

# Looking Out My Back Door

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There is a famous quote from Czeslaw Milosz: *"When a writer is born into a family, the family is finished."* But is it? Maybe it is saved. Preserved.

When I write about my family there are thousands of pages in various states of telling. Well, maybe not telling but trying. Trying to show. Show both the sunlit and shadowed halls of our home. It is the story I repeatedly run from and return to. It calls to me, thrusts me into open seas and wrecks me against piles of stone.

The one constant in our home was music. Both of my parents loved it. We were surrounded by it and heavily influenced by it. My two younger sisters and baby brother, all of us are addicted to it. There is still nothing like the needle drop and that first scratch of song.

My father favored old country, R&B and Gospel: Hank and Patsy, the Staple Singers, Aretha, Mahalia Jackson, and the Reverend Al. My mother leaned towards folk: Joni Mitchell, Janis Ian, James Taylor, and the Clancy Brothers. Stacks of records and eight-track tapes lined shelves and spun on the giant console stereo.

They were educators. They both held Master's Degrees. They were brilliant thinkers, staunch Democrats, and drinkers. They were deadly in Password, Jeopardy, and Trivial Pursuit. They marched the streets, protest signs in one hand, one of their children in the other. They attended lectures and pontificated. They told us what to believe but forgot to tell us why. It was expected that we would read books, the local newspaper, and *Time*. We had to watch the news, Cronkite, or Brinkley. It was assumed that we would have a basic understanding.

They both sang in the St. Anthony's church choir and the spin off folk group, which was led by a vest-wearing John Denver doppelganger. There was a lot of Godspell and a few popular songs with religious imagery. Once in a while there was a song that made no sense in the context of Sunday service other than it became a joyful sing along.

This group nourished them. Their social life revolved around it. Veering off here too much leads me right into the destruction. It's probably not where the demise began but it is where it manifested. At least that is how I remember it when I try to reconstruct the history. It is also where I pull scraps of the happiest moments from the rubble.

Elizabeth Tallent wrote: *"Every unhappy family is periodically ransacked by joy. It is the way the family haunts itself..."* This resonates as true as a tuning fork struck against the solid coffer of memory, the constant pitch vibrating along the edge of time.

The late-night practice sessions surrounded by the smell of chili on the stove, beer, and the bitter juniper of gin. There'd be a match strike, flame held to the end of a True or Salem Menthol, the smoke would swirl and hover. Someone would pull a cigarette from their lips, side blow and throw their head back in a burst of laughter.

It was a gathering of comrades, bell bottomed, shaggy haired, wild colored attire and big hoop earrings. They were talented and raucously opinionated, circled in the lamplight of our living room.



Creedence Clearwater  
Revival

"Lookin' Out My Back Door"

Cosmo's Factory

07/1970

Fantasy

There was tension between the guitar player—a Jim Croce look alike—and my mother. I'd identify it later as attraction. Back then it was just an uncomfortable awareness that dissipated with the shake of tambourines, thump of a bass, snap of the snare drum, strum of strings, and voices as they spread across the room, bounced off of the windows and walls casting color and eddies of light into impending darkness. It was glorious.

My mother was classic-movie-star-pretty. She was the soloist. Lord, that woman could sing. I dare to wonder sometimes how different her life would have been if she had followed her passions. I can't hear "Ave Maria," "O' Holy Night," or Leonard Cohen's "Suzanne" without my skin rising in recollection. It's an instant recognition of her in the song. I'm right back in a wooden pew below the choir loft as she breathes out her secrets, "...And you know that she's half-crazy but that's why you want to be there, And she feeds you tea and oranges that come all the way from China..." I am stunned, awed, and fiercely proud to be her daughter. Understanding slips out of reach like a shadow.

My father was a force of nature. He was funny, a performer who loved a crowd. He was a successful teacher whom I thought of as the Pied Piper. I'd watch other people's children parade behind him. Envy would gag and choke me. I wanted to poke and scratch them, "He's mine." He would stand at the old upright piano that sat in the corner of that living room and play any song that he'd heard once by ear. I knew when he was feeling irritated or impatient, usually waiting for my mother to finish applying her makeup. He'd pound out one popular song after another, pressing the pedal for emphasis the longer it went on.

She would take her time, fully aware of the mood changing. She would ease down the bark-carpeted staircase as if it was made of marble. The wooden railing, rickety and missing dowels along the way could have been gold plated in her regal descent. She'd step onto the torn linoleum at the bottom of the stairs, singing along to the Bill Withers song and wait for him to finish with a finger flourish. She'd ask, "Are you ready?"

Before they cracked and the monsters of rage emerged. Before I rounded up my terrified younger siblings, turned their tear-streaked faces from between the gaps in the railing at the top of those stairs. Before I pulled them away and shut them behind a bedroom door. Before the wail of sirens, howling dogs, and the neighbors parted their blinds to watch the flashing lights on our street. Before my mother wore dark glasses and neck scarves incongruously. Before the blood flowed from her head where she had landed against that piano or from her wrists when she gave into enough. Before he washed his hands of it. Before the breaches and betrayals. Before the beginning of the end. Before then, our Sundays consisted of Mass and social functions afterward in a circle of friends.

One Easter morning the service was held in Greenough Park along the rushing runoff of Rattlesnake Creek. The crocuses and tulips boasted in bloom and the lilacs scented the air. My sisters and I raced around in our frilly dresses and black patent shoes. Baby brother waddled between us in his tiny suit and tie. The promise of the egg hunt dangled ahead.

After communion, before the priest dismissed us with "Go in peace," the Folk Group broke into a rousing rendition of the Creedence Clearwater Revival classic "Lookin' Out My Back Door." Children grinned and shouted, the image of a "Giant doing cartwheels, statue wearing high heels... all the happy creatures dancin' on the lawn." The entire congregation joined in drowning out the sound of birds and roiling water, "doo, doo, doo looking out my back door".

This scene is locked away in the bank, among the stash of good ones. The nuggets I grip to remind me that there was something golden. Claudia Rankine whispers to me, *"Memory is a tough place. You were there."*

There are people who shouldn't bring children into the world. My parents may be an example of this. But then, where would I be? The earth would spin without my words as it mostly does anyway. Those I've loved and wronged would have lived differently, found their sources of throb and pain elsewhere.

Parents, birth orders, patterns behind familial doors influence who we become, how we behave. We learn from this and the outsiders who exemplify a different way. When I imagine all the people I could have been in an alternate life, the one thing I know, the one thing I am most thankful for, is the music.

I love how I love it and my want and willingness to share it with everyone I meet. It asks and answers, addresses the mystery. Ultimately, I am willing to forgive all the rest for this one thing.

Looking "out my back door" I think of Miloz one more time:

*"Forget all the suffering you caused others.*

*Forget the suffering others caused you.*

*The waters run and run,*

*Springs sparkle and are done.*

*You walk the earth you are forgetting."*