

My Life As A Series Of Houses (1950-1968)

by John Olson

The first house I that remember living in was in Golden Valley, a suburb of Minneapolis. It was small, but it had a basement, and two bedrooms. My brother and I shared a room. We slept in a bunk. I took the upper bunk. I remember looking out from the window in the living room and watching steam locomotives go by the swamp where I played a lot with my friends. The swamp was full of reeds, which fascinated me. I liked the way they smelled and rustled, and their sword-like shapes, and the ease with which you could build shelters with them. The house in Golden Valley is where I first saw Elvis Presley on television, and *Wuthering Heights*, with Lawrence Olivier and Merle Oberon in the lead roles, which made a huge impression on me. I had a crush on a girl in my third grade class named Kathy. I imagined myself in the role of Heathcliff. Kathy liked horses. I asked my father, who was an illustrator by trade, to teach me how to draw horses. I drew horse after horse after horse. And gave them to Kathy. But that's as far that went. Kathy did not reciprocate. I probably frightened her. I began drawing ships instead. Galleons with ballooning sails and high sterns. I loved the lines of the old ships, the stately bows, the swoop and sweep of the ropes and spars.

We moved from the house in Golden Valley shortly after I turned ten. I last saw the house in 2000 on a short trip to Minneapolis. The neighborhood hadn't changed. It was exactly the same as I had remembered it. Except for the swamp, which was now thickly wooded. And the grade school I had attended was boarded up. Roberta and I parked our rental on the side of the street and got out to gaze around. A woman came out on the porch between the entry door and the garage. I was tempted to introduce myself and ask for a tour. But I was too shy. I regret that now. My father had glued

some phosphorescent stars to the ceiling of our bedroom. They would shine as soon as the light went out. I wondered if they were still there.

We moved to a house in Fridley, high on a wooded bank overlooking the Mississippi. My father installed plastic tubing in the concrete floor of the basement so that the floor was always warm. I thought that was ingenious. I played a lot by the river. The carp fascinated me. On warm sunny days they would move into the shallows by the shore and languish there in some sort of stupor. There were also a lot of frogs and snakes and snapping turtles. The turtles liked to get up on rocks and sun themselves. I made friends with a girl named Valerie. We went off into the reeds once and showed one another our private parts. Sexuality was quietly, subtly emerging. I could feel it, but had no way to describe what I was experiencing, and no adult had explained its mysteries as yet. I do remember how good I felt when Valerie sat on my lap.

Shortly after I turned 12 in 1959 my father got a job as an illustrator at Boeing and we moved to Seattle. We lived in an L-shaped house in Bellevue, but I have no feeling for that house. It's as if we never actually lived there. My parents got divorced that year and that probably had a lot to do with that. My mother moved us out of the Bellevue house and for the next few years we lived in a lot of different places. The chronology is scrambled. I think the first place was a large, two-bedroom apartment on the steep slope of Queen Anne Avenue North that my mother found after finding a secretarial job in downtown Seattle. While the custody battle raged, my brother and I lived with our mother. I attended ninth grade at Queen Anne High School and watched the Space Needle get built from my drafting class on the third floor. The teacher, a wiry little man in a constant state of anxiety, was a crab. Never happy with my screwdrivers. Always finding fault with everything I drew. He gave me no encouragement. Same with the Latin teacher, an enormous harridan in late middle-age with absolutely no sense of humor, or warmth or patience or tolerance. I think she hated teaching. Or loved Latin and teaching Latin and hated any student for not

learning or respecting it properly. Latin did not appeal to me. I did not like the way it sounded. All the words sounded like the names of diseases or tedious legalities. No wonder they called it a dead language. I cannot remember what motivated me to take the class. The high school has since become a condo building and I see it every day. I live but a few blocks away and pass it on one of my favorite running courses. I frequently wonder who might be living in my old Latin class, which was on the lower level, wrapped in old stone.

A few months later my mother married a commercial photographer named Carl and we lived in a large house in Tacoma that had a stucco exterior and a balcony that looked like it was a cheesy prop from Romeo and Juliet. Eventually, we found ourselves living in a two bedroom apartment. I have a vivid memory of reading Kon Tiki in that bedroom.

Meanwhile, my father found digs in a cottage by Lake Burien. This place was remarkable for the huge windmill on the property, which you passed in the driveway, a lengthy dirt road, and the fishing net pinned to the ceiling, full of glass fishing balls from Japan. The folk movement was getting big and I remember listening to a lot of Kingston Trio. I liked the vigor of the Kingston Trio, especially the humorous and somewhat macabre song about the man that gets trapped for life under the streets of Boston on the M.T.A. because of a sudden fare increase. My brother and I didn't actually live there, we only spent weekends, but I felt a connection with that house. It was the kind of house I would have loved living in had I been a bachelor. A highpoint to one of our visits came in the form of a box-kite my dad put together. He was inordinately excited by the aeronautical properties of this unorthodox form of kite. And it did go high. One afternoon a sedan with two men appeared, officials from Sea-Tac airport. The kite was in the flight path of the jets. We hadn't seen any jets, but had to assume their concern was serious. They issued their warning with the gravity of F.B.I. men. Hell, they may have been F.B.I.

My dad wasn't there long. He married a coworker named Georgia who had four children, two of them young adults who no longer lived

at home. My dad got custody and my brother and I went to live with him and his new family in a two-level stucco house in Seattle's Ravenna district. I never felt connected with that house, although a lot of important developments in my life took place there. That's where I lived when the Beatles and Rolling Stones and Animals all appeared. I turned fifteen and life changed radically. I discovered alcohol, which I loved, and began smoking cigarettes. I read Aldous Huxley and developed a keen interest in hallucinogenic drugs.

I shared an upstairs room with my stepbrother Mike for a short time. I liked Mike, who was a grade ahead of me in school and very handsome and mature for his age. At age sixteen he looked twenty-four or twenty-five and got into bars easily. Getting alcohol was never a problem. Mike was one of the coolest people in school, one of the coolest people I had ever met, witty, cynical, shrewd. But I never felt at ease around him. I was slow to develop. Mike had a five o'clock shadow at three in the afternoon. I had no reason to shave at all until I turned eighteen, and discovered sufficient fuzz to squirt some lather on my face and scrape it with a razor. More importantly, I could not attain the level of Mike's success with the ladies, or his popularity, or general hedonistic cool. He was like a blend of Elvis Presley and Hugh Hefner. He made me feel horribly inadequate. A hopeless geek. There were no Beatles, as yet, to provide an alternate model of cool for misfits like me. I wasn't gay, I liked girls, but I could tell there was something in me that did not conform to the usual model of the American male at the time.

It was while living in the Ravenna house that I learned to drive, went on my first date (a rock concert that included Dick and DeeDee on the bill), and bought a small motorcycle, a Zündapp. It only had a little 125 cc engine, but it got me around, mainly over the hill to Winderemere, a posh neighborhood by Lake Washington where I hung out with a group of wild kids that enjoyed partying and the new music coming out of the radio, House of the Rising Sun, You Really Got Me, Can't Buy Me Love, She's Not There, It's All Over Now. Fantastic stuff.

My dad and Georgia decided to move to the south of Seattle, to an upper class neighborhood called Normandy Park. This was a large house, five bedrooms and a spacious basement. I would come to spend many years there, off and on, and think of it as a true family home.

My mother, meanwhile, had moved to the Bay Area in California. Hurray for me. I couldn't wait to get to California. San Francisco had become the unofficial mecca for sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll, and to my mind it was enmeshed with everything wonderful and exciting in life. My mother was extremely rigid about such things and her view of modern culture and politics was harsh and narrow. I think she may well have guessed my real enthusiasm for coming to visit her in the summer of 1965. I think it was her husband Carl, who had left photography and begun selling used cars, that persuaded her to go to the Bay Area. It was definitely not her milieu. There tensions between my mother and I that sometimes took palpable form, such as the day she coerced me into visiting the Navy recruiting center. I had no desire to join the Navy, but went to appease her, and nodded politely while the guy at the recruiting center told me about all the advantages of being in the Navy. He did not mention Vietnam. A car wash job my mother and Carl pushed me into had equally dismal results. I did it four or five days to keep her off my back, but I hated the job. It was mind-numbingly dull, and offered no future whatever, although, admittedly, I had no ambitions at the time. Outside of taking hallucinogenic drugs, that is. In retrospect, I can see what my true ambition was. I wanted to become a shaman. I wanted to explore other worlds, new vistas of perception, the invisible realms that surrounded us, find the extraordinary in the ordinary and put it into words. I wanted to bring rock 'n roll into poetry, the way Bob Dylan had. Could that be a job? How much did shamans make? Somehow, California seemed like the best of all possible places to pursue shamanistic activities.

And there were models: Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Michael McClure. They weren't exactly shamans, they were poets, but they definitely weren't safe, orthodox members of the canon like Robert

Frost or Allen Tate. They were wild denim-angels, colorful outsiders, and made it possible for me to envision what I wanted to be. And they seemed to gravitate to San Francisco.

But I did not make it to California right away. I took a detour. On New Year's Eve, 1965, after spending six months working as a factotum in a White Center funeral home, I got beat up at a party. The beating left me with an acute feeling of low self-esteem. My grandparents had offered a \$500 bond if I went to college in Grand Forks, North Dakota, so I boarded a train and headed to the plains in the dead of winter. I remember large, taciturn men wearing astrakhan hats as we approached Minot and I got off to smoke a cigarette in subzero temperatures.

I made friends with a dorm mate named Sern Kjelberg. When the semester ended, he and I drove out to the west coast together in his black '55 Chevrolet sedan. We stopped to visit the farm where he grew up in Stanley. It was a farm similar to the farm on which my father grew up. Water drawn into the kitchen by a water pump. Outhouse. Windmill creaking. Smell of sage. Magpies on old weathered fence posts. The melancholy sound of the whip-poor-will.

Sern and I spent a few weeks in Seattle than headed down to San José. We found a small, one-bedroom apartment close to San José City College which we shared with another roommate, a tall, quiet young man from Corpus Cristi, Texas, named Jerry. Jerry was the first of us to drop acid. I was immensely jealous. We smoked marijuana together, but I never liked marijuana. It made me feel claustrophobic, as if I were underwater. Everything seemed muzzy, skittish, and solipsistic. And I didn't like the paranoia. The most ordinary statement could seem freighted with nefarious meaning. I liked amphetamines, Benzadrine and Dexadrine. They made me alert and euphoric. I bought Benzadrine inhalers and cut the inner cotton cylinder, which was soaked in Benzadrine, into three or four sections, which I then swallowed. There wasn't much to say about the apartment. It was dingy, had a cold linoleum floor, a kitchen too tiny to actually make a meal, and no view whatever. We did nothing to decorate or furnish it, outside of the mattresses we slept on.

Someone contributed a record player and I remember many nights lighting a candle and listening to the Beatle's Rubber Soul of Donovan's Fairytale or Another Side Of Bob Dylan. I also liked The Fugs and Frank Zappa's Mothers of Invention.

I finally got hold of some acid, which I thoroughly enjoyed, and took it seven times afterwards, all within a period of about six months. The last time was horrible. The acid was extraordinarily powerful. I felt ghostly, disembodied, a cloud of atoms, nothing more. The panic was unendurable. I ended up having my buddies take me to my mother's (a wrong move) in order to have someone register me into the hospital. She was naturally freaked out. The bill for the emergency room and Thorazin went to my dad, who refused to pay it. My mother ended up paying it. I felt bad about that. But I was beset by far too much anxiety to worry about it. I felt like my life, such as I had known it, was over.

I returned to Seattle. Didn't even take the time to drop out of school. A friend, and English professor named Richard Christian, kindly took over the paperwork and got me officially unregistered for that semester. Otherwise, I imagine I would have gotten straight Fs.

I stayed with my dad in Normandy Park. I couldn't stand my stepmother, a harsh, bitter, constantly carping woman who made no attempt to hide her favoritism toward her own kids, and she hated me. She had an uncanny facility for sowing dissension. The atmosphere was tense. But the house had a basement where I could take refuge, and smoke. My dad smoked a pipe so smoking in the basement was permitted. My father also liked woodworking and painting so the basement always smelled of lacquer and varnish and paint thinner. I had frequent headaches from it. Another reason I decided to become a writer rather than an artist.

I worked at Boeing. I got a job in a plant near the Duwamish scraping excess metal from little plane parts. I think they were mostly ashtrays. The job lasted until June. When I couldn't stand it anymore, I quit, and took off for California again.

I stayed with a friend's family in Santa Clara for several months, then my professor friend Richard Christian found me a berth on a bus somewhere out in the hinterlands of San José. I paid \$10 bucks a month to an eccentric pot dealer for the use of a bed. There were three other guys on the bus. The landlord (or buslord) let us use the kitchen and bathroom in the house he shared with his wife. I rode into San José City College with the other guys, who were also taking classes there. I remember frigid autumn mornings walking back and forth between the house and the bus with a toothbrush and a towel. Then, one morning, utterly without warning, a note was posted on the door of the house telling us to get vacate the bus, and get off the property. To this day I don't know what the hell caused that. Either did the other guys.

We found a house to share in Willow Glen, a pretty neighborhood near downtown San Jose'. It was around this time a girl I was dating introduced me to her friend David Springmeyer, who was attending San José City College and looking for a roommate. I got together with David and his girlfriend and we went to a pizza place and ate pizza and drank beer. We drank a lot of beer. I realized how much I missed and enjoyed alcohol. David and I shared an apartment for a little over a year very close to San José City College, an easy walk past orchards and a soccer field that always seemed full of drunken starlings. He and I shared very similar tastes in music, such as The Doors and Steppenwolf and Traffic, and he introduced me to some artists I might not otherwise have appreciated without his enthusiasm, such as Taj Mahal and Laura Nero.

The apartment was small, only one bedroom, which David kindly let me have, along with the top mattress to his bed. He slept on the bottom mattress. He also gave me a card table to use as a desk. I still remember it. It wobbled, like all card tables do, but supported my manual Royal typewriter and ever-present copy of Rimbaud's Illuminations. Illuminations, I believe, would remain my true home in the coming decades. If it is possible to find a home in one's own skull, a mental habitation, a sanctum sanctorum of the mind, then Rimbaud's spectacular prose poetry was that place. Whenever I

opened its pages and my eyes began to absorb his words, I felt at home. I felt like I had a place in the universe. A destiny. A structure. An energy I could inhabit.

