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Personal Essay

The “pink house” was just a small clapboard rambler at the end of a dirt road. It was a rental and not very well maintained by the landlord; it had that run-down look unique to small-town America. Surrounded on three sides by several acres of undeveloped fields home to a host of rabbits, skunks, and squirrels as well as “forts” dug into the hills and built-up with spare lumber by the neighborhood teenage boys, it had a fence-line of ancient trees – black walnut, apricot, and apple – that towered over the small house.

It wasn't the kind of place you would expect to find buried treasure or to battle flying monsters on Halloween night. But that is just the kind of place it was – at least to me.

When my family rented the pink house in 1969, Orem, Utah was still a small farming community. The roads of our neighborhood had not been paved, and we had to walk a block to the row of mailboxes nailed to a 2x4 on the nearest paved street for our mail. Being the youngest of nine children, and only two years old at the time, I was blissfully unaware of the turmoil of a newly disabled father and the start of a new kind of life that my siblings were experiencing. What I was aware of were trees to climb, dirt to dig in, and spiders to play with.

Each day when my mom left for work and my two brothers and six sisters would leave to go to school, I was left to my own devices to amuse myself. I spent many hours perched on my favorite branch of the apple tree watching the neighborhood, and sometimes trying to build up the nerve to just jump out onto the roof – a mere six feet away.

One afternoon a neighborhood friend came over to play. We were climbing the apricot tree, a much safer adventure than my favorite apple tree, and started to play pirate. Just at the base of the tree seemed a perfect place to bury treasure, so we rounded up some of my toy

shovels and started to dig. Suddenly we found a huge silver coin! We kept digging and found several more. I was so excited that I ran to tell my dad that we had found treasure! After it was all dug up we figured out that someone had buried my oldest brother's coin collection there. No one ever 'fessed up, but it sure made an exciting afternoon for me.

On Halloween night I was at home with my mom and dad handing out homemade popcorn balls to the trick-or-treaters. Every time the doorbell rang, I would run to the door to be the first to open it. Just after it got dark, I opened the door and in flew a terrifying winged creature. I was sure it had to be a monster the way my mom screamed and chased it with the broom. But my dad's laughs from the sofa reassured me that it was just a harmless old bat as scared of us as we were of it.

I was always a daring little kid, and the pink house offered many opportunities for me to test my nerves and rattle those of my parents. I didn't know it at the time, but my family was not exactly rolling in money. My mom did the laundry for eleven people every Saturday out in the garage. We had an old electric washing machine, an open tub that agitated the clothes by vibrating slightly. My mom used a wooden stick to stir and lift the clothes up to run them through a wringer before hanging them out on the clothesline in the back yard. That wringer fascinated me. I would sit for hours hypnotically watching the bars roll toward each other. When no one was watching, I would tempt the ringer with my little fingers – letting it take them closer and closer until I yanked them out at just the last moment. My dad would warn me that the wringer would get me if I wasn't careful, but I didn't care. At least, I didn't care until the day that I was a little too slow pulling my fingers back; that day the wringer caught me, lifting me off of my perch on the stool, and pulling me right in. Fortunately it had a gap of nearly an inch, and my little arm wasn't much bigger than that. But, I'll never forget the feeling of that

wringer getting tighter and tighter as it pulled my arm in all the way to the shoulder. I ended up with a very raw sore where the skin was torn from my upper arm before my mom could yank the cord out of the wall to stop the wringer from turning, but luckily no broken bones.

Norman Maclean says in his book, A river runs through it, there is a point in childhood at which if your questions haven't been answered, they never will be. In the pink house, I had the rare opportunity to answer a great many questions about who I am, and who I would become. It was a place to face monsters and prove my bravery to myself; it was a place of magic and adventure that forever shaped me.