# **Anne Franks in Texas**

S. L. Wisenberg

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azis came to Texas in the 1960s. We would hear them just around the corner. My older sister Rosi would make the sound of their footsteps—would tap her hand on the pink carpet of the walk-in closet in her room (just like the one in mine). She would look up and say, "Listen, do you hear them?" I would hold my breath. We were in the woods with the partisans. Though we didn't know the exact meaning of the word. We sat around our (invisible) campfire. We were hiding from the Nazis. They would take us away. We had saltines and olives to live on.

Sometimes I would be the one to tap tap tap slap my palms against the pink carpet: "Listen, do you hear them?" Nazis coming through the woods. They had been tipped off, perhaps by paid informers like the ones who had turned in Anne Frank.

I had read her diary. We had seen the end of the movie on TV though my mother had said, "Don't you think they should go to bed?" My father had said, "They have to learn." What we had to learn about was life. What had happened to the Jews crouched in silence. On TV we heard the big Nazi boot against the door of the Secret Annex where the Franks were hidden. The Nazis bashed in the door the way ours had never been bashed, or my father's, or my mother's. My father had fought the Nazis in the ocean. My mother had stayed home. She'd been a schoolgirl.

Once I asked her, "Have you ever had a raw potato?" I imagined her digging them from a field, getting through the war. She'd grown up in Dallas. She said, maybe once—when her brother's barbecue project in the backyard hadn't turned out. There was no starvation, there were no Nazis in Texas. No hiding with partisans. Nothing but two daughters in the sixties with saltines and green olives stuffed with pimentos and sometimes a strand or two of raw spaghetti on the side.

For years I kept a getaway bag in my closet, saltines and a notebook, a change of clothes. An alarm clock, so I would know the time. I liked the big friendly white and gold face of that alarm clock. One summer night the air

conditioning didn't work and we opened the windows and I heard Nazis, scratching to get in to take me away and steal my glasses. In the morning my father claimed the noise had been mosquitoes, or june bugs. The same june bugs I would watch at nights on the porch. I would turn over the june bugs that had landed on their backs, skittering. I wanted to right all the june bugs.

We liked playing in the closet. We liked the thrill of hiding. We were victims but were never caught. Sometimes we played secretary instead. Sometimes we played that we were lizards on a ship hiding from the Nazis. The Nazis would take us to a concentration camp. They would take my glasses and asthma drugs and let death just come up and kill me like that. At Hebrew school the teachers talked about Nazis. They showed us a film on a small screen. They showed us the small bodies and the striped prison outfits. But we didn't think of it as prison. It was a camp and the Nazis took people there. Jews.

They didn't take *us* because we were quiet in the woods, we sprinkled sand and dirt over our fire in the closet in the woods before they were close enough to smell the smoke. The Nazis were stupid. They were thick and dumb like animals and wore big heavy boots up to their hips. We were good so the Nazis would never find us. We were smarter and darker than the Nazis. But we were bad, there was something bad about us or the Nazis wouldn't have been after us. We were bad hiding in the closet. We had sneaked the saltines and the olives from the pantry. We had wrapped them in foil. Nobody knew we were there. Mother knew we were playing. She didn't interfere.

When we played secretary, our office was out in the hall and we would hold papers up to the air vents that would suck them so they stuck. When we played school, the air vents along the wall held up the pretend tests we gave each other. Sometimes we would just play without having a name to it and slide on the terrazzo floor in our stocking feet.

Sometimes at dusk we played capture-the-flag with the neighbor kids in the Shelbys' front yard. There were brown rabbits in the field behind the house and once policemen came with horses back there on a search for something. A criminal hiding in the empty lot.

S. L. Wisenberg's story "The Sweetheart Is In" was published in Tikkun in 1989. She was a 1990–1991 fellow at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts.

t some point we stopped playing Nazi. It wasn't my idea to start or stop. Maybe Rosi stopped playing with me, started playing with her own friends, and no more Nazis. We outgrew Nazis. When I was twenty-one I went to Amsterdam and alone I went to the Secret Annex. It was on the tourist map. Each room was small and there was a guest book to sign with a fancy gold pen, unattached to anything, no string or chain. There were the books Anne Frank had read while she was in hiding and movie-star pictures pinned to the wall. The place was small, it had no power, too many people walking through.

Ten years after that, a layover in the Amsterdam airport, a Greek man saw me borrow someone's tour book of the Anne Frank house. The Greek man said to his American wife: "Of course she's interested in Anne Frank—she's Jewish." The man who'd bought the book wasn't Jewish. I said nothing. The Greek could tell I was Jewish.

There is a statue of Anne Frank in front of a church in Amsterdam. In the walk-in closets in Houston now are full-length mirrors and the shelves each of us covered in our favorite pink contact paper, ruffles we tacked along the edges. The closets are shrines. In Rosi's closet are my mother's mink coat and the large bride doll too

big to play with, and the felt board with felt numbers.

Where I live now, I don't sit in the closets. The closets are full. I'm on the third floor. No Nazis bang against my screens at night. Around the world people are defacing Jewish graves, threatening pogroms. In my neighborhood Jewish Community Center I watched a slide show of someone's trip to Europe-pictures of Auschwitz-Birkenau, rust-colored gas chamber. "It was cold," the traveler told us, "so very very cold. Everyone told us to bring our sweaters, even though it was a warm day." Ghosts breathing out cold air from having absorbed the force of someone else's hatred. About a hundred-seventy-five miles from the camp, the traveler had seen two young boys spray-paint on a memorial to the Warsaw Ghetto. She said, "There is hatred for Jews where there are not even Jews anymore."

Anne Frank was shipped from Auschwitz-Birkenau to Bergen-Belsen. I read about her all through my childhood. She never seemed like a chil'd to me. At parties I eat olives and saltines. Alone at night shadows brush against my face. At the JCC, one slide showed words in a foreign language carved into a wall at the concentration camp. The traveler thought it said never to forget. In my late twenties when I felt sad, I would go to the public library and read The Diary of Anne Frank. It was warm and familiar. It would comfort me.

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