

Electricity

Patricia O'Donnell

In May of 2008, an E5 tornado—the strongest category—hit the small town in northeast Iowa where I grew up, Parkersburg. Two hundred eighty houses were destroyed, about a third of the town. Among them were all the houses I had lived in with my family. It was followed by a flood, which damaged some of the remaining town. That July, I visited the town. I had lived in Maine for twenty-five years, but in an essential part of myself I counted Parkersburg as my home.

When I was young in Parkersburg, nothing exciting ever happened except in books. So I read them all the time, sitting in the recliner in the living room of our house on Conn Street, or on the roof outside the upstairs bedroom window, or on the front porch, or in one of the branches of the apple tree. I would read them while I roller-skated up and down our driveway. Sometimes the small-town silence would be broken by the testing of the Civil Defense Siren—the tornado siren, we called it. Deep in my book, I would be jarred by the sound. Beginning low, it would rise to a shrieking, blaring roar that could not be ignored. After the first jolt of alarm, someone—my mother, one of my sisters, my brother—would call out, “It’s noon!” That meant there was no fire, no tornado; we just had to wait for the sound to fade until, our ears still ringing, we could go back to what we had been doing. It was just a test, like the buzzing noises we would hear over the radio: “This has been a test of the Emergency Broadcast System.”

But other times the siren would blow and, startled, we would look around and realize it was not a sunny noon, but dusk, with rain and winds spattering the windows and clouds bulging dark across the fields. Then we’d hear our father’s voice, “Everybody in the basement!” We would troop down the narrow rickety stairs, my father ducking his head to avoid the floor beams. Our parents would herd us to the corner of the back room, between the metal boiler and the concrete wall. It was dark in this room, with its dirt floor, and empty, with only the boiler in one corner. The damp concrete walls smelled musty, and in the dusty light from a small rectangular window with thick, smoky glass, I saw a cobweb with a fat spider poised delicately in the center.

Our back yard bordered the edge of town, the line separating our yard from

fields of corn. Even though our house was on the edge of town, I walked easily to the elementary school in the middle of town, and I envied the kids from the country who got to ride in big yellow school buses. The small back yard of this house had a plum tree next to the cornfield, and an apple tree. I would climb the apple tree and sit in its swaying branches, pretending I was on a ship, looking over the field of corn which waved like the sea.

When I walked to school I knew who lived in each house I passed. I never felt truly alone when I lived in Parkersburg; sometimes I regretted that, and wished that I could, but as I discovered when I moved far away, there was a comfort and security in that closeness that could be recreated in other places only tenuously, briefly, and with great effort. The town was wide and flat and exposed beneath the sky, and there was really no place to hide. In Parkersburg that connection was part of living; like the air, like the wide flat fields, like the dark storm clouds that hung over those fields sometimes in the late afternoon.

When I was in junior high our family moved to a pretty white house on a rise on the southeastern edge of town, the first house built on Johnson Road. It had green shutters and a smooth green yard in front. I liked to sit outside on the lawn chairs in back, in my striped cotton summer dress. The house was a step up from our house on Conn Street; I imagined people in the cars driving by on the highway thought that I was rich. I was 13, and a fantasy life was opening up before me. It was behind this house two years later that I had my first kiss. It was from a boy from the neighboring town who was on loan from his girlfriend, though I didn't know that part until later. When he brought me home he walked me to the back door, and pressed his lips to mine. There was a meadow behind our house then, and the stars were bright.

Inside this house I cried when I heard over the radio late at night that Bobby Kennedy had died. I crept downstairs to tell my father, asleep in his twin bed. My parents had twin beds since my father had awakened from a dream of a snake trying to kill him, to find his hands wrapped around my mother's throat, squeezing. "A snake," he said. "I thought there was a snake in bed with me." We didn't know then that his violent dreams may have been a precursor to the Parkinson's disease which was to destroy his body. In the house with green shutters I watched TV as men set foot on the moon, bouncing slowly like black-and-white ghosts on the grainy surface.

Just on the other side of the grocery store on Conn Street was where the Tip-Top Drive In used to be. My first job was cooking at the Tip-Top. In the long hot afternoons it was stifling inside, with fans twirling ineffectually, blowing around the heat from the grills. At night it was cooler but I was still

red-faced and sweaty as I took orders at the window. People came to the Tip-Top to order a pork tenderloin, a piece of meat pounded with a mallet until it was as flat and large as a plate, then breaded and fried and put in a bun, which covered just the center of the fried meat, like a hat with a big, irregular brim. They came for hot fudge sundaes, vanilla soft-serve in a plastic dish with a scoop of hot fudge poured over it and chopped nuts sprinkled over that. They came for root beer floats and cheeseburgers and chili dogs, wieners in a bun with chili poured over, and melted cheese poured over that. Or they came just to hang out, to sit at the picnic tables behind the building.

In the late 1960s in small-town Iowa, the drive-in restaurant was not yet a cliché; it was the center of our summer social life. Towns all over the world have their town square, where people gather to eat and drink and talk as dusk falls; we had the Tip-Top, a small square building in the middle of a parking lot. The bowling alley shared the parking lot, but teenagers never went there. We got in cars and drove around. The shifting groups who drove together determined our social groupings, our hierarchies. No one drove alone, unless they were actually going somewhere. Small groups of boys or girls drove the straight streets of the town after dark, flashing their headlights at one another to say hello, or stopping to talk on roads bare of other cars, leaning out of rolled-down windows.

Couples drove with just two people, a driver sitting at the wheel of his parents' Chevy or the pickup, his date on the console next to him, pressed against his side. When a girl moved across the bench seat to sit next to the guy who was driving, it meant something; to girls it was like a ring, a sign of ownership and affection; to the guys, something more ambiguous. If a car with a couple in it pulled up to the Tip-Top with long grasses caught in the bumper, it was a sure sign they'd been out parking in the fields that surrounded the town in all directions—that the guy had been “gettin' some.” They could expect shouts as friends circled their car, pointing at the grasses and laughing. The guy would grin, and the girl would turn red, burying her face in his shoulder.

When I think of that time in Parkersburg I think of things growing, of an abundant fertility, and I think of sex. This sexual glow to the town in my memory may be because that was where I went through puberty, where the world suddenly became a minefield of sexual opportunity and danger. I wonder, though, if it has something to do with the place itself. The soil in north-central Iowa is thick and black—Robert Frost is reported to have said on a visit that he would just like to eat the soil itself—and it grows things like mad. Not only do corn stalks shoot up, and bright green fields of soybeans; the prairie grasses

grow tall and tough, and trees are huge and somber, sheltering. Crickets in Iowa are shiny and black, twice as big as the more anemic-looking New England crickets, and their songs ratchet out across the night with force and vigor. Sex. Lightning bugs flash brightly, longingly, on humid summer nights. My mother once showed me how it's possible to squash a lightning bug when it flashes and wear the glow on your finger for a ring—the kind of game, and jewelry, they had on the farm when she was growing up. The glow fades very slowly, the hopeful, sex-hungry light living on. Iowa robins are plump and raucous, hopping across the rich grass as if on a movie set, and the shiny red-winged blackbirds dive bomb the heads of walkers on a country road, protecting their chicks. I wonder if there's something in the soil that wants to make things grow, that people absorb from their contact with the land, that affects humans the way it affects plants. Maybe there is a concentration of energy there, a focus of orgone or life energy. Or maybe it's the openness of the town to nature, to the earth and to the sky, to the forces of nature. When I think of Parkersburg, I think not only of sex but of fertility, of babies, a sense of bursting and uncontrollable ongoing life, and I want to grow things.

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After the tornado, I visited Conn Street, the hole in the ground where our house used to rest. The field of corn behind the lot was shorter than it would normally be in July, but thick and green. The apple tree was gone. I drove up Johnson Road and parked the rental car on a gravel lane next to an empty parking lot. All the houses on this road had been destroyed by the tornado, and construction was taking place on several lots. The lot where the house with the green shutters used to be was bare, smooth dirt. Farther down Johnson Road the high school was half-leveled, the roof and many of the walls gone. I walked its concrete floor, which sat open to the sky, and stepped outside in the sun, which beat down on the football field.

As I stood there I thought I heard the buzz of locusts, but then realized there were no trees for the locusts to be singing from in this part of town; the noise was the buzz of saws, of construction coming from all around.

Walking north, into the less-damaged part of town, I passed the two-story apartment house where my aunt Edna used to live and felt a familiar pang. She was a lonely woman; her husband died young, and they were never able to have children. We were all impatient with her critical tongue, but when I remember we were all the family she had, I wish she were here again. I'd stop by, I'd sleep on her couch.

Here the trees were tall and stately, rising high above the houses. I heard locusts, faintly, and they were the real insects, not the sounds of construction. And crickets, and songbirds, and the hoot of a mourning dove: a lifting warbling note, followed by three low hoots. It was a continual sound in the intact part of town, and it was the background music to my childhood.

An old car drove by slowly, with the passenger window down. It stopped next to me, and a woman leaned over. "Hello there!" she shouted.

I bent down, squinting. It was no one I recognized, a woman with graying hair in a pony tail. Her shirt said "Volunteer." She leaned over and handed me a plastic bag. "If you see any nails. A woman is having them welded into a cross." What should I do, I asked, with the bag of nails? She pointed toward downtown. "I live over there, in that tan house," she said. "Just leave them on my front steps."

I stuffed the plastic bag in my purse and angled through a playing field toward the elementary school. The school, a one-story building that was impressively new and grand when I was young, still stood, though now small and aging. The recess pastime in third grade was for the girls to chase the boys, knock them down, and kiss them. A boy named Shannon, who later moved away, was the first choice. I was not as successful at this sport as were others in my grade, girls more athletic and aggressive. From a bench next to the school I could see across the field to Johnson Road and the high school. The bulb of the blue water tower rose beyond. The muggy heat was the same; the bird calls and the locusts were the same. The differences were bare patches of land and the roar of machinery tearing down the high school bleachers. Throughout this trip to places of my youth I had felt a yearning to belong, to own these places and be owned by them, to be part of them once again in the unconscious way I used to feel part of them. Now I felt for the first time not a stranger, but a daughter, returning home. For the moment it seemed as though I was not just visiting the place where I was a child, but was visiting my childhood, the freshness of those days, the endless beautiful future, punctuated by the mournful cry of the dove like a distant warning.

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From the grade school I walked toward downtown, passing the pedestal next to the Lutheran church. A plaque read: "And like living stones be yourself built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood." Everything in the quiet, battered town seemed eerily to reflect the metaphorical significance of the destruction. This was the place where the foundation of my psyche, my self, was built. The

people of this town were also “living stones,” bonding together to build and rebuild their homes, both spiritual and physical.

On these residential streets, I was struck by the peace of this small town, its profound quiet. I sat on the curb on a corner just one block from downtown, and only rarely did a car go by. No one else walked the streets on this summer afternoon. It was how I remembered Parkersburg. In my teen years I yearned to get away to someplace more exciting, colorful, exotic, someplace with variety in people and landscape and languages and food. But the emptiness and quiet allowed me to visit with myself. It also had allowed me to read as I walked home from school: *Angelique in Love* held in front of my face, all the way home, with only a quick glance up as I crossed a street.

The business district was one and one half blocks long. The buildings were two-stories built next to one another, the only buildings in town without grass yards. Just beyond downtown were the railroad tracks and the grain elevator bins. Our family’s clothing store, “O’Donnell’s Clothing,” took up the center of the block, across from Lühring Monuments. The building was divided into two shops now, an antique store on the left, and an ice cream shop on the right. A new business occupied the spot where I used to get my teeth filled in Doctor Watson’s office. The tasteful storefront of the Blue Stem Winery and Artisan Mall seemed to come from another world, but no, it was owned by Verne Holmes, who used to teach business at the high school. He remembered my family. I bought two bottles of sweet white after-dinner wine because they said “Parkersburg” on the label.

The sidewalk downtown was empty but for one man standing outside the bar, smoking. He rested a leg on a bench in front of the old bank building. His face was grizzled and pinched, and he scratched a blotchy red rash on his arm. “Hello,” I said to him. “You look familiar.”

“Simon,” he said. “Dan Simon.”

“I’m Pat O’Donnell.”

His face lit in recognition, and he nodded. “You’re Jim’s girl.”

I remembered this face, years younger, leaning toward me as I sat with friends in the diner across the highway from Conn Street. I was in junior high, and excited to be going to the diner to order french fries. I felt mature and grown-up to be sitting in a diner for the first time with no parents present, just Jolene, Shirley, and me. Dan Simon owned the gas station connected to the diner. His dark hair was combed back from his face then, much as it was now. I was sitting with my back to him when he tapped my right shoulder. I looked, surprised; his face had an expression which I couldn’t read. Hesitantly, he asked, “Do you

have a dog? A black puppy?"

"Yes," I said. I felt for a moment like the good student, coming up with the right answer for one of those incomprehensible adults; yes, I do have a little black puppy. Winnie, the dear one, who liked to gnaw on my toes with her sharp little teeth as I did my homework. Winnie, short for Winifred; Winnie, who was the essence of joy, whose very name made me feel happiness.

"Come with me," he said. He took me to the side of the gas station, where the expectation of good things vanished at the sight of her small black body, lying slim and stretched out against the side of the building in a way she would never lie. She looked longer and leaner than she was. She had followed me to the diner, and I didn't see her, didn't look back even once to see her trotting along on her spindly legs, one ear cocked up as it always was.

I forgot Dan Simon, forgot my friends in the diner, forgot french fries and ketchup or paying for them; I picked Winnie up carefully in my arms and walked home with her, to the house on Conn Street. Staring at her head lolling to the side, I thought I saw air coming out of her nose in the one bubble of blood that hung there. "She's not dead!" I insisted to my mother, because I couldn't believe that could be true, that she could be here one moment, and then dead the next, just because I hadn't looked back.

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"That's right," I said. "I'm Jim's girl." It felt good to be identified this way: I was my dad's girl again, and talking with someone who remembered my dad as a healthy, vibrant business owner, with a passel of kids, a man who liked to joke down at the tavern with the guys after work.

"How are you?" I asked him. "Is your house okay? Did the tornado get it?"

"No," said Dan. "The flood." He listed the equipment and machinery he had in his basement, which had been lost, with no insurance to cover it. Then he asked, "Do you want to hear something strange? You won't believe it. Nobody believes it." He stood straight, energized by his story. "Everything was flooded. The light bulbs in the house were half-full of water, but there was still electricity. The electrician came, and took out all the fuses, but there was still electricity. The electrician went out and took out the main box from the pole outside. He put it on the ground. There was STILL electricity."

"You could use your lights?" I asked. Dan was right, it was hard to believe.

"Everything!" he said. "I never lost the electricity."

We marveled. Life was strange; there was no answer for the mystery of it all, of electricity, of the two of us, meeting on this street corner after not speaking

to one another in decades. I glanced up at the sky, its eternal pale blandness, and walked on, still feeling like Jim's girl.

Past the Post Office and right on Fourth Street, I came to the new Catholic Church. The old church, across the street, was a disaster relief center: "Clothing and More," a hand-painted sign in front read. A woman leaning on a cane stood on the front porch of a neat house with trees growing in front. I nodded and said hello. In my arms I carried two bottles from the winery.

"Hello," the woman said. Her voice quavered slightly. "Who are you?" Her question reminded me that in Parkersburg, this was not an unreasonable thing to say to a person you didn't recognize. I told her my last name, and she said, "Your family used to own a store downtown."

"Yes." I am visiting from the east, I told her. She told me she was the mother-in-law of Vern Holmes at the winery.

"There was a tornado," she said. She waved vaguely. "Over there." Down the street the trees were still leafy and green at the top of a rise; beyond, only more sky was visible. I could just about see where the tornado had blasted, but not quite, in the way one senses a lake through the forest by the openness of the light. The disaster, and the rebuilding, all invisible from here.

The woman leaned on her cane in the shade of her porch while I stood in the shade of a tree. We were silent, both of us staring into the mystery of that openness looming at the other end of town.

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