chapter

1

THE TRAINS, THE KIDS, THE FOLKS

THE STEAM engines were so much a part of life on Chestnut Street. They chugged and chunted through little Deerfield, Illinois, just across the street and down a sloping bluff from our house, heading north from Chicago, bound for Milwaukee. We could hear them coming through the stillness, huffing and chuffing and sputtering, as they picked up steam leaving Deerfield station about a mile down the track.

By the time they got to our block hurtling forward, those magnificent, living, breathing machines were trailing white steam and rumbling like thunder, *CHOOKA*-CHOOKA, *CHOOKA*-CHOOKA, *CHOOKA*-CHOOKA. I can still feel the thrill that went straight into my bones, and the fear and the awe of it all as they passed, right across from our block on Chestnut Street. Huge, thundering, blustering, roaring steel behemoths that seemed like they were surely alive, breathing clouds of misty condensation that billowed out behind them. Why, you could see the powerful joints of their giant feline legs, reaching, driving, retracting, churning, moving.

Those trains, their moving parts, and their lonely whistles pervaded our play, pervaded my childhood dreams.

Just as soon as the Ding-Dongs started clanging, we kids all ran in wild excitement down to the bottom corner of our block right in front of the Tibbettses' house, where we jostled to take our places to race the train to the top corner. Nerves jumping as the train approached and came into view, Ding-Dongs clanging and electrifying us with even more excitement, every kid straining his neck backwards to see, we tensely poised ourselves until the train was RIGHT THERE. Marks, set, GO…and it was off like lightning up that sidewalk, hearts pounding, racing that train for our lives as it sped on the tracks across the way, rolling north toward the top corner.

Everyone knew you had to get to the corner before the train. Then you had to leap up and touch those carved x's on the telephone pole once for each member of your family, and do it before the train passed. If you failed, they would die.

It was all up to you. This was truly life and death stuff.

If you couldn't make it all the way to the corner in time, you still could save your family's lives by detouring at the Petersons' house and jumping up on that huge stump in their front yard. This was the safe zone, much used by the littler kids.

But if you beat the train and hit those x's, you were a hero, and you had fulfilled a mighty responsibility. You stood there tingling in every cell, breathing as hard as the train, waving wildly at the engineer.

I have an idea those engineers backed off their throttles sometimes, chugging past our block on Chestnut Street a little bit slower, just to let us win. For us living on Chestnut Street, it was part of our childhood lifestyle to wave at the engineer. He always always saw us and he always always waved back. Sometimes, he would even

pull down on a special cord up in his cab and send out that long plaintive whistle, just for us. This was of course the biggest honor and thrill to be bestowed on any Chestnut Street child, especially if you had saved your entire family's lives only moments before.

Our house was at 1148 Chestnut Street, mid-block. Oh, we had some life in that yellow frame house. New babies, visits from aunts and uncles and grandparents, allowances kept in little tin boxes that Daddy's photo film came in, Mom combing the tangles out of our hair so hard it made us cry, Dad in a Father Christmas mask we all knew was fake, and Mom rolling back the living room carpet and playing *Lily Marlene* on the phonograph over and over, while we little girls whirled and danced until we collapsed into panting, giggling heaps.

There was the mysterious and huge pile of coal in one corner of the dank basement, near our big iron furnace. A large shovel and several oval metal ash buckets stood nearby, and this whole area was Dad's domain. In the winter, he would disappear down there and shovel away to stoke the furnace and keep our little house warm. Although we didn't know it, he even got up in the middle of the night to load more coal into the furnace, just so we could all be warm when we woke up.

The basement was like another world, so dark and musty, with that special smell of earth, rock and damp which I would recognize to this day. It seemed almost like a part of the outdoors, with its heavy upper walls fashioned of stones, and memories of the time a mole got in there and made a burrow under the floor.

On monumentally exciting days, a gigantic truck would come to our block, brimming with mountains of coal; and this was somehow transferred off the truck and sent sliding down a chute into our basement, creating thunder like an avalanche. This was a terrifying and fascinating vision, and served well to keep us from playing around the coal area, for fear the chute might suddenly open and bury us alive.

For us little girls at 1148, upstairs was a lot more fun. There was dress-up in the attic with big-lady hats and gowns and strings of beads, capes and bows, and "clompers," which were Mom's old high heels bequeathed to us for play.

We had a long piece of old mirror up there, so that we could model our versions of fashion, and make necessary adjustments to achieve perfection.

A very narrow and steep wooden stairway led upstairs, so steep that I remember placing my hands on the next step up as I climbed it. At the top of the stairs was an open, unfinished area, as well as two bedrooms.

One bedroom was to the right of the open area. The other was straight along in the front of the house, a big room with sloping ceiling and a center window overlooking our front yard and Chestnut Street, and with a good aerial view of the train tracks beyond. This front bedroom was where we children slept, and where we forlornly watched the other kids playing outside after daylight savings time began and the evenings were longer. We kept our usual bedtime even though it was still light out, and even though the other kids on the block still got to play outside. We could only watch and wait until we got older.

Mom was a great baker and the most special of all treats, for me, was her apricot tarts. I can still see that darling woman standing there at her task, no more than twenty-five years old but looking younger (as women did in those days,) patient and contented, with long dark hair in tendrils around her face, fashioning the little delicacies so carefully, centering the sweet filling on the dough, and then folding the thin crust over to crimp the edges.

I loved sitting on a high stool as she worked, chattering to her, all the while marveling that she knew how to do something so magical. I think she liked the company, and probably remembered herself as the little person watching her own mother bake. When everything was perfect, into the oven Mom pushed her tart-filled tray. Soon, heavenly smells reached into every room, every little nose.

We had so many interesting activities. There was no TV yet, but there was *Let's Pretend* on the radio on Saturday Mornings, not to mention *Ozzie and Harriet*, a great favorite. We had our kiddie records, all 78 rpm of course, and we had cut-out dolls whose carefully scissored paper outfits we affixed to their cardboard bodies with tabs.

There was the sand box in the back yard, and the ice box in the basement. It was a very special treat when the ice man came to bring big dripping blocks of ice for that old ice box, swinging them on his tongs and carrying that ice down the narrow little stone steps that led from the back yard into the basement. He always made sure to give us each a delicious chip of ice, as wonderful as a popsicle.

Times and play were simple. The Mandels next door had two daughters the same age as we were and Judy and Patti were our special playmates. They had a swing set in their back yard, a favorite playtime treat for me. Even if Judy and Patti didn't want to come out, Mrs. Mandel let us play on the swings. Oh, I loved to swing! I swung so high I thought I was going to go all the way around. It was so daring, so breathtaking. And as I pumped and pumped, I recall singing *I'm Looking Over a Four-Leafed Clover*. We all heard it on the radio and knew the words. Many years later, Mrs. Mandel told me that it was Patti who started the tradition of singing it on the swings. But soon it was just what we all did – swing and sing *Four-Leafed Clover.*

I'm looking over
A four-leafed clover
That I overlooked before
One leaf's for sunshine
Another for rain
The third's for the bluebells
That grow in the lane

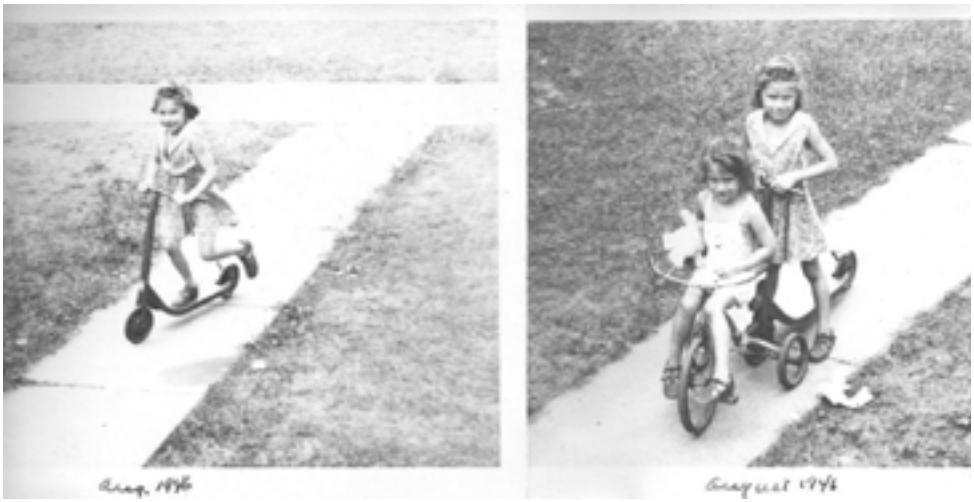
No need explaining
The one remaining
Is somebody I adore

I'm looking over
A four-leafed clover
That I overlooked before

I still know the words to this day, at least I think so.

So many kids – the Tibbetts children, Tom, Dodie, Jimmy and Helen; Tommy Wyand; Billy Rugen and his baby brother; Barbara and Janet Peterson; Pat and Corky Ross; and of course Judy and Patti. Every kid had a birthday party, and all the other kids came. Kids romped and chased each other and played hopscotch on chalk playboards we drew on the sidewalk.

We learned to ride two-wheeler bikes with our dads running alongside, up and down the sidewalk in front of all our houses, until each child in turn learned to go it alone. Meanwhile, the littler kids rolled along on their tricycles, usually with another kid standing onboard behind, clinging for dear life to the kid pedaling. Being bigger, Amy always helped me.



"Go out and play," Mom would say, and we didn't have to be asked twice. Down to the corner to the Tibbettses' we ran. Knowing our favorite playmates were inside, all we had to do was stand outside the front of the house and yell, "OH DODEEEEEEeee, CAN YOU PLAYYYYay." Dodie could always come out and play.

All wheeled vehicles were *de rigeur*, but the rest of what we played I cannot really recall. However, we were busy all day. Once we played doctor in the rafters of the Tibbettses' garage and I remember feeling quite guilty that I'd let one of the kids massage my butt. I also recall Tommy Wyand showing me one time how he could pee standing up, leading me to try it myself later, along the little sidewalk between our house and Mrs. Anderson's, with extremely unsatisfactory results. How could I know? We only had girls at our house.

The Rosses lived on the top corner, and they had an elegant, impeccably trained German Shepherd named Countess. Countess always stood guard for them at their house on the corner; and she never mixed with the kiddies, even though she went wherever Pat went, like a noble bodyguard. We all thought Countess must be a kind of royal or holy dog. She had a royal name and she behaved so regally.

With Countess always at her side, Pat Ross was our playmate. She was our age, and she had a big brother named Court Ross. He was a strapping teenager while we were mere insignificant children, so he never paid the slightest bit of attention to any of us. But we all still called him Corky as if he were our pal. The Rosses' corner house was the last one on the block and that's where our sidewalk ended. A larger street ran along the side of their home, perpendicular to Chestnut Street, and if you turned right onto this street it led up across the tracks and onwards to old Highway 41. If you turned left instead, there was just a field and no place to ride a bike or draw a chalky hopscotch board. So we never turned left at the corner.

Eventually, though, as those post WWII years went along, someone built a group of new homes around that corner, and even put in a sidewalk. The new homes were low, one-storey affairs built of wood, and it must have rained before they had a chance to paint them, because all of the nails holding them together rusted and became quite visible. Seeing these blossoming patterns of rust-colored spots all over the exteriors, we decided that the new houses had chicken pox, and dubbed them so.

Soon families moved in, but only one kid living there ever came around the corner to see what was going on down on Chestnut Street. He was a little older than we were, but a little younger than the oldest Tibbetts kid, Tom. At some point we learned that his name was Bruce Abernathy. He'd ride his bike over and just kind of hang around.

Brucie Abernathy had, in our minds, the misfortune to live in one of the Chicken Pox Houses and this was a poor credential. On reflection he was pretty courageous, being the new kid, and coming from the Chicken Pox Houses, and knowing no one, but just riding his bike over hoping to make friends. None of us would have it. We considered him a kind of a misfit age-wise, and with the cruelty that can only be administered by children, we rejected him.

Poor Brucie was too timid to get off his bicycle for a long time, even though all he wanted was some playmates, some company, maybe a bit of fun. Instead, we dubbed him Goosey Abernathy and called him that behind his back. It was weeks before Tom Tibbetts began bike-riding with Goosey and finally, so initiated, he was incorporated into the Chestnut Street bunch. We still called him Goosey, but now it was just his name. He may even have liked it eventually, but probably not.

There was a huge waving field of tall fragrant prairie grasses north of our block, above and fronting the ribbon of tracks as they headed out of Deerfield. We were only allowed to cross the street to go into the field if we looked both ways at least three times. But once there, we dreamed and ran and played and spent long summer afternoons of invention.

We played so many games in those grasses. We would trample down a little circle to make a "house," or we'd hide and seek, or trample a circle with spokes radiating out from the middle, and play Fox and Hound, or we'd look for wild flowers or Queen Anne's Lace in the field, or we'd go close to the edge, to the top of the bluff for a good view of the railroad tracks. This was the best and most adventurous vantage point, if any thrilling black steam engines should rumble by.

NORTHWESTERN CLASS H. FREIGHT