

In her moving memoir, Rumpf re-creates her experiences growing up in New Orleans in the 1940s and '50s, her struggles for identity, why she left New Orleans, and her need to reclaim her past after the floods of Hurricane Katrina.

RECLAMATION: Memories from a New Orleans Girlhood

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Reclamation

**Memories from a New Orleans
Girlhood**

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This is a work of non-fiction, an account of my childhood as I can best recall it. Last names of friends are not used in order to protect their privacy. Some scenes and incidents are composites, and some details have been embellished to enhance the settings. But everything is true as I experienced it.

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Surviving Summer

Summertime in New Orleans was a test of survival skills. The hot, steamy days could begin as early as April and hang on till October. Few people had air conditioning in the 1940s and '50s, so folks had to find other means to endure the heat and humidity. Our family, like many New Orleanians, relied on several cooling techniques. We ate sweet watermelon, chilled icy cold in a washtub in our backyard, the juice dripping down our chins. Or we'd enjoy our cool treat at one of the city's many watermelon stands, where we'd each get a slice for 15 cents and eat it at an outdoor picnic table, spitting the seeds on the grass. We soaked in cold baths in our old claw-footed bathtub every afternoon. We took drives along Lake Pontchartrain with the car windows rolled down, inhaling the fishy breeze. At home, a large window fan in the kitchen sucked the night air through our narrow, shotgun house, bringing some relief as we slept. And we drank gallons of iced tea.

While the city's wealthier families could spend the hottest days at resorts or second homes on the Gulf Coast, the mainstay of our summer survival was the gallery, or front porch. There we and our neighbors cultivated the fine Southern art of porch sitting. In our small Uptown houses, escaping to the front porch was the only way for us to tolerate the hot, muggy evenings. Yet, porch sitting was more than a defense against the semi-tropical climate;

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it was also an integral part of the culture and social life of our neighborhood.

Each evening in warm weather, as soon as the supper table was cleared and the dishes stacked in the sink, our family drifted out to the front porch. Like many houses on Laurel Street, our shotgun double had twin porches that sat side-by-side, separated by a wall and covered by the house's extended roof. If we heard the next-door neighbors on their porch, good manners required us to lean around the edge of the partition and greet them with "good evening" and maybe a brief conversation. I learned to slip around that barrier with ease and confidence, ignoring the potential danger of falling onto the picket fence that separated the small yards.

The focal point of our porch was a large wooden swing, hung from the ceiling with heavy chains that suspended it about a foot and a half above the floor. It had armrests on each end and a slatted back. Backing easily onto the swing seemed to produce an immediate feeling of relaxation. For my young sisters, getting up was more of a challenge as they faced the swing and used their arms and legs to scramble up. The swing, whose paint had long ago worn off, was large enough to hold both my parents, with one of my sisters tucked in between. My neighborhood friends and I perched on the porch's weather-beaten steps, taking care not to slide around and get splinters. There we played step games like School or Mother May I. If we got to the porch before any adults appeared, we would swing as high as we could without hitting the porch wall behind us. With the older folks aboard, the swing moved back and forth slowly and rhythmically, its creaking chain adding counterpoint to their conversation.

From the vantage point of the porch, we had a good view of the immediate neighborhood and could see a block or so in either direction. We'd give a friendly wave to

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neighbors sitting across the street. Anyone walking past our house was greeted with a nod and "good evenin'" or "ha' do." If we knew the passerby, he or she would pause at our front gate and chat a while. A bit of a breeze might stir the heavy air. The cicadas – we mistakenly called them locusts – ground on with their monotonous *reeeeeer, reeeeer* through the gathering twilight. The squeals and shouts of neighborhood children came from the banquette as we played Red Light, Green Light, hopscotch or jump rope. Girls on roller skates and boys on homemade scooters clattered by. Soon the summer symphony was joined by the sound of hands slapping mosquitoes that alighted on our exposed arms, legs and necks. This nightly ritual might last for a couple of hours, until bedtime for my sisters arrived or the mosquitoes drove us in. Immersed in a lively game of Hide and Seek, I would beg Mama to let me stay out till dark.

Some summer evenings were highlighted by a cool treat, eaten outside on the porch. It might take a few minutes of pleading to convince my mother that we deserved it, or, if she was in a good mood, she might suggest it herself. The pinnacle of this summertime pleasure was snowballs from Woods' grocery store on the corner – crushed bits of ice shaped into a ball by an ice-cream scoop, placed in a paper cone and covered with sticky, sweet syrup in brilliant colors and fruity flavors. Snowballs cost five cents each. Cherries, crushed pineapple or cream on top were a few pennies extra, so we never got that extravagance. Since I was the oldest child in our family, I took everyone's snowball order and, with a sense of importance, marched off to the store a block away, clutching a handful of change. To safely deliver the icy treats to my family, I took along the wire basket that normally held eight drinking glasses in our kitchen cupboard, and I carefully placed each cone in one of the

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spaces. Occasionally, the treat of choice was soft drinks – root beer or Nehi orange for the kids and RC cola for the grown-ups. Again, the wire rack was a perfect carrier for the tall, glass bottles.

Porch sitting served many purposes, bringing families together at the end of the day, keeping us in touch with our neighbors, and providing a natural cooling system. Summers on the porch are among my happiest childhood memories – except, of course, for what happened to Walter. He and I became playmates one summer when he was visiting his grandmother, who lived two doors down from us. He was a friendly, chubby boy, a year or so younger than me, and when we played chasing games, I was usually ahead.

The wall separating the twin porches of our double house extends to the edge of the porch floor. An iron picket fence divides the small front yard. To visit the next-door neighbors on their porch, we're supposed to leave our yard, walk the few steps to their gate, enter their yard and go up their front steps. But I've discovered a faster way to get from one side of the porch to the other. Hugging the end of the wide partition, I can swing one leg around it and then bring the rest of my body and my other leg to the other side. On this day, I'm leading Walter in a chasing game, and I race up to our neighbor's porch, Walter close behind. I know I can escape around the partition. Over goes my right leg, my body, my left leg. I scurry across my porch and down the steps, planning to race away down the block. I turn to look at Walter as he's crossing the partition with difficulty. He slips and falls backwards. He screams, a look of terror on his face. I freeze. Horrified, I realize he's impaled on the iron fence with a picket stabbing his inner thigh. He begins to wail. I'm stunned, but I know I must get help. I rush inside and call Mama. Aunt Sally is visiting us that day,

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and it takes both her and my mother to pull Walter off the fence. I don't what happens next, as I stay in the house, too frightened to watch. I think my friend is going to die, and I feel responsible.

Several days later, my mother told me that Walter had survived the accident and recovered with no permanent damage. But I'd lost a friend; he never came over to play with me again. I stopped using the shortcut around the porch partition. Even now, when my memory returns to the porch on Laurel Street, images of pleasant summer hours of swings and snowballs and the sounds of cicadas come rushing back. But I also see the horrifying image of Walter stuck on the picket fence.

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