

# Tree + Swing = Kindergarten Memories.



**KAL'S  
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# I

It's that time again! Schools across the nation will open their doors to streams of children, hopefully eager to learn. Remember your first day of elementary school? Or kindergarten? What conjures up those long, lost days? Is it the scratchy sound of chalk on a blackboard? A nun's sweet face as she raps your knuckles with a ruler? Or is it the smell of fresh baked sweet rolls from the school cafeteria?

Or children's high-pitched, gleeful laughter on a playground? Could a tree be a time machine back to those days of "reading and 'riting and 'rithmetic"? Me thinks - Yes! The front yard of the Cable One building on Debuys Road is anchored by such a tree. But fifty-five years ago that front yard belonged to someone else, Mrs. Moore. And Mrs. Moore ran a kindergarten.

My first day of kindergarten is one of my earliest memories. I was five. My parents, with me riding shotgun in my mother's lap, were the first to arrive that morning. We drove up the dirt and grass driveway in our baby-blue Nash Rambler. (Dad, the Marine, was always a Rambler man.) My Dad stopped the car and said, "Anthony, do you want us to come in with you?" Bouncing out of the car I immediately said, "NO!

I'm a big boy now." Then, bold as brass, I marched up the steps of the front porch, plopping down in a swing. Little did I know that Mrs. Moore's porch swing was

her "time-out" place for rambunctious pupils; the swing and I became great friends. But on that morning, the swing posed no threat. From inside the house, I heard Mrs. Moore humming. She was busy preparing for the first day of school, and was unaware of my arrival. So there I sat, hunkered down on the creaking, swaying swing, looking at my new-found playground. There was much to see.

To my five-year-old self, Mrs. Moore's front porch seemed an eternity long. It was painted dull gray, and sported slender white columns festooned with lacy Victorian gingerbread. Her wooden porch rockers were cumbersome creations, kid-tough and navy-blue. The house, plain and wooden, was painted white, its shutters green. Looking up, I saw the sky, or what looked like the sky. The porch ceiling was painted blue, not just any old blue, but a bright, robin's egg blue. Still searching for new wonders, I suddenly saw it. I had rushed past it during my frontal assault of the porch. It just sat there, silent and mysterious, holding court, as it were. It was a sprawling ancient oak.

The grand old tree was draped in Spanish moss. Like the long gray beards of a thousand old philosophers, the moss sambaed in the morning breeze. I could see the tree's bark, dense and wax-like, dripping down its trunk. In the weeks that followed, I discovered the crevasses in the tree bark were perfect hiding places for secret messages written on rolled-up bits of paper. The messages were nothing more than scribbles of course, but my



make-believe friends and my flesh-and-bone friends always seemed to know what I had written.

The tree was surrounded by a flowerbed fashioned from small chunks of broken concrete; it was filled with lush hunter-green aspidistra. Mrs. Moore eventually assigned each of her pupils their own chunk of concrete, which became a magic rock. In those lost days when children still used their imaginations, Mrs. Moore was a master at molding ours. The magic rocks transformed themselves into flying saucers, or race cars, or a bucking bull at a rodeo. They became diving bells, enabling us to explore the ocean depths. Like a Star Trek transporter, they could magically beam us down to the floor of some great concert hall, our young talents needed for raucous renditions of "She'll be Coming 'Round the Mountain" and "Old McDonald had a Farm."

If the magic rocks were transporters, the interior of Mrs. Moore's kindergarten was a rabbit hole leading to a Wonderland of delights. Its walls were lined with huge windows, which admitted dancing ribbons of sunlight and refreshing Gulf breezes. Beneath the windows were shelves and cubby holes filled with beguiling treasures: baseball gloves, their leather reeking with age, a homemade doll's house filled with homemade furniture, chunky wooden play blocks for building temples and pillared mansions, a real Howdy Doody gun and holster set, a Davy Crockett raccoon-skin cap, and a box of old dishes, along with the remnants of a once-elegant tea service. One entire wall was nothing but bookshelves. Old Mother Goose held her ground with Grimm's Fairy Tales and Jack of beanstalk fame. There was also a homemade book that Mrs. Moore had constructed of colorful cardboard. Its pages were pasted with clippings from a newspaper series about famous children from the Bible. But more fascinating than these treasures was the treasure chest.

It was a camel-back trunk splashed with red and gold paint and adorned

with old rhinestone jewelry. Inside the treasure chest, grander treasures awaited: a pop-up top hat, a velveteen frock coat, lacy party dresses, feathered hats, tattered riding boots, and button-up shoes. There were silver swords and pirate's hats, and a magician's black-silk cape and wand. A tattered Japanese kimono rounded out the collection. But buried deep beneath these wonders was yet another wonder: a small, carved



*The author, in the striped shirt, enjoying his 5th birthday party (c. 1957) at Mrs. Moore's kindergarten.*

wooden box that contained teeth. Teeth! A human's tooth, a cow's tooth, a horse's tooth, a long hound's tooth, and a shark's tooth were all thrown together. Of all the wonders in the treasure chest, the teeth were my favorites.

Mrs. Moore also had an old upright piano. As she played a John Philip Sousa march, so would we - marching around the tables, out the door, into the yard, and back again. Upon our return, we quenched our thirst with Welch's Grape juice served in little glass bottles that Mrs. Moore washed each afternoon, refilling them for our use the next day. We colored and painted to the strains of Vivaldi playing on her record player. We put puzzles together while Tennessee Ernie Ford serenaded in the background. Then, as our morning came to a close, we put up our play things and awaited the arrival of our parents. Smiles were on our faces. We

knew another fun-filled morning was just around the corner.

Are you asking yourself, "Kal! How do you remember all that?" That's easy. In my college years, I continued to visit Mrs. Moore. Even though she had long since stopped teaching, all the treasures of my childhood were still there, as if awaiting the arrival of her next class. The porch was still there, along with the swing, the chairs and the tree. But as the years passed, little of those days survived. Mrs. Moore's house and its wonders are gone now. She too is gone. Only her tree survives. After graduating from college, I gradually lost track of that dear lady who so influenced my early years. What became of her I never knew. I never saw an obituary, but knew in my heart that she had long since been promoted to Glory. And as long as I live, so will she, because my memories keep her alive.

The next time you drive along Debuys Road, look for the Cable One building and you will see the tree that stirred my imagination more than half-a-century ago. If it's a bright morning, when the air is sweet and fresh, squint your eyes. Maybe - just maybe - the current building will evaporate, and in its place the old one will materialize. It was just a rambling old country house with a front porch and a swing. Perhaps if you let your imagination wander, in that swing you'll see a boy, wild-eyed with excitement, waiting for his first day of kindergarten to begin, but not realizing that day would be the beginning of the rest of his life.

*Please remember to keep our troops in your prayers. May God bless, and keep a song in your heart!*

Kal



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