

2000: The Hiding Place

Perhaps it is because there was no place to hide that as a child I learned to hide inside my mind. The child lurks there still, hiding from the present as well as the past.

Why is this part of myself broken? I always ask (even though I know the answer). I am broken because what I grew up with was too terrible to remember. And yet sometimes I do remember. Every now and then some small fragment comes back, and if I share the memory with my dad, he seems threatened, as though he's worried about what I'll remember next. Wicked, wicked man, who taught me that I was a wicked little girl. My last therapist said children do not have the capacity to be wicked.

So where was I to hide? There was no place to hide where I could not be found, by my mother when she wanted my help, by my brother when he wanted to torment me, by my father when he wanted — what? I was always frightened of him, big gruff man with a roaring voice. I remember hiding in my bedroom closet, under my mother's dresses, which were too numerous for her own closet. She was so frustrated when I grew old enough to need my own closet space and she had to move her seasonal wardrobe to the basement furnace room. I listened to her heavy sighs as she dragged her winter wear down and her spring suits back upstairs.

Those bags in the furnace room! I remember tall plastic garment bags, each one big enough to hold half a dozen of my mother's two-piece outfits, hanging from a pipe in a long row, across from the many-armed monster that ratted at night in the radiators upstairs. I doubt that I ever hid in there! That dingy, dark furnace room with the hideous stain on the ceiling was much too terrifying a place for a little girl with so many fears.

And the fruit cellar directly across the wide hallway, where the Christmas ornaments lived in boxes under the stairs — I would never have hidden there either. It too was dank and dreary, and the string on the single bulb in the middle of the room was much too far from the door for this frightened child to dare the darkness long enough to grab it. As a teen I once braved my way, fearing for my bare feet, and then began shrieking hysterically when I encountered a large millipede inches from my toes.

There was the laundry room, but this was my mother's domain, even though there was plenty of tempting space under the built-in counter tops along two walls. My brother's room, right there off the laundry, was a similar problem — no point in hiding out in enemy territory. And the den was inaccessible except through my brother's bedroom closet. We spent much of our time playing together in the den, always getting in trouble for closing the door, which kept in the fumes from the furnace on the other side of the partial wall. From this side the ceiling stain above the furnace looked like a mournful woman's face, still scary but less overwhelming.

The recreation room had several hiding places, but they were soon too well known to be used for true hiding. I wonder if the contractor who built this house for his own family knew what great hiding places he created when he built the corner storage cubbies on either side of the downstairs fireplace? How long was I able to squeeze through those narrow doors, surely not more than 8 or 10 inches wide, one on either side of the built-ins, leading to the empty triangular spaces behind and below the bookcase on the east wall or the TV on the west?

I know my brother and I played frequently in these cubby holes, the one behind the TV

being our favorite. I suspect I liked it better because those spaces around the TV let in a little light. We usually couldn't get into the other side. Our mother kept folding tables and chairs in the ones surrounding the built-in bookcase. That was, after all, what the built-in storage was designed for, and Mom hated to use things for other than their intended purposes. Sometimes I think she bought those folding tables and chairs we grew up with just to be able to use the special storage spaces properly.

There was another great built-in across the room, a three-section bench under the front stairs, which formed a sort of square horseshoe. The bench seats lifted up, offering a tempting spot to climb in and hide. But my brother sat on the bench once after I crawled in, and thereafter I was terrified of being trapped. We used the benches mostly for our toys and games, claiming it was the biggest built-in toy box on the block. Unfortunately two of the walls were formed by the poorly sealed outside corner of the house, and water seeped in, making a musty mess of our favorite board games. I can smell them still.

There was more space in that huge basement of my parents' house than in the three-bedroom apartment where I live today. It's no wonder every place I live seems much too small. Yet every home I live in these days is a hiding place in its entirety, a precious escape from the outside world, only rarely violated by family visits .