

NON-FICTION | FALL 2012

## The Lilac House

By Sarah Gurley-Green

My mother's parents ran a one-room schoolhouse. Her father was a short, dark-skinned man with an intoxicating wit. Her mother was a tall, strawberry-blond Swede who played ragtime piano. In this unconventional school, he taught academic subjects to the children through storytelling and she taught art and music through singing popular songs and making projects from found objects.

My mother and her siblings lived with their parents in a small house next to the school. In the garden, her father tied the boughs of lilac bushes together to make a small playhouse for my mother. When the long winter ended, the walls and ceiling of her house would spout tender green leaves. The twisting leaves dappled the weak Minnesota sun upon her body as she lay on the ground. As the days lengthened, each day would be different in her lilac house. When the first lilac buds bloomed, it filled her house with spicy sweetness. She would hold the white and purple blooms to her cheek and feel the blossoms caress her skin.

My mother learned to read early. Years later, it was found she was very near-sighted; the world beyond the length of her arms was a swirling blur. Until then, safe in her lilac house, she learned about this world through the eyes of others in the books she cherished. As she read, she would pull off the blossoms and put the tiny stems between her lips to taste the sweet purple flavor of the nectar.

My mother's time in the lilac house ended during the Depression. Her parents believed she would be better off in the countryside with relatives. My mother lived there for two years without her parents. Looking out the window each day, she waited for the first glimpse of them.

One day they finally came for her. She told me that as they walked toward the farmhouse, they seemed to be like cutout paper dolls framed in the windowpane.

A lifetime later, while she sat waiting to die of cancer, she told me many stories, many from her time on the farm. She told me about nearly being killed when she fell into the sow's pen; how her great Aunt used to serve apple pie and cheese to the farm hands for breakfast. She never told me who molested her on her great Uncle's farm. When she spoke of it, her eyes filled with tears and she shook her head, letting the tears fall on her still soft and unlined face.

When I knew she would not recover from cancer, I brought my own children to be close and to care for her. The days were filled with the tyranny and monotony of illness: medication regime, pointless and tiring doctor's appointments, shopping for food that was left untouched. I carried a tray of miso soup and her favorite chocolates into my mother's bedroom. Pausing at the door, I saw my daughter snuggled beside my mother as the weak

New England sun streamed across the bed. They did not notice me as my mother told my little girl about her magical childhood refuge filled with tender flowers.

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