

It was springtime in Fairbanks. . .

by Theresa "Tiny" Demientieff Devlin
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It was springtime in Fairbanks, and the snow was melting everywhere.

Of course, Sugar, Tootie and I kept ourselves busy with important tasks at hand. We faithfully worked in front of the house, building little channels in the wet muddy driveway.

We took our work very seriously. I guess we imagined ourselves as engineers of sorts. After the springtime breakup and the driveway was dry and solid we felt that our work was complete.

We were good at working in the dirt. Mom and Dad built in a dirt cellar beneath the cabin and during the winter months when we tired of television, we climbed down the wooden ladder to our own private house of mud. It was great! Dad set up a light and we played away the cold winter evenings.

I enjoyed working the mud, creating road systems along the walls of cool earth. Sometimes we built little cities, and sometimes we played war games. At dinner time Mom would call down to us and up we climbed. The cellar was under some loose planks in the floor near the stove, so we would lift up one plank at a time, climb out and return the planks to their place. Sometimes I felt rather like a clever spy coming back into the real world as though I had never left.

The rules of the house included washing up before every meal. The wash stand was probably like any other wash stand from that period of time. Above the wash stand was a mirror with a shelf behind it. It was really neat. I liked to snoop around in everything that was behind the mirror.



One time, I was so engrossed with the mirror I decided I should cut my bangs. I got Mom's scissors and trimmed the hair back. Somehow I just couldn't get it straight. Just a little more here and a little more there, and before I knew it my hair was so short it stuck out from my forehead.

I figured that I'd take care of it real easy. All I had to do was get some water and start watering my hair on a regular basis. In fact, if I got busy now I could probably get the job done sooner! I was dribbling some water on my short crop of hair when Mom walked in the door.

At first, without too much thought she went about her work. But then, I was at the mirror so long that she noticed I had gotten soaked! She casually asked what I was doing. I explained that I was watering my hair. She came over, looked at my pitiful haircut and got real excited about my new hairdo.

Sunday rolled around and we were busy getting ready for church. The older girls were "painting their lips,"

as Dad called it. He was good about getting us kids to church on time.

He always made a point of reminding us that we were never late for movies. He did his level best to get us into the car.

He'd ask Mom, "What in the world are they doing? What could possibly take that long? How much time do they need in front of the mirror? Why do they need to paint their lips?"

Mom rarely got excited. She would nod her head in agreement and reply yes, yes.



After we all piled into the car we would ride quietly into town, cruise down Cushman, cross the bridge and file into the little church. If we were even a few minutes late Dad would herd us all back into the car and back home.

He would remind us, "If you can make it to the movies on time, we can make it to church on time, too."

So we went back home, and no one was to get dirty, eat or play outdoors. Everyone was to wait until the next scheduled Mass. So we all would sit around the house until the next run for the church. When we did finally make it, we always sat toward the front of the church.

During Mass I would dream into the stained glass windows and marvel at the beauty of the people of those saintly days. I would try and imagine how beautiful and wonderful Mary was. The statue of Joseph holding the Baby Jesus was just grand! Then, when the gentle jingle of the altar bells rang, I would bow my head and pray.

My only problem with the church was the fact that I didn't get to receive any of the Host. I didn't understand why nobody could bring me back some of theirs. I asked everyone I could possibly trust, but no one was willing!

So every once in awhile, Sugar, Tootie and I would conduct our own Mass. We carefully went through as many of the motions, prayers and Latin words that we could collectively remember. I thought we were pretty good. I don't remember actually being the priest, but I sure enjoyed the very reverent moments that led up to the lifting of the Host, the silent genuflection, a slow bow of the head and the sharing of the Host. I finally got that Special Bread.



One day I was behind the house. Under the hot sun I laid in the sand box Dad had made. The sand was warm against my back. It was quiet as I looked at the blueness of the sky. There were some wispy thin hair-like clouds high in the sky, and I enjoyed being by myself.

I noticed a big bug flying. It was a huge bug, about an inch long. I raised up onto my elbow and kept an eye on this thing. It landed on one of the corner posts of the sandbox. It was an ant, a flying ant. It took off its wings,

climbed down the little post and walked off into the grass. I couldn't believe my eyes.

I thought for a moment, took the wings into the palm of my hand and blew them away.

Sugar, Tootie and I did a lot of walking. We walked to the store, to the movies, to town and mostly wherever we wanted, except across the bridge. Now and then we would catch a ride to the gravel pits to swim. The gravel pits were just beyond the railroad tracks.



One time we were busy splashing, running and screaming, then, I'm not certain how, we stumbled onto a whole housing project. It was a community all by itself.

We snuck in for a closer look. I couldn't believe it. There were Eskimos here. I wondered how could this be? They were supposed to be living up North somewhere, in igloos, with parkas and blankets and all.

Then I wondered. How did they manage to create their own little town without being noticed? Maybe they snuck down here and made their own place. I thought about it and decided that if they were happy I certainly wasn't going to tell on them.

It made me wonder about the school system. My trust in them had lost something. I wasn't as trusting after that discovery.

During the hot summer evenings, Sugar, Tootie and I liked to walk to the neighborhood store. It was just a little store. We enjoyed looking at the big selection of candy that was there. We made quite a production of selecting just the right candy.

The storekeeper enjoyed us. He always made small talk with us. It seemed like a big deal to us. It made me feel like a real honest-to-goodness customer, and a regular one at that.

One evening on our way home we were busy talking when we noticed a bi-plane. It was flying low, too low for flying. We dropped to the ground and laid there until it was clear. After we decided it was safe, we got back up and continued on our way.

The plane came back and made another low pass. This was just too suspicious. We decided that this was not good. We would run close to the ground, drop down and lie low until the plane was out of sight.

It just kept coming back. We figured that we must be at war! In that case, it was our duty to get home and tell Mom.

Finally, after making it safely to the house, we ran inside and in short, excited voices managed to tell Mom that the war was on and the plane was after us. She tried to get a look at the plane as it was flying off in the distance, then remembered that they were spraying for mosquitoes.

Mom always liked to walk down to the river during the evening after the kitchen was clean and look at the slow moving, churning currents.

Not long ago I learned that there really was a village in Fairbanks called Eskimo Village. It's no longer in the railroad yard, but there is still a place with that name.

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