

Google Earth

by Jane Hertenstein

They say you can't go home again, and there's something to this, but last night I found my old house on Google Earth.

I moved away in the middle of third grade, in the middle of learning the multiplication table, leaving me forever stunted, never able to get past the 6x's. I even found my old school. They say when you revisit as an adult some place you've been as a kid it will look vastly different, diminished, time and memory tend to aggrandize, like a side mirror in a car, making the past appear larger than it really was. On my computer screen Driscoll Elementary looked quaint, its 1950s flat-roof architecture not quite as formidable as I remembered it. Now crowded by plat-style houses, it used to sit on treeless acreage, a sure target for Cuba's missiles. There was a bomb shelter under the school, but we were never trained for an evacuation. Instead we drilled for tornados by ducking and covering in the hallway. In gym class we used to have to run around the playground to warm up for kickball. From Google Earth's satellite view I could peer down on that field, just a patch of grass that seemed no bigger than a double lot.

I journeyed back to the past using the street finder tool. I remembered it was Princewood Avenue where my old house stood, I could even remember how to get there from the school since I'd walked home a couple of times—but I couldn't recall the house number. So I retraced my route by moving the mouse over the map. Down Marshall Road, where it narrowed by the ravine. Narrow shoulders. Ha, I always wondered what that sign meant. And, after that, the sign BUMP, where I encouraged Mom to speed up so that we could catch some air. Past Whipp and Rahn Roads. One led to State Route 48 and the other forked right toward the bowling alley and the gym where Mom had bought a lifetime membership. This workout club of the early 1970s featured the latest in slimming equipment. There was an upright machine with a canvas belt that one strapped around the fanny. When turned on the contraption jiggled the buttocks. Mom would stand there passively vibrating, never breaking a sweat. Then there was something

like an overturned barrel upon which Mom would sit. It was covered in what I can only compare today to those wooden-beaded seats that taxi cab drivers use. Switched on, the barrel cylinder rotated, massaging the bottom, or if straddled, the inner thigh. It was never about exercise. Dad continued to write checks to the club long after we'd moved away.

Princewood curved and in my mind I followed the bend. Those other side streets were a mystery since I'd never bothered to explore them forty years ago. I stopped at a corner and employed the street view. It was disconcerting to go from a map, flat and informational, to a photo. Yes, two-dimensional, but with the ability to swivel 360 degrees, I got a complete picture of both sides of the street. Wait, I recognized something, back, back, that house, that's the one the Bingosheas lived in. I can tell because there was the upstairs mother-in-law apartment above the garage. Or used to be, when the Bingosheas lived there. Etoile and her mother Clara and the kids Kim and Linnie. I always thought it was odd for a boy to be named Kim, but then the Bingosheas were odd. I tried Googling their name. I'm not sure how to spell it as I only heard it pronounced. I expect the old women are dead by now. Etoile's husband had died in an accident before they'd moved to Princewood. I saw pictures of him around the house and was surprised that he was a handsome man as Etoile was a bit horsey with large teeth and a drooping chin. Her mother Clara was batty even back then and often invited me upstairs to have a snack with her. She offered me pop when pop was considered special. I'd watch as she poured it, entranced by the fizz and froth. The first sip was like pure gold, followed later by explosive burps. Clara and Etoile watched me when my parents went away on a weekend trip. As Clara was tucking me in at night I shared with her some comments I'd overheard my mother make, something about Etoile watering the front lawn wearing her swimsuit. Mom didn't like that and thought Etoile should know better than to be showing off. After that my mother's relationship with the Bingosheas cooled and I wasn't left with them.

I spotted on the screen a row of trees. Those must be the last trace of a windbreak of hedge apple trees that ran behind our house. I expect when Princewood was farmland that an old farmer had planted them there as the trees were not random. They lined up exactly one after another for what seemed like forever but from viewing the map probably only extended down a block or two. Us kids could start at one end and go from tree to tree like it was some arboreal passageway, our feet never touching the ground. The name hedge apple is a bit of a misnomer; nubby green grapefruit-size balls that were anything but apple-ish grew on the tree. Except when the heavy fruit dropped to the ground where they soon rotted and turned into another pome euphemism--taking on the resemblance of 'road apples.' The awful truth about hedge apple trees is that they are infested with five-inch stickers that can puncture the skin like nails. More than once I fell and if the fall didn't knock the wind out of me, then the stickers piercing my back was enough to keep me out of the trees for a few days--until I went back to climbing and falling all over again. No wonder my mother was intermittently admitted to the psych hospital. Of course, back then I had no idea she was suffering from depression; I thought it was because of me and something I'd done. But that's another story, not one for Google Earth.

I tried looking for the rock, a glacial remnant left by the last ice age, in front of the Schoening's house where my sister Nancy slipped and cracked her front tooth. Not long after that accident her tooth went black, dead my mother said. Without understanding, I mourned the loss. It took several drives and several treatments to fix the tooth, the last of which involved laughing gas. I remember on the way home in the car from that appointment I plied Nancy with a list of questions, thinking under the influence of the gas I'd get her to reveal all her secrets. She simply nodded off on her side of the car. I'm sure we weren't wearing seatbelts. Our driveway was on an incline. One time Nancy and I were fooling around in the parked sta-

One time I went to my cousin's house

But she wouldn't let me in

So I called my mom and she said

"That's not your cousin"



tion wagon and pulled off the parking brake. The vehicle, loosed, started to roll backwards. Frightened, all I could do was scream at my older sister to steer. She guided us down and into the front yard of the Kohl's house across the street. There it was on my laptop, filling the monitor, of course much smaller than I remembered. Later, in high school the Kohl boys became tennis champions. Even later after that, in college perhaps, one of the Kohl boys died from leukemia. Mom knew and kept up with gossip from the old neighborhood from her friend Miriam Schoening, though, last time I visited Mom at her extended-care living facility, she claimed she and Miriam had never been friends.

I clicked and swung the Google Earth compass west of the Schoening's and found my old house; a two-storey salt-box style, middle-class and modern. Stunned, I sat in front of my screen. I'd come back home, to the house I shared with my mother and father, sister and two brothers, Tom and Steve. My brothers were older, meaning four or five grades above me--thus, our lives hardly intersected, yet I can still feel myself reaching. I remember trying to climb up for something (a Cincinnati Reds pennant? An old coonskin cap from Disneyland?) and falling into a crack between the chair and wall, folded up like a sandwich and crying for help. Tom rushed in and lifted me up and then warned me never to come into his room again, or else. Here it was, before me, as real as day. There was my window, where Nancy and I shared a room and next to our window, Steve and Tom's room. The distance I feel today from my brothers can only be measured in Google miles. Tom, the rebel growing up, has matured into a Republican, an abyss so wide I cannot cross over to him, and Steve, the brother I felt closest to, was eventually so racked by Kennedy's assassination (both of them) that when he left in 1969 for college he left for good.

Tears moistened my eyes, eyes often dried out from staring at a screen too long, especially in a dark room, eyes tired from a long day and only longing for relief. That's why I Google late at night. Looking for

evidence I exist (I type in my name to see what might come up), searching for lost classmates, until one thing leads to another. I am crossing streets, flying like a disembodied soul over years, hovering above my front yard. The irony is that the trees have grown, much larger than I last remembered them. What Dad had planted so long ago are now full-grown tulip maples, the green canopy sheltering the front of the house. If we still lived there we could rest, finally, in the shade of those trees. But we are no more we. The people we are now are so changed and altered that we cannot go home again.

And it is this realization that makes me cry. Through the magic of the Internet, I can locate 580 Princewood Avenue, circle the property, once more look down the street upon which I'd walked many times, coming home late for dinner, pause and zoom in on the front door, but it is forever shut... even as I am standing outside now.