

Red Bank Road

by Prudence Todd Moffett

When Uncle Billy borrowed one of his company's planes to fly down from Connecticut on a summer weekend to join the rest of his family in their annual visit to Grandmother, he always buzzed the house. The whole neighborhood ran out front to wave.

To spot tree-covered Stewart Avenue, he had to locate Madison Road—"the Pike," as Grandmother always called it. He followed it down from the cluster of stores and schools that made up the town center. He turned when to his right he could see Stewart Road (not Avenue) run away past the city playgrounds up into the hills and Montgomery.

Banking left, he swooped low over the neighborhood and saw the four Victorian houses, now on his right. Grandmother's was the second, sheltered from the busy Pike by the Darts' gloomy brick pile. Grandmother hustled visiting Aunt Pat downstairs. Mother hurried to join them in the front yard. The great aunts, next door, stood on their front walk waving linen dinner napkins. Across the street, behind Aunt Lil, even Vera dared rest her broom on the front porch and shield her eyes to peer upward. Next door, Cousin Mattie might stop her sweeping long enough to stare skyward.

We children, eight of us, counting Dr. Paul's three, were already in the street, Cousin Lyle yelling, "Here he comes! I hear him!"

Cousin Lyle knew airplanes like other boys knew cars. His father, our Uncle Rob, and Billy Andrews had flown together in what our teachers taught us was The War to End All Wars. Uncle Rob was the one who got shot down, but in the end they came home together and Rob's flying ace buddy became our Uncle Billy by marrying Aunt Pat.

"There he is!" Lyle shouted. He told the make of a plane by its engine's roar, the way the fuselage tapered, or the shape of the wings. He pored over his airplane magazines the way we did later over *Silver Screen*. The plane's wings wobbled a greeting before heading off toward Lunken Field, where Uncle Rob was waiting.

After the grownups had gone back to finish whatever they were doing—supper, probably—we stayed where we were, testing the gumminess of the asphalt, which on really hot days swelled up in bubbles we could pop. Or, after a quick check that no one was looking, tear off to chew. If we looked one way, past Dr. Paul's Victorian house, the street dipped off into a little hollow, bordered by apple trees on both slopes, the remnants of Farmer Barker's cornfield in the bottom. Our neighborhood ended at the next house, the painter, Miss Annette's. Beyond that we never visited.

The other way lay the Pike. To go from the leafy quietness of Stewart Avenue onto the Pike was like floating from a gentle tributary into a rushing whitewater. If

we turned our backs on the familiar way, up to the town center, once we passed the little house in the shadow of the Darts' that was rented out, and the Gliddens', the Lutherans took over. Their school, playground, and looming stone church stretched away to bare ground and, finally, Red Bank Road.

The opposite side of the Pike was blocked completely by the buildings of an orphanage facing the other way. In our day, it housed actual orphans. Beyond its fence the land petered away, unused. Dirty and rubble-littered, housing factories, most of which sat silent, idled by the Depression, Red Bank Road was the end of all we knew in that direction.

Growing up on Stewart Avenue, we were safe. No one told us not to talk to strangers, to look out for—whatever—anything. Till she was ninety-three and died under the great carved headboard of her marriage bed and four children's birthings, Grandmother never locked her front door at night. I heard Uncle Rob dare to tease her, suggest that we grandchildren might be stolen in the night. She looked around at us all, head to one side, and said, "They'd get you under the first street light and turn around and bring you back." Matter settled.

Which is why our Christmas afternoon walk found us so unready. Unseasonably warm, it was a day that made our mothers insist on a sweater only because the calendar said so. Dr. Paul's middle daughter, Sudie, had a new doll carriage that needed to stretch its wheels. She, cousin Babs, and I, senior by a year, unwillingly let our little sisters, my Sister, Babs's sister Annie, and at the last minute Sudie's baby sister Sylvia, tag along. Sylvia, well into her two's, was still apt to sit down and bawl if upset. She'd grown enough the past year that carrying her further than across the yard was more than our nine-year-old arms could bear.

Since we gathered at Dr. Paul's house for our walk, we naturally headed down Stewart Avenue that way. Past the familiar corn patch and the apple orchards, we stopped to reconnoiter on the corner by Miss Annette Willingham's house. Babs was inspired to lead us past Miss Annette's, into unknown territory. We took turns pushing the buggy and holding Sylvia's hand, looking around at small houses, strange to us, wandering along a way we never came.

When we reached a plot of land defined by a high wire fence, Babs's sense of direction suddenly kicked in. "I know where we are! The other end of Red Bank Road is right up there. We can take it down to the Pike and walk home that way." It seemed like a great idea. Deserted, Red Bank Road wasn't any better kept at this end than down by the Pike, but we could see the empty factory buildings and knew we'd be on familiar ground in a few minutes.

Sylvia was beginning to tire, but Sister, who could be wonderful at entertaining little kids when she felt like it, took her hand. Soon they were off in some make-believe land. Sudie and Annie followed behind them, each with a hand on the new buggy. Sudie was being great, letting somebody else share her treasure. Babs and I, in the rear, were comparing what Santa had left us under the tree from Connecticut when we saw a man walking toward us. Such a pleasant day, it was a wonder more people weren't out for a walk.

Sister and Sylvia, wrapped up in their game, didn't give him a glance, Annie and Sudie, a friendly wave. Sudie at the last moment cast a questioning look back at Babs and me. We saw, and flicked a hand at her to keep moving. Annie was oblivious.

The man, dark shaggy hair falling to his brow, wearing a black patterned sweater that matched his pants, came abreast of us, still headed in the opposite direction. Proudly, he waved a gigantic engorged erection. Even though till now we'd only seen Cousin Lyle's thumb-sized weenie, we felt its threat. The smirk with which he

returned Sudie's and Annie's wave was not reassuring. Still, he continued past us, and we saw nothing to do but forge forward.

Annie, if spooked, could scream and run like a deer. Sister might waste valuable time pausing to inspect the phenomenon, but once she started, she could keep up. Sudie, Babs, and I, bigger, could barricade the littler girls. But Sylvia, at two just getting really good at walking, if frightened would drop to the ground wailing, and lift her arms to be carried. We couldn't outrun a grown man with one of us burdened with a screaming, uncontrollable two-year-old. The only thing we knew was to buy some time to get nearer the Pike and people.

The Pike didn't carry a whole lot of automobile traffic on holidays, particularly Christmas, but Red Bank Road's weeds and fences offered us no protection at all. Balancing myself on Babs's shoulder, I did a little pirouette to check the location of—what was he? All he'd done was smile at us lewdly and offer a sight of something none of us was ready to see. Still, he spoke danger, and my heart pounded as I turned.

He stood on what for Red Bank Road was a curb, a crumbling slab of pavement, a good stone's throw away, teetering back and forth as if making up his mind about something. About what was only too plain. If we just kept on moving and he kept teetering, everything was all right. But the menace hung precariously there in front of him and in his knowing smirk.

So we sang. None of us could carry a tune. Sudie and her older sister Jody, too old unfortunately to take a Christmas walk with a doll carriage, took Elocution. I practiced the piano. Annie went with her mother to the stables and rode a pony. The only song we all had sung recently was "Away in a Manger." Out of nowhere I chose "Old MacDonald had a farm," to be sung at the top of our voices to a marching tempo.

We took turns naming what he had on his farm. At first, regular animals, a cow, giving Sylvia sole ownership of the Moo, waiting till she could get her breath from giggling to pipe out a toddler's "... with a moo-moo here, and a moo-moo there . . ." "After we ran out of country animals, we gave the old man elephants, then gave him Democrats, "with an FDR here, and an FDR there," gave him long underwear. We gave him a great-grandmother. We roared and stamped and laughed and sang. Limping and hurting and afraid to stop, I gave him a "stone-in-his-shoe, with an ow-ow here . . ." Old MacDonald had pickled pigs' feet. Had no ears. "EE-I, EE-I, O."

We sang and above all marched right along. When at last I could see where the fence ended ahead, and thought I heard a car whizzing by on the Pike, I chanced another look at our tormentor. Not far behind us, he stood in the middle of Red Bank Road, his ridiculous red baton bobbing, his smirk dissolved into a peculiar mix of puzzlement and pure befuddlement.

We sang all the way up the Pike, we three bigger girls passing the exhausted Sylvia back and forth among us. Past the empty Lutheran church, rousting starlings nested in the belfry, past the school and the playground, swings still and empty. At Stewart Avenue, we turned and found a cluster of worried-looking parents standing at the foot of our drive.

"We were beginning to wonder—"

"Oh, we took the long way home—"

"Don't do that ever again, please"?

"Oh, don't worry. We won't."

It was not a thing we wanted to talk about in the street, under the sycamore tree's peeling white branches, or at the dinner table, but to whisper to our mothers as they bent to kiss us good night in a room already darkened. Could she leave the hall door open tonight? We saw this really strange man today—