

Eleanor Ray

## THE CELLAR

There were six of us then, my four brothers, my sister and me. We all went down the cellar together. We took out the ashes. It was a dirt cellar, extending the length of the house. The raw walls gave the cellar its tomb-like feeling. The windows, covered over with years of dust, affected the stuffy suffocating atmosphere of the cellar.

When something went wrong with the cellar's furnace, a long electric cord with a light bulb on one end and a plug at the other was used to light the cellar area. The plug was attached to a wall socket on the first floor. Then the long cord was carried down the cellar steps, placed near the furnace in a catch on the ceiling. There it lit up a small area near the furnace. But we never used this lighting fixture. We kids had our flashlight.

Our flash-light was our most valuable possession. It warded off danger. Shadows of figures, portentous shapes of every kind lost their presence when our flash-light hit them. But we didn't just imagine those images. They were in the cellar. Because this house was not just your ordinary picture book row house. No, this house was the most exciting house in the world. Mrs. Davis, who paid us the fifty cents for taking the ashes out, told us that Walt Whitman, the world's greatest poet, died here, upstairs, right in the bed. We knew she was telling us the truth. We also knew every detail of the bed he died in. Walter, our oldest brother, was the first to learn the words on the plaque nailed to the foot of the bed. The plaque said, "Bed in which Walt Whitman died."

Then, too, people came to see the Walt Whitman House. We lived next door. We would sit on our front step and watch them go in. And it never failed, those visitors always had changed expressions on their faces when they came out. It was as though they became aware of something alive in that house. Most of them left the house with expressions of pleasure that seemed mixed with awe.

We kids took no chances when we entered the cellar to bring out the ashes. My older brother Walter went first. He was about eight. He carried the flash light. Following close behind him was Fred, then me. I kept watch over the back of the cellar. My job was to note any unusual movement. I also listened for unusual sounds. My brother John stood near me. He verified my observations, while Gladys, our youngest and only other sister, held the hall door open. For a fast exit, one could go up the cellar steps to this door, and walk down the hall to the front door which opened to the sidewalk. Junie, our youngest brother, held open the cellar door. This door led to the back yard.

We were always on guard. It was as though we expected something to happen. But, when it happened, we were hopelessly unprepared. Walter dropped the flash light. It broke. There was no light. It was unbelievably dark. The cellar seemed like a tomb. All the dead in the world seemed to come alive. They sucked up all the air. And held it. I couldn't breathe. They were all around me. I couldn't move. Something cold and wet touched the back of my neck. I became tense, stiff all over. I even lost my voice. I tried to scream, but no sound came. After what seemed like hours, I heard voices coming down the cellar steps. It was my brothers. They had brought Mrs. Davis to get me out of the cellar.

The memory of that incident set strong on my mind, smothering the joy of being appointed curator of the Walt Whitman House in 1955, even though I knew I didn't have to contend with an unlighted cellar. The house had been totally restored by that time. It was the uncomfortable feeling that I wasn't alone in the house. The feeling was stronger in the rooms which Whitman had used. He occupied the front parlor downstairs, and the front bedroom upstairs. I found myself unconsciously searching every area of these rooms each time I entered them by myself, no matter what time of day I entered. One day that feeling left. I don't know how or when, but one day I realized I felt good being in every room in the house. I think the fact that all my spare time was spent studying the pervading ideas in Whitman's poetry, and loving every one of them, had something to do with the good feeling I had acquired for the Walt Whitman house.