

Dottie Thompson
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FIRST MEMORY

In my earliest memory, I am in my little red rocking chair. It is one of the few things I ever had to call my very own. Someone gave it to me, just for me. If it had been given to one of my five older brothers, it would not have survived for my use in that raucous household. But it was for my use for a time in that little house near Honey Creek until it became splintered during hand-to-hand combat, maybe used as a weapon or a shield. Its demise is not within my memory bank.

This day in my earliest memory, it is peaceful in that little house. I am less than two years old. The boys are all at school. I am rocking in my little chair and singing a song. I don't know if the song had any words, but I rocked and sang, sang and rocked. I am probably happy because there is no fighting and yelling and teasing and chaos, and I can rock in peace without fear of being overrun by marauding brothers. I have my mother all to myself, and she is in the kitchen, standing at the wood-burning cook stove. The stove's warmth, the aroma of something cooking, peace—all blend together to make me feel happy and secure in this primitive, bare-boned house.

Dad came into the house with another man, probably a hired man. I can see him and his smile and the love in his eyes as he looks at me and says something to the other man. I know that he is proud of me, so I continue to rock and sing, sing and rock.

This is not a memory influenced by what others have told me. I know this memory is mine and mine alone. How could anyone describe that scene to me, the look of tenderness and love in the eyes of a father to his child?

In another brief memory of being in that little house, there are multiple brothers around. A little boy around my age has to come to visit. He climbs into my little red rocker, and I go over and shove him out while my brothers laugh and cheer and exclaim over their tough little sister. I know that they too are proud of me for that brief moment.

Our family's time in that little house that Dad built near Honey Creek was short lived; it was foreclosed on in the height of the Depression before my second birthday. When we moved to Grandma Tarwater's farm, I was left overnight with Grandma Doak. She was not a warm, fuzzy grandma, and I did not like her and did not want to sleep with her. So, when it came time for bed, I sought security and comfort in her big rocking chair, and started to rock and sing, hoping that she would let me spend the night there.

I remember her lying in her bed, trying to entice me near by lighting matches. "Oh, come over here and look at how pretty the flame is," she said. The phoniness of her voice and the flaring match lighting up her face in darkness made her seem even more sinister and scary, so I sang louder and rocked faster.

Finally, she called to Uncle Olin to carry me to bed with her. I submitted without crying or tantrum, even though I didn't like her. Grandma, if asked, would probably have said, "The feeling is mutual. " Poor woman. She must have been tuckered out helping with grandkids. I was number fifteen.

I saw the little house not long ago in north Missouri, still standing sturdy where Dad built it almost seventy-five years ago on the spot that Mother picked under the tall trees. It was vacant, and I yearned to go inside and sit for a while to evoke further memories of that brief but happy time in the life of our family. The next time I'm that way, maybe I'll take a rocking chair, and if I can get inside, I'll just rock and sing and sing and rock, an old lady off her rocker, and wait to see what happens.

In the meantime, I will piece together my bits of memory and what has been told to me in order to recount what I know of this family's story as we moved through the Great Depression, plunged into World War II, and struggled to find our way after the death of our father and the return of brothers from the war.

To any who disagree with my version, I say, "This story is mine. If you don't like it, write your own damn story."
