

My Window to the World

BY DIANE FORMAN

As a child, I was always afraid of the dark and of enclosed spaces. Before I even knew the word, I was claustrophobic, imploring that we take the stairs rather than risk potential entrapment in a dark, stifling elevator, my uncertainty rising with each floor. *Would the doors open? How long would I be confined inside before I began gasping for air, like my long-dead goldfish?*

When my brother Steve was 10 and I was 7, he made a fort in his room with two packing boxes, large enough for him to easily escape the rest of the family. He was a good brother who let me decorate the fort's exterior with crayons and markers. I colored a cheery rainbow and bright yellow sun on the side facing the hall. I liked seeing my illustrations looking back at me every time I went to my bedroom.

One day, Steve asked if I wanted to peek inside the fort. He'd open the flaps and leave a large air hole open where I could exhale easily. Despite my anxiety, the fort had me curious so I agreed, because I knew my brother. He would never intentionally trap and frighten me like some of my friends' brothers. I stayed away from them.

Steve gently tilted up the bottom edge of the box, and I crawled in and sat, surrounded by three sides of darkness and an opening of light and air, where I could breathe less jaggedly. After a few moments, I began to giggle. I told him he could lower the flap a bit to make it a bit darker. I wanted more of the fort experience, but just enough to stay in my comfort zone. We sat together inside the box for a little while, the open flap loosely propped on his desk chair.

"See?" he exclaimed. "I knew you'd like it! It's not really that scary!"

My brother did tease me when he was in



The writer and her brother in 1959 (above) at their home in Chicago, and later, in the mid-1970s, when he was home from college for the holidays. Both still play piano.



high school. I was in junior high at the time, only permitted to peer from the stairs while his extremely cool band practiced in the basement. But I was so proud when they played in the Fourth of July parade. They rode by on a flat-bed truck decked out in patriotic streamers, and you could still hear them singing "Louie, Louie" as they turned the corner.

"That's my brother," I boasted, secretly wishing I were one of those high school girls dancing on the truck with their long hair blowing in the wind. Secretly wishing he'd waved to me as they rolled past.

After college, Steve moved 2,000 miles away from our home outside Chicago to Seattle, but it may as well have been the North Pole. I continued to send him letters, and was surprised to learn a few years ago that he'd saved them all. During a visit east before the pandemic, he handed me a large stack tied with a piece of twine. We read them together, letters I'd written while he was at camp, in college, when he was newly married, newly divorced. I didn't remember half the things I had scrawled. I didn't remember feeling that way. I didn't remember dotting the *i* in my name with a heart.

Distance prevents us from seeing each other often, but like old friends, we text and e-mail about articles and podcasts. Once a week we talk on the phone, sharing details that don't belong in texts. More than five decades after we sat together under a propped boxed fort, Steve continues to be one of my greatest champions and quellers of anxiety.

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