Life on the Mississippi

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IN MY PART OF TOWN, there was no bookstore. We didn’t even have a library. Fishermen and sporty gents in porkpie hats shuffled around in the blaring silence of jukeboxes straining against the endless noise. My parents fought this mute resignation by smuggling books into the sunny midnight of Shelltown, our rough little corner of southeast San Diego. One of the heroic things that stands out to me now when every sad parental stratagem seems heroic is the ritual nightly reading of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*.

Mark Twain came barreling out of the past like a vast well-lit riverboat churning through the fog. I couldn’t believe it. I could not believe this dead old ghost from the last century was so much more alive than any ten neighbors breathing in the hives of our housing block. And he defined my world—after all, I was as scruffy as Tom and just as adventure hungry. Soon I was living on the banks of the Mississippi.

The little dock behind our place was only a few steps from the brown current that sloped past. The dock was splintery wood, unpainted. Beat down by years of weather and wood-boring beetles and termites. You could find slugs and hibernating snails under its planks, down by the bank. Standing there, you could see all the way across the river to the Cotas’ place. They had a wall that kept out the river riffraff. I had a powerful crush on their daughter, years older than me, even though she convinced me that golf balls were full of acid and cut one apart so the tightly wound rubber bands inside fizzed out like angry worms and I ran out the back door and straight through the river.

The Ol’ Miss flowed south, past our dock, and cut east down around Preacher Jones’s house. His place was overgrown with trees and weeds and his property backed to the river. He had no dock. He had a falling-down slat fence—Tom Sawyer might have painted it white. I didn’t ever go there, since Preacher Jones was black and wore a hairnet and a severe black suit, and my mother—by nature a Virginian pre-reconstructionist—would not have allowed me in “that man’s” house.

Where the river curved, there stood a row of garages where my father parked his work truck. Down about a block was another dock, this one low and long, where the trash boats would tie off and collect our festering garbage. There, I secretly met my best friend, the river dog, Johnny. I named him. He was a starving German shepherd who enjoyed morsels from the splitting bags. I was sure Johnny loved me back, and I believed he would defend me from the scary wolf pack of river urchins and cut-pockets that lurked back there.

THE MISSISSIPPI came off National Avenue—the blacktop ended abruptly at the mouth of the alley, and it was dirt all the way down and around, and when it rained, the alley actually ran with muddy water. Rainy days were rare for us in Shelltown. But when it rained, Mark Twain’s ghost strode along the edge of the road, waving a walking stick and smoking a cigar. He directed me to launch a hundred paper boats. I was safe out there with him—the thugs were smart enough to stay out of the rain.

Our landlord had a beat El Camino that he parked in the river so he could keep his eye on it lest any carjackers take a shine to it. I made that my boat, standing athwart the open bed slaying pirates with my stick. It was a perfect boat until Glenn and Gary, our neighbor boys, got inside and released the parking brake and rode on down the river until they crashed into the garages and wrecked the car.

I, of course, lurked around the broken garage to enjoy the devastation. One fine aspect of the ruined El Camino for me was the welcome discovery of a gnome’s door. In a concrete-block retaining wall that doubled as levee, keeping the alley from collapsing into the garages, someone had left a small rectangle of wood. It was exactly in the shape of a door—and it had a bent nail in it, looking like a door handle. By Jove! What have we here? thought I. Why, it is a door, and whoever lives inside this wall must be as small as a mouse. I would knock each day, hoping the little rascal would step out and have a chat.

Inside our own quarters, it was always dark. Adult miseries kept our shades pulled and a blue pall of cigarette smoke choking the rooms. I wandered from the banks of the Great River, in search of adventures. There was plenty of nature in the ’hood, let me assure you. There was even a Becky Thatcher—just like Tom’s. My Becky Thatcher was named Noni Machong. My Filipina princess! I would boldly ride my red bike outside her fence, hoping she’d see my thrilling feet-up tricks and swoon.

Here, we had the oleander bushes that, I was warned repeatedly, would kill me if I ate them. So do not eat the bushes! There, poinsettias which produced sticky milk that also, the adults insisted, would kill me if I drank it. What a dangerous little forest. I managed to resist the temptation.

We had many legendary cats, but the ruffians did things like encase them alive in cement.

IN SHELLTOWN there were always gulls cutting west to the sea. They did not light on our yellow grass, but sparrows did, and we tossed them Wonder Bread until the pigeons muscled in and stole all the food. Sometimes Johnny ate the bread. I would tell myself he was a wolf.

Most of the strife in that little dirt alley world was racial. Isn’t it always? Brown, black, white fighting for every apartment block. Giving up turf with heroic last stands. I got smacked a few times, but mostly stayed out of the way. I was busy looking for critters.

Twain might have appreciated nature’s ultimate expression of the world as I found it. The futile drama played out each afternoon near the laundry hut. A curb afforded me a godlike panorama of a small stretch of cement. On one side, a colony of black ants. On the other side, improbably, a colony of red. Idiotically, they stumbled forth and rediscovered each other, then swarmed out in a savage and silent war, hacking and ripping like Spartans and Persians. I hovered above, astounded by the mayhem as red and black legs and antennae littered the field. It was utter, pure horror. It was delightful. Neither race seemed to prevail. All small and dead under the sun.

Soon enough, as Tom Sawyer made way for Mowgli, I drifted away from the big river and found hibiscus bushes under the cement stairway crowded with hummingbirds and millipedes. There, I waited for Kipling to come tell me about Rikki-Tikki-Tavi. The Mississippi was strictly for the back porch.