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First Home

Paul's and my first home was a small efficiency apartment on Overton Street, NW, in Portland, Oregon. When Paul carried me across the threshold (and he really did) that typically beautiful June day in 1943 I already had a lasting olfactory impression gained as we walked up the winding path to the front door of the building. It was the pungent odor of slabs of Douglas fir stacked on either side of the sidewalk. (Slab-wood was the curved bark-covered outside pieces of large logs -- sometimes charred -- that were sawed off to start the process of sawing the wood into lumber.)



Thomas Wolfe uses his prodigious memory of odors to invoke many of the images in *Look Homeward, Angel*. I certainly don't have that sort of memory, but today when I occasionally smell freshly sawed pine, I am transported back to Portland by my "Portland smell." As we drove from the train station, I'd already noted the strange piles of sawdust and stacks of cut wood in front yards on the way to our new home. Paul had lived a year in Portland and knew that the sawdust and wood from the logged-over Tillamook Burn and other remnants of forest fires supplied Portlanders with much of their primary fuel for heating their homes. Later we would have the experience of feeding a slab-wood furnace and learning how to keep the heat going all night. But first we had a great many other firsts to experience in our newly married life.

Paul had found the furnished apartment before he came to Dallas for our wedding. He used some of his food ration stamps to stock the kitchen cabinets with a few cans of vegetables, a five-pound bag of sugar, and a pound of coffee, a really magnificent beginning for housekeeping in those war times. The kitchen was tiny and very convenient -- we could sit at our small breakfast table and serve our plates from the range, get a bottle of milk from the refrigerator, or place our dishes in the sink. What one of us couldn't reach, the other could. The kitchen was separate from the living/bedroom, which had a sofa bed, two chairs, and an end table. The dressing room/closet/bathroom was handy, too. Our thirty-dollar-a-month rent included utilities, a communal telephone in the hall, and a coin-less laundry room in the basement. We were just a block from the streetcar which took Paul to work, two blocks from the baseball stadium, and six blocks, in the other direction, from Washington Park, which sat high on a hill overlooking downtown Portland and Mount Hood. It contained tennis courts, a zoo, and Portland's famous rose gardens.

I said we had many firsts to experience. The pronoun should be *I*. I provided us with many dubious taste thrills as I learned to cook, an especially exciting enterprise involving as it did balancing food stamps and food budget at the same time. I also had to learn to launder our clothes in the basement, where the ringer-equipped washing machine delivered the soapy clothes into fixed wash tubs for rinsing. There were no driers then, and my chore was learning to hang sheets on the indoor line without letting them touch the low hanging, sooty overhead pipes or the never-quite-clean floors. Having to rewash newly clean, newly dirtied sheets was a great teacher. After the laundry dried, I had to learn how to iron a man's shirt. At the time no commercial laundry in Portland would accept new customers, and Paul needed a clean white shirt every day. I took his oldest shirt and wore it out practicing getting the starched collar, cuffs, and front ironed without putting extra wrinkles into them. With the help of a book from the library I devised a workable procedure for attacking the various parts of the shirt. After a while I could finish a neatly ironed shirt in seven minutes, about the length of time it took to hear one side of a 78-rpm record. One of the best things that happened much later in my life was the advent of wash-and-wear shirts.

We had to get used to each other, too. I could understand Paul's reading the newspaper as he ate breakfast on work days, but I wasn't delighted when he did the same thing with the Sunday paper. He'd been a bachelor too long, I decided. I don't remember that I ever told him I didn't like that practice, but I do remember what I did about it. One Saturday I tinted a bowl of sugar green and added a hint of green to the cream for cereal and coffee. (Remember those days when we used cream? Our supply came from the top of a quart of sixteen percent butterfat milk which cost sixteen cents a quart.) After he began eating and reading, I removed the untreated sugar and cream and substituted the prepared ones. After a while, Paul complained of feeling a bit ill, and he looked it, too. When he discovered that he had observed without noticing the tinted cream and sugar, he recovered quickly. We had a good laugh about it, and he stopped reading the paper at Sunday breakfast – for a time. Before long I, too, discovered the joy of reading at breakfast and, except for the years the boys were growing up, reading the newspaper became *our* established breakfast custom.

We both had a learning experience when we decided we didn't like the mahogany painted toilet seat; it never looked really clean. We invested in some white enamel which we applied to the wooden seat before we left home for the day. When we returned, the seat was still quite damp. Not only that, the mahogany color had bled into the white, making a sort of marbled pink and white sticky mess. After several unsuccessful re-paintings, we stripped the paint, sealed the wood with shellac, and reapplied the white enamel. Several days later we were finally able to use the seat as it was intended. We've not refinished any more bathroom furniture since then.

During the year we lived there, we had wonderful evenings and Sunday afternoons, sometimes at the ballpark or at Washington Park playing tennis or meeting friends for picnics on the hills overlooking the zoo. Baseball in 1943-1944 proved to be a good time for me to learn some of the subtleties of the game. Most young, able-bodied men were in the armed services, but all the teams in the Pacific coast AAA league managed to field teams of sorts. I particularly remember one California team with a center fielder who was a minimally cerebral palsied man but who was able to field remarkably well and even occasionally connected with a pitched ball to get on base. We sometimes went to the *Blue Mouse* for a movie such as *Citizen Kane*, or met friends in town for dinner. Portland was such a lovely place in the summertime with its mild temperatures and blue

skies that we spent a great deal of time exploring the city. The rainy September-to-May season didn't discourage us either. I still recall how little the rain got us wet.

But we also had great times entertaining in that apartment. We were able to serve coffee to our friends because I hadn't yet begun to drink coffee, and Paul only wanted a half a cup for breakfast, so our coffee ration could be stretched for entertaining. Whenever we had enough sugar for a cake, we would have a party. No one expected to be invited for dinner -- meat stamps simply didn't stretch that far.

We enjoyed our tiny apartment. After a year, we were delighted, however, to find out about a furnished house we could rent. From no bedroom we went to three and from a breakfast table in the kitchen, we graduated to a real dining room and a large kitchen. Instead of a small living room, we found ourselves in a large comfortable room with a piano and a wood-burning fireplace. There were also new chores to get acquainted with, such as that wood-burning furnace and a wood-burning addition to our electric range. Perhaps that can be another story.