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Red Rover, Red Rover
a memoir

By Meredith Sue Willis

My sharpest memories of Shinnston are out-of-doors in summer. I remember a blanket under the scrawny young maple tree in our yard, which was not a back yard, but a double-sized lot with its weeds cut short and our two-story cinder block house set all the way to one side. In this memory, I am on the blanket with my best friend. I know it is hot, but we don't fan ourselves like church ladies before air conditioning. We aren't old enough yet to murmur musically about how it's not the heat, it's the humidity. My friend and I are younger than school age, and the heat is just there the way the neighborhood dogs are.

So it is a hot morning in the scanty shade of the young maple tree. Our cotton blanket is threadbare in the literal meaning of having been washed so many times that the fuzz has worn away, and all that remains is a weave of threads. In my memory, my friend and the blanket and I and the tree are not really separate. Everything is blended: crackers, Kool-aid, dolls, the yellow haze in the air, the green shade, and the crisp late summer grass that crunches under the blanket when we stir. That's the only sound in this memory, which is suffused with the music of play.

Another memory from about the same time is dominated by the sound of voices under my window. I have been put to bed, but the other children are still playing outside. I have a sudden sense of self, a self who is suffering an injustice. They have put me to bed, and *it is still light outside!* The children are under my window. The voices rise and fall and shout. *Their* feet have not been washed, *they* have not had to say their prayers, *they* must not lie still. I want to be outside with them! My heart is breaking: a wrong has been done me! *I have been put to bed, and it isn't dark yet!*

It is possible that I was being punished, but if so, I have no memory of my transgression. It is more likely that there was an established bed time, and

that this was simply the first time they were playing where I could hear them. I had already learned that saying "The other kids are doing it" didn't get me what I wanted. My mother would just tell me that her rules proved that my parents were good parents, and the other kids were being let run wild. This lowered them a little in my esteem— but at the same time made me want to run wild too.

This caused me to be aware of the pain of complex feelings.

Eventually, I figured out an argument that got me what I wanted: *It isn't right*, I rehearsed to myself, and eventually said to my mother. It isn't right that I am in bed when it isn't dark yet.

Eventually, a new rule prevailed: I must come in the house at dark.

Perhaps a year later. My baby sister was the one kept inside while the big kids played. I was one of the ones playing outside in the twilight. We ran, we shouted, we followed the elaborate rules of our games. One of the rules was that whenever possible, we must shout and run wildly!

We played in my big flat yard with only one tree, which was ideal for home base in games of tag and hide-and-seek. We played many versions of tag and *Simon Says*, and *Mother-May-I* and *Statue*. We were that big gang of East Shinnston kids. There were Louise and Sandy, who were sisters but had a lot of fights. The Barker boys lived on the other side of our newly planted hedge, and Teddy was the one who cried easily. My best friend Lee was there, taller and more beautiful than anyone else. There were a couple of families of Hardesties, but the best Hardesties included my oldest friend David. There were kids from the other side of East Avenue, too. We were a crowd! I was part of it!

Our activity level increased as the colors leached out of the day and the grass became slick and heavy with dew. Our games were intense. We argued over the rules which we seemed to have always known, as if the games arrived in our lives suddenly, like giant birds settling gently among us. We played in *my* yard, and I was respected by the others because I had the biggest yard, but also because I was energetic and loud and insistent on my rights. Mainly, though, I was important because I was one of the kids.

I liked all of the games and participated in the *Mother-May-I* debates over whether someone took a giant step without permission or only lost their balance as they claimed. I liked *Simon Says*, too, except that it had too much holding still and listening to instructions and not enough running wild. I had already learned how to hold back. I preferred letting go. Which is why my favorite of all the games was *Red Rover*. That was the one I waited for.

Nobody is ever out in *Red Rover*. Fifteen or twenty kids, and more is better. You form up two teams that make lines facing each other, arms locked. When it is your side's turn, you shout "Red Rover, Red Rover, We dare—" and here you insert a name from the other side—"David over!" The challenged person charges across the yard at you, chooses what he perceives to be a weak link, and tries to break through. If he fails, he is captured and becomes part of your team. If he breaks through, he chooses a person to take back to his side.

Do you see why I loved this? You win— or you win. I loved to be the one called out, dared, chosen, and I loved gripping forearms against the onslaught of the runner. I adored the abandonment of running full steam across the yard and hurling myself into the arms of the other people, feeling the resiliency of their muscles, their crusty smell after a long day of play.

I loved breaking through, and I loved being caught. Caught, you hang over their arms, panting with delight, and even though in one sense you have failed, you are being held because they *want* you. If they capture you, you still have a team. I loved the fluidity of shifting alliances, and no hard feelings because you will all shift again. It was physically engrossing and companionable, everyone was wanted. The weaker kids were called first, but the stronger kids had to be called eventually, because the game goes on until the last player is caught, and everyone is finally on one side together.

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