

My Interesting Summer: Short Story

By Jane Skinner

That summer – the summer between grades 5 and 6 – my brother and I were subjected to an exacting regimen.

On Mondays, we went for swimming lessons. The lessons were held just up the street, in the pool of one of my mother's friends. Her university-age daughter was home for the summer and trying to make some extra money giving swimming lessons in the family pool. We could walk up the street in our bathing suits, have our lesson, then stay and swim in the pool for as long as we wanted. Our swimming instructor's mother, Mrs. Harrison, would bring a tray with Cokes, chips and other goodies to the side of the pool when we were ready.

Tuesdays, we were driven first thing in the morning to the golf club where we took golf lessons and tennis lessons. I didn't take either of these activities very seriously, but my brother did. He liked to boast about how much better he was at golf than me. I liked sitting around the club house afterwards, waiting for my mother to pick us up, drinking ginger ale and putting the charge on my parents' tab.

On Wednesday mornings, we set off for the church day camp, again on foot. It was a longer walk, but, unbeknownst to my mother, we took a little-used path along the river. The path came out at the edge of the little woods behind the church, next to the old cemetery. We spent the day reading Bible stories, singing songs, and running around the church auditorium like maniacs. I liked sneaking outside to peer over the wrought iron fence at the cemetery.

I had piano lessons on Thursdays. Mrs. Condicort, my piano teacher, took a laissez faire approach and often, at the end of the lesson, began to play and sing songs I'd never heard before. She had long, orange-red painted nails that clicked on the piano keys and sang in a warbling, dramatic voice.

The falling leaves ... Drift by my window ... The autumn leaves ... Of red and gold ...

I thought it was the prettiest song I'd ever heard, but when I told my mother that, she said "She really sings that?"

One day, Mrs. Condicort sent me home with a note. The contents were simple; the Condicorts were going to be away for the month of August. Piano lessons would resume after Labour Day.

My mother made the necessary adjustments to the large calendar that hung in the kitchen and detailed all of our household's activities. My parents had very few interesting things noted on the calendar. In fact, none of it was very interesting: *John, dentist, 2 p.m. Louise, doctor, 9:30 a.m.* And more of that kind. Very dull.

Friday was our day of freedom. We were not booked or organized to do anything that day, but not due to any inability on behalf of my mother to find us things to do. But there were fewer options back then, in the mid 1960s, in a small Ontario town.

“Maybe you could do something constructive on Fridays, help the neighbours with their garden for instance.”

We were sitting at the breakfast table one Monday morning. I was eating one slice of toast, all I was allowed as in those days, it was ill advised to eat much before swimming. My brother Bobby, on the other hand, was still in his pajamas, claiming he was feeling too sick to go swimming. He had toast too, but he was dipping it into a yolky fried egg, settled on his plate next to several strips of crisp bacon.

“If we had a dog,” I said, as innocently as if I’d never brought the subject up before. “I could walk the dog on Fridays.”

“We’re not getting a dog. Not right now, anyway. And if you have a dog, you have to walk them every day, not just Fridays.”

My brother nodded in agreement with my mother. “Yeah, you have to walk them every day.”

“You’re not sick. Faker,” I said to him, with as much vindictiveness as I could summon. My mother looked at Bobby, seeming to realize for the first time that he was eating his way through a full plate of food.

“My gut aches,” muttered my brother, clutching his stomach.

I swam, golfed, prayed, and did scales and my weeks passed fairly pleasantly. The afternoons were usually free, and I spent time with my two friends, Mary and Denise. We had concocted a little hideout in Mary’s mother’s garage; the garage was so full of junk that the car could no longer be parked there, and we perched among boxes and old furniture and discussed matters of great importance. Mary’s mother was a young widow and worked as a schoolteacher. In the summers, she spent a lot of time reading and listening to music, often lying on the living room couch. Mary’s older sister and her husband lived in the basement of the house. No one paid much attention to we three girls hunkered down in the dark garage on beautiful summer afternoons.

One of our topics of conversation was how I could acquire a dog without, somehow, my parents knowing.

“You could sneak a dog in when they’re out somewhere, and take it up to your room,” said Denise.

I shook my head. “They would know. Plus, they never go anywhere. They stay home all the time.”

“Your dad goes to work, doesn’t he? And your mum must be down in the basement doing laundry sometimes, right?”

I just shook my head again. I knew that would never work, for about a thousand different reasons.

Friday soon became my favourite day of the week. I felt free in a way that I wouldn’t experience again for decades. My mother had decided to start her own business baking cakes for other people’s special occasions, and she was often busy on Fridays getting cakes ready for weekend parties around the neighbourhood. The cake orders were listed on a piece of paper pinned to the bulletin board next to the telephone.

Mabel Green large white with buttercream icing (must serve 12)

Claire Dobson round spice, white icing, tea party

Ruth McNab two large chocolate, fudge frosting, baby shower

“What’s the difference between icing and frosting?” I asked one day, looking over the list.

My mother glanced at me. She was busy sifting flour. “What? There is no difference.”

Sometimes the cake deals fell through at the last minute. If this happened, we would be treated to cake for dessert that night. My favourite was spice cake, and when Claire Dobson fell and broke her wrist the day before her tea party, I was practically gleeful when my mother set large slices of cake before each of us at dinner on Saturday night. We didn’t go to church on Sundays in the summer, but I did add a desire for more cake to my usual prayers at church summer camp the following Wednesday.

My brother usually disappeared, on his bicycle, with friends, by mid-morning. With Mum busy in the kitchen, I was left to my own devices. I found an old wildflower identification book on the bookshelves in the basement and started taking it with me on walks in the ravine behind our house. Or I went over to Mary’s house, and we sat with her mother as she watched soap operas in the afternoon. I filled my bike’s tires with air and rode to the public pool across town. Alternatively, I rode to the local library and took out the three books that children were allowed, at a time, in those days.

One Friday, two momentous things happened. I was sitting idly at a table in the library when the librarian approached me, book in hand.

“Here’s a new book you might like,” she said, holding out a book with a picture of a girl wearing jeans on the cover.

“Harriet the Spy, by Louise Fitzhugh,” I mumbled. Spy? That sounded interesting. I signed the book out, along with two others whose titles I have long since forgotten. The three books, with Harriet the Spy on top, were set in my bicycle basket for the ride home.

I rode most of the way home on the sidewalks, the streets being busy with traffic. The town where we lived was on the cusp of enormous change – development and growth unlike anything we’d seen or even imagined was coming, and soon. The flow of cars from the highway and onto the main street was already increasing. I waited patiently at a busy corner for the lights to change. Once home, I decided, I’d see what there was to snack on in the kitchen (despite my mother’s aptitude for cake-baking, we had relatively little snack food in house. “Have an apple”, we were often told) then hunker down in my bedroom to read Harriet the Spy.

Meanwhile, I’d have to wait what felt like forever for the red light to turn green. There was a Mac’s Milk on the corner where I crossed the street, and I gazed idly at the notices in the window about various specials on offer. Then a small notice caught my eye:

Dog Walker Needed – Urgent!

Senior citizen needs help walking small dog

Will pay!!

Call ...

The sign ended in a strip of phone-numbered tags. I tore one off and shoved it in the pocket of my shorts. The light changed and I pushed off.

Using the telephone was somewhat awkward. I never actually made phone calls, and there were disapproving looks from my mother on the rare instances when Mary or Denise called me. The phone was dark green and hung on the wall in the kitchen. Privacy was impossible. For one thing, my mother was constantly in the kitchen. There were often cakes cooling on racks or having icing spread on them. The smell was intoxicating. If the phone rang, it was usually someone calling for my mother, perhaps to order a cake. Using the kitchen phone was out of the question.

I climbed the stairs to my bedroom and set my library books on my desk. My small room was as neat as a pin, and the bed was, of course, made. I thought about lying down on top of the bedspread and starting Harriet the Spy, but decided instead to creep quietly across the hall to my parents’ bedroom. As far as I could determine, there was no one in the house, besides myself, except for my mother, busy in the kitchen. Bobby was off somewhere riding his bicycle. There was my older brother Clay to contend with, but he was, as far as I knew, out of the house at his summer job at the nearby grocery store. He was seven years older than

me, and usually he was either at work or out somewhere with his girlfriend Debbie. Clay had scraped up enough money to buy his own car, making his absences even more frequent.

My parents' bedroom door was open. I slipped quietly into their room and closed the door behind me, thereby breaking one of my father's cardinal rules: bedroom doors were never to be closed unless you were getting changed. But Dad wasn't home during the day, and it was very unlikely that he would come home early from work. I sat on Dad's side of the bed and picked up the receiver of the princess phone kept on the night table.

Quickly I dialed the number on the slip of paper I'd plucked from the sign at Mac's Milk and, after just one ring, a quavering voice answered.

"Hello, I would like to help walk your dog?" It was both a statement and a question.

"Well, who is this please?"

I told her – it was obviously an old lady – and she immediately said, "Oh yes, the Anderson's little girl. Dear, do you think you're old enough to walk a dog? He's not very big but he has a mind of his own."

It turned out that I was talking to one of our neighbours. It was old Mrs. McGill from up the street. She lived in a comfortable-looking bungalow a few houses beyond my piano teacher Mrs. Condicort. Come to think of it, I had noticed a small, brown, roly-poly sort of dog, occasionally sitting on Mrs. McGill's front step or being walked, very gingerly, by her along the edge of our street.

"Since Leonard died, it's terribly hard for me to get out and walk Henry in the morning. He'll go in the back yard in the evenings, but he needs his morning walk. Leonard always walked him. Henry misses Leonard too, you know, misses him terribly. Well, dear, if you think you're mature enough to walk Leonard – oh no, I mean walk Henry – if you're mature enough to walk Henry, that would be just fine. How old are you dear?"

I had just turned 11, but wondered if it would be OK to fudge and say I was 12. 12 was mature. 12 was practically a teenager.

But Mrs. McGill knew my mother and would no doubt want to talk to her about me walking Henry. And Mum would tell her how old I really was, too.

"Going on for 12," I said. It wasn't a lie.

We agreed that I would walk over after dinner and meet Henry officially.

I opened my parents' bedroom door, prepared to quickly cross the hall to my own bedroom, when I saw that my brother Clay was moving around in his room.

"Hey, what are you doing in there?" he asked in genuine surprise.

“Never you mind,” I said tartly. It was one of my mother’s expressions.

Clay snorted. “Hope you didn’t stink the place up with your farts.”

“I’ll have you know,” I said, in my most high-and-mighty voice, “that I had an important phone call to make.”

Clay shrugged, immediately disinterested, and headed downstairs with a duffle bag slung over his shoulder.

I was on pins and needles until dinner time. I’d have to say something to my parents, although Clay had probably already blabbed to Mum on his way out to wherever he was going. I lay on my bed, staring at the ceiling, forgetting about Harriet the Spy for the time being. It wasn’t long before I heard a clamour from downstairs – Bobby arriving home, my dad’s car pulling in the driveway followed by the clomp of his shoes on the kitchen floor, Mum’s voice calling my name, telling me to get down here and set the table.

During the meal, Bobby chattered away incessantly, something about a baseball game, a ball falling in a pond, a bicycle getting a flat tire ... none of it made any sense or interested me at all. I kept thinking about a small brown dog, just up the street, desperately in need of a walk. Finally, as our plates were cleaned and the table was cleared, I blurted out, “I have to go somewhere tonight.”

“What? Where?”

I swallowed. “I have to go see Mrs. McGill tonight. She needs somebody to walk Henry in the morning and I’m applying for the job.” There was silence, and then I saw a small smile on my father’s face. “I found her phone number on a poster at Mac’s Milk and I called her.”

“Not fair! I want to walk Henry!” Bobby shouted.

“Maybe you can do it together,” my mother suggested.

“No! I’m doing it by myself!” I said.

“OK, no Bobby, this is Alice’s thing.” My father, the voice of authority, and suddenly the most wonderful father in the world. “I think it’s a great idea. You’ve wanted a dog for a long time, and this will be the next best thing to having a dog of your own. You’ll get an idea for what having a dog is all about.”

Later, Dad and I walked up the street together, and Mrs. McGill greeted us at her front door. The grown-ups sat on chairs in the back yard while I played with Henry on the grass. He was a sturdy little dog with short legs and a round body covered with bristly ginger brown fur. His eyes and nose were black, and his tongue bright pink. A few sharp whiskers jutted from his wide snout. He was the most wonderful dog I’d ever seen. I sat on the grass and he lounged in my lap, his tongue hanging out.

“So, you want to do this?” Dad asked. Mrs. McGill looked on expectantly.

“Yes!” I shouted. Henry, as if understanding my delight, tore ecstatically around the yard.

The agreement was that I would walk Henry for fifteen minutes at 7:30 every morning, rain or shine. Mrs. McGill showed me his collar and leash, and the leather harness he sometimes wore. They were kept on a small table next to the front door. Henry looked on with interest as we went over these precious items. I would be paid two dollars every week for walking Henry. The money seemed like incredible wealth to me, but really, I would have paid for the privilege, if I had any money of my own.

I skipped home, excited beyond measure, that night. And I barely slept a wink. I was up at 6 a.m., and since it was Saturday, everyone else was still fast asleep. My new job started that very day! I dressed in a pair of brown shorts and the blue polo shirt I wore for golf lessons and went downstairs to make my own breakfast. A bowl of cereal, a slice of toast, and I was ready to go. And it wasn't even 6:30 yet.

I started reading the first page of *Harriet the Spy*, just to pass the time before I had to walk up to Mrs. McGill's house.

Harriet was trying to explain to Sport how to play Town.

“Good book?” It was Dad, still in his pajamas. He opened the cupboard and brought out a jar of coffee.

“I just started it, but I think it will be good. This girl, she lives in New York City and she spies on all her neighbours.”

“You like reading, don't you, Alice?” Dad added several spoonfuls of coffee to the percolator and set it on the stove. He turned up the heat on the element, then adjusted it.

I nodded.

“Well, liking reading, and liking animals, those are two pretty good things. That's what I think.” Dad sat down at the kitchen table with me. “Two pretty good things.”

For the rest of the summer, and into the fall, I walked Henry faithfully almost every morning. The only time I missed walking him was when I was sick with bronchitis and Mum kept me home in bed. On those days, Mum or Dad went and walked Henry, and sometimes Bobby went along with them. So, Henry got his walks every morning, and when I knocked on Mrs. McGill's door at 7:30 each day, and heard his happy barks, and saw his fiercely wagging tail, I felt my heart surge with pure joy. Joy and love. We walked together – not far, just around the block – every day. Mum bought me a new, bright yellow raincoat for wet, dark days, and I found some yellow ribbon and made Henry a bow to wear on those days too, so he would stand out in the gloom.

December 1st, a Friday, arrived. Thoughts of Christmas were already taking over the minds of my brothers and I, and the Eaton's toy catalogue was quickly getting tattered. I got up in darkness to find that light snow had fallen overnight, and the temperature had dropped and stayed low. I put on my winter boots and a warm hat and mitts before heading up the street to Mrs. McGill's house.

"Put on a scarf too," Mum said, probably mindful of the long bout of bronchitis I'd had in October. "You'll have time for a hot cup of tea after you walk Henry, before you have to leave for school."

Mrs. McGill's front walk was snow-covered, and, unusually, her morning paper still lay on the door mat. I knocked several times. Henry barked and whined inside. I peered through the front door's small window, and then stepped into the flowerbed along the front of the house, to look through the living room window. But the curtains were tightly drawn, the little house locked up, still and quiet. I turned and ran home as fast as I could.

Dad was at the kitchen table, swallowing coffee and finishing a plate of bacon and eggs. Mum was leaning against the counter, leafing through the pages of a cookbook.

"Mrs. McGill isn't answering her door. I knocked and knocked but there's no answer." I started to cry. "Henry's inside ..."

Mrs. McGill, age 87, had died in her sleep. Her family, grown children with children of their own, swooped in, as families must do. Before too many weeks had passed, a For Sale sign appeared on the lawn of the little house. I stood outside one day, Henry on his leash, and watched as a new family moved into Mrs. McGill's home. Henry, yes, my Henry, he came to live with Mum, and Dad, and Bobby, and Clay and me.

Mum and Dad are long gone now. Clay is gone too, and last year Bobby's wife Jeanine died. There's just Bobby and I left, and we mark the holidays by meeting for lunch at a cosy local pub in the city where I now live. Neither of us live in the town where we grew up, which is now unrecognizable.

Henry died at age 15, in my arms, at the vet. He was my dog for ten beautiful years. In the end, a large tumour took over his small sturdy body and it was time for him to go. The misery and agony of losing Henry is still as fresh today, forty-six years later, as it was that summer day, long ago, when I had to say goodbye.

Several years ago, I found a copy of *Harriet the Spy* at a used bookstore. It was – still is – one of my favourite books. I keep it in a drawer beside my bed, with an old photograph of Henry tucked between the pages. Dad took that photograph one morning not long after I started walking Henry, and the joy on the face of my young self is a delight to behold. It was the summer of Henry, the summer of *Harriet*, and the interesting summer of me. (2023)