Roadtrip Down Memory Lane

I've been curious about trying to find the first home I remember living in. Went to a guy to see if he was interested in joining me... Dad.

September 30, 2022 By Shawn Decker

The first home I remember living in was in Grottoes, Virginia. Census from 2020 says about 2,600 or so live there. Was probably even less when my family lived there for a brief period in the mid-70s, when I was 3 and 4, and my big brother always two years ahead of me. I bet his frustration with my lack of progress was still evident when we moved to Grottoes, but by the time we moved out I was able to hop around and be a more active and engaging presence in my role of little brother. The house felt huge in the few memories I have living there. But family photo albums and the upgrades ahead would reveal how small the house actually was... a couple bedrooms, a living room, kitchen.

Which was well big enough for our young family. Actually the house was the perfect size for keeping tabs on the physical whereabouts of two little boys, at the ages where trouble can happen fast. As it is for any family with two or more nimble youngins' in tow, but especially important for a younger sibling with a bleeding disorder: hemophilia. The situation could be life-threatening if I sustained an injury that resulted in some kind of internal bleed... the kind that probably feels confusing to a child, but builds in intensity, quietly...

Thankfully, by the time I was born, treatments for hemophilia had advanced, and concentrated blood plasma made treating bleeds a much faster process. My mom was intent on me having a normal childhood, especially after my brother pointed out that life for him was different than it was for me. Around age 5 or 6, Kip told Mom that they didn't let me just be a kid. She took his honest assessment and, with the advancement in treatments and our ability to treat a bleed at home, felt comfortable in letting me explore more of the world around me.

Grottoes represents the only pre-aware-of-living-with-a-medical-condition days. When we moved to Waynesboro when I was 5, I'd been taught to alert my parents at the first sight of my own blood. Sometimes I'd wake up in the morning, my face stuck to a pillow soaked in a puddle of semi-dried blood. I knew I was a little bit different than my brother in the bleeding department and I was starting to understand why I always seemed to bleed and my big brother never did, or his accidents weren't as dramatically received as my own.

I've driven past Grottoes qutie a bit recently. My parents, brother, sister-in-law and nieces live on the other side of the mountain from me and Gwenn. Waynesboro, where I spent most of my childhood, is smack dab in between the hour-long trek. But if you go a few miles out of the way,

you get to drive past Grottoes... then hit downtown Waynesboro on the way home.

This year I've driven over that mountain more times than ever before, necessitated by my mom's declining health and her passing on the last day of June. Each time I've taken the Grottoes route, I wondered: could I snake through Grottoes and sniff out the actual house I lived in when I was toddling about? I thought I could, but never dared to challenge my false bravado.

Well, there's no way I would have found it. That because, recently my Dad accepted an invitation to take a stroll down memory lane. A carride to a place where some of my first memories took place. Not only would we see the old house in Grottoes, Dad would guide me to nearby Bridgewater, where we lived before Grottoes.

Actually, I do have one memory from Bridgewater. I was 3 or had just turned 4. The distant memory is not sustained in a photograph or any other hint, and it was restoked recently when I took Dad to see the Elvis movie. The trippy path that movie took helped me remember the tiny record player and my go-to favorite song, Hound Dog. I must have been just co-ordinated enough to pull off the feat all by myself. I'd run upstairs and play that song all by myself. Not only is it my first memory, it's also the first sign that I'd like a little privacy from time-to-time and the lifelong adrenaline source that would be accessed via a catchy tune.

The reason why I know the memory took place in Bridgewater is because that was a two-story living situation. And Grottoes was one-story with no basement... no stairs. I remember going up those stairs and into a room where that little record player was.

The Bridgewater home holds special interest because my Mom was convinced that the house was haunted. And my Dad backs her up. As the story goes, there was a double bed in me and Kip's room. Occasionally, my parents would be shocked to discover that, at some point during the post-bedtime hours, our bed had been moved to block the door to the attic. Mom said Kip would sometimes be upset in the morning, too.

He told her that the people that came in the night- perhaps the same ones that would move our bed?- would only talk to me. Imagine that rejection? You can actually talk, and this cool spirit people show up and your little brother just babbles nonsense at them... and they respond! Now, maybe you think some merry pranksters would sneak in and move a couple of kids bed to scare the parents... but our didn't have access from the outside, without a ladder and window-lock picking skills.

Supernatural causation is more plausible. At least to the Deckers. Mom made peace with the concept of uninvited visitations and meddling from beyond. Her and Dad agreed that the ghosts were friendly. Like Casper. Mom also shared our family's experience with one of the Bridgewater neighbors at the time, and they quickly and calmly confirmed that weird shit had taken place in that house long before we moved in.

But no, I don't remember talking to Casper or Pascow, the helpful-albeit grotesque ghost from Pet Sematary. I do remember sitting alone in the room proudly playing that banger of a tune, the one

about the dogs… well, who knows, maybe I wasn't alone after all?

It was a joy driving my father around, hearing a bunch of tales from our past. Fittingly, the journey started at Staunton Lanes with some practice games and helpful bowling tips from Dad. When we got in the car, my random playlist fired out "Your Wildest Dreams". In a previous blog post, I shared the initial story of that song's connection to the day Mom passed… how I woke up with it in my head and then it was the first song on my 70-some-odd song Playlist that came on when I was getting ready to join my family upon the sad, but somewhat expected, news… "It's that song, that reminds me of Mom," I told Dad, who I shared my day-of experience with.

I told him that I think she's telling us that she's happy that we got in some bowling. And that, maybe, she is coming along for the sight-seeing tour. To stoke more distant memories and do some minor fact-checking.

Dad nodded his head and agreed.

The trip was just wonderful. Dad told me where they were in their lives as young parents, and the moves required due to promotional opportunities and dumb luck. Hearing about some of the breaks they had along the way made me feel a sense of comfort- I can't imagine the stress involved in being a parent to two young children. But when he told me about the good times, and the things that made life for them a little bit easier, I felt the relief that they probably felt.

A bank now sits where the haunted house was. After a cruise down the main drag we lived on, we made our way to Grottoes. I have more memories there- wrestling with my dad and brother and then ceasing the action abruptly when Mom got home. Playing football with plastic figurines and a dice, my dad probably making up the rules as we went along. The figures were green and yellow. My dad and brother's favorite color was green. I think mom claimed blue.

Yellow was mine. I picked it because I was worried that poor yellow wasn't anyone else's favorite color. Not just in Grottoes, but the entire world. I'm still convinced that my assessment at four years old is not just a hunch, but a fact. The first Christmas I remember was in 1979, pictured above. I remember getting Doogan, my stuffed friend, and nearly standing eye-to-eye with him. I also got my first Christmas stocking, which I immediately emptied and put on my foot for a celebratory run around the living room.

There was a convenience store that I remember being closer to the house than it actually was. I'd get a pack of M&Ms and I'd give my Dad all of the green ones. Dad remembers the store being closer- we both agreed that Mom probably encouraged us to go so she's have a solid hour or so with the noise polution that me and my brother generated. I'm glad she did, because those walks were a huge bonding experience for us.

"Oh, there's the swimming pool," Dad said. My brother took swimming lessons there. Just before we made the move to Waynesboro, I started learning how to swim, too. I started out as a "minnow". I'm not sure what my brother's ranking was. Both of our lessons came in handy after we moved to Waynesboro, where my mom's folks lived. They put a in-ground pool in their

backyard, which became a mainstay for us during the Summer time. I remember jumping off the side of the pool into my dad's arms, then paddling myself to the steps to get in as many jumps as he could handle before his arms wore out. I'm sure he didn't want to press his luck, either, with this little projectile missile launching at him, trying to jump further and further each time.

Part of mourning my Mom's passing has been connecting with my Dad and my brother. And reliving the past, even the times before my memory picks up the story. I'm just so open right now to all of the emotions that kind of self-exploration can bring. Aside from asking me to take care of my brother, one of Mom's final expressed wishes for me was to enjoy my life.

I think in recent years she'd noticed a more pensive "Pookie", as she called me at various times through my entire life... I didn't really feel comfortable going into a lot of the mental health work I've been putting in over the last several years. Mainly because I didn't want her to worry, or feel some kind of slight that I think my life was hard because she worked so hard to relieve as much of that as possible.

We are complicated creatures, us humans. She always did her best to take care of me, and I always did my best to return that grace.

I have to say that confronting depression really got me through all of this. The feeling of loss comes in waves, but it ultimately resolves in gratitude and a cosmic understanding that- in the end- everything will be alright. Mom engrained that when I was little, when she'd take me to see one of my doctors about some kind of medical incident... no matter how scary it was, Mom always assured me that it would be better soon. Her final months during this flesh and blood section of our amusement park ride wasn't much fun for her. Now she has the fast pass to go wherever she wants, her bright spirit shining brightly down on my life.

Positively Yours,

Shawn

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