

Through the Blue

My three young brothers and I share a spare little room with hardwood floors and bunk beds, two sets of them stacked two-high. They are placed along adjoining paneled walls with a shadowy space for an old chest in between, where an assortment of dusty, mostly broken toys lie unused and neglected – G.I. Joe’s with missing arms, baseballs with ripped covers, misshapen green Army men wounded in their battles with our dogs’ jaws, and pieces of metal and plastic from forgotten who-knows what. My bunk is a top bunk. A wooden ladder can be hooked on the rail at the side, but I mostly climb up the end of the bed, next to the old chest. I use the wagon-wheel spokes of the headboard for hand- and footholds, pretending to make the first ascent of some icy miles-high peak at the end of the known world.

The little bedroom shares a wall with the den, where a television, an ancient couch, and my father’s battered recliner squat in a close circle above a stringy oval rug. And an odd thing, a window is cut into this common wall, a hole through which you can see – and even climb – from one room to the other. It is a narrow window, but tall, about four feet high, reaching nearly to the ceiling.

The first time my parents saw our house, buoyed though they were by the dream of buying something of their very own, this window cast some doubts. My father assumed the existence of anything and everything was due to some rational, though not always good cause. He narrowed his eyes and looked the window up and down. For the moment, at least, he was lost to the window’s purpose and the intent of its maker.

“By God, there’s a window in this wall,” he said thoughtfully. My father did not like things that had no purpose in the world. “Now, what in the hell...”
“It’s decorative,” my mother said, and then added, “I guess.” My mother did not assume that all things must have a purpose. They could be decorative.

My parents stood in their future den that day, my mother with her hands on her hips, thinking she could hang a plant in the window between the rooms, my father with his arms crossed, thinking he could rip everything out and build a proper wall. But in the end, they covered the window with a piece of particle board, which was decorative in its own right, with a pattern of holes cut through it in diagonal rows. I could peek through the holes, but I couldn’t climb through the window anymore.

My parents soon realize that from my top bunk I can watch the television through the holes in this divider, though the images appear as a disjointed kaleidoscope of gray and white, a jigsaw puzzle of shifting light. So at night they hang a dark blue sheet over the window. I lie awake and look at the pieces of my mother’s face through the pattern of holes, as she smiles at me and raises the sheet between us. But the sheet is no defense against sound.

In the near-darkness, in the bluish, radioactive-like glow created by the sheet, I lie awake and listen, trying to identify the sounds that come leaking through, each of them oddly more distinct in the still half-light: my father pulling a chair back from the dining room table, my mother saying something to him in a low soft voice, my father replying with a grunt and an “I guess.”

I watch television with my ears, straining to listen through the blue barrier. I imagine James Arness as Marshall Matt Dillon, Raymond Burr as Attorney Perry Mason, and Jack Webb as Sergeant Joe Friday, conjuring up faces and places to go along with the soundtracks. Through the blue I hear hoof beats and footsteps and police sirens, the tinny pianos of saloons, the gavels of courtrooms, and the

radios of squad cars. And of course there were the voices, those of Matt Dillon warning the bad men, Perry Mason divining the truth, and Joe Friday stating just the facts.

Of course, it isn't all make-believe. Real life seeps through the blue sheet, too. It is through this gauzy curtain that I hear of my parents many worries and hopes, hear little bits of who is doing what and who is doing who – my veiled window on the sometimes difficult world of grown-ups. On such nights, I count the holes and the diagonal rows, up and down, and side-to-side; I add and subtract and multiply these carriers of fuzzy light and mixed sounds, of television fantasy and real life truth, turning them into numbers, wondering if there is a way to never grow up.