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Home Runs

By Joy Birnbach Dunstan

The first time I ran away from home I was only four. While I don't remember all the details myself, my mother tells me it was about vegetables. I hated them. I didn't want to eat them in any way, shape, or form. With the wisdom of all four of my years, I'd put myself on a pure protein diet, trying to live on egg yolks and meat, with an occasional supplement of buttered spaghetti. We had countless fights over the dinner table about why I should eat at least a few bites of those nasty morsels of vegetable matter. Apparently, I frequently declared my resistance by holding my breath until I turned a lovely shade of blue.

After months of these daily power struggles, I finally had enough, and one evening I packed my overnight bag and headed out. I was sure that in one of the many apartments in our building there must be a loving family that would take me in and not expect me to eat anything green. Having always been an extremely shy kid, I'm not sure how I got up the gumption to do it, but I'm told I went door-to-door knocking on each one, suitcase in hand, inquiring whether they made children eat vegetables at their house. After about an hour, I returned home, disappointed and forlorn because there didn't appear to be a single non-vegetable household in the entire building.

As it turned out, I did triumph in the end, because my poor mother had also grown weary of our mealtime struggles. She consulted our family physician about how to get me to eat better. The

wise doctor said, "She's a healthy kid. Let her eat what she wants." Score one for me.

With that battle won, I settled in and figured I'd stay for awhile. Life was okay, but from the vantage point of our series of Brooklyn apartments, all I could see was block after block of grey concrete. The grass certainly looked greener everywhere else. Sometimes, mom would take my brother and me to visit my aunt and uncle in the luxuriant suburbs of Long Island. People there had yards, front yards *and* back yards. Grass to roll in. Trees to climb. Life looked better there. I loved playing in what seemed to me like the wild countryside with my three cousins, and I hated the inevitable return home to my concrete jungle.

So at the age of eight, enlisting the help of my cousins, I was off again. They'd come with my aunt to spend the day with us in the big city. When it came time for them to leave, I curled up on the floor in the back of my aunt's car, carefully hidden by two pairs of legs and an old jacket. We jostled and bounced our way through the city streets and onto the Expressway blissfully heading for greener pastures. My aunt would certainly see the sincerity of my desire to improve my lifestyle and let me stay once we got there.

We never did get there, though. Kids that we were, keeping such a big secret was not easy. With each highway exit we passed, the tension grew until we all exploded in a fit of giggles. "What's so funny?" my aunt kept asking. None of us could stop laughing long enough to say anything. I suppose we're lucky we didn't crash as she craned her neck around and spotted me tucked away in the back of her car. Sincerity is not what she saw. Her stern I-don't-think-this-is-funny look on her face silenced our giggles as she pulled the car off at the next exit. The atmosphere was tense for the entire trip back to

Brooklyn, and I didn't get to live with my aunt for another eight long years. Score one for the grown-ups.

Which brings me to my third try at leaving home. It was the weekend of Woodstock; I was 16 years old. Like all my other best-laid plans, I never did make it to Woodstock. Somehow my mother had gotten wind of my plans, and my friend with the tickets was being detained by the local police.

Oblivious to why he wasn't at our designated meeting place and angry at being stood up, I headed to where I always go when I'm troubled: the beach. Army surplus pack on my back, guitar over one shoulder, I made my way to Rockaway. I'd met some folks there a few weeks before and so it seemed like as good a destination as any. I didn't have any real plans; I just knew I was ready for freedom.

Well, I'll skip most of the details, but freedom wasn't exactly what I found at the beach. The folks I'd met were long gone. The new ones I met I'd have been better off without. About ten days into my new adventure, I called home for help.

This time there was no simply going home again, and so I did finally get to live with my aunt and her family for awhile. It wasn't quite the way I'd pictured it eight years before, but then I wasn't quite the innocent kid looking for a grassy lawn anymore either. No one scored on this round.

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