

A MEMOIR

On Mile Hill

BY THERESA KONCELIK QUIGLEY

We marked the clearing as our secret spot. Every time we passed it we spat, made our secret sign, and said our spit swear — our allegiance to our group of four.

When I was growing up, Mile Hill Road was unadorned. It was a narrow strip of black asphalt cut into the woods. It had no shoulder, markings, curbs, street lamps, telephone poles, or road signs. The road did not need any of them, because it rarely was visited by any outside cars or people. It was used almost exclusively by my family, our cousins, the Whelans, and, less frequently, by the campers who intruded into our solitude for several weeks every summer.

My driveway sat on the right side, at the curve at the bottom of the most obvious part of the hill, exactly at the midpoint of the road. From the top of the road down to our driveway, the world of Mile Hill Road was nothing but woods. From our driveway down to the beach was my world of Mile Hill Road.

The cut of our driveway was the first disturbance of the road's untamed nature. Our driveway was six feet wide through the trees and the small hill bordering the road's asphalt. The roots of the trees along the driveway clung insistently to the dirt that yearned to fall away with the rains. Our dirt driveway went in for about 50 yards and then forked — up the hill to the right to my house, and up the hill to the left to the Whelans' house. Beyond our houses and pastures, the woods ran for miles and miles.

About two-thirds of the way to the beach was another, very long, dirt driveway, also on the right side. I never went down that driveway, as I was a scaredy type and supposedly a strange and reclusive man we called Alec in the Undershirt lived someplace down that driveway when camp was in session. I never saw Alec in the Undershirt, and never saw his house, and was aware of him only in the sense of being afraid of venturing down the dirt drive.

I also never dared to enter the last and only other driveway on the road. It, too, was on the right side, just before the beach. It led to the cabins and big house of Camp St. Regis, a summer camp. The house sat close to the road, in the center of a clearing overlooking the beach. We knew it as the camp's "big house" but also as the house that had originally been built by the Van Scoys back in the early 1700s and later lived in by the Monks. The Monks were not, as I had first thought back then, an order of religious men, but a family.

As a child, my world was my home, the woods, or Mile Hill Road. We could take the road either uphill or downhill. The trip up the hill was through woods, and led to more woods. It provided no interest and no relief, only woods. The trip down the hill was where the promise lay. It was a half-mile down the long strip of asphalt called Mile Hill Road to the beach — the west side of the bay on which Sag Harbor sits.

In times before our residence, and around the time the Monks lived in the big house at the beach, Sag Harbor had boasted a thriving whaling industry. Back in those days my road had been called the Road to the Place Where the Whale

Was Tried. Tried meaning purified and made ready for sale. Now that was a name that told a story. I yearned for that to be the name of our road, instead of the unimaginative one our time had saddled it with.

The beach was the goal, but the trip was the challenge. The black asphalt baked in the summer sun. Our feet, unshod in summer, as shoes were purchased in September for the school year and were worn out and outgrown by the summer, burned. We ran from tree shadow to tree shadow, steeling ourselves to the searing heat scalding our feet.

The first third of the trip was safe. We walked down the right side of the road, staying close to our cow pasture, which ran along the road. We were separated from the pasture by the few trees, which struggled against the grapevines wrapped tightly around their trunks to capture the sunlight. Toward the end of that leg of the journey was our bread stand. There we sold bread made by my mother and the Whelans' mother to the gawking outsiders who "discovered" our delicious secret.

After passing the end of our pasture, we crossed to the left side of the road. This second third of the trip ended in Alec in the Undershirt's driveway on the right side. It felt safer over on the left side. Just before the scary driveway, and also on the left side, was a large oak tree with a clearing around its base. Burke, Ann, Mary Cecilia, and I marked that clearing as our secret spot. Every time we passed it we spat, made our secret sign, and said our spit swear — our allegiance to our group of four. Our secret spot was ours alone. We sat there and bonded and tested life and discussed whatever was fun or the wonders of the world recently discovered by one of us.

The last third of the road opened to the sounds and smells of the rushes, blackberries, honeysuckle, the lapping waters of the bay, and, finally, the beach. This last third we also walked on the left side. The right side had the big house and cabins of the camp. The left side had the honeysuckle, grapevines, and rushes. The left side was ours and the right side was off limits.

In the fall of each year, my great-aunt Helen would visit and take walks with us to the beach. She stood on the asphalt and picked the grapes from the vines that hung down from the branches of the strangled trees, and as she picked she cloaked us with attention and love. As she talked to us and picked the grapes, the only other sounds were those of the bay's waves softly lapping, the gulls calling out the victory of a crushed clam, and the wind moving through the rushes.

The world was peaceful and giving; my aunt was loving and attentive. She would make grape jelly from the grapes she picked and give it to us. We would eat it on the bread my mother made.

The world of Mile Hill Road was my world and while it remains in memory and in the shaping of who we, blessed with its beauty, became, it is a world that is gone in its purity. The road still hints at what it once was, but it now has houses and street signs and road markings and shoulders. There is no more honeysuckle, no more grapes, and no more solitude. No longer the silence, no more bread stand, no more cow pasture, no more Camp St. Regis, no more Alec in the Undershirt, no more Aunt Helen and no more our secret group of four, and no more my mother.

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