

The House on F Street

Dorothy Johnson

“Stand here,” my dad said. “Reach your hand up this 2x4 as far as you can.” I stood by the framed-in partition of what would eventually be the wall between the dining and living rooms of the house my dad was building. I stood up tall and strait and stretched my hand up as high as I could. I was four years old. Daddy worked at the Work House in Lorton at night and spent his days building our new home on F Street in Woodbridge. The house was in the middle of acres of land that had been bisected by a dirt road and divided into lots. None of the other lots had sold or at least no one else had begun building on them when Daddy and his brother Jack dug the basement and laid the cinderblock that formed its four walls.

Gradually more houses were built up and down the street, many of them by the hands and sweat of their new owners. Only the lot across the street from our house remained vacant for over twenty years. Mr. Botts, the farmer who had owned all the land, refused to sell this one lot because the neighborhood children used it as a baseball field. It sat idle until all the children had grown up and moved away.

My parents and the other families built their houses right after World War II. Because factories had focused their production on war materials and were only gradually returning to their previous endeavors, building materials were scarce. Everyone had the same windows, doors, flooring, and woodwork because there were no choices. My parents moved into the house as soon as it was habitable so they could focus all their financial effort into finishing it. The only heat was from an oil stove in the living room and a small electric heater in the bathroom. There were no appliances in the kitchen and no hot water heater. In these aspects it was not much different than the duplex in Lorton that they had been renting. My mother cooked on a two-burner kerosene stove that sat on the kitchen table. Since it was winter when we first moved in, she stored perishable food in the milk box outside the back door. Over the years my parents added on to the house several times, improving it with each expansion. No one would have guessed that it started out as a simple Cape Cod.

Many years later when my first child was around four and we were visiting my parents, my daughter and I were in the dining room. She reached up and turned on the light. I was startled by this because in our house she couldn't reach the light switches. Suddenly and for the first time in my life, I remembered my dad standing by that unfinished wall and saying to me, “Stand here. Reach your hand up this 2x4 as high as you can.”