

THE SPRINKLER

POPPY WEST

The summer of 1982 was so hot that my friends and I, a gang of six-year-olds from the neighbourhood, lived in our bathing suits while roaming the block on our bikes with one objective: keeping cool. We cruised up and down Stevens Street, checking out the yards to see who was willing to waste precious water on a wading pool or slip-and-slide.

The size of our gang would vary, but the core members included me, Michael, DJ, Big Jess, Little Jess, and the twins from the next block over, Neil and Natalie. My younger brothers, who were four and three, were allowed to join when we deemed it acceptable for them to tag along, though they tended not to stray far from the house.

I, on the other hand, escaped as much as possible. Michael lived directly across the street, and out of everyone in the gang, he had been my friend the longest. I spent so much time over at his little white house with black shutters that I remember it as if it was my own. He was an only child, and his parents bought him an endless supply of toys (“spoiled,” my parents maintained). We acted out scenes from Smurfs, Star Wars, and Star Trek, and I always played the most heralded female roles – Mrs. Smurf, Princess Leah, Lieutenant Uhura.

Along with acting, we spent a lot of time spying on my parents behind the hedge that lined his front yard. My house was a starter bungalow, sided in yellow wood and flanked by a vast purple lilac bush that triggered an asthma attack every time I walked by it and forgot to hold my breath. I do not know why we spied. I think it was in part because I had convinced Michael that my mother was a witch, quick-tongued and even quicker with a wooden spoon. My father needed no explanation. I suspect I also did it to wait to see when my parents’ shift work would overlap and neither would be home, so I would know it was safe to return and check on my brothers. I remember our surveillance efforts clearly, both of us crouched low, peering through the tangle of stems and leaves. I wonder how my life looked to Michael through those branches.

And so it surprised everyone, myself in particular, when my father turned on the sprinkler in the front yard. I wondered why he had bothered, as lawn care was not his priority. Our lawn was so atrocious that we were THAT family on the block who had blankets of dandelions and clover instead of grass. When my friends were busy with summer camps and swimming lessons, I would pop the flower heads into an old ice cream bucket for a penny per head so my parents could make wine. One hundred flowers meant a whole dollar of my own to spend at the candy store four blocks away in the mini-mall beside K-Mart.

The sprinkler on my lawn caused a dilemma. It was like a beacon, taunting my friends with its promise of relief from the heat. Yet they were hesitant because while we could come and go as we pleased amongst each other's homes, there was an unspoken rule that no one ever went over to mine.

This ban on playing at my house was due to an incident the previous summer. My father had burst into DJ's house where I was playing, grabbed me by the scruff of my neck, and kicked me all the way home down the middle of the street for everyone to witness. It was an event where I blacked out and did not remember but one that my father liked to retell at parties.

If the sprinkler had been on at anyone else's home, there would have been no doubt. I can imagine the quiet looks between my friends, rationalizing their decision – parental warnings versus the sweet relief of water. Michael broke the silence by dumping his bike on the curb and jumping through the water, chasing my brothers. I felt a rush of energy hit me as everyone followed suit. I was so proud. They were playing **HERE**, at **MY** house.

We all took turns jumping through the water, then spinning through it, finally holding the sprinkler still, daring one another to stand over it for as long as possible before the water filled our noses. I can still remember the scene as if it was yesterday. Me laughing in my lavender one-piece bathing suit (the only one I had, which I washed carefully every night) with my wet strawberry blond hair hanging heavy in my eyes. Glowing yellow dandelions covered in glistening water droplets. The dusty smell as the water hit the hot gravel of the driveway. The shrieks of delight. The arc of water projecting a rainbow with my friends dancing beneath. The feeling of belonging.

But the bliss did not last for long. Our games stopped abruptly when my father yelled at us to come inside for supper. He had a loud, booming voice that stopped people of any age in their tracks, frightening them into temporary paralysis, an effect he particularly enjoyed invoking in public places. It was unusual for us to come in for supper so early, as the sun was still hot and bright in the sky. It could not have been past 4 pm.

“How long will you be? We’ll wait for you!” someone yelled as my brothers and I dutifully turned away to march inside.

Dinners in the summer were an informal affair, a rotation of orange and brown foods from tins and boxes that did not involve turning the oven on and could be prepared quickly: beans on toast, bologna on toast, tomato soup, Kraft Dinner, all tasting of paper and sodium. I thought this meal would be as quick as usual. I could scarf it down, clean up quickly, and then I would be back outside to play.

“30 minutes tops,” I yelled back over my shoulder before I held my breath to run past the lilac bush and into the kitchen.

We were told to sit still as we squirmed on the hard wooden chairs at the table eager to escape, our bathing suits and hair soaking, water dripping on the linoleum floor. But much to my astonishment, my father began to prepare an oven dinner.

Oven dinners were for winter, weighty affairs of meatloaf or pork chops paired with gluey mashed potatoes and square frozen vegetables. At this point, I was thoroughly confused. I was convinced that because we were not allowed to change that we would be allowed to go back outside shortly. The oven dinner, however, did not make sense. I silently pleaded in my head to my friends, “Please, please wait for me!” I could hear them, still outside, laughing and shouting.

After an hour of chopping and swearing, boiling and baking, dinner was finally served. The kitchen was stifling hot. The air was sticky and laden with the dense scent of baked meat, boiled potato, and the rotten-sweet smell of floral alcohol fermenting in the closet. We chewed in silence as fast as possible, listening carefully to what was happening outside.

We had somehow managed to force the joyless food down. Our plates were empty, but we were still sitting because we were not allowed to leave the table until we had been officially dismissed. I then had to tidy up and wash the dishes. My brother's duties varied more wildly, depending on the mood of the day. Today was one of those days when I would have to do it all myself.

I could hear the merriment outside fading as some of the other parents called from their front steps for their kids to come home for dinner, which meant it must have been about 5 pm. I could feel the panic rising inside.

"When will we be finished?" I asked.

"When I'm done," my father replied as he got up to retrieve another beer from the refrigerator and sat down again.

And then it dawned on me what was happening. My father was deliberately keeping us there, waiting for all of my friends to leave before I was allowed to go back outside. He had spent time preparing an oven dinner, a ritual that was supposed to reinforce the idea that we were being parented, nourished, looked after, and I dared to put friends before family. I felt my anger simmering, the sense of pride and excitement now fading, being replaced by bitter disappointment.

I had to decide at that moment whether this would be a fight that I could win. Winning against my father meant knowing when to choose my battles. Today, he had his calm face on, the worst one, because I never knew what was coming. At least when he was raging or sulking or laughing, I knew what to expect. But this was his poker face, the one he used while waiting to see what my next play would be – would I be the rebellious fighter, willing to take a hit? Or would I behave like I was supposed to, gracious and thankful, as the thin prospect of obtaining what I wanted hung precariously in the air, like a gift to be granted.

I did not want to risk him erupting and scaring off my dwindling group of friends, so I did not fight. I sat, and stared, and waited in silence. I heard the final "Bye, see ya tomorrow!" from Michael, which meant it was now 5:30, his standard dinner time.

We continued to sit, only my father leaving and returning for another drink. I had learned long ago that time was relative, and I spent these long, silent punishments making up stories in my head or reciting passages from my favourite books. I do not know how long it was after Michael left that we were finally allowed to leave the table.

Rather than clear up the dishes and start running the hot water in the sink, I ran outside, risking a smack across the back of my head but not caring. My bathing suit was sticky, my skin already turning into an angry red rash. Even though I knew they were gone, I had to see for myself. My father did not bother to stand up to hit me. Instead, he just sat there, waiting for me to realize my lesson. I burst outside to see the sun receding as the purple twilight took over. The lawn was empty except for the sprinkler, slowly thwap-thwapping against the grass.

My father had won. The lesson to be learned that day was that friends would come and go, but my family would always be there, a mantra he spoke of often.

I had been waiting for the punishment to come from my last offence, and here it was. It stemmed from nearly a week ago when I had yelled at my parents because they had forgotten to pick me up from Sunday school. Being a girl who was destined for sin, I was required to go to church. My brothers did not have to go, nor did my gang, so I sat on the front steps of the church when Sunday school let out, alone.

I had been there for at least an hour, according to the stranger who had offered me a ride home. I was just about to open the door to that stranger's green station wagon when my family pulled up, my brothers eating ice cream cones in the back seat.

I knew I was not supposed to go anywhere with strangers, but I did not have faith that my parents were ever coming back, and besides, what could be worse than going home? In the car I was been lectured for being ungrateful and not trusting that they would remember me; my punishment was undecided but sure to follow. They were family, and no one else was to be trusted, strangers or friends. They had saved me, they said – though I'm not certain from what.

“The Sprinkler” is a work of autobiographical fiction that observes childhood development in an abusive, working-class, Protestant “dour Scot” family headed by an alcoholic, bipolar father, and a distant, passive/aggressive immigrant mother. The memories were recalled during psychological sessions and personal development journaling, remembered through the eyes of a child; rationalized through psychology; then fictionalized to protect identities and interject detail. The child reflects on their insular family life that shuns materialism in contrast to their modern, North American neighbours. In particular, the piece spans the disciplines of psychology (childhood development, surviving trauma), sociology (social class), religion, and feminism.
