

2006 Eugene England Memorial Personal Essay Contest Third Place Winner

HOME BEFORE DARK

By Afton L. Wilkins



Dad, in front of the family's Oak City home, circa 1940

I WAS SUPPOSED TO BE GROWING UP DURING WORLD War II, and I worried. With one older brother and our Mama in a humble home on a small farm in Oak City, near Delta, Utah, I was trying to figure out who I could be and where. Four older brothers and sisters had married and left home. A brother I'd never known had died as a toddler. A miner in Eureka, some fifty miles away on a dirt track, Dad was rarely home. Our Uncle Earl was the town drunk, and Grandma and Grandpa drank coffee. Dad smoked Bull Durham, and Aunt Vera got a divorce. We came from the wrong side of a polygamous family, and one of my cousins became an unwed mother. Some Church people looked down on us. However, this was my family, and I loved them all. Church bells rang all week, and in spite of our marginal status among the Saints, Mama, Clead, and I always attended meetings. My teacher didn't like me, and a boy at school called me, "Dirty Jap."

I was tired of the war. I wished it would all go away—ration stamp books and Western Union telegrams with horrible



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news. I mean, how could all *five* Sullivan brothers have been killed? I wanted to hear no more of Hitler or Jewish death camps. I wanted the Japanese internment camp at Topaz erased from the desert and our old Oak City world back, including my brother Ray, fighting in the Pacific.

But I also wanted America to win the war, to win big victories. Mama did, too. She never missed any speech of President Roosevelt. That's why we always took the newspaper and used electricity to listen to the radio after chores and supper. One night as the radio blared out more war news, Mama said, "It's downright atrocious!"

I figured she'd heard that big word in Relief Society, where she often went. Attending Relief Society had begun to make her act a little odd. For example, one time after being with those women, she said, "Ice cubes would sure be grand in the summer." I could not believe she would want to drink a glass of water with an ice cube floating in it. It was just too weird. Now, if Relief Society could remove the slimy cream clots in the milk poured over our toast for supper, that would be *real* relief!

One evening after a Relief Society meeting, Mama asked if I would like to kneel by the bed and have prayer with her. I felt awkward. I thought of the boy Joseph Smith kneeling for the very first time in a grove of trees in upstate New York. I felt embarrassed as Mama humbly knelt and waited. I had never knelt



Class photo, 1946. Afton is in the front row, third from the right.

to pray with my mother before. She, Clead, and I had always given thanks before eating supper, and if we had anything to say to God, we said it then. But I slid down beside her and bowed my head.

Her voice cracked when she blessed those in the armed forces and asked that her sons and son-in-law would come home safely from the war. Then she asked a special blessing that I would grow up to be a lovely young woman. Oh, growing up again!

ONE AFTERNOON AS I walked our fence line, I thought how those Relief Society prayers were surely starting to put a damper on my life. I had been planning to go, at least once when I got a little bit older, to see Delta's famous Billy Van's Dance Hall. My wild, red-headed cousin went there, she who smoked store-bought cigarettes, stuffing the butts through the floorboards of our grandfather's abandoned adobe cabin on Main Street. She loved Billy Van's and drank beer there all the time.

Some folks said she'd once danced there with her blouse unbuttoned down to her navel. Her underpants had been found in the back seat of several cars. Why, she was way off the straight and narrow path. Mama said, "It's a crying shame she's fifteen years old and going to have a baby." This was actually bigger news in town than the war. The mothers of some of my friends snuggled their daughters close whenever I came around, and I lost one friend forever.

My cousin said the dance hall spread out above the auto parts store on Main Street and that the hall glittered and sparkled as a 400-pound globe covered with 2,000 little mirrors rotated in the middle of the ceiling. On top of the globe was a small Salt Lake Mormon Temple, and circling it was a model train supporting a little airplane that towed a banner reading, "We dance next Sat."

She said eight smaller, mirrored balls hanging from the ceiling threw a kaleidoscope of yellow, aqua, and pink all around the big dance floor. And there were hundreds of hand-cut mirrors glued to the walls and ceiling.

THE THIRTY-THIRD president of the United States, Harry S. Truman, now seemed to be putting a Billy Van sparkle in Mama's eye. From the beginning of his term, she'd decided never to like him—no one could ever be as wonderful as Franklin D. Roosevelt. Yet she had thought it only fair to politely, open-mindedly listen to the broadcast of Truman's first presidential proclamation:

Whereas it is fitting that we acknowledge anew our gratitude, love and devotion to the mothers of America; and,

whereas, in this year of war's greatest intensity we are ever mindful of their splendid courage and steadfast loyalty . . . I do request the observance of Sunday, May 13, 1945, as Mother's Day.

Mama really puffed with pride about that.

My birthday would follow. Mama wasn't much on birthdays. I don't think any of us kids ever had a birthday cake. Still my birthday was important to me. I would get to stand up in front of the class while everybody sang "Happy Birthday" to me. Well, probably not the boy who had been calling me a Dirty Jap ever since the day when, as the last one up on his team, I'd struck out. Anyway, I was watching out for my friend Nola to come up the ditch path. I wanted to tell her about my birthday coming up and also our new, rumble-seat roadster.

One fine day, Clead had driven a 1928 Ford black, rumble-seat roadster down our driveway, swung right, and braked between the woodpile and the fence separating the house yard and farm yard. Mama had run from the house to stroke the black canvas top over the two-seater convertible. Each window space had a rolled-up black curtain tied with a string above the doors. Two headlights bulged like frog eyes on each side of the little mesh radiator. Very gently, Clead kicked the 17-inch spoke wheels. The front bumper angled slightly unevenly. The original trunk was no longer strapped on behind. But the leather rumble seat was jazzy. And when Clead lifted the sides of the hood, they settled over the small blue engine like gray pigeon wings folding down before sleep.

Mama said, "You're not really old enough for a driver's license." Yet with her help, my fifteen-year-old brother had paid the mammoth sum of \$25 for this wonderful seventeen-year-old car. Climbing in, he said, "Let's take a little spin before chores." His right foot pressed the floorboard starter button. His head sat proudly on thin shoulders as the black and white

gym shoe on his left foot jammed down the clutch. His hand maneuvered the ball of the gear shift rising from the floor. The engine grated hoarsely. He pulled out the choke, which shuddered slightly and then clipped into a tinny rasp.

After Mama had seated herself up front, Clead slapped his hand on the outside of his door. Our little dog Punk understood, hopped on the running board, and braced himself as we flew down the old Delta road. At 20 mph, we zipped past the pheasants in the twilight fields. Mama's feet strained against the floorboard. Being in the rumble seat, I felt a little rich and wished I were wearing a long, pink chiffon scarf that flew out into the wind.

I TURNED THIRTEEN on Monday, May 14, 1945, the day after Mother's Day. The same day, George Albert Smith, 88, President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, died. Also on my very birthday, the first train carrying Topaz Japanese started for Chicago. Local officials had been doggedly following the national "big squeeze" plans to close the center and had shut down three mess halls.

"But where on this earth can those poor Japanese people go?" Mama asked.

I was a teenager, now, as were some Japanese I'd seen. After he'd been fired for sitting and coughing at the mine, Dad had come home and worked some at Topaz. I'd gone there with my sister when she took her baby to the doctor. So I knew that despite being fenced in, the Topaz Japanese had lots of conveniences we didn't. Flush toilets, a beauty salon, library, tofu factory, art classes, kindergarten. The Japanese got food from the government, vegetables such as cauliflower, which I'd never even seen. Meat and store-bought milk and cheese every day. Milk from our cows tasted like the sagebrush and stinkweed they grazed on. And the Japanese sometimes got to go into Delta to shop.

Somebody said that putting the Japs in camps probably saved their lives. Later I thought maybe that idea made some people feel better about the way these U.S. citizens had been treated. Back then, like Mama, I just wondered where they could go after Topaz. We knew that some who'd gone back to their homes in California had suffered lots of prejudice. Lost land, houses, and businesses.

Anyway, while I was waiting for my friend Nola, I wondered where I could go if forced out of the place I'd been living all my life. What would I do if, as lacking as it was, I didn't have a home to go to now?

I asked Nola that question when she finally came to the ditch. And I told her about my birthday and our new roadster. She didn't answer anything. She didn't even seem to want to know about my birthday and our roadster. Maybe birthdays weren't celebrated in her family, either. Maybe she thought everyone should have a car like her father's Model T Ford. Anyway, she soon whispered good-bye and left. She did that sometimes. Yet sometimes she brought her two little brothers and let them play in the ditch or with Punk quite a while. No matter what went on in our town, Nola was my dear friend through thick and thin.

WHILE I WAS thinking, evening shadows had crept like stains up the foothills, blotting the scrub oak and sage. Now that the Europe war was over, was Ray thinking of home? Thinking of our peach orchard in bloom and of feasting on new potatoes and creamed peas first chance in the spring? About the shed securely made from railroad ties? Of the cow and sheep corral, chicken coop, pig pen, the haystack that looked like a large loaf of bread? Of the dark, cobwebby root cellar I hated to go down into? Might Ray be in



Mama, circa 1946

a foxhole half full of bloody water near a marsh full of dead soldiers? Had he even gotten Mama's letter telling that Dad had died in February, just a few months back?

I crossed my legs beneath me on the ditch bank. Sunset over Delta and Topaz glowed crimson. Mauve-gray clouds were veined with strands of fuchsia, apple green, and canary yellow embroidery silk. Punk curled beside me as color kissed the east mountain tops, and some great hand began turning down the lamp in heaven. I told a red ant carrying a speck of food past, "You better hurry to get home before dark!" Finally standing, I sighed. Punk and I would also have to hurry to the home Mama kept up as best she could for Clead and me, the home that, in his roadster with friends, Clead would leave every possible night.