

My Favorite Place

Eric Gau

Before I moved to Taiwan, I lived in a small town called Saratoga in California. Unlike most people's homes here in Taiwan, it wasn't an apartment, but an actual house. It had a front yard with a lawn and a big oak tree, as well as a spacious backyard. That backyard was my favorite place.

When we first moved there, when I was about six years old, the backyard seemed a very large, frightening place, especially at night. Some of the woodwork in it had begun to fall apart over the years, and my imagination made it a downright dangerous place to go by myself. Naturally, these fears and worries faded over the years as I grew older and was better able to appreciate the wonders of the backyard.

Half of the backyard was actually a patio, an extension of the house. Most of the patio was just a concrete platform, with some white patio furniture and a built-in wooden bench. It was on this patio that my family and our friends spent numerous happy days and nights throughout the years. During the summer, we would often host barbecues for our friends, with dozens of people eating and laughing together, enjoying each others' company. Since I was still a kid while my family lived there, and my friends were all about the same age, we would often spend those evening chasing each other around with water guns or water balloons, soaking each other when we weren't busy stuffing ourselves full of hot dogs, hamburgers, ribs and chicken legs. In later years, we bought a ping-pong table, which increased the noise level on the patio and often had kids running after flying balls.

After the patio came the swimming pool. It was some thirty feet long and shaped something like a penguin, at least to my childhood eyes. Dad spent a lot of time and effort keeping the pool clean and the water clear. I was frequently drafted to help him, often times by going into the pool and scrubbing the walls. Again, during the summer, this was a favorite hangout for my friends. While the adults were busy preparing the food or talking, the kids would all jump into the pool and swim for hours, except for the mandatory no-swimming period after eating, of course. I remember being very proud of myself the first time I managed to swim the entire length of the pool in one breath; now, of course, it doesn't seem nearly quite the achievement that it did then.

Past the pool was the garden area. Actually, the concrete rectangle that the pool was built into was surrounded on three sides by areas suitable for planting. On one side were our strawberry plants, which I would occasionally pluck and eat when they became ripe. The side farthest from the house, which happened to be the largest garden area, was where Dad kept his vegetable garden. It only took up a small portion of the space, but in it were planted tomatoes, beans, and squash. The garden was a

more half-hearted hobby of Dad's, so it wasn't very productive. The last side of the garden was the greenhouse area, with a small wooden structure where Dad raised a variety of plants that I was never able to identify. Actually, I believe most of the plants in the building were left there by the previous owners. Dad just watered them.

On the edge of the concrete surrounding the pool, right before the garden area, there was a crack in the concrete. One year, I discovered that a hive of yellowjackets had made their nest in it. I spent hours watching them climb in and out of their little home, totally unafraid of these insects with stingers. I don't think the yellowjackets survived though, because they were gone the next year.

Yellowjackets weren't the only wildlife we came into contact with. At the edge of our property was a chain-link fence with a stream on the opposite side. Occasionally, we would see animals such as deer walking along it, or ducks floating downstream. Not all our encounters were from opposite sides of a fence, of course. Moles commonly invaded Dad's gardens. Squirrels often scampered up and down the trunks of our trees and across the lawns. One year, after returning home from a vacation, we found our pool to be contaminated because a raccoon had fallen in drowned. One time, in the garage, Mom came face to face with an opossum. They froze, staring at each other. Then, they both fled, Mom back into the house, the opossum back into the wild.

Living now in Taiwan, it is much easier to appreciate how wonderful that backyard truly was. Taipei is such a crowded city with so little space for greenery that the idea of having a patio with barbecue grill, a pool, and a garden seems rather far-fetched. Thankfully, I have my memories, so I can go to my backyard whenever I want.