

BRIGHTSIDE REFLECTIONS ON MY CHILDHOOD

By Joe Bartolacci

Written in Sault Ste Marie Ontario in 1973, missing my home.

It was always with us; we grew up alongside of it. I used to think that it burgeoned with us, but no, the steel mills were always more powerful. We simply didn't know it.

The houses on Leeds St. were simple, when looking back at them now, but they always seemed like castles; colourful, comforting, warm and indestructible. The soot from the Steel Company was a part of the paint, part of the décor of our industrial home ground.

Every morning my grandmother, rotund as always, would pick up the broom that was a part of the verandah's fixtures and deftly sweep away yesterday's soot from the grey peeling paint of the boarded floor. We would sit for a moment and from the little patch of grass in front of us would drift up the freshness of spring, just before it was lost amidst the pungent odour of sulphur that came with the forging of steel.

Ours was a little street, but I seem to recall uncle Rico's house, that small one that seemed so different from the rest. It sat on a small hill that we called the mountain. We would storm the four steps up the front of the house and attack its stone walls; so very few of the houses were actually made of real brick, so it seemed only natural that this would be our fortress.

The sense of distance, even though it was only five houses down, was made more real to us by the crowded front foliage before such a tiny lawn. The maple tree, and mixed about it the ferns and fronds, spoke to us of tropical mysteries and dense jungles that might lay further down the block.

Our house was covered in brown and beige shingles, and I remember how masterful my grandfather seemed when he was putting them on, diligently ignoring all the help my grandmother ungraciously offered from the upstairs window.

The front verandah of the house was the gathering spot on hot summer nights. It is where we would sit on a silent starless evening, watching the reflections of discharging furnaces on the muggy hazy sky. In the distance you would hear the constant shifting and shunting steel train cars, riding on steel rails, loading and leaving the small brown rusting mountains of pig iron that stared back at us from across the fence, across the field and finally across our narrow street.

My father was an important man, then. We all knew it because he was the only man on the street that drove to work and wore a tie. Some days he would wear a suit. His importance was felt by everyone, too, because as we simmered together on warm, summer nights, friends and relatives sipping fresh lemonade, he would be asked what he thought of those people going into that dingy Hotel on the corner. Through his "*hrumphs*" and so-forths, we knew we would never go there, at least not when we were being watched.

Rocco's garage used to be right across from our house, on the other side of the green field. It was a big garage and two cars could fit inside of it at the same time! Those big doors would swing all the way up to the roof, causing me to wonder how strong Rocco was to move such

portals by himself. But the big white garage with the thin red stripe and peeling paint had to go. The men who made steel had to have more space to park their cars. Steel-making meant tearing down Rocco's garage, and with it Uncle Mario's home, the Campanella's little house and Sharon's home. It saddened me that Sharon had to move. I couldn't understand why the cars that parked where her house had been were more important.

I guess I missed Rocco the most. He was bald, and my dad said that no one could wash a car as well as he did, even if he did charge a whole dollar for it. On Sundays he would wander back to where his work had been, and in my Sunday suit I would peer at him through our windows, watching him kick at the stones where his garage had been, wandering and walking about its outline, picking up a small piece of slag that had slipped through under the fence. He would hurl it back towards where it had come, almost a defiant gesture, as if trying to push back the fence, the tons of steel and the passage of years that the fence stood for. Almost defiant, yet shrugging his shoulders he would turn and walk up what had been Birmingham Street, past the ghost of wooden structures and dust covered cars. He was looking older, tired and somewhat bent.

Then I thought how safe I was, because the field was between the fence and our house. The field always seemed greener on Sundays because it still wasn't a real parking lot and the broken scattered pieces of glass on an early Sunday morning would sparkle and glow in the sun, making the patches of weeds seem fuller, almost like a real lawn that somebody actually cared to see grow.

Leeds Street isn't there any more, nor is the field and almost no one could tell you now where Rocco had spent so many early Saturday mornings polishing the fenders of my Father's 51 Chevy. The parking lot is big now. The sky still flames to life on muggy summer evenings, but it saddens me that no one is there to watch the lights dim and fade as the steel settles in its moulds.