

## *The Big House*



I am seven years old and we move to a new house in St. Louis Park that I call the big house. It's a very modern home with a flat roof, lots of windows, a huge back yard and a big porch. I get to walk to school. Mom and Dad wanted a bigger house and knew the architect. As the story is told, Mom and Dad were having dinner one night at the architect's house, which he had built for himself. Dad said, "I love this house." Harley Johnson replied, "Great! You can buy it. I'll just build myself another one." He moved out and we moved in shortly after.

During these years my father works for my grandfather in his snowsuit factory, and our life is good. I have everything I ever wanted, but I am still afraid of everything.

We get out of the car in the garage. As we walk to the house, Dad says, "Stop," and he goes back in the garage to get a shovel. The

walkway from the garage to the house is covered with black slimy lizards. The light from the street shines on them and they look scary to me. They are small but move quickly and climb all over each other to get out of there, but they aren't going anywhere. They have come from the swamp across the street from our house. There are a ton of them. Ick! Dad shovels them into the yard, and in the house we go. Now I don't like big dogs, I'm afraid of the bus, and really don't like the basement. I add lizards to the list.

I walk over to Judy's house less than a block away from mine. She has just moved into our neighborhood and we are in fourth grade. Her small house feels warm and cozy. I walk in without even knocking. I am happy. I spend as much time at her house as I do mine. Her family gives me the only nickname I ever had, Lestle. I drink so much Nestle's chocolate drink at their house they start calling me Lestle.

I run into the house yelling at my mom, "You gave me a boy's name, you gave me a boy's bike. What did you want? A boy!" They had given me my cousin Tom's little two-wheeler. It is tan and about three feet tall. Leslie is mainly a boy's name at that time, but mom named me after the actress Joan Leslie. The kids at school are teasing me about it. When Dad gets home, Mom says, "The kids are making fun of Leslie because of her bike." He takes me the next day to get my very own red three-speed girls bike. I am ecstatic. Now maybe the kids will stop teasing me.

#### **Wonderful New Bike**



Judy loves horses and we pretend we are riding. We name our bikes after horses. Her's is Fury mine is Red. We are always together and ride our bikes all over St. Louis Park with some other friends.

I am lying in front of the fireplace in my PJ's listening to music. My father and a few other musicians are playing string quartets. It's wintertime and the fireplace is lit and crackling. Lots of my parents' friends are over. As I have done many times before, I get up and go onto Forest Wiggins lap. I have known him most of my life. He is the only black man in the group. Mom has a big modern chair with wonderful big arms. It is called a Womb Chair, and when I sit in it, it feels like being swallowed in comfort. As we sit in that chair, Forest wraps his arms around me and I feel completely safe and loved. Then one day he doesn't come anymore. I miss him terribly. I never see him again. We don't talk about it, just like Sudie.

Mom always cooks her favorite blintzes for string quartet night. Rolled up dough with cooked cream cheese inside. Homemade strawberry jam on top. She cooks all day. The house smells wonderful, even though I don't like to eat them. Music flows through the house, out the windows and through the neighborhood. Just about the time dessert is served and music is still being played, I fall asleep on Forest's lap. He gently wakes me and says, "It is time to go to bed." The music drifts up to my bedroom as I fall asleep.

Everything is so sweet. Yet I wake up most mornings with a stomach ache and bite my fingernails down to the quick. I walk into Mom and Dad's bedroom and in a little voice say I don't want to go to school. I'm not sure why but my stomach hurts. Mom finally takes me to the doctor. I have to drink this icky, white chalky stuff for an X-ray. There is nothing physically wrong with me. They keep telling me I have to eat more ruffage.

It's Saturday morning and Mom has made me Cream of Wheat.