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Home

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Home

Hannah Rauhut Wells

It was always a quick turnaround. The Army has a funny habit of doing that (though my mother would disagree on the choice of adjective here). We'd stay in one place for a few years, usually no more than two, and then the Army would ship my dad off to his next duty station. We always went with him. Since I was born in Monterey Bay, California, my family had moved three times: first to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas (two years), then Fort Hood, Texas (three years, where my brother was born, the longest time we'd ever lived in one place), and then to Fort Polk, Louisiana ("home of hicks and crawfish"--my mother). In April of 2006, it was time to make my fourth move in seven years of life.

The moving didn't faze me. At least, not then. There wasn't too much for me to leave behind in Louisiana besides North Polk Elementary School and its collection of Children's Classics in the library. I had just finished *The Wizard of Oz* the week before my dad got his next assignment to Korea. When I was done, I gave it to my best friend, Danielle. Danielle and I were in a "Gifted Learning" class together for the two years I lived in Louisiana. We were in the same first and second grade class, and our love for reading quickly united us in that childlike bond of absolute friendship only sincere loyalty to *The Magic Tree House* and *Little House on the Prairie* can produce.

But that's what happens in the military. You move, you unpack, you make friends, you leave. It's the circle of life for every single one of us, one that's repeated every two to three years. Most of us will repeat this cycle eight or nine times before graduating from high school. Home is complicated and strange, like a hand-me-down sweater that doesn't quite fit. And so is friendship. Saying goodbye to Danielle and our shelf of Children's Classics was just like saying goodbye to the other best friends I'd accumulated over the years—Claire Riggs in kindergarten, Joshua Roark in the first grade, Laura Ingalls Wilder and Junie B. Jones the summer before we moved...

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The first things I always unpacked were my books. I'd unearth the bulky box from the sea of cardboard in my new bedroom, searching for thick Sharpie scrawl reading "GIRLS BOOKS" across the top. Once I found my buried treasure, I'd shove it to the middle of the carpet where I'd proceed to unpack each book one by one. It always felt like Christmas day—a weird, wonderful, déjà vu Christmas. Then I would undergo the painstaking process of reorganizing my books in alphabetical order before I put them on the shelf, lingering over a few and setting them aside to read later. Unpacking my books was the first step to making a new place feel like home.

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(There's a photo tucked away in some long-lost scrapbook of my mother's: it's me, age three, plopped naked and unashamed on my bedroom floor. I'm held hostage by a fortress of books that I've somehow managed to entrench in high piles around me. Towers of picture books threaten to tumble and topple over at any moment—still, I sit, perfectly content in my house of books, clutching a copy of *The Monster at the End of This Book: Starring Lovable, Furry Old Grover* to my bare chest. I'm grinning ear to ear.)

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I'd always make sure to tuck at least two or three books in my backpack before the movers came so I'd have something to read on the trip there. My book of choice for the

seventeen-hour-flight from Washington to Tokyo was *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*. I don't remember much else from the flight—but I'm sure my mother can recall every moment with excruciating detail. My dad had to leave before us to start his new commanding position, leaving my mother with the task of traveling solo with a seven-year-old and a four-year-old halfway around the world on a small commercial plane. Miraculously (and thankfully), she did it, and, after a two-hour layover in Japan, we made it safely to our new home on Eagle Point Drive in Yongsan Garrison.

When my dad wasn't staying with us in the house on Eagle Point Drive, he lived by himself in a small duplex (endearingly termed "The Hooch" by my mother) in Camp Casey, a base two hours north from Yongsan. He would stay at Camp Casey during the week and come home to see us every other weekend. When he couldn't come to Yongsan because of work (which turned out to be most weekends), we would go to him. And that's how it went for two years—back and forth between Camp Casey and Yongsan on a two-hour bus ride that left Friday nights at seven.

I didn't mind the bus. Two hours on the Greyhound gave me plenty of time to read. I would nestle into my vinyl-covered seat, *The Phantom Tollbooth* or *A Series of Unfortunate Events* spread open across my lap. It was easy to get swept away by my book as the hills of Dongducheon blurred into night sky and the yellow glow of the aisle lights burned into the pages. It would be close to ten by the time we reached Camp Casey, and my mother would have to guide me and my yawning brother down the steps of the bus to the station where my father was waiting. It was always packed on a Friday night—the bus was always full of military wives coming to visit their husbands, sleepy children cradled in their arms.

"The Hooch" resembled more of a bachelor pad than a military-issued apartment. It was quaint, with a small corner kitchen and coffeemaker next to a couch that constituted the living room. My brother and I shared a bedroom since there were only two in the whole house, and our weekends consisted of reading books before bed and flashlight hand-puppet shows after my parents turned off the lights. We'd twist our fingers into butterflies and wolves and chase each other's shadows on the wall until our eyelids grew thick with sleep and we'd curl back reluctantly under the covers. Jacob would usually nod off first; I would sneak a copy of *Samantha Saves the Day* from my American Girl books under my purple sheets.

One night at The Hooch, I dug out a piece of crumpled lined paper from the bottom of my backpack and taped it to the side of the dresser. With a slowly decaying Hello Kitty pencil, I scrawled "BOOKS I WANT TO WRITE" in novice cursive at the top. Then I began my list. They were simple titles: "Looking Through the Window" (thought-provoking, I know), "A Dog Comes Home," "Meeting on the Mountain." But they were stories I had collected in the pockets of my mind in every bus ride to Camp Casey and every plane trip to a new home. I loved to tell stories; in stories, I was home. Friends weren't guaranteed—at least, not right away. But books. I could take books with me. I could mark up their pages and make them my own, tuck them into backpacks or buses or boxes and know they'd still be there at the end of the day when I'd come home. Books didn't change; they were constant. They were mine.

That's the thing about military kids. We're storytellers by trade. We leave, travel, explore, learn, observe, take it in, adjust, do it again. We are the authors of first day scripts and bestselling introductions, masters of adjusting to every plot twist or cliffhanger we encounter along the way. There is purpose in every chapter, every setting we encounter—and we embrace it. Dad's

deployed? Character development. Bully at school? Antagonist. Recurring anxiety? Motif. And, when we move every two or three years, we get to write our story all over again.

We see all the little things—the minor details, the hidden themes, the metaphors and meanings—clinging to detail and memory as a method of survival. We make our home in imagery and transition. The setting changes, which changes us. We rewrite and revise and edit ourselves, constantly adapting to new audiences. Our lives are punctuated by change, and as I drifted off to sleep next to my notebook sheet of dreams, I knew that the story I wanted to tell—wholly, truly, fully—was my own.