

Back Home Again in Indiana

by Indy Quillen

The Indianapolis 500 Race is about to begin and Jim Nabors steps up to the microphone to sing *Back Home Again in Indiana*. No matter that I haven't lived here for seventeen years, the lyrics "the new mown hay sends out its fragrance from the fields I used to roam..." evokes vivid memories, and I find myself reminiscing about the days of my childhood, of home in Indiana. I know I made the right decision, to return for a visit.

I stand in the full sun of summer, staring at the house before me, the house where I grew up from a chubby four-year-old toddler to a willowy eighteen-year-old teenager.

The clapboard house looks dull in its coat of beige paint...ordinary. Where is the expansive front yard leading down to the white picket fence, where petunias and marigolds bloomed in a vibrant splash of purple and gold? I miss their pungent fragrance, mingling with the scent of fresh cut grass. Instead, a small patch of yard barely separates the house from the neighborhood sidewalk and paved street.

The porch—I remember it being much grander back then—where we neighborhood kids joined together with our instruments and 'played music'. How tolerant our neighbors were!

Gone are the yellow primroses that graced the side of the house. Gone are the trees which bordered the yard, including *my* tree, a graceful box elder. I spent many hours hiding among the softly fluttering leaves, reading books. I loved my books—mysteries, fables and books about horses—stories that allowed me to magically live in whatever fantasy world I chose. On my high perch I could look out over the surrounding properties...pretend I

reigned as the Indian Princess of that land...waiting for my Warrior Prince to come and find me. I still believed in 'happy ever after' back then.

I look back at the house again. Would the owners understand why I want to walk inside once more? Wander the halls and seek out the bedroom where I spent my childhood? Where I dreamt my stories—mostly about cowboys and Indians—and I was always an Indian. It didn't matter that when I looked in the mirror a tow-headed little girl stared back at me. In my dreams I pulled on my doeskin dress, braided my blonde hair in long plaits, packed my little cardboard suitcase and took off to go 'home'.

Would they understand why I want to stare out the window to the backyard again—the window that I learned to 'jimmy', so that I could sneak out at night—and stand alone in the dark, under the stars? It didn't matter that I had nowhere else to go. It was just the idea that I could do it. I'd breathe in the moist air, knowing that it would soon be transformed into dewdrops, tiny sparkling jewels upon the flower petals.

I want so badly to experience it all again, to find the girl who dreamed such big dreams, and believed with all her heart they could come true. If only I could touch the walls of this house and bring back those memories...then maybe this feeling of emptiness, of knowing something is missing, could be healed.

But can I really 'go back home'? What if—just like the outside of the house—the inside has changed so much I would not recognize it. What if instead, entering the house completely destroyed those vague and precious mental pictures I cherish, forever leaving behind memories of a stranger's house, not my home? I turn away.

I gaze instead at the surrounding neighborhood. The large field we ran and played in, now just an ocean of rooftops, as far as I can see. The homemade baseball diamond is

gone...no place to race across the open land and fly a kite so high it becomes a tiny speck in the sapphire blue sky.

I think back to the young girl of my memories, free as the butterflies floating over the fields and flowers, scrambling over the slippery rocks of a creek, the water cold, clean and crisp on my fingertips...searching always for fossils and shells...the delight at each discovered treasure.

I can still recapture in my mind the smell of damp earth and leaves as I meandered through the woodlands, searching for mushrooms in the spring...memorizing the names of the trees...oak, maple, sycamore...while shafts of sunlight fell through the leaves overhead, the cardinals and robins flitting among the branches, the crunch of leaves and smell of pine needles underfoot. I remember the freedom of my youth, to roam and wander with no destination in mind.

How did I lose that sense of freedom over the years?

The houses around me come back into focus—back to reality—to now. Maybe I can't go back home. Maybe I shouldn't even try.

I know then it isn't the physical home I am longing for, after all. This is really about the spiritual oneness with nature I remember as a girl. The *knowing* that everything is connected, and a part of me. It's about the secret little places I found as a youth, where I knew the freedom to dream whatever I wished.

What's to stop me from returning to nature? True, I no longer live in the countryside. It's a bit more difficult to find these days. One has to search out the little wild places in the cities. But they do survive.

If I use my imagination, as I did as a child, I can find all sorts of hidden riches...that copse of trees just off the walking path at the lake...a quiet corner at the zoo, shaded by giant bamboo shoots...sitting on a boulder overlooking a pond at the botanical gardens.

And what's to stop me from wandering through the forest of a state park, playing again like a child in the waters of a creek, looking for fossils and listening to the singing of the Red-winged Blackbirds nearby?

I turn away from the houses, the neighborhood I no longer recognize. I choose to keep my memories as they are.

But I will find that little girl again, who played so hard and free.

That part of me I *can* find again—I *must* find again—if I am to survive, as the 'me' I've always wanted to be.