

You can't always get what you want

The words of a local legend ring true during a trip down memory lane

by Amanda Summer Slavin

I grew up in Excelsior, Minnesota, a place that couldn't be more different from the Central Coast of California. Instead of the Pacific lapping at a nearby shore, I looked out over Minnetonka, one of the state's famous 10,000 lakes. Instead of oil rigs dotting the horizon along Santa Barbara's coastline, my view during the winter months was of multicolored icehouses – little cabins built on the frozen lake for fishing – scattered over a gray landscape; "ticky tackies," my mother had dubbed them, after a popular song from the 1960s. But there were some similarities. You have small towns, as do we. I returned to mine, recently, and came away wondering what had changed more: the little place in which I grew up, or me.

Threading our way around the lake, my sister and I made a first stop at one of two houses we had lived in over a 20-year

period. Hoping to evade detection by the current owners, I crept across the lawn, feeling a little like an escaped convict. The yard was still the same, the steps to the lake in the same place; the only insult was two new houses, built right up to the old property line and hovering a little like cruise ships, blocking the view. Yet I could still imagine my granddad, dragging his portable grill across the lawn to cook up a mess of croppies he had caught that day for dinner. Or my younger sister and me running through the woods, from which we would invariably end up, scratching and miserable, with a case of poison oak.

After taking some sentimental shots, we drove on, across old Highway 7 and down to the dead end of Murray Street. There stood our other house, cloaked in an unfamiliar coat of paint, at the top of a crest overlooking a large apple orchard.

As I walked to the edge, I recalled one winter night when all the neighborhood kids had come over to sled down our hill, a favorite for its extended steep descent. I

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remembered when it was my turn I settled happily into the orange disk and pushed off into the frozen night. Gaining speed, I realized I was going faster, and, as a result, further than any kid had, the path now well greased as it curved towards the bottom. My older sister had been positioned in front of the fence rimming the orchard, to ensure that no one accidentally went through a gaping hole in the snaky barbed wire.

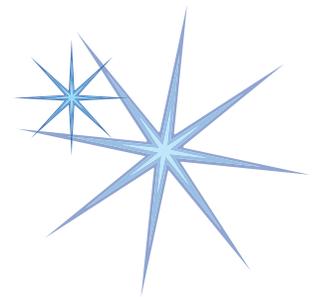
I recall a look of concern on my sister's face at my rapid descent and seeing her hop away to the left, after which everything went blank. As I lapsed in and out of consciousness, I heard the murmurs of the gathering crowd, telling me to keep my head tilted back, so the blood wouldn't cascade from the gash in my cheek. Standing now at the edge of this hill on a late fall afternoon, the image of the black sky and tiny, distant stars as I was helped up the slope is just as vivid as it was on that icy night, some 40 years ago.

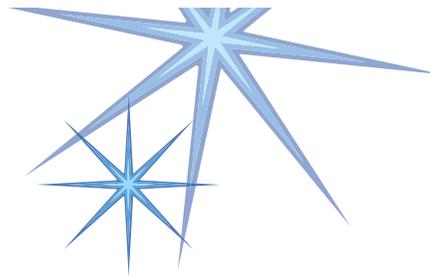
I turned to see that the old screen porch above the garage had been enclosed. On hot summer nights my brother and sisters and I would sit on that outside deck, eating Eskimo Pies and watermelon, the black seeds and pink sloppy juice running down our chins in rivulets. On the 4th of July my dad would hoist me up high enough to see the fireworks display, cracking and dribbling like psychedelic egg yolks over the tops of trees in the distant sky.

During the holidays, my family would pile into the car for a ride down to the Excelsior fire station where the whole town would turn out to sing carols. Back home, before my mother called me to bed, I would sneak into the living room behind the Christmas tree. Hiding behind the Technicolor bulbs, glittery tinsel and ornaments concocted from foil, doilies and mayonnaise jar lids, I would peer out the window for Santa, enchanted by an icy midwinter moon spilling a sea of platinum across the deep drifts of the orchard.

It was getting late, and we set out for our next stop. Winding through the cemetery, we spent some time noting the markers of familiar names, side stepping planters and large headstones on the hilly site. Locating my mother's grave, I spent a few moments saying a silent prayer, kneeling down to touch the incised marble surface of the stone, and wishing I'd remembered to bring a handful of irises, her favorite flower. As we were leaving, my sister came across a Hutmaker family gravestone. "Remember Jim?" her voice rang out, recalling Jimmy Hutmaker, a local character we all knew to be a little different, who could be seen walking up and down Excelsior's streets at any given time of day. My mother used to warn us not to stare if we saw him, talking to himself and moving jerkily, a knit cap pulled over his tangled hair.

Silently we filed into the car and drove into town, passing the elementary school, dry-goods store, and rumbling over the railroad tracks. Some familiar landmarks began to appear: that was where Olsen's Bakery used to be, we giggled, almost smelling the aroma of chocolate glazed donuts, brownies and sugar cookies, right out of the oven. I could envision the old Excelsior amusement park, long since demolished, with its roller coaster, an octopus tangle of white boards rising to dizzying heights,





and Danceland, a small club where traveling musical acts performed. Yes, 50 cents could buy you a whole evening of entertainment in the early 1960s.

Approaching the end of the street, I spotted a building that used to be the corner drugstore; I could still picture the distinctive neon letters spelling out its name – Bacon Drug - in garish, orangey splendor. Remembering the fountain area with its chrome soda taps - where I was told I could redeem my Tootsie Pop wrappers for a nickel if they sported an image of an Indian - my thoughts turned to Jimmy Hutmaker.

He witnessed his family die in a fire, the story goes, and never recovered from the trauma. He was in Bacon Drug one day, the legend continues, ordering a soda when a young Englishman, in town to perform with his band at Danceland, walked in to fill a prescription. When served a regular cola instead of the Cherry Coke he had ordered, Jimmy voiced his disappointment to the singer, uttering the words that have since become embalmed in rock music history, "You can't always get what you want." The

year was 1964 and the young Englishman was none other than Mick Jagger.

With Bacon Drug no longer there, we decided to take a break at a small coffee shop across the street. Ordering a pecan bar and cookie to go with our coffee, we took a seat by the window, across from the movie theater, where I used to take in a matinee for a quarter. The lake sparkled just beyond, the water reflecting a cloudless, cobalt sky.

The door jingled when a customer came in; I looked up to see an older man, wearing a Greek fisherman's cap backwards and a large wool overcoat, fumble his way past the counter. The young cashier smiled broadly and waved. "Hi Jim," she sang out, clearly happy to see him. My sister and I looked at each other in disbelief; slowly our gazes returned to watch an aged but still recognizable Jimmy Hutmaker, haltingly make his way to a nearby table. With the same toothy grin and sense of seeming to know something you didn't, he sat alone for a while, not drinking coffee, just watching the other customers. Eventually he rose to leave, but just as he reached

the door I was gripped by an impulse to call out his name and wave goodbye, as if to an old friend. He turned and nodded in our direction, a slight smile on his lips, as he made his way back out into the warm autumn sun and down the street.

They say you can't go home, but somehow, catching a glimpse of Jim on this sentimental journey made me feel like I'd come full circle. Maybe you can't relive that summer night when you caught fireflies in a jar, or recreate that moment when, waking up on Christmas morning, you could smell your mom's turkey just starting to brown in the oven. Yet a funny thing happens when you gather shreds of your past. They may not serve to reconstruct your childhood, or bring back loved ones, but they can be woven into a quilt of recollections just big enough to cloak yourself in warmth ... and an abiding sense of consolation. So maybe you can't always get what you want, but if you try sometime, you just might find, you get what you need.



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