The Old Neighborhood

People seem to be geographically grounded based on where they spent their early, developmental years. Though they may have moved several times during their life, where they spent those early years developing their first relationships outside of their own family remain with them.

My father died about 6 years ago at the age of 83. It was his time to go so his passing was not a surprise although it still shocked me. My mother had passed 10 years prior to my dad and that left him somewhat lost during his remaining years. After several years of living alone he finally realized that he needed to be with other people where assistants could give him the help he needed, perhaps with simple activities that my mother used to help with.

I moved away from my parent’s home after graduating from high school and have since lived in states far away from my parents. I would typically come home to visit my parent once or twice a year. About three years before my father passed I came home to visit him. I hadn’t seen him since he had moved into a new retirement complex. It was further from the city where our family had lived for decades so he wasn’t being visited by family members or friends as often. His memory was also slipping away which frustrated him.

I found him in the community room with some of his new friends and everyone was having a good time playing games, watching television or just talking. He saw me walk in and told his friends that I was his son and gave me a big hug. My plan for the day was to take my dad to lunch and spend time with him. During lunch we talked about family members both living and the ones who had passed away. He stated a couple time that he missed my mother and always thinks about her.

When lunch was over we decided to take a drive by our old house. We drove around the neighborhood pointing out houses that had been the homes of people we had known. It was still early after we had toured the old neighborhood so I asked dad if he would like to go the neighborhood where he had grown up. He immediately said he would. I could tell that he was excited as we approach the neighborhood. I almost suspected that he thought he might see some of his old buddies walking down the street.

We drove down the first street and he leaned forward in his seat. He asked me to slow down in front of one house. He told me that his friend Billy lived there as if I knew Billy. He chuckled and told me a story of something that he and Billy had done and gotten in trouble for. We drove down the street and he pointed to a house where Jimmy lived. He and Jimmy were good friends but were always competing in foot races or on bicycles. He said Jimmy had died in the Korean War. I could tell that he was probably reliving the moment when he had heard that his friend had died.

We drove around the corner and there were some neighborhood shops so we stopped and walked down the street. He told me what stores had been in each of the buildings. The corner space had been a small grocery with a counter that had many different types of penny candy. Again he chuckled as he recalled how he and his friends would steal candy when the owner wasn’t looking. He said once they went to the store to return soda bottles for the penny deposit and the owner kept their bottles but wouldn’t pay them because he knew they had been stealing candy from him. My dad said they never took bottles back there again but still went in to steal candy.

We drove down another street where my dad pointed out a house where his friend Bob lived. He told me that he and Bob were really good friends and hung out together all the time doing things that boys do. Laughing until he cried, he told how they would throw snowballs at a trolley at a certain location where they could hide then jump out and plaster the trolley. He was so excited, laughing and crying remembering how the trolley driver would stop the trolley and jump out and yell at him and his friends. They knew he couldn’t run after them and leave the trolley so they would move away just far enough that they knew they were safe. As the trolley would start to pull away they would plaster it again then run away.

We drove past a couple other houses and he told who lived in them and some about each of the boys who were his friends. I could tell that dad was getting tired as the day was starting to fade away. He said it was getting late and that we should probably go home. I told him OK although I wasn’t really sure which home he was referring to. I wondered if he was thinking his parents house where he grew up, or the houses we had lived in as I was growing up or did he mean the retirement home where he now lived.

When we arrived back at the complex we hugged and he thanked me for taking him to his old neighborhood. He said he had forgotten about that part of his life. We walked in and down to the door of his apartment. We hugged again then he smiled at me and shook his head a little and said he missed mom so much.