

# Wars and Small Wars

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## I.

On the pie carousel of the local diner, beside slices of lemon meringue, coconut crème, and berry pies, the waitresses inadvertently deposit their woes. So, in every booth, the patrons pick up forks full of worry about crop failures, church rivalries, and teen-age pregnancies. Media portraits of small towns never quite replicate the complexity of one-square-mile hamlets or the private struggles of their 1,200 residents. Nostalgic made-for-TV movies don't capture the history embedded in the red bricks of the picturesque courthouse or the isolation signaled by the boarded-up train depot.

The decade of my Mahnomen school years fell at the beginning of women's lib. The movement came late and slowly to my rural northern Minnesota hometown. While Betty Friedan and her followers led the national struggle, my friends and I engaged in debates about the more symbolic aspects of the movement: Miss or Ms., to bra or not to bra. We did trade Girls' Athletic Association (GAA) for bona fide competitive sports teams, and rode buses to other small towns where more daughters of housewives and farm wives fed on french fries and tentative

dreams of careers. Equal pay, though, wouldn't mean much if we married the summer after graduation and had our 2.5 children to raise quickly thereafter.

Though we didn't plan women's marches, we did find ourselves in skirmishes that "Take Back the Night" rally-goers would have found familiar. The small wars we fought, together with their sometimes invisible wounds, remain largely unstoried. Books memorializing the era focus on the urban or more-high-profile drama. Still, the sexual quagmires of a rural high school and attendant ghosts of those days have marked us.

## II.

The '70s. When driving around was a pastime. When walking uptown, sitting on the stoop of the Corner Drugstore, and talking to people in the cars driving around filled the evenings. When we were on the cusp—with a license, but not yet a car. Among the sweet pastimes of the era were evenings when our begging won us the use of our parents' vehicles. We piled in, pooled our change for gas, and cruised the tank dry. Then even a cramped slug-bug could house us for the evening.

When we hadn't won a car to use for the night, we wandered Main Street, walked down to the park swings, and hungered to be noticed. We knew our small-town kingdom well, knew, too, its unwritten codes and value systems. A pecking order existed even during those leisure hours. Those who lived west of the railroad tracks had a little more power in the group. Those called by name and asked into cars with the older kids were a notch cooler than those who just leaned into the windows to talk or flirt.

In those intense years of fitting in and not fitting in, little dramas played out in the closed system of our small town and smaller high school. Sometimes insularity protected us. One summer an unknown white car cruised our streets for weeks. We kept a careful distance. On football Fridays, packed out-of-town vehicles came, searching. Their occupants, too, we held suspect. These were the outsiders we warned one another against.

Cars with people we knew were safe.

Except when they weren't.

## III.

In our Middle America in the 1970s, we only locked our doors during County Fair weekends. Each year we would oil the deadbolt and pull the key from behind the canister set. Maybe parents pointed fingers about a kid's preferential treatment at school, but community pride beat out personal jealousies. Over those lesser skirmishes, we flew a flamboyant flag of neighborliness. On the coldest days of winter when we shopped downtown, we left our car keys in the ignition and our vehicles running. The car stayed warm, it remained untouched.

In our naiveté we held trust as a base condition. Any breaking of that trust would shatter our confidence—not in the character of the persons involved, but in our own judgment. *They* were just having fun. *We* should have known better. Sometimes, even now, we still blame ourselves.

In this story, the car keeps running and no one drives off with it. In this story, though, someone tried. In this story, we learn to pocket the key.

## IV.

We were juniors; we owned cool. We also ran in packs. Mine was made up of honor roll students who tried (perhaps too fervently) to look like they weren't. We finished each night's loitering by singing our way to the KC (Knights of Columbus) Hall, a landmark we considered a midpoint. From there, we scattered toward our own homes. The whole Main Street was three blocks long and most of us lived just a few steps away from that core.

Indeed, I stood literally steps from home the night the car of older high school boys came out of the alley by the Liquor Store and stopped to talk. We said the nothings we had to say. They flattered me, teased me, and then asked if I wanted to ride around. I didn't have a curfew. I could go. I could almost see myself calling my best friend later—curling the long phone cord around my fingers as I gave her the scoop. Or maybe if I hopped in, we could catch her before she went inside, and she could come too.

K. and D. sat by the windows. I leaned in closer to check out the rest of the packed car. A humid wave of beer fumes and the sickly sweet smell of cherry vodka mixed with boy sweat. The teenage contraband didn't entice me; the

hanging out with cool boys did. But some energy in the car hit me like distorted rock music through blown speakers. I hesitated.

In the back seat, I spotted a former neighbor, R.B. He was older enough that we had never played together as children. Something in the night chill recalled for me the die-cast warplanes and marbles his mother had once given me. His hand-me-down toys, still in my basement somewhere. I pulled my jacket closer, and R.B made a joke about wanting to check out the fringe on my pockets. A seemingly playful remark, but as he leaned forward, his dark eyes flashed a warning. Did his friend nudge him? Did I imagine that?

My smile never wavered as K. cajoled a bit more. Finally, I made my excuses, said a casual *have fun*, and turned away. When the car squealed around the corner, I wiped sweaty hands on my jeans and sought the safety of the yard lights.

My brown fringed jacket and the tingle of fear remain joined in my memory.

## V.

The Monday gossip at school was often about keg parties, fights, and what we would now call *assault*. Then, hallway voices said *slut*.

*Take Back the Night*. At reunions, we do recast those teenage initiations—but timidly as if our future still depended on the careful crafting of nouns, of verbs. A friend recalls her car story that ended differently than mine. She never told us then; even now her voice drops—holding that octave like a shield.

## VI.

Perhaps we all need protection from the unvarnished past. I try not to look too closely at the other faces in that darkened car. Instead, I attach to a simple version of the story. *Saved*.

Still moments haunt, harbor in our cells.

The second before, the signal, the safety of after.

The scenario repeats in dreams until I am stuck: the second before the second before . . . no signal, no after, only *danger danger danger*. As if the years since had held nothing worse than that moment, as if they had taught me nothing about

boys and fringe, shadowed faces, and self-preservation. Maybe we never age out of the nightmares of first betrayals. Nor forget who took which side in the everyday gender wars.

## VII.

Seven years later when I am walking down that old Main Street arm-in-arm between my then boyfriend and R.B., I squeeze my old neighbor's arm particularly tight.

R.B. makes a joke about the three of us—two dark Oreo cookie slabs and me a soft center between. This humor comes hard for my friend who has experienced his own particular kind of betrayal as a young man drafted into the Vietnam War. Even here, safe in his hometown, here warm in the crisp fall sun, I see him blink ghosts from his eyes.

In his lighthearted teasing, I recognize the same unassuming generosity he showed from the back seat of a car—in the years *okay* and *not okay* moved around like the worm in an upturned tequila bottle, in those jungle spaces we called adolescence. What made him, makes any of us, protect another—even from our friends, even if it might damage our status in some group?

I consider his later—brave if unheralded—military service. Even coerced as it was by the draft. I consider the price.

Shall we call both acts of chivalry?

Today, women might label R.B. a pro-feminist or an ally. I don't reject those popular terms, but my heart searches for another way to understand the nonpolitical kindness or the determined loyalty his actions embodied.

The pacts and betrayals that come with small-town lives—the ones we name and those we remain afraid to name—define us. Dig beneath the surface of our actions and you find a code. If R.B.'s story holds true, we follow it in every conflict, matter-of-factly through all the wars—the large wars, the small.

