

## Through Different Eyes

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On a cloudless day two summers ago, at the beginning of my freshman year of college, I decide to take my bike for a spin. As I pedal across the campus, I find myself wandering further and further south, the pumping motion of my legs on the pedals lending rhythm to my thoughts. My eyes turn to slits against the blaring sun, the wind whipping my flyaway hair across my cheeks and into the corners of my mouth. When I reach the bustling intersection of Lincoln and Florida Avenues, I suddenly realize exactly where I am headed.

The field of unkempt grass is visible from several blocks away as I pedal east down Florida Avenue. I turn right onto Orchard Street, welcomed by the familiar sign proclaiming “Orchard Downs: Graduate Family Housing.” My bike hiccups along the uneven sidewalk as I navigate the cracks and protruding weeds, riding deeper into the neighborhood. Orchard Downs looks almost exactly as I remember it from over eight years ago, if perhaps a little worse for wear. The telltale signs of wear are visible in the rusty balcony railings, the faded, weather-beaten bricks of the buildings, and the asphalt parking lots crisscrossed by spider webs of cracks, all the more noticeable under the sun’s intense scrutiny.

This was my childhood home, the site of my many adventures and exploits, victories and tantrums. It’s a profound experience, viewing Orchard Downs through fresh eyes, without the veil of my glorified childhood memories. I cycle through the winding roads, nostalgia forming a lump in my throat that refuses to go away. On my right is the famed Orchard Downs hill, whose treacherous icy slope is perfect for sledding during the wintertime. Next, I pass the South Laundry building, where I learned to shoot my first free-throw in the basketball court behind the parking lot.

Soon, I am picking up speed, coasting aimlessly through the maze of narrow sidewalks, assaulted by the intense humidity and comforting boom of cicadas. I imagine myself once again at nine years old, twiggy legs flying across the pedals, mind racing with the endless possibilities of summer. Summers were my freedom; I would often head outside to play at eleven in the morning, and not get back home until after seven at night. For my nine year old self, it was exhilarating. On a beautiful day like this, I would be busy assembling my gang of friends.

Because the vast majority of graduate students living in Orchard Downs were international, my friends came from all sorts of different backgrounds. In the building next to mine were Sandra, my friend from Cameroon, and the ever charismatic Bruno.

“Sorr-e, sorr-e,” he would apologize in his thick Polish accent after doing something particularly goofy.

Then there was Jane, the petite, proud French Canadian; and Hye-Ji, my Korean

friend who tried unsuccessfully to get my picky palate to appreciate sushi. Together, we formed a veritable United Nations, though we were blissfully unaware of the fact. We would roam the flat, mowed fields behind my apartment building, clambering on the sandbox roof or inventing a new game on the monkey bars. We were the Orchard Downs gang, and the world was our playground.

I finally approach the next intersection and turn right towards my old street, Hazelwood Drive. I smile at the two empty wooden picnic tables nestled under the shade of a tree. At the corner by my bus stop, toothless Chinese grandparents would sell their daily fare of vegetables on these picnic tables, beckoning at us with fistfuls of onions and lettuce.

I turn left onto Hazelwood Drive, retracing my daily trek to and from the bus stop. As my eyes slide over the familiar buildings, I realize that I probably don't know anybody who lives here anymore. The parking lot is filled with unfamiliar cars, heat emanating from their sun-scorched surfaces. Everyone has moved away; in fact, I was one of the last of my old friends to still live in Orchard Downs, before we too moved away to my parents' new jobs about eight years ago.

My old building has a fresh coat of paint, but the color is the same monotonous beige as before. It's a hot, lazy afternoon on Hazelwood Drive, and I almost go inside my old building, curious to reopen the heavy metal door and retrace my old steps in the cool, dark hallways. But I stop myself at the last moment. I realize that I already know what's inside; the dark hallways and cramped apartments haven't changed at all in the interceding years. It is I who have changed.

I find myself standing at a mental crossroads. Under the soothing hum of the cicadas, I close my eyes and let the memories flood over me in intense undulations. I never thought that I would be back in Urbana, much less in my old childhood home. Nevertheless, I realize that this time, my future lies up north, in the bustling campus, not on this deserted street. There's nothing for me here now, except empty hallways and vibrant memories. A subtle shift in the wind snaps me out of my reverie. Slowly, I begin to smile as I squint at the shocking blue of the sky. It's time for the next adventure.