

Excerpt from House in the Attic

by David Plumb

We stopped at the Western Summit of the Mohawk Trail. Below Richland lay in the valley. I could see all the way to New York State and well into Vermont. From memory, I picked out the Hoosac River running south under the railroad bridge past the long low station for the Boston Maine Line. I felt secretly exhilarated. I knew every turn of the road and what to expect. I felt comfortable for the first time in months.

The gray green Hoosac River moves through this history of long-gone spinning mills, paper mills, and the shoe factory that clacked and whirred and hammered at the river's edge. Today, the swells churn the banks almost like they did in the '52 hurricane when the bridges wobbled and row boats floated down Eagle Street; when Columbia bicycles raced wheel-deep down Holden Street and the Pericles Construction Company smacked its lips and made plans for the rip rap flood control killing of a lifetime.

Back then, Spring, smelled like lilacs all the way to school. Yes! Yes! There's Jessie, her lithe-sweet thirteen-year-old body in wet May rain, her damp ponytail, her hot sweet breath on my face. There we are lying on the grass strip between Mr. Pinelli's gladiolus and Mr. Pinelli's Jack in the Pulpits. Hey July, hey Bobby, let's swim across the lake. Hey Bobby. Going to the State Line and hear Rex Stewart tonight? Hey Bobby, bring your brother's draft card. Bobby, ya got that?

Come summer, the carnival trains of the World of Mirth and James E. Strate Shows pulled into the depot in the middle of the night and exploded on summer dawns with mysterious secrets designed to

skin kid's allowances five times over. Awesome red and yellow wagons rolled off the flatbeds and trucks and horses pulled the winding extravaganzas through town in a clink-clunk parade of wallyoops and tootles that made my heart wang and bump and my fast feet dance inside themselves.

A carnival came from somewhere; somewhere beyond the emptiness of Sunday Summer streets; somewhere beyond the feeling life might be one long yawn; somewhere beyond the dark attics and musty cellars, beyond church pews, bigger than Jesus, longer than Cheshire Lake; somewhere beyond the echoes of hunting rifles, beyond the tinkly pinball machines in the back room of Petropolous's Candy Store. Now, I had to be on the lookout for the somewhere side show; for the upside-down, the cosmic bink, the man with the baby growing out of his chest for an extra quarter in the back tent.

When all the quarters had been collected, and all the tent flaps secured and guarded, when the final hush dropped into the dimness, what appeared to be a man of great sadness, a man of unspeakable torment, his head tilted to the side, his skin stark and patchy in the halo of a carnival spotlight on a low wooden platform, opened his robe and unfolded the white cloth ever-so-slowly, so I could smell the warmth and wonder flowing into the dusty light. And I saw the little baby hanging down, back facing me, its head imbedded in the man's chest skin, its rubbery legs dangling stiffly in stillness along the cloth background that held me darkly white and mysteriously wanting. I clung to every second. I wanted to get closer. In the back of my mind, I knew even then, that for a quarter, time was short, and the horror, the very idea, the drama, the mystery of the twin baby stuck in the man's chest, had to be recreated every ninety minutes, even if it was true. I went back every year.

Hems of the cheerleader's skirts flap through cheering October. A gray squirrel sitting on a fallen oak blinks, blinks, blinks. The last gasp of Billy Bowman, shot by a 22 short in a hunting accident

bubbles beneath the bridges all the way to Adams. I hear his sweet breath stop as the river finds another curve. Oh sadness of winter turnips on grocery shelves, oh mad, mad silver-bladed ice skates and holding hands with mittens, oh milky heated January houses and the stammering hiss of radiators. Oh February, when changing a tire is Blood Knuckle City.

I want to feel eight-penny nails rolling in my palm and the wonder of cross cut saws, the exquisite balance of a fine hammer. Oh ball peen hammer, oh lime, oh mercury in a bottle, oh Wonder Beans, oh pumpkin, oh lettuce, oh corn, oh succulent August tomato, oh screen door hinges, oh rat traps and awls, auger bits and flanges, oh telephone poles and fence post diggers with whoopy jaws, barbed wire stretchers and teat dilators, oh Wild Root Cream Oil, oh Billy Lynch, oh bullhead dreams and sunfish realities. Oh Jackie, oh John, oh Billy, oh Tom, oh Barbara, oh Jessie, oh row boats on Cheshire Lake, oh linoleum tacks and Blue Blades, oh deep river memory, gurgling, gone blank, deep and cold, rolling softly past the ever and ongoing childhood of my heart.

“The dark that matters is the last one. Autumn is the best joke ever told.” Richard Hugo

