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Basement Nostalgia

The smell of a musty basement. For some people, the smell might seem repulsive, reminding them of dank, dirty spaces overcrowded with boxes that haven't been opened in years. Others might be repelled by the smell for fear of the creepy crawly critters that loom in the dark corners and crevices of the basement. For me, however, the smell brings back fond childhood memories of rainy days spent in games of Hide and Seek, Cops and Robbers, and epic Halloween haunts.

I lived for most of my childhood in a semi-dilapidated 1901 mansion in the Main Line of Philadelphia. The only reason my father could afford the place was because of its disrepair, and he spent the 11 years of our occupancy bringing it to a state of livability. I have many fond memories of that house, despite (or perhaps because of) its disrepair. My siblings and I spent many hours playing games of Kick-the-Can or touch football in the backyard. In inclement weather the basement became our playground.

Our basement was perhaps the creepiest and most exhilarating basement I've ever seen. It ran the length of the house and included a number of period-specific areas such as a wine cellar complete with iron bars and a living room sized coal bin (wine and coal not included). Since the basement ran the length of the 6,000 square foot house, and was dimly lit on the best of days, it provided us with limitless opportunities for imaginative play. We would disappear in the basement for hours, returning to the light only when our empty stomachs began complaining. I

don't remember my mother ever minding the filthy bodies that emerged through the basement door; I would imagine that's because she had received a well-deserved reprieve during our basement adventures.

One of my favorite basement games was Hide and Seek. As one of the younger siblings, I always struggled to keep up in games of speed and agility like freeze tag and kickball; however, my diminutive size and quiet demeanor gave me the edge in Basement Hide and Seek. You might think that after a while all the best hiding spots would have been figured out, but not in our basement and not with our rules. According to our rules, those hiding worked as a team to evade the "seeker". Rather than hiding and staying put until found, the "hider" could move from hiding spot to hiding spot to evade detection. The crime of discovery resulted in the punishment of prison time.

The wine cellar served as a fabulous prison for this game because of its iron bars and the squeaky rusted out hinges. Since the game had to be played in complete silence (upon penalty of prison time), the eerie creeeeeeeeek of the opening and closing wine cellar door, followed by the resounding clank of the heavy iron latch seemed to add a certain ominous formality to the game. Prison breaks were possible in this game, but only if a "hider" managed to sneak to the prison, open the door, and release the prisoners, all without being detected. Once released, prisoners could reclaim hiding spots and the game would continue. In order to win the round, the "seeker" had to capture and imprison all participants.

I rarely tried to play the hero in Basement Hide and Seek. Instead, I would curl up in an obscure, shadowy corner and hide for the duration of the round, delighting in the sounds of shrieking siblings, slamming prison doors, scuffling feet, attempted prison breaks, and the occasional pained cry resulting from a stubbed toe or bumped head. I remember one particular

round during which I chose an old, broken down wardrobe as my hiding spot. Lest you think this will turn into another rendition of Lucy's tale, I will reassure you that I chose to hide on top, rather than within the wardrobe. How I managed to climb onto the wardrobe I do not remember, but I do remember that at some point during the game I fell asleep. I awoke several hours later to a basement emptied of both light and inhabitants! The game was over, and my siblings had exited the basement some time before I awoke. For some inexplicable reason on this particular occasion they actually REMEMBERED to turn the basement lights off upon exiting.

The most astonishing thing about this story is that I wasn't the least bit scared when I awoke to the deafening silence and blinding blackness. Since I only knew the basement as a place of fun and entertainment, I felt no reason to fear the black silence. Instead, I crawled back down from the obviously epic hiding spot, felt my way through the darkness, ascended the basement stairs, and reentered the main floor to the astonished looks of my family who were sitting down to dinner. Apparently, my sister had spread the false tale that I had quit the game and headed to my room for a nap in order win her round of hide and seek, since she had imprisoned all "hidiers" except for me. My mother believed her and decided to let me sleep rather than wake me for dinner. I suppose in one sense it was only a half lie, since I had in fact fallen asleep atop my wardrobe hiding spot.

I could recall other fond basement stories, but that's for another day. Suffice it to say, I have nothing but positive memories of my dilapidated-mansion-basement. To this day, I can't help but be bombarded with nostalgia when I inhale the pleasant scent of a dank, musty basement. Please do not take offence if I sneak a deep whiff of yours.