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There was a time when the rooftops of a city, for many kids, were as mysterious, as forbidden, and as inescapably alluring as an Arctic expanse might be for a Polar explorer. The rooftops on a row of 3-story apartment buildings in my old Chicago neighborhood were such a place.

Most sprouted a variety of storage sheds and air vents. All had chimneys, allowing for the escape of impurities from the basement boilers that provided steam, and noise, especially noise, for all the apartment radiators. The roofs also had square, removable skylight covers that, with the aid of a ladder, could be pushed aside and thereby offer access to a world of urban adventure unlike any other.

But there was a question: What did you do once you arrived on this brick and mortar mountain top? This wasn't Everest. It was just a flat city roof 40 feet above the street achieved without climbing gear, not including the ladder. But there were several tests of fortitude. The buildings were built wall

to wall, except in three or four locations where they were separated by about six feet to accommodate ground-level concrete walkways. But it was in those six-foot gaps that seemed more like 20 feet that courage was replaced by foolhardiness – some might say abject stupidity. No one ever fell in my experience, but it took a while to come down, literally and figuratively, from a rooftop excursion.

There were, however, no pigeon coops up there despite an ongoing myth that pigeons were housed on all city rooftops; most of us thought that had to be a New York thing, and anyway, where could you acquire a pigeon? The only place we knew where they congregated was on distant elevated train platforms, eating passenger handouts from the peanut machines there.

The buildings in our neighborhood were called six-flats because each contained six apartments, three to a side. All had very small back yards. Our block ran north-and-south for an eighth of a mile, if you believed the

accepted measurement at the time of eight city blocks to a mile.

So, if you were young enough and fearless enough, and therefore incautious enough, you could get from one end of the block to the other, except for the funeral parlor, via the roofs – the incautious part involving those six-foot leaps assisted, almost certainly, by guardian angels working overtime. The ladder, which usually was "borrowed" was deployed on a third floor, outside back porch, and allowed the user to climb the ladder, push the skylight cover aside and hoist himself through the opening.

The funeral parlor, a single story, was the last building on the north end of the block and nobody walked on that roof; it was too spooky and too hard to reach. But it was useful for some kids who, on Mother's Day, for example, might pick up from the alley behind the "death chamber" as we called it, a basket of fairly fresh discarded flowers from a recent wake. It was located across the alley from a butcher shop that, during the summer months, always had an open rear window, guarded by a set of vertical steel bars, where a box

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of kitchen matches usually sat on the window sill. No one ever figured out why the butcher shop needed kitchen matches. But this was a time, during World War II, when patriotism ran high and allowed us, with a handful of matches taken from the sill, wet the tip by licking it and scratching it on the pavement to create bluish-white smoke. Thrown into air, the match perfectly simulated a German Messerschmitt or a Japanese Zero going down in smoke if not in flames.

The alley, thus, was almost as important to our youthful culture as the roofs, though not nearly as dangerous. The alleys in our neighborhood had interesting features: most slanted into the center where collected water drained into the sewer system. If the timing was right, and the temperature low enough, a marvelous skating surface was created. We were convinced, as a result, that we had the longest and narrowest ice rink in North America, but one that required skill to navigate because it was only about two feet wide for its entire length.

The alley also was the route by which coal deliveries were made for the apartment building's boilers. Every two weeks, approximately, men with blackened faces who looked like the miners in the local movie theater newsreels, arrived in dusty trucks loaded with heavy canvas bags of coal which were carried from the truck through the yard to be dumped into a portable chute that was run into the basement coal bins. No one ever wanted to be a coal delivery man.

Milk deliveries also were made via the alley. Every morning the truck would arrive with its cargo of dairy products, all refrigerated by ice chipped from blocks and distributed over various crates containing milk and cream. On a warm summer day there was nothing quite so welcome as the milkman arriving and offering a piece of ice to suck on.

And there was another thing about our block. When it rained in the summer, and was not accompanied by lightning, it was a cherished opportunity to pull on swim trunks and run, giddily, up and down the front sidewalks, a poor

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man's substitute for a Lake Michigan beach visit, which was way too far to the east and across several major thoroughfares.

It was a time, though, that no longer exists. The rooftops are still there, and so is the alley. But the neighborhood kids are probably behind a digital screen of some kind and never will know where to find a ladder that could, in turn, add a dimension to their lives that someday might be worth retrieving.