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The View from My Porch

An item from the *Albany Evening Journal* on Thursday, April 3, 1879:

A son of Louis Marx, gardener on Madison avenue, having his mind full of dime novels, took \$30 a few days since and left for the Black Hills to dig gold. He was heard from at Chicago this morning, and Marx has sought the aid of Chief Maloy to secure his return home.

I know a thing or two about Louis Marx's family, for reasons I'll explain shortly, and I wonder which of his sons it was who leapt at the chance to leave Albany for the open West.

There were four boys in the Marx household in 1879. One was two years old, and though toddlers do enjoy adventure stories, when they escape the house they never remember to bring money along. So it's probably safe to rule him out. Neither, I suspect, was it the gardener's oldest son, Luie. Luie would have been twenty years old, and had he run off to seek his fortune, he'd probably earned the right to seek it and then find his own way home again.

William, age fifteen, was in the prime of his restless years. No one can do daring and half-formed plans as well as a teenage boy can, and in all likelihood it was William who hopped the train, stopping to check in with the folks once he was eight hundred miles away.

But I like to think it was George. Eleven years old in 1879, he had grown up watching the wagons pass through the tollgate on the Great Western Turnpike, not far from his father's house and farm. George could have seen how past the gate, the road stretches arrow-straight to the horizon, offering him a running start into the west. Maybe the pull of that road just became too strong. If at age fifteen a journey to Chicago is a dime-novel adventure, at age eleven it's an epic. Maybe I vote for George because I have a daughter who's on the brink of eleven, and I see so clearly how life swells up inside her like the opening notes of a musical. All it would take is a downbeat and a lungful of air for her to break into song.

Whichever it was, William or George, the son of the Albany market gardener was restless for change. He didn't find it in the Black Hills, but change was coming anyway. All the Marxes would have to do was stand still, and it would sweep over them. Within the boys' lifetimes the fields and woods of Albany's western reaches would be graded, tamed, and covered with houses. Their family was the last to farm this side of our street, West Lawrence Street.

Fast forward one hundred thirty years or so, and we're having a party.

Here on our slice of the old Marx farm, we're celebrating our house's hundredth birthday with a gathering of neighbors, friends, and others who have a connection to the house and neighborhood. There's Greg, who grew up in my house in the 1940s. From his third-floor bedroom window he'd shoot matchsticks at the neighbors' slate roof with his Red Ryder BB gun. Once, when he and his Red Ryder were deep in a war story, Greg took a position on the upstairs porch, drew a bead on his enemy, and fired. His enemy, unfortunately, was a cleaning lady leaving a Morris Street apartment. "Within three minutes the cops were at the door," he remembered sheepishly, and that was the end of his sniper days.

And over here: This lady, at the party with her nephew, is the granddaughter of the house's first owner, the man whose name is on the Historic Albany Foundation plaque near the front door. Her family gave me the photograph that sits on the hall vanity: the little boy on the sidewalk looking at—is that a monkey? Yes it is, a monkey in a braid-

trimmed coat. To the side, at the foot of the stairs, an organ grinder holds its leash. Those are our stairs, our sidewalk. In the background, our neighbor's house is being built. The year's about 1913.

It's a curious gathering of friends and strangers. Our younger daughter is getting chocolate frosting on my 1930 census map. The neighbors are talking to the guy who sold us the house nine years before. A woman who grew up down the street has brought a stack of postcards to show me; they were sent to her aunt a century ago by a lady who lived in our house. We offer everyone a tour, show them old photographs, feed them cake: it's a birthday party, after all.

Let's call Louis Marx and sons point A and call our 2012 party point B. This book is the story of how my house got from point A to point B.

When you buy an old house, you get more than a house. In its quirks, its alterations, in fragments of memory and traces left behind, you get a bundle of small mysteries. Who used to live here? Why did they come here, and where did they go? Whose name is that written on the attic wall? When did that odd little bathroom get shoehorned in there, and what did the room look like before?

If you're lucky, one or two of your house's mysteries might unfold into stories. I was very lucky. Using public records, newspaper accounts, and interviews, I traced my property forward from the last man who farmed it. I located and spoke with the families of everyone who's ever owned my house, as well as its builder. I was able to learn the answers to my questions, or parts of the answers, and much more.

As I followed these threads, I came to see the development of my house, my street, and my neighborhood as part of Albany's story. And in the lives of its residents, their struggles and triumphs, I saw a reflection of twentieth-century America.

It's not exactly a linear narrative. Sure, it leads forward—time is stubborn like that—but it's not above stopping to look around now and then. That's the kind of walk I like to take: one with plenty of pauses to see where I am and how I got there.

This book follows another path, too: my own. I grew up in one of those families who weren't from here—wherever “here” happened to be.

I guess you'd say we moved around a fair bit. Before I came to Albany at age twenty-one we had lived in nine houses in six towns in four states, my parents following the journalism/teaching job markets. We rented all but one of the houses we lived in. Renting was light: no roots, just passing through. There was something comfortable about being the outsiders. "Comfortable"—is that the right word? Maybe "safe." When you're standing on the margins, away from the action, you're less likely to get hurt.

After I moved to Albany, several things changed. The first was that I fell in love with the city: its history, its distinct neighborhoods, its marvelous architecture. Then came children, then buying a house, and somewhere in there I realized that there might be something to this notion of "community" after all.

Albany's history is much larger, longer, and grander than the lifespan of one little house. And our house is not especially old or particularly grand. Nobody famous ever lived here. But I'm a believer in thinking small. I'm taken by the beauty of how a thousand everyday moments can add up to something extraordinary. And as I looked at the century of change that brought Albany's Pine Hills from farmland to streetcar suburb to modern urban neighborhood, I learned that the legacies of these ordinary people reached far beyond West Lawrence Street.

This is the story of my house, the people it sheltered and the neighborhood it stands in. And it's the story of how Albany became home to this wandering girl.