

**All I Really Need to Know:  
On Growing Up White in East Germantown**

April Rosenblum

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The story of Germantown, and how it's influenced me, is one I feel I've been writing my entire life. As a child, when I played outside, it seemed to me that there were stories seeping out of the soft, red-brick sidewalks – stories of generations and generations whose feet had sanded down those stones, floating up silently around me and mingling in the summer air with the songs of ice-cream trucks, double-dutch games, glass crunching underfoot, the jazz band practicing down the street.

Walking over the cobblestones of Germantown Avenue with my mother, I felt that we must have been leading a certain kind of pleasant coexistence with the spirits of all that history around us. (It's a good thing ghosts don't take up too much room, or Germantown would be filled to bursting, trying to fit all our regular, real neighbors too). So the first way that Germantown has shaped me must be this – my sense that something as ethereal as history *lives* around me, making just as firm a mark in everyday events as my own concrete presence.

Now, walking down the same streets I skipped along as a kid, Germantown is filled with new landmarks for me – the historical markers of my own growth as a young woman. And each time I come home to the neighborhood after my time away, I am reminded how much who I am can be traced to coming of age in precisely this time and place.

Factories surround you in this neighborhood, and for that, the sight of an old factory appears beautiful to me to this day: its bricks weather-beaten, its walls crumbling, the wild trees creeping through the cracks, the brilliant sky visible through the open roof. Does it sound funny to be enchanted by things so simple, things normally considered ugly? Likewise, the advantages of life in Germantown are not always obvious at first sight.

You know that book, for instance, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*? I could write that book, except about the 23 bus. Boarding the 23 is like being carried through the city by the coursing of Germantown's blood. I started riding the 23 to high school when I was 13 years old, and those rides, at seven every morning and four every afternoon, rewrote the way I looked at everything. In our times, it is possible to go through life without getting to know your neighbors. Try it sitting in a crammed SEPTA bus with forty other people, hearing every detail of their conversations and seeing every drop of sweat that rolls down their neck.

Being on the 23, you become intimately aware of the nuanced personalities around you. There are the little kids riding to school, the young mothers and fathers with babies and toddlers, the tired people on their way to and from work, the old folks who make laid-back conversation in the center of the chaos, the war-weary bus drivers.

There are the riders you see all the time, who get to know you in daily installments. The etiquette you soak in here, interpreted broadly, spills over to every other part of life: Give up your seat for old people and mamas. *Don't* be afraid of strangers... but know when to gracefully deflect overly personal inquiries with humor, and change seats. Stick up for people whether or not you know them. Sit in the back of the bus. Talk to the people you wouldn't normally hear from. Never argue with a crazy person.

That's the kind of education you can get here, if you pay attention; the formal training of how it is you live in the world. You say hello to people as you pass them on the street – or, more appropriately, “How you doin’?” It doesn't matter if you know them or not, that's how it's done. If you live here you know that if you're scared at night, you can't just lock yourself up in a car and go through life being afraid. You have to walk past that person under the street lamp and nod and look them in the eye. You have to have respect for the people around you. You have to know that danger exists everywhere and the best thing to do is to keep on *living*.

Germantown is like that. It's filled with beauty, but what's beautiful is that, like human beings, it's complex. If you really love it you have to be willing to see it in all its complexity. There are things everyone would rather be without; it's not white picket fences. But it's all Germantown: walls covered over and over again by graffiti and fresh coats of paint, dandelions coming through cracks in the sidewalk, vendors selling bean pies and incense. It's seeing the train pass by my window, the ghost of a staircase visible on a house that once shared its wall with another, and the sunset over C.A. Rowell's. It's thinking you smell that old, familiar chocolate scent and remembering that Asher's Candy is gone; the abandoned factory-turned-welfare office, the trolley tracks that almost never get used. It's honeysuckle, corner stores, kids playing in graveyards, and fire hydrants, fireflies and front stoops.

It's row-houses, rally leaflets, liquor ads, sneakers on telephone wires, hopscotch, dollar stores, church bells, murals of David Richardson and all our patron saints. It's 25-cent library sales, pigeons, crack vials, the R & B station playing in Village Thrift Shop, storefront churches, street party barbecues, “stop-and-go's” getting shut down and re-opening, boarded-up houses, community gardens, Sun Ra, cars going the wrong way down my one-way street while everyone shouts at them, dogs barking in the middle of the night like whisper-down-the-lane, connected back yards, horses in the parking lot down the block, chickens bred and honey cultivated by my neighbor, gunshots, the old lady on her porch who always smiles and waves when you say hello, green awnings, fake grass on porches, the “Jesus Never Fails” sign.

A lot of what I have learned here has that same quality – it didn't all seem so amazing until I was able to step back and take it all in. In fact, one of my biggest strokes of fortune in life was one I didn't appreciate until I was almost an adult: that among all the kids in my part of Germantown, I was the only white girl I knew. I can remember while doing errands with my mom on Chelton Avenue when I was about six, seeing white people on the other side of the street and pointing at them, bewildered. It was obvious that they didn't belong. I was consistently reminded by my playmates on the

block that I was white, and *I* didn't belong. Not a day passed when some kid didn't point it out.

For many white people in our society, our own race is something that, for most of life, remains invisible. When you receive the benefits of the racial structure, it's pretty easy to forget that race plays a role in life at all. Not so for those who don't have the privilege – nor for me, and at that age, it seemed miserable to live in a neighborhood in which I was a minority of one.

The irony of that role-reversal escaped me until several years later. After all my years of Black History in the Philadelphia public school system, what woke me up to reality was living through events like the riots over the Rodney King verdict, when I was in sixth grade. And once I began to think about the big injustices around me, the routine inequalities of everyday life started to fall into place in my consciousness. Suddenly, walking down 'the Avenue' was one small epiphany after another.

Germantown is a lesson in the daily struggles people go through. For a white kid who is awakening to all this, it is a lesson in humility – a realization that you can't ever again let yourself be fooled into thinking that you're better than anyone else.

Once you notice something as pervasive as inequality, there's no going back. It's everywhere you turn. It had never dawned on me, for instance, to wonder how Black History became a routine part of the classroom. I know now that it took the combined voices of thousands of young people, from Philly – from Germantown – marching, raising the issue, asserting their right to learn their history, until it could no longer be ignored. And I'm living in the unique moment when that generation is my mother's age, living all around me, in our neighborhood. They are living links to our history, who urge us to take things into our hands and become the agents of change.

Germantown taught me, and teaches me, respect for human dignity and admiration for the human spirit. It made me down to earth, outraged at injustice, and conscious of my place in history. It has sharpened my hearing to the untold stories in the air. It begs us to tell our stories aloud.