

I wish I had posted this tree weeks ago...

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...but I had forgotten that it existed, until I came across it in my computer today. A magazine for teenagers had asked me to write an article...this was maybe a year ago...about---well, I hardly remember what it was supposed to be about, but I guess it was about me and politics during my much-younger years. pSo I wrote this. pBut they didn't like it and it wasn't published. pSo I left it in my computer and went on to other things.

But when I came across it today, I thought...oh. I wish I had posted this in the beginning of November.

Anyway, a little late: Here it is. Me and politics:

The first memory I have of me in connection with politics is a spring day in 1945.p I had just turned eight.

It was wartime, the last year of a devastating war, and my father, an army officer, was still overseas. We lived in a small college town, the town where my grandfather was president of the bank on High Street.

At eight I knew nothing—cared nothing—about politics. I didn't know, (though I do now, and find it unsurprising) that my mother and grandparents were Republicans. But I did know that the president of the United States was named Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and I knew that my mother and grandparents disapproved of him. I had overheard conversations about “that man in the White House” and can still hear, in my memory, my grandmother's disdainful sniff at the mention of his name.

So when, on an April day, I heard my mother, who had been listening to the radio, gasp and say, “The president is dead!”p I leaped to a childish assumption. My eight-year-old's thinking took this form:

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My mother didn't like the president.

She wished he weren't in the White House.

Now he wasn't.

Hooray.

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I was not ordinarily a show-offy child, but like all eight-year-olds, I relished being

the center of attention, and certainly being the bearer of important information

would put me in that spotlight.p

So I went to the front porch of our house. These were the days—the days of gas rationing—when people still ran their errands, went to doctors' appointments, did their shopping, made their visits to the library, by walking.

I called out to everyone who walked past.

“Have you heard the good news?” I shouted.

They stopped, said no, asked what.

“The president is dead!” I announced gleefully.

It didn't last long, my stint as newscaster. When my mother became aware of what I was doing, she appeared on the porch, grabbed me by the neck of my shirt, and hauled me inside. I had never seen her so angry.

Even though she calmed down quickly, and explained my lack of judgment to me as I stood there blubbing, I didn't really understand. It became part of the topic of *politics* to me, a topic I filed in my brain as complicated, incomprehensible, and boring, boring, boring.

pp Jump ahead to 1952. Now I was fifteen, living no longer in a small town, but—because of my father's work—on an island in New York Harbor. Each day I took a five-minute ferry ride from Governor's Island and from there a subway to my private school in Brooklyn.

pp In the fall of 1952, a man named Adlai Stevenson was running for president on the Democratic ticket, and the Republican party had convinced war hero General Dwight Eisenhower to be their candidate. I had no interest in either candidate or in the presidential campaign—no interest, that is, until the day that I got off the Governor's Island ferry to find myself face-to-face with Dwight Eisenhower, who had a beaming smile and looked as if his name should be Grandpa. He had just made a speech at the entrance to the ferry terminal and now was about to make his way north through Manhattan in a motorcade.

pp We kids, those of us who came from the island each morning and made our way by train, or in some cases Staten Island ferry, to various schools, hung around briefly watching the commotion. Then we went our separate ways to school.

All except me and my best friend, Elaine. Caught up in the excitement of the crowd, and I think beguiled by the wonderful grin the candidate—his nickname was “Ike”—had bestowed on us, Elaine and I followed the motorcade. We ran along the sidewalk as it began its slow journey up Broadway. Suddenly the world of politics was not boring, boring, boring anymore. There were balloons. There were cheers and shouts of “I like Ike!” and we joined in.

We never went to school that day. I suppose our mothers had to write excuses for us the next morning. Elaine and I ran alongside that string of open limos, darting in and out of the crowds, waving again and again at the candidate, who appeared amused at the two teenaged girls, one blonde, one dark-haired, who never gave in and drifted away but followed him all the way to Times Square. (Writing this now, so many years later, I checked a map and see that it would have been more than five miles). There, as the motorcade dispersed, we searched our pockets for enough coins and rode the subway back to the southern tip of Manhattan where we could catch our boat home.

I had no idea whether the Ike I liked was a Democrat or a Republican, but I was thrilled when he won the election because he had a crinkly grin and cute grandchildren. The other guy, his opponent, was a bachelor, staid and intellectual.

So much for the depth of my political thought and opinions at age fifteen.

But now I'm jumping ahead a year and a half, to the spring of 1954, when I was almost seventeen years old. I was still living on that island, I was about to graduate from the girls' school I attended, and I would go off in the fall to Brown. It was the spring that my parents bought a television.

Does it amaze you that we had no TV before then? Most people did, and I watched the Ed Sullivan Show, Jackie Gleason, or “I Love Lucy” often at the homes of friends. But my own

parents had been hold-outs. Television seemed an expensive, silly, time-wasting thing to them.
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Until that spring. That spring a television set, with doors that closed over the screen when the set wasn't in use, was delivered to our home.

Excited by the installation of the large piece of furniture that a TV then was, by the admonition not to sit too close for fear of eye damage, by the ritualistic adjustment of the rabbit-ear antenna, I gave little thought to what programs my parents might enjoy watching. None, I figured. They weren't into goofy sit-coms or pop musicians.

So it took me by surprise the first afternoon that I came home after school and found my mother standing at her ironing board that had been set up in the living room. In those days we wore more formal clothing to school—no jeans—and my closet was filled with neatly starched and ironed blouses.p Mother did that ironing, always, in the large pantry off of our kitchen.p But suddenly the ironing board was in the living room floor and beside it was the laundry basket filled with dampened, rolled-up pieces of clothing. She barely noticed me enter the room. She barely looked down at the pillowcases and blouses as she ironed. Every bit of her attention was on the television.

She was watching a political phenomenon called the McCarthy hearings.

Joseph McCarthy was a Republican senator from Wisconsin. He'd been around for a while, and was chairman of a committee that was investigating the presence of Communists in the government. The 1950's were a time of what was called The Cold War, when Americans feared Russia and the Soviet political system: Communism. Senator McCarthy had worked his way into a position of great power by alleging that he knew who the Communists in the United States State Department were.p He and his staff accused and terrorized people, ruining careers without any documentation or proof. He turned on college professors, writers, and filmmakers as well. Some people accused by McCarthy were never able to work again.

Good, intelligent people, including a Republican senator from Maine, the first woman in the US Senate, Margaret Chase Smith, had opposed and condemned him.p But still, preying on people's fear, McCarthy had gone forward, destroying reputations and lives.

With my usual adolescent disinterest in news or politics, I had paid little attention to the commotion Senator McCarthy had been causing for several years. Then the television set arrived in the spring of 1954 and my mother moved her ironing to the living room.

McCarthy had begun accusing a new group, and this time it was the United States Army, including the Secretary of the Army, Robert Stevens. My father was a high-ranking military officer. This time friends of my parents were among the accused, and this time, for the first time, the hearings were televised. Now the American public, including a housewife at her ironing board and a teenage girl with blond hair and braces on her teeth, were able to watch the government process taking place.

It woke me up. It taught me about power. I learned how important elections are. Voters in Wisconsin had given power to a man who was now in a position to destroy innocent people.

But as I watched, each afternoon, day after day, I learned, too, how people—ordinary people—through the political process, can also wield their own power. As people all across the country watched those hearings through the spring of 1954, McCarthy's power began to evaporate. The public watched his bullying, his harassment, his false accusations, his abuse of power; by the following fall the Senate voted to censure him. He died, an alcoholic, still in his forties, and went down in history as a name that still makes intelligent people shudder today.

I was not old enough to vote in a presidential election until 1960, when I was twenty-three and Richard Nixon was running against John Kennedy. I remembered, then, the day that I, at eight, had misguidedly cheered the death of FDR, and the day when, at fifteen, I had stalked Ike for five miles because I thought his grin was cute. But I was remembering a former self, an immature and uninformed person I had outgrown.

I recalled the days that I watched the McCarthy hearings the spring when I was seventeen and realized that politics was not boring at all, but was the process by which we keep our democracy intact and honorable and that each of us plays a role. I read the newspapers every day the fall of 1960. I watched the debates on grainy black and white TV after putting two toddlers to bed. I cast my first vote that November, a vote for JFK.

Today, still—a grandmother now—I listen carefully to what each candidate has to say. On election day of 2008 I will walk up my street to my local fire station and cast a vote that I hope

will give power to someone I choose, someone I believe in, someone who will serve me and the rest of my country. I will think then, as I always do, about how lucky I am to have that privilege.

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