

Family Homes

by Paul Edward Johnson

My parents chose to elope to Iowa, where they were married on October 25, 1940.

My father's Christian parents chose to disapprove of their young son's scandalous choice to marry "an older woman." It was only since October 8 that he had ceased to be a teenager.

So his parents tossed suitcases upon their home's front lawn. The suitcases were filled with all of their son's personal belongings.

Taped to one suitcase was a harsh note: my father and his bride were no longer to be welcomed within his parents' northeast Minneapolis home, wherein he had been born and raised.

My father had been enrolled at the University of Minnesota's Institute of Technology as a mechanical engineering student.

But during December of 1941, when I was a six-month-old infant, my father, Oscar Edward Johnson, chose to enlist in the United States Army Air Force to be a World War II bomber pilot.

Instead of being assigned to pilot training, he was sent by the United States government to Detroit, Michigan to serve with a team of mechanical engineers who stressfully worked around the clock to design and refine the airplane engine for what would eventually become the B-29 Bomber.

During the spring of 1943, my mother, Mary Jane Johnson, chose to give birth to my brother Larry in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where with her father and kindhearted mother she felt she would receive the utmost and proper attention and care during the weeks before May 14, 1943, the day of Larry's birth.

Then during the month of June of 1943, Mary Jane enclosed her new-born baby Larry into a blanketed cardboard box.

And with Larry and her two-year-old son Paul, she boarded a DC-3 plane to return to Detroit and her husband Ed.

When the DC-3 plane landed and stopped upon the airport tarmac, Mary Jane, carrying her baby Larry enclosed in the cardboard box, descended the plane's staircase, and gently placed the box down between her and the outstretched arms of her awaiting husband.

Excited, Ed kicked aside the cardboard box enclosing baby Larry, raised Mary Jane in his arms, and twirled her around and about the cardboard box.

Lowering Mary Jane back to earth, Ed said, "Thank God you and Paul are with me again. But where's our new-born baby Larry?"

We lived in a house somewhere in Detroit that had a front porch, where I as a two-year-old toddler was warned by my mother to never leave the porch and wander out upon the front lawn.

"There are kidnappers here in Detroit who could take you away and never return you, Paul. You see that man across the street? He might be a kidnapper."

Almost two years later, on April 8, 1945, my sister Sue was born.

Several weeks later, with Sue in Mom's arms, Dad and Larry and I gazed up at the sky as hundreds of United States Army Air Force planes flew above and beyond our Detroit home's front lawn, all the planes in "VE" formations celebrating that the war in Europe had ended.

We then moved on to a small summer cottage located on the lovely shoreline of Cass Lake, Michigan, where there were no kidnappers. It was located close to where Dad was employed by the Distel Tool & Die Company as a mechanical engineer.

Larry and I slept on the enclosed porch in new solid-oak twin beds that would also sometimes serve as a bunk bed for us during the rest of our childhood and teenage years together.

Then just before Sylvia was born on August 7, 1946, we moved to 1202 Lawndale Drive, located in the Royal Oak district of Detroit; into a little three-bedroom colonial house, where on both ends of our block the foundations for new homes were being dug, and the dirt road in front of our house was to be soon tar-topped.

It was a one-and-one-half-story house wherein Larry and I enjoyed the entire top floor as our bedroom.

Each evening we had to go to bed as early as seven while the kids on the block were still outside playing together.

After getting under our blankets, we heard Dad's size-12 shoes mounting the wooden staircase. And then, sitting between our twin beds, Dad would read Winnie the Pooh stories to us while Larry and I wiggled our toes.

After reading a story, Dad would say the Lord's Prayer with us, and we would sing "Yes, Jesus Loves Us."

Then when we heard him close the door at the bottom of the staircase, I would reach over to the radio between our twin beds, turn it on, and we would listen to our favorite serial radio shows, such as *The Fat Man*, and *Gang Busters*, and maybe *Fibber McGee & Molly*; until Dad would again open the staircase door and shout, "Time to turn that damn thing off!"

During the summer of 1948 we moved to a brick two-story house in Royal Oak located on the corner of East Lincoln Avenue and Longfellow. On the corner of our property was a vacant lot upon which a neighbor kid taught me how to throw and catch something he called a football. And just down Lincoln Avenue was a park with a baseball field where Dad would watch me try to play softball with other little kids in the neighborhood.

And that autumn Larry and I would walk several blocks down Longfellow to Franklin Elementary School, where Larry was then enrolled in kindergarten and where I was enrolled in second grade.

For a reason I refuse to remember, on one such walk to school, Larry pissed me off, and I then beat him up on the sidewalk in front of the school.

Upon entering my classroom, my teacher took me to the principal's office, where the principal sat me down and gave me a stern lecture about bullying.

I still recall that lecture as if it were conducted yesterday.

And I still recall being handed my first report card in a sealed envelope, to take home to my parents, unopened.

“What does it say, Mom?”

“Your teacher, she says you play well with others.”

When we then moved to Circle Pines, Minnesota during the summer of 1949, I did not play well with others.

We lived in a one-floor house with no basement. On a dirt road. Across the road lived a kid who was four years older than me.

Mike Blumgren.

The first thing Mike did was beat me up on the dirt road.

The second thing Mike did was invite me into his house, take me down into his family’s basement, hand me a pair of boxing gloves, hand his sister, who was two years older than me, a pair of boxing gloves, and then Mike watched her beat me up.

Mike would walk to and from school with me, he in seventh grade and me in third grade; often stopping with me on the way home at what was the little community grocery store, where we would often shoplift ballpoint pens to “sell” to kids on the school playground.

Sometimes on the way home from school, Mike would stop a farm kid and tell the kid he would give the kid a ballpoint Paper Mate pen if the kid could beat me up.

By then Mike had taught me to clasp a roll of nickels in my fists so as to add power to my punches.

Our “friendship” ended one day in May when he refused to hand me back my baseball bat.

I punched him in the jaw, grasped my baseball bat, and told him next time I’d hit him with my bat.

A month later, in June of 1950, we moved to Minneapolis, into a two-story stucco house located several blocks from Lake Harriet: 5025 Vincent Avenue South.

Then, on January 22, 1951, baby Ricky was born.

Ricky's crib was in Mom and Dad's bedroom overlooking our back yard, until a tornado hit our house the summer of 1951. A tall tree fell onto our roof, its branches protruded through Sue and Sylvia's front bedroom, the garage roof blew off, and our back yard swing set wound up a block away in someone's back yard.

Mom and Dad then chose to trade bedrooms with Larry and me so that the two of us were then sleeping in the same room with Ricky.

Then several years later, we switched bedrooms again with Mom and Dad until 1956, when little Ricky was no longer so "little."

Mom and Dad then moved Larry and me down into the basement.

We took over a finished room with a sink, toilet, and shower, a room that up until then Mom and Dad rented to a college student, Archie Lee, who had his own private entrance into the basement.

Then in the summer of 1957, Dad announced we were going to move into a better house, two blocks away, and only two blocks from Lake Harriet: 4845 Upton Avenue South.

Unlike 5025, this house featured carpeted floors, a living room with a fireplace, a magnificent dining room, an elegant sun room, plus three posh upstairs bedrooms: one for Sue and Sylvia, one for Rick, and one for Mom and Dad with an attached screened porch.

Larry and I were assigned to a finished basement room that had a fake fireplace in a far corner. And Dad gave us the big benefit of having the family TV placed in the adjacent corner of our room. Dad hated TV and would only come on down to our room to watch *Friday Night Fights*, *Bonanza*, and *The Jackie Gleason Show*.

Sometime around 1962, after Larry and I had moved out and were living near the University of Minnesota, Dad announced to Sue and Sylvia and Rick and Mom that they would be moving into a duplex he had purchased just seven blocks away: into "a turreted castle" located on the corner of Chowen Avenue South and 50th Street. Directly across the street from a Werness Brothers Funeral Chapel.

Because the street was commercially zoned, he could place his produce brokerage office within the wing of six bedrooms that extended from the corner duplex all the way back to the alley.

“Will rent the lower duplex, convert six bedrooms in the wing to offices, and rent them to tax accountants and insurance agents.”

“Dad? Do you know what those six bedrooms in the wing were?”

“So what if those bedrooms were part of the whore house? I got a guy who can remodel them and make them all look respectable.”

After dubbing his turreted castle *The Queen Mary*, because it had two boiler furnaces, Dad then purchased the house directly across the alley (on the corner of Beard Avenue and 50th Street) and chose to reside there with his wife and daughters and youngest son.

It was upon the front porch of the Beard House that I, at age 20, introduced Alice to my mother. Alice was my “blind date” at my Lutheran chapel’s annual banquet, and only six weeks after the banquet we became engaged to be married in the chapel.

My mother instantly adored Alice. But as much as my father was also charmed by her cheerful nature, my father did not approve of our engagement.

“You’re not even yet age 21 and you already want to get married? And you say she’s a year older than you?”

We married on July 4, 1962 and during the first week of October Dad hired me to work in his produce brokerage company office within *The Queen Mary*. But two weeks later he fired me.

“As you were about to leave the office yesterday I asked you to close the Beard House garage door. And you didn’t close it.”

“And that’s why you’re firing me?”

“Paul? I should have realized how you often do not do what I advise you to do. And you often do not do what I tell you to do. Plus you refused to maintain my two sets of accounting books.”

The Beard House garage hid Dad’s produce brokerage company’s actual accounting books. He maintained a fake set of accounting books within his office for the IRS auditors to review.

Soon after my mother and father divorced, somewhere around 1964, the Beard House became the home of my father’s parents.