The Field

In the ’60s, Kingston, Ontario seemed as exhilarating as its gray limestone buildings. Our dads left every morning, headed for the university, or the Alcan plant, or the penitentiary. Our moms stayed home but worked ten times harder. As soon they got us out of diapers and imparted a few rudimentary survival skills, they kicked us outdoors to play with the other neighborhood kids—totally unsupervised—in the sweet, green anarchy we called The Field.

It was a landscape made for adventure: a pussy willow marsh, an abandoned apple orchard, and a pond populated by a choir of boisterous frogs. Out there, we performed every daring stunt we could dream up. We dammed the creek. We built forts in the tall grasses and waged war. We poked groundhog holes with sticks, and watched in awe as monarch butterflies took their first jagged flights over the milkweed patch.

My big sister was The Field’s reigning belle. It certainly wasn’t her looks—she had the same hideous bowl haircut our dad gave all three of us—but she packed muscle. The neighborhood boys were equal parts smitten and terrified.

“Eat this.” My sister waggled a lanky weed. “Root and all.”

Today’s victim panned his eyes to me, seeking rescue. Being a mere hanger-on in my sister’s entourage, I shrugged.

He grimaced. Then he began to munch.

Later that day, he barfed gouts of multihued slime. Holding true to The Field’s Code of Honor, he never squealed.

It didn’t get him his heart’s desire, though, because my sister always elbowed her peers—and me—aside, when given the chance to play with our big brother. From the sidelines, I often watched

forlornly as their pirate crew sailed The Field's grassy seas, my sister buckling and swashing with the boys.

Occasionally, our parents yielded to my whining and forced my sister to hang out with me. On those enchanted days, we made-believe we were winged horses, with fanciful names: Thundering Star for her, Comet Lightning for me.

"I challenge you to a race." Thundering Star pawed the ground with her decrepit sneaker and whinnied.

I bowed my equine head. "I accept."

Across the baseball diamond and through the dancing buttercups we galloped. At that moment, my wings were real. All afternoon, as the shrubs puffed pollen and the bees hummed secrets, we flew.

If only every day had been like that—but my brother had a magnetic pull my sister couldn't resist. He was imaginative, too, especially when it came to cobbling together weapons using household hardware. I wasn't allowed in their games—but that didn't keep me from spying on them from behind the gnarled elms.

"Marie Antoinette, you are hereby sentenced to death." The Royal Executioner pointed to the guillotine, which he'd constructed from a kitchen chair, a snow shovel, and an extremely stretchy plastic skipping rope.

The Queen lifted her haughty chin. "*Non, monsieur*. I have committed no crime."

The executioner glowered. "Put your head on the chair." He clutched the rope. The blade of the shovel, dangling from a branch, glinted in the sun.

Fortunately, the Queen rewrote history by failing to obey. My brother released his grasp, and the blade whooshed downward onto the vinyl seat, slicing right through it. Cotton stuffing poked out like guts. For that he got a vigorous spanking, but at least we all survived.

In autumn, our dad mowed a path through the chicory and wild asters, from our house to Lord Strathcona Public School. We walked beneath chevrons of migrating geese in October and slid precariously over the partially frozen creek in November. When the snow fell, Dad used our guillotine-shovel to clear a trail. We were all-season trekkers, making it through the flurries of winter to the gushing melts of spring, when the creek flooded. Mom never seemed concerned about anyone drowning, but she scolded us when we ruined the leather shoes we wore inside our snap-up galoshes.

We could have taken the road, but it was a longer route, and as it was we barely made it to class by the bell. My sister was sick of my burdensome existence, and every morning she wasted time protesting.

"Do I have to take her?" She jerked her head at me.

"Please?" I gripped the handle of my new brown book bag.

It was scary walking alone. The wind whistled creepy tunes through the reeds.

"Get going. *Together*." Mom banged the wooden Maypo ladle against a saucepan until we vamoosed.

On the porch, I smiled at my sister, who rewarded me with a scowl.

"You're such a baby." She hunched a shoulder and marched toward The Field.

"Am not." Still, it was comforting to have her with me.

After school, I was on my own. Then, perils were everywhere. The wind broke my heart when it whipped away my Easter artwork, kiting it through the skies and refusing to return it to earth. The pussy willows seduced me with their cuteness, only to trap me in their bog.

"Help!" I tried to extract my booted foot from the mud. The boot stayed where it was, while I flamingoed in one-legged desperation.

"We're coming," a friendly voice called.

It belonged to my brother's best friend, who forever after was my number one crush. He pulled me out, rescued my boot, and set me back on the path, filthy but grateful. My mother put the pussy willows in a vase; my dad sent me to my room without supper.

Gradually, The Field changed, as structures sprouted on its fringes. Across from our house, crews scraped away raw chunks of earth and built the Capri Hotel. Its neon sign, straight out of *The Jetsons*, proclaimed the modern miracle of air conditioning, a TV per room, and a pool.

The hotel grounds were off limits to us, which, of course, intensified their appeal. We often played hide-and-seek there, goggling at the hotel guests—seedy salesmen with pack-a-day eyes, and potbellied Speedo-wearers with baby-oiled skin. They hollered threats and tried to shoo us off—as if pirates and flying horses could be so easily intimidated!

One Sunday morning, when my sister and I were busy squeezing Wonder Bread into dough-balls and cooking them over our bedside lamps, gleeful that Dad was too tired to take us to church, the doorbell rang and kept ringing. Ultimately, Dad hauled himself out of bed and padded downstairs. We peeped over the bannister. Two uniformed policemen stood in our entranceway! We crept closer.

"Sir, there's been *mumble mumble* at the Capri," the older cop murmured. His face was Etch-A-Sketched with lines.

Dad tightened his bathrobe belt. "What kind of incident?"

We couldn't hear the response, but Dad nodded as the older cop explained. The younger guy kept his Brylcreemed head lowered and took notes. It was like being at the best movie of the year and having the sound system fail.

Afterward, Dad told us someone had been assaulted at the Capri, and he needed to ask us—Had we heard any suspicious noises last night? The room we shared overlooked the Capri's parking lot. Had we witnessed anything?

We hadn't. He told us to forget about it, but the chilling truth remained: someone—maybe a gangster!—had been attacked, perhaps killed, right across the street. At the very least, clearly Dad would need to start driving me every morning. My sister had recently switched schools and no longer guarded me on my treks across The Field. I was only eight years old—too young to face assassins alone.

Our parents didn't see it that way. Daily they pushed me out the backdoor, with only my book bag as a shield. Surely someone was stalking me—a homicidal maniac who wouldn't be satisfied until he throttled me. As I passed the swamp, killers skulked behind the cattails. I broke into my fleetest Comet Lightning gallop. I quit picking wildflowers for my mother, and I never again visited the pussy willows, no matter how fluffy they were.

The next year, I enrolled in a different school—not for my safety, but because it offered an enrichment curriculum that intrigued my parents. At age nine, I took public transit all alone, from the convent stop to the Dairy Queen. Every day, I dropped my ticket into the glass collection tube and smiled at the bus driver, my heartbeat steady.

Through the windows I admired Kingston's limestone. Gray was so serene—much calmer than uninhibited green, although, as time progressed, there was less of that in The Field. Houses mushroomed where pirate ships once sailed and winged horses grazed. Asphalt was laid where Dad's trail had sparkled in the winter sun.

The changes didn't concern me at the time. As a sophisticated middle-schooler, I no longer cared to ponder butterflies emerging from chrysalises, or lie on my back in tall grass and suck nectar from clover petals. I left The Field behind, and my world slowly grayed, as I began to grow up.