

The Clodhoppers of Winter

Ron Keedy

“Free at last!” shouted five left toes. “Free at last!” shouted five right toes. “Free at last,” wiggled all ten toes as they stuck out from under the old quilt, tasting the warm June air, knowing they would no longer be prisoners of the “clodhoppers of winter.” Brogans, boots, clodhoppers, call them what you want, but this morning they get tossed to the deepest, backest, remotest corner of the closet, never, again, to surround these toes with the stiff leather trappings of winter snows and heavy rains.

There’s a special season, known only to boys. It comes at the end of spring and the beginning of summer. It’s the season of barefoot. It’s the season of Huckleberry suspended pants, torn t-shirts and the magic of Milligan Park grass still cool and wet between your bare toes. It starts with a quick drink from the water fountain next to the old picket fence bandstand where you can stand under the roof and watch the whole park get washed clean by a warm summer shower and you never get wet. Tearing down the hill to the playground you can make a high jump off the swings, tumble through the monkey bars and fly down the big slide at burn-your-butt speed, finally grabbing at the sky in higher and higher circles on the Maypole and falling breathless, burying your toes in the warm sand while spilling squeals and giggles everywhere.

Next comes a quick cooling, minnow-nibbling wade in Dry Branch around past the miniature train and golf course and you come face-to-face with every Milligan Park kid’s rite of passage, THE TUNNEL. A heart pounding crawl through total darkness while stranger-friends taunt you with spooky growls and groans and you pop out the other end squinting in the sun, heading for the trails. Climbing to the top you get to dirt-pants slide down to Dry Branch and then do it all again while making Tarzan calls to friends in pursuit.

The huge covered grandstand bleachers of the old ball diamond are lonely and empty now. On hot summer days past, it sheltered sweaty, cheering baseball fans from the sun. Like a giant Noah’s Ark, they sat two-by-two, feasting on hot dogs and warm Cokes while hoping for a cool breeze to find them. If you listen, you can hear a million “sa-wing batta” taunts that have soaked into the nooks and crannies of the weathered boards. As the sun begins to wander into the west, a solitary home-run trip around the bases with the wonderful feeling of hot ball diamond dust all over your feet, and it’s time to head home.

Slamming screen doors brought together the neighborhood gang for a game of statues or hide-n-seek in the waning evening light. Mothers calling everyone to wonderful small town suppers and finally the adults settling into the porch howdahs with the glow of pipes and cigars lighting up the night like so many red fireflies, ends a perfect June day.

Feeling the good tired, I climb the stairs to our bedroom and spy a shoe box on my bed. Mom has surprised me with a box of new adventures. Nestled among the crisp tissue is a brand new pair of tennis shoes from Miller's Shoes, downtown. Tennis shoes that are full of summer magic. Tennis shoes that can scorch sidewalks, jump over Dry Branch, flower beds and sleeping dogs. Tennis shoes that won't let you stand still; that have miles and miles of running stored up that steer you to the Strand theatre, the skating rink and back and forth from The Big Dipper for ice cream. Tennis shoes that let you pull the pig tails of street skating girls and disappear into a puff of summer dust. I knew, in my heart, that these brand new, super charged, wings for my feet would die next September and there would be a new pair of "the clodhoppers of winter," but right now, the summer adventures begin.