

15SHORT.DOC 11-15-01

The Mertzson house faces the school playground area and football practice field. First audio contacts are the school buses grinding off before dawn. Next, mothers flash by, releasing a sense of urgency to make the dropoff at school fast enough to regain the margin and be on time at work. In the mothers' wake come the students owning school cars, rumbling along waiting for a straight-of-way to gun their vehicles into a roaring finale at the parking lot that says "look at me!"

By class time, the band releases in front of the old school building a block away. Mertzson fields extraordinarily fine bands, state level bands that go off to Austin to win high ratings. I delay clearing the breakfast dishes until the music starts to march in time to "ka-ka-boom, ka-boom-ka-bum". Slosh the waffle syrup to the right, sop the spillage to the left. The first morning back at the ranch, I miss the stimulation of the crashing cymbals and brass section heralding the team to battle. Find myself leaving plates and cups on the table to cake in the dry days of autumn.

At 10 o'clock or so, the gladness of grade school recess flows over into my work area. First and second graders shriek to a high pitch, stilled only by teachers

cautioning the wild ones back under control. Swings rattle to the merry chase, little girls in pairs promenade along the fence, arms locked in love embraces never to be recaptured again in life, and all is interspersed and interrupted by the howling male cubs, slugging and pitching in the antics of schoolground clowns. (Often I miss morning appointments waiting for recess.)

On holidays and weekends, five cars or five people are a big assembly for the playground or the parking lot. Halloween is the only school holiday when I leave town on purpose. Halloween is a sad day. More so than cases of Christmas blues, or memories of empty Valentine boxes and solitary May Day dances. Recall please, how deeply my mother yearned for a little blond-headed, blue-eyed girl to dress in red velvet adorned with white pearl buttons and topped with delicate lace collars. Instead, she had a freckled, red hair towhead of a boy, sunburned in the summer and blighted by a chronic nasal drip all winter, infatuated by catching frogs on Spring Creek and trapping coons at the ranch.

But this was her tragedy. My sadness was to come on Halloween Eve at 4 p.m. in 1936 at a meeting of the third grade room mothers in the southeast downstairs classroom in the then only building of the school. The scene remains so

clear. A boy named L.J. Reader and I are sitting on the stairs in the hall outside the meeting. All the mothers except ours file out the door. L.J. and I pause from a trade we are on involving a .38 pistol cartridge he wants to swap for a rattlesnake rattle I brought from the ranch. At that moment, after a deep sob, we hear Mrs. Reader's voice, "Now, now, Nan (my mother's name), don't cry. At least you don't have to buy him a mask for Halloween."

L.J. is my best pal. He says, "Gawd-a-mighty Monte, you can have my .38 shell. Remember, if we can slip Dad's .38 from his trunk, we can be bank robbers. All bank robbers wear a mask." My heart was broken in spite of his condolence. Ripped from my chest, shattered to pieces, torn to bits, broken beyond repair, and fractured worse than the wreckage of 12 back to back cases of failed puppy love.

The Halloween party, however, turned into a big success. L.J. broke a tooth in front from a piece of hard candy that made him look like a pirate we'd seen in a Robert Louis Stevenson book. And the oldest girl in the class, Claudine Brown, tripped me on the playground, confirming that not everyone thought I was ugly. But the sound of a mother's sobbing is never forgotten. I never see a jack-o-lantern without flinching. And I never spend Halloween away from the ranch.