

For my mother, Regis Illston Venable

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By Alan Venable

Not that four children was a lot in those days. The Falks had four and so did the Kerrs, for example. And the Ayres and the Foldeses and lots had three. Two kids was nothing back in those days.

But four and all boys was different. All she had was one boy after another. The first one was born, and about a week later he wanted a Lionel train. She'd never had a brother even, much less a son, and she was very happy with him.

Then a year or so passed and she had a second boy, this one a little more elusive but still a boy, and though she'd been open to the idea of a girl, she'd begun to learn about boys and was happy again, and could see the convenience of it.

That first boy was about age four and the second right around age two in 1944 when they bought the old mansion in Shadyside, the house with the sixteen rooms not counting the eight bathrooms, the room-sized halls, and the cavernous cellar. They rented out what used to be the servants' quarters on the attic floor and her husband set up his labs and shops in the basement.

In the main upstairs, two good-sized rooms looked out over the front yard across the streetcar tracks along Fifth, across to a long flight of steps up Squirrel Hill. She chose one of those rooms for the master bedroom and the other for the boys' room, and set aside in her mind another room that looked out over the wild backyard, its bay windows overlooking the lilacs. She thought it would be the girls' room.

Then she had me, and I was a boy, and though she'd been thinking privately of a girl by now, well, she wasn't displeased this time either, was grateful for her

growing family, tended and loved her children. Anyway, boys were probably simpler, now that she'd figured a few things out, especially what with the hand-me-downs. So they put the older boys in a bunk bed and put a single bed in the boy's room for me when I outgrew the crib. And Mattie Belle Herring started coming days to help keep house and kind of even things out a little.

Then somewhere in along there came her father-in-law, climbing his seventies, a man of benevolent but definite opinions, who, when her husband had to be away on business, would keep her spirits up nights reading her Shakespeare, expurgating any unfit passages as he read. But they spared the girls' room and he occupied another smaller bedroom tucked back in a corner of the upstairs that no one had used yet -- moved in with his scientific books and drafting table, his checkers and jackstraws, because in some ways he was still a boy. And that in a way made four boys.

Then she had her fourth child. And though she'd been thinking "girl" pretty religiously by that point he was as boy as the three before and she concluded that's how things would be with her and babies.

So that was five boys counting the four and the grandfather, and, to speak the truth, the husband was kind of a kid himself and made it *six* boys really. Six boys and Mama, and Mattie, who got to go home at night.

I guess around then she let go the ambition of choosing her progeny and came to agree with her women friends at church (though she did not have a lot of time to see her women friends from church in those years) that four boys (or six) was plenty. So she stopped. She and her husband put another bunk bed in the boys' room and stacked them in two pairs. And she and her husband made those four boys' room into a real *boys'* room for sure by painting the walls with aluminum paint and sticking decal

stars on the ceiling; and for just enough light to get into pajamas by, found a chrome hub lamp with a tiny aeroplane propeller in the center with an eerie, circular fluorescent bulb. The boys seemed pleased. Over the years they hung pennants and suspended balsa airplanes and pasted airline stickers and so forth on the headboards. And that was the boys' room.

That left the girls' room empty, the room she'd painted sky blue, with the wide bay window framed by the fluted pillars she'd scraped and smoothed and painted ivory, and if she ever found the time someday, she might sit on a window seat and look out over the lilacs.

She'd moved her sewing cabinet in there, though it didn't take up more than a corner. And moved the crib in there by the fireplace and put in it the lace and porcelain dolls of her girlhood, which did not take up much room either.

She had a double bed put in the room and called it "the guestroom" though to me it was "the blue room", and for all but six or seven nights a year that beautiful blue room was empty, unless her husband's old Uncle Bryant, the pepper-bearded mathematician, passed through on his way from Washington to Cincinnati, or some other uncle, or once a year maybe her sister Dorris down from Jamestown, with *her* son, Bobby. Or so I remember.

Even after Grandfather died and his room could have become the guest room, and by now the eldest boy was sprouting in his teens, the blue room stayed mostly empty, unless she was up there during the day or sometimes of an evening (though she liked to be downstairs with her family) hemming someone's chinos.

"The guest room... Mama's sewing room ... the blue room...." It's still the most beautiful room. At night in late spring you can curl up on the window seat, the window

up, sit flush with the open air three stories above the lilacs, and hear the crickets in the yard.

All the years you were growing up, you never slept there, never disturbed the bed, because it was still her daughter's room, and the only way you were ever going to get to stay in the blue room was move out of that tin-walled bunkroom of boys, straggle through college and get married and bring her home a girl.

So that's what we did. We each went out and got married and came back and said, "Here she is, Mama."

And she and she would settle smiles on each other and Mama would say something to me like, "It's nice to have you. Take the bags upstairs." While she and her newest daughter drifted off together toward the kitchen.

And I carried the bags upstairs and put them in the room and looked around at the old sewing table and the low crib of fragile dolls and the three bright windows looking out on the still green yard and thought, No, I'd been wrong. This room was never empty.