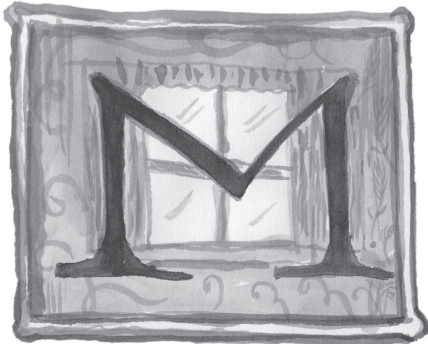






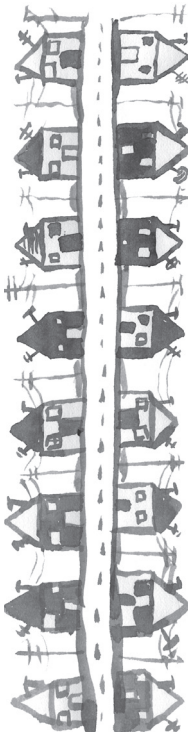
my street



MY NAME IS EDNA ARKINS. As usual, I'm stuck sitting around watching my sister and my cousin Ellen's baby until my mother gets home from work.

Come over here and look out this window. You see that street? That's my same old street. I know everything that has ever happened on it and everything that is ever going to happen on it. In the beginning of this street it was a mainly white street. That was a long time ago, but I

can remember the houses went White, White, White, Japanese, White, White. Across the street and down the next two blocks were about the same except there was more Japanese, two Chinese and a Philippines house on the corner by the woods. Down past Crowley was where all the Negro houses started. Them and some other houses, a white motorcycle house with sheets for curtains and two white trash houses with matching refrigerators laying on their sides in the yards.



Then was the first Negro house ever on our street, the Vidrines of Mrs. Vidrine who worked at our school. They had high school twins named Lillian and Lionel and about five other children who were married and would bring their babies over in cars on Sunday afternoons, which made my Aunt Margaret mad when she came over because she couldn't get her usual parking space.

Then the Quicks moved away, which was fine with us because can you believe they thought *we* wrecked the street when we moved in? Then the Mosely's moved, fine with us too because they thought they were better

than everyone just because of their car. And then the Aymond's moved, which was sad because they were so nice and always gave the best candy for Halloween, but they were old and said they had to go live somewhere easier. Then it seemed like just about everybody kept moving out until now our street is Chinese, Negro, Negro, White, Japanese, Filipino, and about the same but in different orders for down the whole street and across the alley.

my Song



YOU KNOW HOW WHEN people say “They’re playing our song”? Or like how the stars have a theme song that plays right before they come out from behind a curtain? Well I had a song too. Probably everybody did. It’s the

first song you could really sing, the one your parents made you do over and over to show all your relatives how above average you were. And you can’t ever change your song. Once a song is yours, it’s yours for life.

Mine was by Louis Armstrong who I did one of my

reports on recently and found out that he learned to play the trumpet at such an early age by shooting off a gun in the middle of a downtown street on the fourth of July. He got locked up in juvenile for it where there was a music teacher who handed him a trumpet. The book I read on him said that getting put in the Colored Waif's Home was the luckiest thing that ever happened to him because if you want to get professional on an instrument you really do have to concentrate, and it turns out that jail is one of the best places to do it. Later he grew up and played for the Queen of England.

Louis Armstrong's song "What a Wonderful World" was the favorite one of mine, my theme song. When I sang it and did the voice everyone always started laughing and thinking a lot of perfect things about me.

The First Song of my Life



S FAR AS THE FIRST SONG of my life goes, I think it was “I Went to the Animal Fair” from when I was a baby and the neighbors had told my mother the reason all my hair was falling out was from nerves, and singing me this song might help my condition. My mother must have been pretty worried because I heard the song about forty million times.

Back then, almost all the songs had animals in them doing something. Now, though, there’s hardly any animals

doing anything in songs. It's just love, love, love, love, love.

The part I remember most went

The big baboon by the light of the moon

Was combing his auburn hair

When I was trying to fall asleep at night, I sometimes would stare at the silver spot of the street light coming through the curtains of our bedroom window and wonder was he trained to do that? And how did his hair get all burned?

My little sister Lucy told me one time that she used to think that street light was in reality God. I don't see how she can even stand to admit that. Nine. You can't get much dumber than when you're nine. She's a lot different than me and it's not just because I'm older. I could always tell the difference between God and a street light.

Borrowing Things



ONE WEEK WHEN MY Uncle Jim and Aunt Margaret were going away on vacation, my dad asked if he could please borrow my

uncle's tape recorder to goof around with while they were gone. Dad told him he was thinking of getting one himself one day and just wanted to test out how he would like it. My Uncle Jim is my father's older brother and they haven't liked each other much since when they were little and my dad constantly wrecked things of Jim's—not on

purpose—and took away Jim’s girlfriends—not on purpose either.

What was Jim going to say when my father asked him right after grace on my dad’s combination birthday and Fourth of July dinner, with practically every one of our relatives sitting there to celebrate it? Aunt Margaret looked down at her plate and started making her tiny little faces. My teenager cousin Ellen started doing the same thing because, as you know, monkey see monkey do. Aunt Margaret hated us for owing them so much money, like it was our fault they lent it to us.

“Well I guess I can’t see any reason why not,” Uncle Jim said after he had tried his hardest to find a reason and just couldn’t with everyone staring at him. My father said he would be happy to pick up the tape recorder when he dropped them off at the train station the next Saturday, and I almost told him to knock on the table three times fast and say “No take backs.”

Later my cousin Steve came into my bedroom where I was leaning out the window watching Uncle Jim and Aunt Margaret have their usual big whisper fight in the back yard, and he kicked me in the leg as hard as he could. “If your dad breaks that tape recorder, that’s it,” he said. “I’m killing you.” And then he said what he always says to me every time we are ever alone together and probably always will say even when we are both as

old and shriveled up as two ancient pieces of gum stuck under a chair. “And if your dad and mom die, and if my dad and mom die, remember you owe all that money to *me*.”

Piano Lessons



WHEN I WAS EIGHT, AUNT Margaret bought Ellen a whole piano in honor of her twelfth birthday and also because Aunt Margaret wanted their lives to be surrounded by the sounds of beautiful music. She said

she wanted to give me the same great opportunities Ellen had and that if Mom would just pay for my lessons, I was welcome to practice on their piano. Aunt Margaret told Mom I had begged her and begged her to please let me take the lessons with Ellen and she couldn't bear to see me

be underprivileged, but I don't remember ever begging her to let me take any piano lessons. And even if I did, I was only in third grade. Later Mom found out that the actual reason Aunt Margaret wanted me to take piano was so she could get a cut rate for bringing the teacher another kid.

The teacher was this lady whose apartment smelled like a lot of cats. She lived downtown on a street with bums walking on it, and when we would pass one my Aunt Margaret would look at the bum and then look at me and Ellen to make sure we could see how much she was willing to suffer in order for us to learn the piano.

Aunt Margaret would stay until after Ellen's turn, and then they would leave to go wait for me at the Woolworth's lunch counter, and I would be alone with the music lady who naturally scared me because she was always talking loud and sweating big sweats under her arms and yelling "Tempo! TEMPO! goddamn you!" She would grab my hand and pound out the time with it like I was too stupid to count. It was always the same song over and over. "Ten Little Indians." Ellen was already on "Carnival in Venice," and I was still stuck playing "Ten Little Indians."

After my lesson I would walk down First Street three blocks fast, following my aunt's instructions to quit my bad habit of

stopping to stare at interesting people. Then I'd turn up Cresswell Avenue, go one block, then go into the Woolworth's, walk through the candy, the makeup, the ladies' nightgowns, then over to the counter where Ellen would slide off her stool and tell me what she just ate.

I was supposed to practice more than I did, but Uncle Jim developed a problem of not being able to stand the sound of the piano when I played it. And then before I knew it, it would be the day to walk past the bums again.

Lucky thing for me something happened to that lady. Who knows what, but we went there one time and knocked and knocked and finally a man in an undershirt opened the door behind us and said "She moved. Do you mind?"