

Of Flags and Friendship

By Lulu M. Newhart-Roarick

Iowa City High School

*Winner of the 2022 Glory of the Senses: Paul Engle Essay Contest
from the Iowa City UNESCO City of Literature*

In the first light of June, a warm, dull air embraces the Northside Neighborhood. Large Hickory and Oak branches dance with aged integrity. Beneath the trees, our homes have soft corners, dull fences, and worn wooden porches. On this particular evening, the summer going into seventh grade, my friends and I are lined up in shorts crusted with dirt, and shirts dulled from years of play. Our parents did encourage us to wear our “good clothes,” but we knew those couldn’t withstand the battle ahead.

When choosing where to host the first neighborhood capture-the-flag game, the Brown St Inn was the best place we could think of. Framed by Osage Orange trees, the Inn was raised on a well-loved grassy hill, facing the Northside’s sole remaining cobbled brick road, the heart of our neighborhood. The left side of the Bed and Breakfast had a paved pathway to the parking lot. The right side was a steep hill ending in brick, which was hard to run across, creating a challenge for the opposing team. More importantly, Brown St Inn looked over the block party.

The annual block party was advertised, as always, with signs held by flimsy wire. Julian Lally, with his curly brown hair flopping around his face, had biked the entire neighborhood to invite every kid to the very first capture the flag game taking place at the neighborhood block party. As I grabbed his spare bike, we traveled around the Northside together, looking for kids playing ball in their front yard. Careful to not step in the gardens or disturb the chickens, Julian and I told them the plan, our excited voices often interrupted by parents inviting us in for snacks.

A couple of evenings later, the block party rolled out across yards manicured in white clover and speckled with patterned lawn chairs and ice coolers. Families exited their historical homes leaving their doors slightly ajar. Old Hickory, Birch, and Oak trees shadowed the street, light danced on the brick as tables and chairs were set up.

Organizing the game, kids drew a fantastical battlefield, washing away the gardens of Brown St. Inn. We followed a sacred set of unwritten rules: the captains were both middle schoolers, granted authority based on the maturity that only comes with the trauma of a long bus ride to secondary school. They went back and forth with one another pointing at kids they wanted on their teams, making sure the younger kids had at least two older ones to buddy up with on each side. The Northern boundary for the game was the prairie lining the back parking lot of the Inn and the Southern boundary was the sidewalk and food tables embracing Brown street itself.

We decided the teams, and the neighborhood kids scattered every which way. My team paced around the cracked pavement, hickory trees framing the property, an occasional Catbird making itself known. Amelia and I were partnered to hide the flag, also known as Stanley Byerly’s shoe.

I squinted, trying to recognize who I was partnered with. The color of the tips of Amelia’s hair changed constantly when she was in elementary, once it had been a hazy blue, or a green that gave the illusion of leaving a tang in your mouth. Now as she was about to enter eighth grade, her hair sat in natural loose curls, in a ponytail fastened with a scrunchie matching her shorts. She was a head taller than me, naked legs that wobbled like jelly and her top tied to show her stomach. As I stared, I saw my own legs bruised and hairy, my flat torso drowning in one of my dad’s old shirts. Hiding with the flag in a bush or a tree suddenly felt enticing.

“Hey Amelia, can I have that hair tie on your wrist?”

Amelia pulled the hair tie off her arm, a smell of strawberry conditioner permeating the air between us. I folded my shirt inwards, and tied it above my belly button, tugging with my toothpicks of fingers to fasten the hair tie securely around the knot.

We peered around corners in an attempt to find a good spot for the flag, when suddenly, Amelia's eyes brightened, a deep hazel turning golden. She gestured for me to come over. I pulled tufts of my wild hair back so Amelia could cup her hand to my ear and whisper her plan. I paused and looked around, considering. The chatter of the crowd was a constant in the distance, and people stacked their paper plates into trash cans until they overflowed. I nodded my head.

I climbed on Amelia's shoulders at her offer. My spider-like limbs grasped for equilibrium as she moved towards the car. Amelia trudged forward and I placed the flag, exactly where Amelia had instructed my flailing arms to put it. This was an especially tough task because the smell of grime on the soles had a permanent stench in my nose, stunning me. As I regained my balance, dust from the roof of the long-neglected car coated my palms. The grimy coat was waiting patiently to be gently washed away by a summer shower, or what my mom calls God's carwash.

Contorting my body back down to the pavement, Amelia and I ran to our team, and let them know the game could begin. I started to pace the parking lot. Amelia wandered off to hunt for the other flag, or to talk to someone that piqued her interest, perhaps the boy that she had updated me about all those months ago.

Meanwhile, my side of the Brown St. Inn got quiet. The yells of my opponents and allies being chased were my only reminder that the game continued. If I focused, I could hear the folk music playing from a guitar and banjo, filling me with the tranquil nature only ever felt on a summer night. As I fell into a dream, all went muted, but the sounds of small stomping paws from neighborhood cats wandering after hours. The sounds of this Iowan lullaby were eventually interrupted by an abrupt rustling from the left. The strain of small branches was getting louder, and I took a few steps towards the corner of the lot.

Taking off his ball cap for a fuller view of the parking lot, a small blur sprinted towards me. I lunged forward in an attempt to tag him, but tripped on my own knobby ankles. The small elementary schooler, Joey, now ran in circles looking for the flag. He paused for a half-second, if I blinked I would've missed his realization. Joey's small shoulders sank as he tilted his head upwards at the single blue family car. The flag was perched high on the only obstacle in the entire Northern Boundary. He would have to climb the dull steel frame to grab the coveted shoe, a daunting task for such a little guy.

Determined, Joey ran off to alert his team of the news-- the flag was found! I caught my breath, sweat greasing my hands as I paused. Suddenly, the side door of the bed and breakfast creaked open, and a man stepped out. He wore an apron and carried a broom and dustpan. I stared, and stood straight, unfurling my fists and curling my bare toes into sunken pavement. He walked out the door right towards me, a flat expression on his face.

"Placing shoes on the cars of our guests is not allowed." He said, exasperated. He went on to tell us we were disrupting the inn's routine and function, grimy hands and callused elbows did not belong in this area. The man corrected his gait, grabbed his broom, and made swift motions, side to side, throughout the yard. We got the message; game over. Elbows bashed and knees knocking in defeat, the neighborhood kids walked down the grassy hill. A quiet buzz of laughter permeated the air, as we descended back to a street instead of a boundary line. To this day, I wonder what became of Stanley's shoe as it was left perched on that family car.

The sky turned a swollen pink, and chatter had softened to a dull hum. In front of us, tables were lined with husked corn, carrots and a shallow bowl of ranch, puppy chow, snickerdoodles, and scoopfuls of macaroni with a 4 cheese sauce. We grabbed handfuls of Puppy Chow from the table, the powdered sugar spilling out of our small fists as we walked across the

block party to our shoes piled under a street sign. A harmonious buzz of cicadas itched our ears, and slowly parents grabbed their children as the warm light in our windows beckoned us home.

I was reminded that the block party was happening again this year as I walked home from working at the City Park pool. My hair in a knot, and a tote bag over my shoulder holding empty tupperware from my seven hour shift, I heard the roar of a crowd on Brown St. Exhausted from the heat that had chiseled my skin to a sweltering boil, I considered following the river away from Brown St. The sound of a guitar rose me out of my slouchy daze. Grabbing some mac and cheese I sat on the curb, and others from those infamous capture the flag games from middle school crowded in next to me. As I was stealing puppy chow from Tommy June, I noticed a young elementary school girl hovering over us as we sat. She wore basketball shorts, so big they covered her knobby knees, and tennis shoes with a thin sole from months running around the neighborhood. I paused and looked at her and she took my stare as permission to talk:

“ Do you want to play a game of capture the flag?”

I smiled, placed my paper plate on an ever growing pile, and heard the wind bustling in the trees as we drew the new boundaries of our battlefield.