

Wet corduroy

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I've lots of good memories of my childhood. Climbing the Big Fir, learning to stay upright on a two-wheeler, building a crystal radio from one of those kits you could order from the back of magazines. Giggling catfish in Phantom Lake, catching my first snake in the woods by our house. Rites of passage in a boy's life; back when I was a boy, anyway.

One of my sharpest memories involves trudging home from school in the dark, in a driving rain, sobbing and drooling snot as I went. My Catholic school uniform trousers becoming ever more sodden with each splatting step. I was miserable, truly and inconsolably miserable.

I don't recall the exact nature of the failed communication that left me stranded at school long after all the other kids had been picked up by the fleet of mothers. My own Mom didn't have a car at her disposal most days but when she did, she would never have left me to my own devices in such an impressive storm. I probably just started out later than usual. I remember I frequently stayed late at school for this reason or that. Basketball practice or a Scout meeting or altar boys or sorting cans for the current food drive. Usually, things worked out. I was well accustomed to walking the mile-or-so, rain or no rain. Sometimes I'd catch a ride with Mrs. Russell from down the street or Mr. Negri, the school janitor if I happened to time things right. But mostly, I walked.

It seldom bothered me to make these solitary treks. My older sister had her own after school activities and my younger brother usually went right home, so walking alone was part of my normal. And as I said, growing up next to the Cascade foothills, rain was a fact of life for which we were generally well prepared.

Just not when it was raining hard enough to so thoroughly overwhelm the roadside storm ditches that my ankles at each step made rooster tails in the running water. With the exception of driving through a gully washer north of Atlanta many years later this was probably the most impressive rainstorm I've encountered, before or since. And there I was, marking my squishing cadence down Main Street, along the flat by Larsen Lake and up the hill to my neighborhood, soggy book bag slung over my shoulder like some sort of pre-teen hobo.

The funny thing is, this is not what I consider a bad memory. In fact, I recall it sort of nostalgically. I mean, I knew I would get home eventually (I did) and that Mom would meet me at the back patio door with a huge towel (she did) and that it was neither evil intent nor negligence that decreed I walk home alone in the rain. It was just one of those things that happens. And through that whole mile-plus of self-pity, I never seriously doubted that things would work out okay.

Still, why do I recall such a miserable slog with such warmth?

Couldn't tell you. Except that maybe even then, I knew that I was one of the people who by accident of birth was anointed with good fortune. I might be cold and wet but not starving. No one was invading my country and if I got sick, there was always a doctor. I was lucky.

The thing is, sometimes even the lucky ones end up wearing soggy corduroys.