

# THE LOST CHILD FROM THE LOST CITY

## An Ode to Thomas Wolfe

*It's a crime  
That his theory  
Has been forgotten by time.  
He's the one who raised the query  
As to who you are.  
Your life is a mirage bigger than a garage.  
You traveled so far  
But you're met by a barrage  
From those who are wrong  
And know nothing about you.  
But his message is strong.  
Read him and find the brew  
For what is really true.*

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to go back in time to a city before the invention of the automobile? Just read Jack Finney's *Time and Again* or Richard Matheson's *Bid Time Return*. But these are works of fiction and the truth is that no person has ever traveled back in time, not by one second. It seems clear that the past is gone forever.

But, have you ever thought about it the other way around - the city of the 1890s traveling ahead in time to today, rather than people traveling back in time? Suppose you woke up one morning. Your TV has today's news and programs. But when you go outside, you walk out into a city of the past. There are no cars on the street. An ancient open trolley car clangs up to the bus stop on the corner and passengers hop aboard. Horses and wagons and pushcarts are the only traffic on your street.

Would you believe this actually occurred in the 1940s and that it lasted over two years and deeply and profoundly affected very young children. But to everyone else it was hardly noticed. Why were only the very young affected?

Thomas Wolfe propounded a theory in *You Can't Go Home Again* and *The Return of The Prodigal* that there's a dividing line which separates one's conception of the world into two periods, early childhood and the rest of your life, which is heavily influenced by early childhood experiences. We're talking about the first Thomas Wolfe who died at the age of 37 in 1938. Sadly, he is no longer recognized for what he was, a true literary genius and one who really understood himself. He had the unusual ability to explain the inner workings of the thought processes of his chief character in early childhood.

Wolfe always started his stories at the beginning - early childhood. So that's where we'll begin.

It's July 23, 1945, a Monday morning, just after 8:30 on Kensington Street in New Haven, Connecticut. It's 75 degrees and the forecast predicts it will reach 90. Four year old Upton Samuel Aram (Sam) steps out the front door onto the stoop of the eight unit apartment house in which he lives with his father and mother and two sisters in a 2 bedroom apartment. Sam's father, a civilian air raid warden, too old for the service, has been looking for a bigger apartment for two years, but during a war in an industrial city with all industries operating on three shifts, seven days a week, his chances are slim to none. Sam always wakes up before 7:00 but never goes out before 8:30 because he listens to his favorite radio show, the Breakfast Club with Don McNeil while eating breakfast. He can't miss the marching music between 8:15 and 8:30.

You're probably wondering how a loving mother can just put her four year old out on the street early every morning to play on his own until he gets hungry and comes home for lunch. How can she do her daily chores without worrying

about Sam being on his own out on the street? And how can all the other mothers do the same thing to their children without worrying?

The answer is simple. The children weren't put out on the streets of the 1940s. They were put out on the streets of the 1890s. Sam's been put out - perhaps the better term is let out - every morning except Sunday ever since he can remember and that's an awful long time for a four year old. In fact, it's a lifetime. As he steps out the door, he sees and hears exactly what he would have seen and heard in 1895: the familiar "clip-clop" of a horse heading down the street without a single car visible. Sam has never seen an automobile on Kensington Street or at least has no memory of ever having seen one. In fact, he's never ridden in one. His first ride in a car won't come until 1946. From early 1943, which is as far back as Sam can remember, when the gas ration was cut to two gallons a week, nobody on Kensington Street has a car.

First, Sam sees his milkman on a high white enclosed refrigerated wagon pulled by a stocky brown mare. Wearing a spotless freshly pressed white uniform and cap, he stops in front of Sam's house, jumps down, opens a compartment door and fills a large carrier with bottles of milk and cream, cottage cheese, and other dairy products. He shouts "good morning Sam" and Sam shouts back "good morning Bill."

Soon, a fresh fish vendor on a small flat wagon with long covered ice filled trays keeping his fish fresh, pulled by a small frisky brown horse turns the corner from Edgewood Avenue and heads north on Kensington. "**Fresh fish, fresh fish**" he yells at the top of his lungs. Over twenty women rush out onto the street excitedly surrounding the wagon. With beef rationed to three ounces a week, the

demand for unrationed fresh fish is high. Price controls keep the price as low as fifteen cents a pound. They know it's fresh because he gets it at New Haven's wholesale fish market. Several cats, attracted by the smell of fresh fish join the crowd. When he makes his sales and moves on, he has a sure fire way to be certain the cats won't follow him. He flips them some fish heads. It works every time.

Then comes the watermelon man. Watermelons are heavy so his wagon, four times bigger than the fish man's, is pulled by two huge draft horses. He shouts "**watermelons, watermelons**" followed by his sweetness guarantee: "**sweeter than your mother-in-law.**" His popularity stems from the fact that not too many shoppers are willing to walk home from a shopping trip carrying watermelons. Other street merchants appear often selling fruit and vegetables, ice, shoes and clothing, hats, gloves, ties, tools, books, magazines and just about anything else you can think of. They come by horse and wagon or pushcart. Their wares are in demand because it's so difficult to get to the stores.

This hot Monday morning Sam, sitting on his front stoop, has a very important decision to make, one that he has to make every day of the week except Sunday. "What can I do today?" Query: how many four year olds have that option today? But it's 1945 and all the children over two are just put out to play on their own every morning. Sam has no recollection of any other agenda. It's been a lifetime for him. He loves nothing more than his freedom on the street. He doesn't even know what adult supervision is, let alone experiencing it. In his mind, a four year old, makes his own decisions outside the family home. Life is great.

“I’ll find some other kids and play War” he thinks to himself.

Just then, two older kids on bikes stopped. Bobby Kelly, age 8 who lived on Elm Street just around the corner from Kensington Street and Stan Wykowski, age 7 who lived across the street from Sam, were riding their bikes and seemed bored. “You wanna play find the Jap?” Sam shouted at them.

“Okay.”

“But I don’t wanna be the Jap again. You always make me be the Jap. It’s not fair. It’s your turn to be the Japs and hide so I can find you.”

“You can’t count high enough to give us five minutes to hide.

“I can too. I can count to 29.”

“That’s not even half a minute. You have to be able to count to 300.”

To a disappointed Sam, it seemed like an unreachable goal that might as well have been 300 billion.

“That’s why you have to be the Jap and hide so we can hunt you down. You’re not big enough to hunt down Japs” said Bobby.

Sam did not have a response to Bobby’s logic, so he asked him: “What do I get if you can’t find me?”

“If we can’t find you, we’ll buy you a glider at Millers.”

“I want a candy bar”

“You know we can’t get candy bars until we get next month’s ration stamps and even then there’s never any candy bars at Miller’s.

“Then I want a big glider”

“I’ll tell you what” said Bobby, “you be the Jap and hide anywhere on this block and if we can’t find you in an hour, we’ll buy you a dime glider. They’re

twice as big as a nickel glider and fly much higher and longer.”

“Wow! You’ll really buy me a dime glider?”

“Sure, but if we find you, you’ll have to give us that red wagon you’re always pulling around.”

Bobby and Stan had just started delivering newspapers as partners and that wagon was just what they needed to make their job much easier. It had been a birthday present from Sam’s aunt Sophie when he turned two. It was worth more than fifty dime gliders. Bobby really wanted it because by 1945, it was impossible to find a metal wagon with real rubber tires. Sam’s aunt worked in the toy department of a big department store and was able to buy one of the last of the metal wagons in stock in late 1942 for \$5.95.

But Sam really wanted a dime glider more than anything. He was just too young to understand value and bargain on that basis. He had never bought anything on his own except ice cream and candy at Miller’s grocery store on the corner of Garden and Elm Streets. He was always given the exact amount, a nickel for ice cream or a penny for penny candy. So he made the bet: his \$5.95 wagon for a 10 cent glider. A four year old is not a good businessman.

They had played hide and seek many times. The street name was converted to “Find the Jap” during the war. The rules were simple. Sam would get a five minute head start and could hide anywhere on the huge city block bounded by Kensington Street on the west, Edgewood Avenue on the south, Garden Street on the east and Elm Street on the north. The only restriction was that he couldn’t hide inside a house where someone lived or where you could lock yourself in. He could go into unlocked garages, barns, or sheds.

Sam had gained notoriety as an expert hider a week earlier when he hid in Mr. Chapman's rubbish barrel covered with trash and old papers. It was the only time Bobby couldn't find him. But Sam didn't consider the risk. The only way to dispose of trash in those days was to burn it in the barrel. Who knows what would have happened if Mr. Chapman decided to burn his trash when Sam was in the barrel. But Sam knew he couldn't fool Bobby again with the same trick.

While Sam wasn't a good businessman, he was a veteran at street games and tried to clarify the rules: "How do I know you won't cheat and watch where I go?"

"We wouldn't do that" said Bobby.

Usually they covered their eyes and put their faces up against a tree or pole and counted to 300.

"Jerry said you peek and count too fast" Sam said.

"No we don't."

"How will I know when it's an hour? I can't tell time."

"We'll yell time's up as loud as we can as soon as the hour's up."

Suddenly, Sam had a brilliant idea: "I'll ask Mr. Neely how I can tell when it's an hour and make sure you don't peek."

Old, amiable Mr. Neely was sitting on his front porch two houses down from Sam's. To Sam, he seemed as old as Moses and wise as Solomon. Usually he sat there all day chatting with passersby. He was the best source of neighborhood news, which was not all good during a war. There were two gold stars hanging in windows on Kensington Street. Sam knew this was a very sad sign because it meant that a soldier who lived there wouldn't be coming home

from the war. But he couldn't understand why because he couldn't understand the concept of death. Nobody on Kensington Street had a car. Anyone going anywhere had to walk by your house. Everyone on the block stopped to chat with Mr. Neely to catch up on the latest neighborhood news. Nowadays, we never even see our neighbors, let alone speak to them because they all just go out the door and jump into their cars.

Not only did Mr. Neely agree to referee the game from his front porch but, he was great at explaining things to young kids. He said to Sam: "Even if you can't tell time, you can still measure it by knowing the whistles at Winchester's. It's ten minutes to nine now and the next time they blow the whistle it will be at ten o'clock for a 15 minute break. It's very easy. The whistle will blow in a little over an hour, so let's wait five minutes before starting. If the whistle blows and Bobby and Stan haven't found you, then you win. But if they find you before the whistle blows, then they win."

Wow! Sam could understand how to tell when an hour was up. That was a big development. Really big! He heard the whistle blowing at the huge Winchester Repeating Arms factory, less than a mile away, all day and night ever since he could remember. Winchester was one of the largest gun factories in the world. The M-1, the Army's rifle of choice from early 1942 right through the Viet-Nam War, was designed and developed at Winchester. With tens of thousands of employees working nonstop around the clock since Pearl Harbor, the huge factory, turned out thousands of them every day. In fact, it seemed that half the people on Kensington Street worked there and since they all had to walk to work, the amount of pedestrian traffic was staggering with war workers,



morning, afternoon, and night, seven days a week. Not only did the whistle blow every 8 hours when the shifts changed but it was blown when it was time for each shift's half-hour lunch and two 15 minute breaks.

At 8:55 Mr. Neely ordered Bobby and Stan into his hallway, shut the door for five minutes so that there was no possibility of either of them fast counting or knowing in what direction Sam was heading. Sam took off, running southerly on Kensington Street, knowing that after he used his five minutes to find his hiding spot, the whistle would blow in exactly one hour. Sam decided he was going to hide in "Howard's Lot", which was a huge abandoned land locked rear lot in the middle of the block, except for a long narrow right of way from Edgewood Avenue.

Nobody knew who Howard was or how the property became known as Howard's Lot. It had been a used car lot and auto repair facility abandoned for several years but barns, garages, stables and shops were still there. The ground, loosely covered with gravel, wreaked everywhere with a strong petroleum odor from years of ground saturation. Old petroleum metal signs were on the doors and sides of the garages and barns. A huge faded painted Model A Ford sign was still legible on the side of a garage. Today, the property would be declared an environmental hazard and nuisance and the owner would be hounded and prosecuted if not cleaned up and the buildings were not secured. But during a world war, those who were responsible for the safety and security of an industrial city vital to the war effort, had more important things on their minds.

As Sam rounded the corner onto Edgewood Avenue he ran into his

friend Tommy Turner who lived on Garden Street, just around the corner from Edgewood Avenue. Tommy was coming to look for Sam.

“Why you runnin’ so fast?” Tommy asked,

“Cuz I’m gonna hide from Bobby and Stan and I’m gonna get a dime glider if they can’t find me,” replied Sam without even slowing down.

“Where you goin’?” shouted Tommy, running alongside.

“Howard’s Lot.”

They turned into the long narrow right of way. When they reached the end, Sam saw that some of the barns had lofts. “If I could get up there” he said, pointing to one, “they’d never find me.” The only problem was that there were no ladders around. All personal property had long since been removed from the abandoned lot.

“I know how to get up there.” Tommy said

“How?”

“My big brother has a ladder. He’s painting our back porch”

Tommy ran to the fence along the easterly side of the huge lot that formed the rear boundaries of the Garden Street properties, leaped onto it and yelled “Hey Jimmy, can we use your ladder?”

Jimmy Turner was thirteen but to a four year old seemed like an adult. He was on a ladder painting the Turners’ back porch less than forty feet from the fence. He replied: “Can’t you see I’m using it?”

“Just for a minute” shouted Tommy.

“Why?”

“So we can hide in the top of a barn?”

“Okay, but just for a minute.”

Jimmy climbed down and carried the ladder over to the fence, put it over, climbed over and said “now where do you guys want to hide?”

“Up there” said Sam pointing to a loft.

The ladder was high enough but they needed Jimmy’s help because the steps on the ladder were too far apart for a four year old to easily climb. When they got up into the loft, Jimmy threw the ladder back over the fence and said “now I’m going to finish painting, so don’t bother me to get you down for at least an hour.”

Suddenly, Sam had a brilliant idea: “I know when to come and get us down.”

“When?” asked Jimmy.

“When the whistle blows at Winchester’s”

“Okay, that should be in about an hour”

“And don’t tell Bobby or Stan where we are”

Not long after Jimmy climbed back over the fence with his ladder, they heard Bobby and Stan yelling in the distance. As their voices got closer they heard Bobby yelling “He’s in Howard’s Lot.”

When they got close, they heard Bobby say “he couldn’t have gone up in a loft; there’s no ladders. I’ve been here a hundred times and I never saw a ladder, besides he’s so little he probably can’t even climb a ladder. The garages in the back are full of barrels of junk. I’ll bet he’s hiding in one.”

Bobby and Stan ran into a long open structure in the back. There were dozens of barrels filled with everything you could think of, including oil soaked rags and old pieces of wood with rusty nails protruding from them.

Searching each and every barrel was a tedious task because Bobby and Stan had to be very careful not to get cut by one of the many protruding nails while searching. In fact, this task took up the greatest amount of time, probably close to half an hour.

As Sam lay in the loft, barely breathing for fear of being discovered, he realized how strong the petroleum odor could be on a hot windless day. It was almost overwhelming. But, it would all be worthwhile if he could only get a dime glider. An active four year old doesn't often get time for reflection, but this was his best and only chance. Never before and never again would there be such circumstances during his life on the streets in which he would fear to speak or move for 30 minutes and yet his adrenalin was flowing leaving him in a state of heart pounding excitement. This new found feeling, for the first time in his life, gave him time for reflection.

He was obsessed with the dime glider, thinking about how great life would be if he had one. Nothing else mattered. As the saying goes, it wasn't everything, it was the only thing. It was a rare moment frozen in time that remained with him for the rest of his life. Nearly 70 years later, when trying to figure out his early childhood and its impact on his adult life he always came back to that moment - frozen forever in his mind. Whenever it popped up over the years, Sam would call the feeling of wanting something so cheap so desperately as the "Dime Glider Syndrome". Basically, it's the principle that the harder you have to work to get something you want, the more you appreciate it, regardless of its monetary value. But it's much deeper than that and that's another story for another day.

Finally, they herd Bobby yelling: " He's not here. He's got to be

hiding on Garden Street. We'll have to search every barrel and garage on Garden Street."

"We better hurry, it's already over half an hour and we can't fool him any more about the time" Stan said.

A few minutes later, Sam and Tommy heard Bobby shouting from Garden Street: "Have you seen Sam?" and Jimmy replying "I'm not telling you".

This exchange only confirmed Bobby and Stan's belief that Sam was hiding somewhere on Garden Street because if Jimmy hadn't seen Sam, he would have answered the question "no."

Then, after what seemed like another eternity while Bobby and Stan searched every garage, shed and trash can on Garden Street, they heard Bobby in the distance shouting "We gotta get a ladder and go back to Howard's Lot."

After several minutes, all of a sudden, everyone in New Haven heard:

**WHOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO.**

It was the whistle at Winchester's.

In a minute Jimmy was there with his ladder. Just as he was helping Sam and Tommy down, Bobby and Stan were running up the right of way with a ladder.

"I won! I want my dime glider!" shouted Sam.

"No fair!" shouted Bobby. "You cheated. You had help getting up there and hid the ladder so we couldn't find you."

Everyone walked back to Kensington Street yelling and arguing over whether Sam cheated by having assistance and the ladder removed.

Mr. Neely, still sitting on his front porch, could hear everyone yelling and arguing at the top of their lungs before they even turned onto Kensington Street, half a block away, and he was hard of hearing. In those days there were no air conditioners or traffic noise to drown out the sound of anyone shouting on the street. In the summer everyone kept their windows open and it wasn't unusual to overhear even casual conversations on the street while sitting in your living room. In fact, the commotion just after 10 o'clock that morning could be heard all over the neighborhood.

It took several minutes but Mr. Neely finally managed to calm everyone down. Then he listened to each participant in the game and each witness, Tommy and Jimmy.

Having had a hard time quieting everyone down, Mr. Neely issued a stern warning that anyone who interrupted the witness who was telling his story would be disqualified.

Sam asked: "What does disqualified mean?"

"It means you lose because you didn't follow the rules", replied Mr. Neely.

First, he asked Sam to tell him everything about how he got up into the loft and to explain what happened to the ladder and how he got down. Sam explained that all he did was tell Tommy that he wished he could get up into the top of the barn. When Mr. Neely asked him whether he knew the rules of the game, he

answered directly: "I can go anywhere but not in a house where I can lock the door."

When it was Bobby's turn and he started complaining it wasn't fair, Mr. Neely asked Bobby for his version of the rules which wasn't any different from Sam's. Mr. Neely then pointed out that there was no rule to prohibit Sam from getting help climbing up and down the ladder. Also, there was no rule requiring that the ladder remain there for Bobby's use.

Mr. Neely then stated his conclusion: "If the rules aren't fair, you have to change them before the game. ***You can't change the rules in the middle of the game.***"

Sam was declared the winner.

Sam got his dime glider. He was so thrilled about winning a dime glider that he spent countless hours over many days flying it. Never in the history of mankind did a dime ever go so far.

Within a few weeks of Sam's great wartime victory, his amazing life on the streets of the lost city of the 1890s came to a crashing end when he and the lost city were suddenly thrown into the middle of the twentieth century. The war and all rationing came to an end. Street traffic returned to normal – clogged with cars. The horses and wagons were gone forever. Then Sam started kindergarten on September 4, 1945, just two days after the formal Japanese surrender aboard the *USS Missouri*.

Four year olds were admitted to kindergarten because of inadequate day care for children of working mothers. Between the rapid return of the 1940s to the streets and the sudden imposition of a structured daily schedule under adult supervision, Sam didn't know what hit him. He couldn't do anything about the sudden return of the cars

but he couldn't stand being told when he had to sing, draw pictures, read, play games or nap. He played hooky once but it wasn't any fun with all the other kids in school.

Sam would never again experience the sheer joy and total happiness of his unstructured daily life on the streets of the lost city with no other care or worry in the world. In his mind, his childhood ended at the age of four and a half. He always knew that his early life on the streets profoundly affected him for the rest of his life by playing an important and dominating role in the major decisions he had to make. But, he was always so busy that he never had the time to try to learn why or how this made him different from anyone else.

Nearly seventy years later Sam, was finally forced to retire as a result of several painful ailments and failing eyesight. Suddenly, he had the time to look back on his life in a belated attempt to understand it. He recalled reading Thomas Wolfe's *Return of the Prodigal* and *You Can't Go Home Again* over fifty years ago. They were published in 1940 from a huge hand written manuscript after he died. Wolfe was right on the money when he said early childhood was very important.

Then, after his retirement, he was browsing in a used book store one day and came across a book with the title *Daddy's Gone to War* by William M. Tuttle, Jr., Professor of History and American Studies at the University of Kansas. [Oxford University Press, 1993]. It was the subtitle that caught his attention: ***The Second World War in the Lives of American Children***. The dust jacket blurb offered it as: "[a] pioneering effort to reinvent the way we look at history and childhood. [Tuttle] views the experiences of ordinary children through the lens of developmental



psychology.”

To make a long story short, Tuttle’s conclusion is that “[t]he youngest children, up to about six years old, knew the least about the war, yet they were the group most deeply affected by it.” He also noted that two experts, Anna W.M. Wolf and Irma Simonton Black, came to this same conclusion in 1946.

Tuttle devotes a full chapter to age and culture and believes that “some experiences strengthened the home front child’s sense of autonomy, initiative, industry, and self-worth . . .”

For the home front child, age is crucial during times of great important events that change the course of history. For the very young like Sam, the experience was definitely positive. Tuttle adopts sociologist Glen Elder’s theory that believes one’s social patterns is determined by “the timing, duration, spacing, and order of events [and that] the timing of events may be as consequential for life experiences as whether the event[s] occur[red]. . . .”

While Tuttle deserves praise for his pioneering work, he really doesn’t tell us why the very youngest were the most deeply affected. Born in 1937, he was eight when the war ended, so he was old enough to remember the pre-war world and know that the strange conditions caused by rationing were only temporary inconveniences. But when Sam read this book, he knew the answer right away. The very young were the most deeply affected because their highly unusual and unstructured life on the streets of the 1890s, was the only life they ever knew. Sam had never experienced anything else. All his life, he made his major decisions with the need to find a solution with the least amount of structure. But that’s also another story for another day.

Then he decided to return to Kensington Street to search for his lost childhood in the lost city. He believed that being there would help him find the key to understanding himself. He chose a hot July day just like the day he hid in Howard's Lot. His old apartment building was still there. So were most of the houses. He half expected to see Mr. Neely still sitting on his front porch. For a split second he thought Mr. Neely could help him find the elusive key. But, even though it was 90 degrees, a cold overwhelming chill raced up his spine giving him goose bumps, as he came to his senses and realized Mr. Neely would have to be well over 150 years old if alive.

He recalled what Wolfe so forcefully said in *The Return of the Prodigal*: "In the old house of time and silence there is something that creaks forever in the night, something that moves and creaks forever, and that never can be still." And then Sam recalled the timeless message Wolfe's Eugene Gant heard from the creaking floor boards when he returned to his first home in search of his early childhood. The only difference was that Sam didn't have to go inside his old house to hear Wolfe's powerful admonition. As soon as he opened his car door, the traffic whizzing by on Edgewood Avenue whispered it to him:

"Brother! Brother! . . . What did you come for? . . . You know you can't go home again."

Sam heard it over and over and over again.