

The Painting of My Life
by Ricker Winsor

Excerpt from opening chapter

Note: This chapter in The Painting of My Life contains photographs not included in this excerpt.

My two sisters and I were born in Evanston, Illinois at a time when there weren't so many people in the world and there were spaces and pauses in the daily routine and a feeling of time hanging, just hanging there. We were redheads, my sister Ann and I, the gift of Nana, our Swedish grandmother. I had early memories, vivid ones of coming into consciousness, seeing shapes, geometric and in color, hearing sounds; going from nothing to something. It was earliest knowing. Not much later I had recurring dreams of a vortex with Chinese ideograms, a whirlpool that seemed to want to pull me back into nothingness again, back to where I came from. What can anyone know about that? Nothing. Where do we come from?

I was born in nineteen-forty five, the year the war ended and the musical, Oklahoma hit the Broadway stage. My mother, whose maiden name was Martha Ricker, sang to me every evening, "Chicks and ducks and geese better scurry when I take you out in my surrey, when I take you out in the surrey with the fringe on top." She had a nice voice and a warm, open, Midwestern beauty. She grew up in Fargo, North Dakota, the great northern prairie. She could reassure any doubts a baby might have about this life.

Our father, Roy Winsor, was from the back streets of Chicago. My sisters, Ann and Mary, were six and three years older than I respectively. They stayed close together and that left me and Ma to be best buddies. She would sing, "Me and my buddy ..." She sang often and could dance too. She had one of those minds that could remember every lyric to every song she ever heard.

We lived in a small house nestled in between two old estates in Evanston just on the city limits of Chicago. It was known as the "garden cottage" and, at an earlier time, was probably the housing for people who worked for the estates on either side. It had a high wall all around and a gate with stanchions, each with a large spherical wooden orb on top as decoration, an important detail for a modest dwelling so subordinate to the stately homes on either side.

Between the garden cottage and the property to the north was a trellised lane with old vines growing up and over the top so that the first hundred feet of the lane became a leafy tunnel with the cottage wall on one side and a smaller wall protecting the fine property of the neighbors with its duck pond and gardens on the other. This was the estate of the Mayfields, genteel people who were sometimes seen on the terrace overlooking their property but were mostly absent.

Down the lane at about the place where the leafy tunnel gave itself up to the sun again, another fine place was located. It was quiet and mysterious and the people living there also unseen and little known; Kewnan was their name. Their fence was wrought iron and their garden was a place of formal walks and wrought iron benches and a concrete birdbath. On the other side of the garden cottage beyond its concrete wall, was another big house and between it and the garden cottage, a large vacant lot.

Wartime was slowly giving way to domestic prosperity but there were still shortages of many things and economizing was still part of the collective culture. People saved bacon fat for cooking and I can remember a horse-drawn milk wagon delivering bottles of fresh milk down the little lane, and another horse-drawn wagon of the man who sharpened knives for the housewives of the neighborhood.

Across Greenleaf Street just opposite our house was another vacant lot. It had most of the flora and some of the fauna from a time when the area was wild, a little bit of wild Illinois. A big cherry tree had fallen into the crotch of a maple tree making a long ramp, a place for us kids to test our balance and courage.

In contrast to the big estates on the north end of Greenleaf, the scene changed abruptly down the street where more modest houses, some with two families, stacked up side by side. These places were wooden with shingled roofs and porches, small yards and humble tenants paying rent. Greenleaf Street is only a quarter of a mile long, maybe less, but it was a world with all the variety of the world, the rich and poor, the rural, a little bit, the suburban, and the city all represented.

My sister Ann was precocious and super smart, the leader, the eldest. She led us places in the neighborhood we might not have seen on our own, including into the homes of some of the poor people living in the apartment buildings at the far end of the street near busy Ridge Avenue, which intersected Greenleaf Street and defined the border to the south where things became more and more citified and buses moved workers to their jobs in downtown Chicago.

The apartments of the working poor in those days had little furniture, just the minimum, which included a bed and a table and sometimes only that. It was like the TV set for *The Honeymooners* with Jackie Gleason, Audrey Meadows, and Art Carney. When children would go to one of these places to play they needed a lot of imagination because they found themselves in a large empty room with only one toy or an old telephone to play with.

I had a running buddy from this end of the street. His name was Will Colstead and he was a little younger, maybe four, and not much companionship really. I was about four and a half or maybe five at this time. Will was only sparking on a few plugs, sort of just stuffing for a set of junior overalls his parents pulled onto him in the morning before they let him loose in the neighborhood. His mission, part of the time, was to follow me around.

“Hey Will” I said one fine day. “Let’s sneak over to the Mayfields’ place and see if we can catch Freddie.” Freddie was a young duck someone had brought to the Mayfields’ knowing they had a formal duck pond on the grounds, a round one made of concrete and a low surrounding wall dressed with slate on top. It wasn’t deep, just a foot or so, and there were goldfish in there too.

“Ok,” said Will. “Ok” was about all I ever heard him say and sometimes I wondered about that, wondered if that was all he could say. But I didn’t dwell on it because sometimes any companionship is better than no companionship even if it is, well, uninspiring. So off we trudged down the street and into the ivy-grown lane, crossing over the low wall to the Mayfield property.

We stopped in the bushes a minute to survey the scene before moving out onto the expanse of lawn and garden.

Nobody seemed to be around in the big house and we could see Freddie walking the perimeter of the pond eating grass and pooping which is what ducks mostly do. He was quacking contentedly at the moment. As we moved slowly toward our intended captive those quacks changed from peaceful to agitated to frantic as Freddie, wings flapping, jumped into the safety of the pond away from the marauders. This scenario had been repeated many times before, causing distress for Freddie and frustration for us, at least for me. It was not clear that Will cared one way or the other.

As I circled the pond hoping Freddie would make some improbable mistake and knowing that once again there would be no victory, I considered my lackluster running buddy with disdain. Will did not understand how to help, that if he went to one side of the pond and I stayed on the other, our chances might be better. He didn't seem to get the picture. Out of frustration I just got behind ole Will and pushed him in, hoping he would catch Freddie or at least make something happen. Oh it did! Will started crying, just sitting there in the shallow pond all soaked and helpless. He was sort of the opposite of a fish out of water but just as sad.

"Now I have done it," I said to myself. "Now there will be some hell to pay." I had to forget about Freddie and deal with this soaking bundle of suffering Will. I led him out of the pond pulling on his waterlogged overalls as I tried to figure a way out of this serious situation. There were going to be consequences, all of them bad. Even though Will was a man of few words the grownups would figure out that this was mischief caused by me and not by Will. And I felt bad for having dumped Will in the water. And there he was all drenched and crying and just standing there. What to do? Dry out the clothes somehow.

My mind was in overdrive. I did have some matches in my pocket because children are not supposed to have matches or to play with them which makes them important to have. And since all adults smoked in those days there were matches everywhere. Even a child mind can figure out the sequence: match, fire, heat, dry clothes. Back down the lane and across the street to the vacant lot with the fallen cherry tree. Find some scraps of paper, a few dead twigs. Start a fire under the big cherry tree where the wind was not blowing.

"Come on Will, Get those overalls off. We got to dry them over the fire," I said. Will was still sad but had stopped crying and got out of the overalls while I tried to get the fire going. I took a bigger stick and tried to roast the overalls over the small flames which soon petered out. A couple of tries like this and it was clear it wouldn't work. We had to get more fuel for the fire and feed the fire, build it up. So we made a pile of what we could find of dead wood including some pine branches with the needles all brown and we tried again. Will was skinny, cold, and shivering in his underpants and the whole scene was depressing and going downhill. This time I hung the overalls from the cherry tree right over the fire.

"Feed the fire! Feed the fire, Will," I shouted. He looked confused. It was sputtering so I had to do the feeding and once I got it going, just kept adding more sticks and debris. Then I threw in the pine branches and snap crackle and pop it was like the Fourth of July. And that is what

happened; the overalls caught on fire and were smoking and burning. As Will stood there in his cold pale skin I grabbed at the pants and stomped on them until they stopped smoking.

My bright ideas had run their course. Now there was only one thing to do; get Will back into his burnt, sodden overalls and point him in the direction home. I watched him shuffle off, head down and pants still smoking. I went home and waited for the inevitable call from his outraged parents but for some reason it never came.

But this wasn't the end of the story because even if the parents did not want revenge, Will's sister, Amy Colstead, did. She was about ten or eleven like my sister Ann and built like a little fire plug with a wide mouth full of teeth that were all the same length like they might be able to work as wire cutters and bite off the heads of nails.

The next day when Mary and I were out on the sidewalk playing in front of our house, Amy came along and without warning grabbed hold of me and started choking. "Aaaahhhhhh! Aaaaah!" I gurgled. "Aaaaaah!" Next thing that happened stuck with me the rest of my life. I heard a noise like a cyclone moving across the prairie. My big sister Ann came flying out of the house and attacked that Amy Colstead so fiercely, smacking her face and pulling her hair, that she not only let go of me but ran down the street crying and screaming. Sucking in the air gratefully, I thanked my sister. It is really good to have a sister like that.

Ann could have led an army. She was only eleven like the Colstead kid but she was fearless in matters of defense and fiercely loyal to the people she loved. She proved this later in a lot of different and more complicated ways. Now things were simple but Ann had problems already.

As a baby and the first-born, she was the guinea pig for new theories of child rearing which, among other things, demanded discipline! She would be crying to be fed, nursed or given a bottle, and our father would insist, "Don't give in Martha. Her feeding time is not for another forty five minutes."

"But Roy," Ma would plead, "She is hungry now. She needs to be fed now." And he would say, "Nonsense, she is just trying to control you. It is all in Dr. Field's book. Just ignore her crying and wait until feeding time." As soon as Ann was old enough to have some control over her own eating she stuffed her face nonstop and, at an early age, developed a weight problem. By the time she was eleven and able to overpower that chunky Amy Colstead she was already heavy.

Why should my sister have had such a struggle for happiness, to feel loved, to feel accepted? Even as a young boy I worried about her and wanted her to find a good friend and enjoy the comfort of that love. Even as a five-year-old I could view her condition in that way even if I did not have the words to express it. She was super bright and could read anything by the time she was three including Shakespeare and she was fast, way ahead of her siblings and peers and most of the grownups too. She wasn't intimidated by them or even particularly respectful.

In a lot of ways she was like our father at least in terms of quickness and raw brains. He was the boy genius, a total pain in the ass, the brilliant only child of impoverished, doting parents. The world revolved around him. I am not sure he learned anything after college, (Harvard of course).

He used to say, “My mind is open, open from twelve till noon.” We never knew how to address him; ‘Dad,’ “Pop.” Mostly we avoided the issue and avoided him as best we could. We loved our father because it’s genetic, but we loved him at a distance.

His best side came out when he would read to us at night. He enjoyed that and we did too since he was a great reader. And he was funny, talented, handsome, energetic, so many things, but all unto himself. It was easy to see he didn’t care too much for any of us but we could see he loved our mother. We forgave his criticism, his selfishness, his meanness because of that.

Brought up in the slums of Chicago he must have talked the slang of the streets and had the accent of his low social class. We knew about that from his mother. Grandma mentioned many times how his speech changed after the first year at Harvard. He adopted a slightly affected English pronunciation with no hint of back street Chicago. He became supremely articulate, in love with the English language. Summa Cum Laude, the Class Orator in 1936.

Ann was his pride and hope for the future on account of her brains. But she let him down. Smart people sometimes feel they are in the world to take advantage of the dummies who are almost everyone else. Their smarts and disdain translate into advantage for them in their dealings with others, advantage they willingly exploit. This kind of thinking has produced gruesome results in the modern world. But Ann wasn’t evil, just somebody sensitive and in need of more love than she was able to find, especially from her father.

She could be charming and friendly and some of the people from the big houses around would invite her in for a chat and a cookie and a glass of milk. Items started showing up at home that did not have a known place of origin.

“Ann honey,” Ma would ask, “Where did you get this beautiful Japanese fan?”

“Oh Ma, Mrs. Mayfield gave it to me. I admired it so; she thought I should have it.” And so it started, both the stealing and the lying. Mary and I had nothing to say about it; it was something we witnessed without knowing what to do. It is stressful when you love somebody and you know they are not happy and constantly getting into trouble. I never stopped worrying about Ann, hoping for her to do better, hoping for her to find good friends who cared about her. We never knew when another “incident” would take place to make our father mean spirited and hurtful, Ma frantic to make peace, Ann confused and defiant, and us, her younger siblings, anxious. Ma used Ann’s problems as teaching for Mary and me. “Don’t lie. Tell the truth and you won’t be punished.”

I made a religion out of it because of the pain Ann’s lying caused the family. Also, I was not smart enough to be a good liar. A good liar needs to remember made up stories and details and circumstances. Actually it is hard enough to try to recall what really happened in any situation. If you don’t believe that just go to a fortieth or fiftieth reunion of your high school friends and watch the phantasmagorical Roshomon show unfold as your mates recall events from the past.

“Do you remember when we went down to the railroad station and serenaded the commuters off to work with our conga drums and flutes,” said Dominic at one such reunion. Not wanting to

contradict, I remembered that we sat in the car and did not have the courage to do what he remembered. Oh well. After a while one is not so sure what happened.

Even though there were problems, life on Greenleaf Street in the latter part of the nineteen forties was simple and peaceful. During that period my mother and I spent most of our time together. My sisters were already in school. In the winter when there was snow, Ma would pull me on the sled and slide with me down the hill at the park up on Asbury. In the hot Chicago summer when one of those torrential Midwest thunderstorms would break, out we would go, without much clothes on, walking around the block just to feel it. Ma would go out in the pouring rain with just a bra and underpants on. Nobody noticed or cared. Her North Dakota growing up inculcated some great natural values. Being relaxed about one's body and all its doings was one of them. We were great pals, two happy people.

We children all loved our mother and loved Shirley, the Negro woman who helped raise us in those years. She was beautiful and looked like Billie Holiday, Lady Day with the gardenia in her hair. Shirley was gentle and kind. Maybe it was because of her that, when I went to kindergarten, on the first day, I fell in love with a little black girl wearing a fancy white dress. She was the only black kid. Everybody else was white. She stood out like a raisin on a plate of rice. The dress looked like a ballerina outfit with a sheaf of crinoline petticoats underneath making it all puff up. Like the seeds of a milkweed pod on a windy day it seemed that if she jumped up she might just keep going, up to the clouds on that fine September day.

Out on the playground there was a seesaw. This was something new. Everybody encounters a seesaw for the first time and it is not clear exactly what it is all about. She was sitting on one end, just sitting with that end of the board on the ground. I approached and sort of pushed on the other end, sort of an invitation to see if she would want me to climb up there so that they could get this machine working. Well, for some reason, that scared her out of her wits. Looking horrified, she ran away.

A quality of persistence revealed itself in me. I knew my intentions were good and, because I thought she was beautiful, I pursued her as recess ended and we returned to the old wooden classroom with its big windows, wooden chairs, and a big table which held, besides books and paper, a glass aquarium with a few turtles paddling around. As we kids filled up the room she was on one side of the table and I was on the other. I asked, "Do you know Shirley?" which seemed like a good question since they were the only two colored people I had ever seen. She looked scared and suspicious but answered, "No. Who's Shirley?"

"Shirley takes care of the house and takes care of me when my mother is busy," I said.

"Oh," she said, and then, "My momma made this dress special for

"It is really pretty," I said. "My name is Rick. What's yours?"

"Daisy," she said. And then "My momma is worried about me going to school with all, y'all, y'all white kids."

“Oh, I think it is ok.” I offered, not knowing what else to say. “My Ma is worried I won’t like school but I think I do,” I said.

The teacher came in then and imposed order on the kindergarteners which ended the conversation. And there was no time to follow up because the next day our family was on its way to New York City where my father was making the move from CBS radio to the new medium of television and CBS wanted his brains and talent to help create programming.