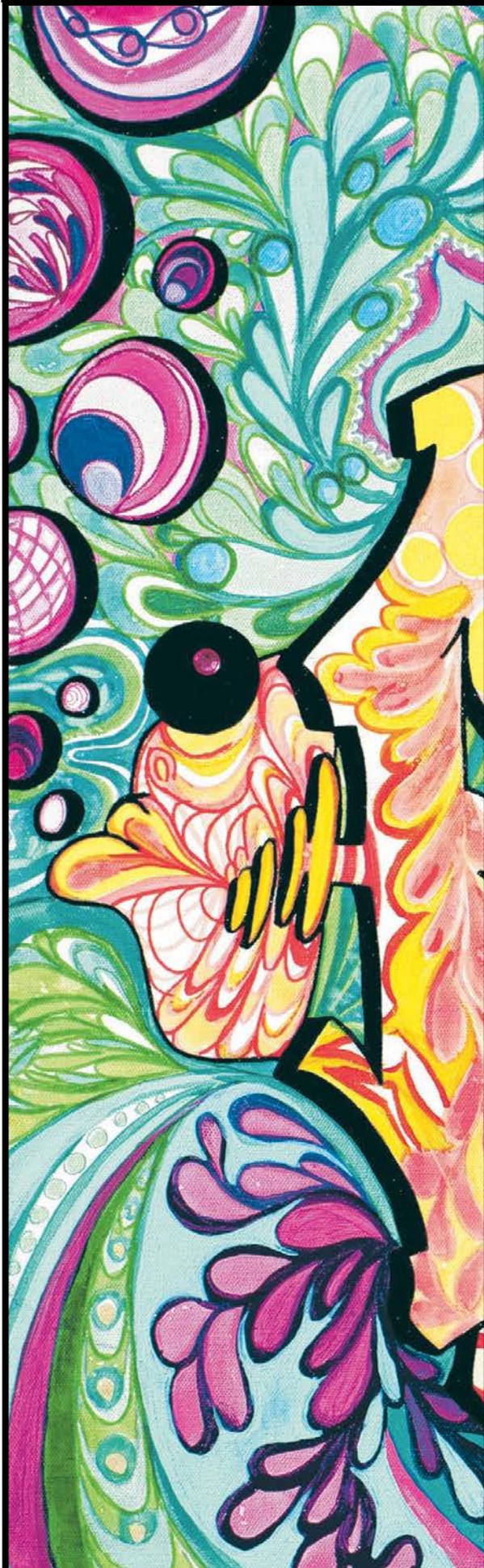


#FRESH ESSAY



EDNA AND ME

When I was 6, I ran away regularly to the house of my neighbor, Edna Arnold. Edna was a 50-something Marge Simpson with more than a dash of Lady Gaga spunk. She smoked name brand cigarettes - no slim, feminine ones for her. She swore freely, laughed loudly and used colorful phrases to sum up nearly any situation. Her words popped and crackled.

I overheard my mother and Edna gossiping one day about some woman's ill-fated love match. When Edna blurted out, "Love goes where it's sent, even if it's up a pig's arse," I knew I'd found some exotic, mesmerizing creature. Edna's coarse accent, from some distant mid-Atlantic state, was a bonus. No one talked like that at my house.

So whenever I was fed up with my mother not understanding my artistic sensibilities, I walked. A few doors down I found solace in the plain two-story house that Edna shared with her husband, Frank, a stocky, milquetoast man who often looked like he needed a drink the minute he came home from work each day.

I never dreamed of going to my best friend Cindy's house. I could have gone down the street to Ronnie Kurtz's house bursting with the activity of five kids. Nope, Edna was my girl. A housewife with grown children, Edna was always home.

I'd pack seven clean pairs of underwear — nothing else — in my mother's small alligator-imprinted suitcase with her initials "MDG" etched on the closure and start off. To prove my point of being an under-appreciated small human, I did not make a sneaky getaway through our backyards to get to Edna's house. Oh no, me and my suitcase walked down my gravel driveway to the narrow road. I strutted with my head high, posture erect, and suitcase swinging. After about two hundred yards, I marched up Edna's long driveway. She always seemed to be waiting for me at the back door, which led straight to her kitchen.

"Hello, Tina. How are you today?" Her cat-shaped eyeglass frames were eclipsed only by her mouth, cranking up like an un-tuned motor. "Come in and have some cookies and milk."

They were usually inexpensive store-bought sandwich cookies, vanilla wafers and cream. Not my favorite, but runaways couldn't be choosy.

She'd talk about the weather ("The rain came down in sheets like a waterfall!"), the neighbor's garden ("The rhubarb was as big as an ox this year!"), the fishing season ("Atrocious!"), and anything else she deemed worthy of discussion with a 6-year-old nibbling somewhat distractedly on pure sugar.

The phone would always ring while I was there. Before Edna picked up, I would say, "If



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that's my mom, don't tell her I'm here." "Of course not, dear." She'd lower her chin and bob her head, as if we were in this together from the start.

Her conversations with my mother were always brief and cryptic. I imagine they went something like this:

"Did Tina arrive?"

"Uh-hum."

"How does she seem?"

"Pretty good."

"Send her home when you're sick of her."

"I'd be happy to."

"Bye-bye."

Edna betrayed nothing. She sat back down with me at the kitchen table with her cigarette smoke punctuating our conversation. She never ate any cookies or drank any milk that I can remember. She just talked. Those words kept bubbling up and out of her mouth in unusual ways. I loved the world Edna lived in.

But after about twenty minutes of Edna's incessant talking, home didn't look quite that bad after all. I had a few more cookies just to be sure. When I left Edna's house, eager for some quiet time, she would send me off with a cheery goodbye, "You come by any time for a talk, dear." Then I imagine she would call my mother to alert her to an incoming child.

I sauntered back the same way I'd come, walking down Edna's driveway and onto the road with my suitcase, which I held as discreetly as possible at my side. I moved slowly with intention, examining cracks in the macadam, butterflies swirling, puffy clouds — anything that would prolong my runaway status in the hope that my mother would worry longer and that I'd appear less foolish for stomping out. My mother, no doubt, could simply look out the window to see her little girl, somewhat embarrassed, making her way home. I walked back up my own driveway, feeling defeated, knowing that my will had not lived up to my righteous indignation. It was combined with a ruby-slipper, three-click sort of sensation. I really had a very nice life.

My mother pretended not to notice as I walked into the house, closed the door quietly behind me, and tiptoed up the stairs to my bedroom. I can only imagine that she stifled a grin as she allowed me to keep some self-respect intact. I like to think she was at least a little proud of her independent child. But who knows? She may just have been relieved to have me back within her own four walls. One thing is fairly certain: she must have been grateful for a neighbor like Edna Arnold. I know I was.

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