rodríguez can visit whenever he wants to; if you don’t like it, you can leave.”

But I didn't. I didn't get it then.

I got it now.

I went over and looked at Evan's blank paper as he looked at his friends' paintings of butterflies, swings, trees and families.

Families.

"Why don't you draw a picture of Daddy Tomás?

Evan gave me a look of bafflement, but as the reality of my asking this slowly dawned on him, I saw something in my boy I had never seen before.

"That was where he lives, isn't it, Evan? Where we went this morning? With the empty porch?"

Evan's smile and his misty eyes told me I had guessed right. I thought of that young widow listening to the concerns of her family, absorbing their fears about neighbors seeing a Mexican man visiting so soon after her husband's death. I watched as my son began to paint the house where that morning he had met with disappointment.

The care I saw in his painting the steps, the porch, the windows and finally the young man in the chair was something new.

Weeks later, I thought of these things as we helped to paint the gray house a cheerful yellow. Papi Tomás was the best at painting the dark green on the trim without spilling it onto the yellow, but Daddy John was the only one to not get paint on himself.

“Mae,” I said as we watched our kids learn to use paint rollers, “You remember when you asked me why I was sad?”

She nodded. I broke into sobs. She held me. “Well, I want to tell you now.”

But I didn’t, not till later when we were alone. Right then I just stood and watched my new family turn that burned gray building into amazing sunshine.