

## A New Perspective

by Janice E. Fein

Our lives are shaped by the seemingly insignificant events of our youth. My childhood has become a series of mental snips edited from the long playing film entitled “Cheated in Life.”

My mother is walking me to kindergarten. I’m sure it must be kindergarten. In future years it would become vitally important for me to remember just exactly when it was. If it were first or second grade we would have been walking in the opposite direction but I can clearly see each familiar house as we pass by: Leedom’s, Neiman’s, Salem’s, yes, it was definitely kindergarten. The film clip does not take us to our final destination, nor does it begin at home. It’s a simple walk down a simple block in time. I can still feel my left fingers cradled in the smooth grip of her hand, one not much bigger than that of my own. I actually feel the warmth of the rising sun on my face as I look up at her each time she speaks. Aha! It was kindergarten! The sun always rose from behind that row of houses. If we had been walking anywhere else, the sun would have been in her face, not mine. She never walked me to elementary school. She only walked me to kindergarten, and very possibly, only that one time. Was it the first day of school? Or Parent’s Day?

It was important. What became important, in later years, was my ability to woefully lament, “I only remember my mother walking one time in my life. She walked me to kindergarten.” Thereafter, all recollections of her were in her hospital bed, a massive ugly thing that took up a good portion of my parents’ room. The debilitating effects of rheumatoid arthritis confined her to that bed. There were, however, what she referred to as “good days,” days in which she was able to drag herself from her bed and onto a small kitchen chair with curved metal legs. She would then muster enough energy to force her hips in an awkward motion. Each painful hip movement would inch the chair laboriously forward, commanding it to perform the tasks that her frozen arthritic joints could not accomplish. My friends never came to my room to play. To do so they would have to pass by my parents’ room. I remember that bed and that chair as embarrassing eyesores and how, once again, I had felt cheated.

Connie had the best playroom in the neighborhood. She was my very best friend and every day after school I would race home to change clothes and, in a heartbeat, I was at her door. Half of her basement was converted into a wonderful playhouse with paneling, carpets, and lace curtains to match. I was sure that every toy ever created was in that room. Despite the lure of all those treasures, what I remember most were the marvelous sounds and smells that drifted down to us from the kitchen above. Pots and pans clanging, water rushing through the pipes, and best of all, Connie’s mother humming softly as she worked. One particular evening, the aroma was so compelling that I had to ask. Connie wrinkled her nose in disgust and said, “Lasagna... again!” I pretended to have to use the bathroom so that I could pass through the kitchen and briefly glimpse what a lasagna looked like.

The oven timer was the saddest sound. When I heard it I knew what was coming next.

“Connie, come and wash up for supper,” and I would have to leave. At a snail’s pace, I would wander back to my own kitchen door. No wonderful aromas ever greeted me there. Sometimes there would be cold macaroni and cheese left over by one of my brothers or sisters. Most often I would prepare something on my own. Frozen hamburger patties, fish sticks, maybe I’ll just have a can of soup. It never really mattered. It would never be lasagna. One evening, as I wander into my mother’s room, bologna sandwich in hand, she shakes her head and says, “Is that the best you can find out there?” “I’m not very hungry,” I lie. Only now can I see that the look in her eyes matched the despair in my heart, and yet, I felt cheated.

As childhood progressed, certain actions became innate. Handouts at school calling for volunteer room mothers and field trip chaperones were surreptitiously discarded along the nine-block journey home. I’ll never forget those nine blocks. In January and February they might as well have been ninety! My classmates are piling into their mothers’ warm waiting station wagons. I hunch my shoulders to my ears and silently watch as they disappear into the swirling gusts of snow. No steaming mug of hot cocoa is awaiting my arrival, just those sad eyes. Cheated.

I’ve rolled the film a thousand times. The scenes have never changed, only my perspective. It took the birth of my first child to truly see the whole picture. I’ve often tried to imagine what it would be like to see my son in pain and not be able to brush away a tear, mend a knee or simply hold him in my arms. I’ve seen the look in his eyes when he hit his first home run. I’ve “hugged him warm” on snowy days and “tickled him happy” when life was cruel. I’ve knelt with him to say his prayers and thanked God for my ability to do so. I may never understand why some of us are cheated in life. I only know, from this perspective, that I am not the one who was.