

## The Sidewalk

—*Deb Noll*

I'M NOT SURE HOW OLD I WAS WHEN THEY poured the concrete for the sidewalk that led up to the house from the garage straight into the kitchen. The sidewalk that wrapped around the house to the right leading to the outhouse, and to the left to the front door steps to an entrance we never used. It was poured just in time for the training wheels to come off my two-wheeled bicycle, so I must have been somewhere around four, five, or six. At the garage-end of the sidewalk—about 100 feet from the house—was an old, black, iron water pump. We used it to get water for watering the dog, for filling water guns, and for filling five gallon buckets of water to carry to the trough to water the Holstein feeder calves—it would take my brother and I about eight trips back and forth from the front pasture to the pump to fill the trough. That pump was also the place where dad stopped to wash the manure off his work boots before coming to the house.

As a young girl, I remember watching daddy come up from the barn. He walked with a quickly sprint to his gait. He would pick up a stone and throw it for our dog, Tutor, to fetch. Or he would tease Tutor to jump up into his arms, or play tug of war with his shirt sleeve. When he stopped to wash his boots was my cue to leap out the door running down the sidewalk to meet him. He would pick me up in his strong arms and toss me into the air; in free fall, I would drop back into his safe, waiting arms. He would scratch me with the stubble of his beard as he kissed me and sat me back onto the ground. Daddy always had time for his Penelope, the nickname he gave me.

It took three of my small steps to keep up with one of his smooth strides. His

strides filled with pride. He was a proud man, working hard to provide for his family, an honest-day's labor from sunup to sundown, and then some. He was a farmer farming 360 acres, raising 200 head of hogs at a time, and milking 80 head of Holstein cattle. He farmed on the shares with our landlord, Johnnie. An aged old man, Johnnie had twenty hives of honeybees in our backyard—when his arthritis acted up, he'd anger a hive so they would sting him—"it's a cure for the 'itis," he would say.

Daddy was tall. At six feet two inches tall, he was the tallest of anyone at family gatherings. He was the oldest of ten children, and whenever we visited my grandparent's home, there were always some of my aunts, uncles, and cousins there. But whenever there was a death or a wedding, everyone showed up like it was a family reunion. Dad had aunts and uncles and cousins who would come from all over Ohio and Indiana. He was the tallest of them all. I remember him being asked from one relative or another, "Leroy," for that is what his family called him, "What's the weather like up there?" Daddy had a somewhat brash response that I was never allowed to repeat. You couldn't lose Daddy, he was the

tallest one in the crowd.

He was handsome, too! Broad-shouldered, narrow-hipped, distinguishingly bald, a missing front tooth gave a jester's character to his smile that stretched from dimple to dimple. His big, brown cow-eyes danced in those days. He was happy and proud, and everything about him showed it, and I was his little girl.

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At age sixteen, I stood at the kitchen door where I had stood many times before, watching Dad come up from the barn. On this day, he didn't stop to wash the dirt off his boots. I gingerly opened the door and gently walked to meet him on the sidewalk. Today he wasn't walking with quite as smooth a stride. Coming up next to him I slid my smooth, youthful hand into his calloused, cracked, aged hand and said, "It will be okay, Dad." I didn't get a response. His eyes, now glassy looking, filled with tears, were appraising the front yard filled with household belongings and farm equipment, polished and shining like new, waiting for the auction. He let go of my hand as he reached for a tool setting on the hay wagon. He had just milked the cows for the last time. He had no hogs left to slop; the last of them had gone

to market about a week before. This day was a day that he had never wanted to come. He had been born into a farming family; farming was in his blood, but today he was giving up farming for good.

Mom often told the story that on the day we moved onto the farm, dad had admired it—you might even say he had fallen in love with it—and he had said, “If ever I have to leave here, it will be the day I stop farming.” Dad was always true to his word.

The farm was located in southwestern Ohio. Some of the land around our farm had been sold to Cincinnati Gas and Electric for as much as \$300 an acre (very rich for the day). Johnnie, our landlord, had suggested that he would be open to selling the farm for the right price. Dad made a legitimate offer to buy the farm, not quite the \$300 an acre that Johnnie was hoping for, but a fair price for farm land. Johnnie, a greedy man, laughed at it. So when negotiations to buy the farm failed—angry with the landlord; disappointed in himself for not having more money to offer—Dad decided to quit farming despite encouragement from Mom to look for another farm. Dad seemed to lack any interest in the idea. His ego had

been bruised. It was like that old man had defeated him. Dad lacked motivation or desire to buy another farm.

One of his excuses was he did not want to move me out of our school district. I argued that I had friends through 4-H, Farm Bureau Youth, and Jr. Leadership from all over the county; I could move into any neighboring school district and already have friends there. My brother thought it was his fault. He had left home to go to college at OSU and did not plan to spend his life farming. To Dad farming was a career that was passed down from generation to generation. Now, it seemed that the next generation had no interest in farming. That’s what my brother thought. Maybe he was right.

It was one of those times when I wished the Magic Eight Ball, set there on the hay wagon in a box marked miscellaneous, could really tell the future. I picked it up and silently asked, “*Why is Dad being so stubborn about this?*”

Turning the ball over, I read, “Ask again later.”

“*Is my brother right; does Dad wish he would stay home and farm with him?*” was the new question in my mind.

“Most definitely!” I read on through that dark circle on

the bottom of the ball.

One more question I thought, *“Will Dad be happy with his new job?”*

“Uncertain!” was the writing on the ball.

“Stupid ball,” I said, and put it back on the pile of stuff.

I don’t really know if those were the responses from the ball that day. I only remember having those and many other questions, and wanting, hoping for easy answers.

Our family changed that day. That night we slept under a new roof, in our new home, in town, in Trenton, Ohio. None of us got any sleep—we had left the quietness of the country, finding ourselves amidst the noises of town living—we heard everything. The next week, my brother went back to the Ohio State University. Dad was beginning his new job driving a fuel truck for Limbacher Fuel Oil Company. His route took him to all the farms in the county; he could keep in touch with his friends, but it also served to remind him of what he had lost. You could see sadness in him; his once broad shoulders began to droop. His fatigue was no longer from working sunup to sundown; but rather from not working hard at all. He commented that the job was too easy—not very physical. He said

once, “I feel so confined inside the cab of that truck.” There was never any doubt that dad missed farming.

The Magic Eight Ball could not have predicted the changes that were yet to come. I could not have imagined the questions to ask it about the future.

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Four years after moving off the farm, dad had filed for a divorce from mom. One night, my brother had come home for a family meeting. During the family discussion, we were trying to discern what had gotten Mom and Dad to this point in their marriage, hoping we could find a point where reconciliation might be persuaded. Emotions were running strong in all of us. At one point, Dad made a comment that he wasn’t appreciated. My brother replied, saying something about having learned a good work ethic from Dad, “How else could I be able to pay for my college tuition?” he said to emphasize his point.

Dad saw it as a slap in his face, like he wasn’t paying for his son to go to college—missing completely the point my brother had tried to make. My brother responded with something to reiterate his point. Dad was angry. He stormed to the door and raged, “I have no son!” I

had never seen Dad so angry, so distraught.

In the next instant, I sealed my destiny of having a relationship with Dad. I said, "If you have no son, then I guess you have no daughter either!" Dad must have known how much his hurting my brother would hurt me...

He merely looked at me and said, "I guess not, then!" He abruptly left the house, slamming the door behind him, never to return, leaving my mother, brother, and me standing there, each of us hearing, in our own way, the silence.

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In the thirty plus years since that night, my brother and Dad have been able to rebuild a relationship. My brother says, "When we get together, it's like two friends talking over old times. It's not like we're father and son." Still, he's invited to celebrate Dad's birthdays, to picnics, to family events, where he gets to see our aunts, uncles, and cousins. He's very fortunate not to have lost everything like I have.

I've tried on several occasions to reconnect with Dad; to ask his forgiveness for speaking so boldly. Most recently was when my husband was in the hospital fighting for his life. My brother had said that Dad was

really concerned for me and my family. So one night, I called him. I introduced myself on the phone to his wife—whom Dad had married only three weeks after the divorce was final; yet he had denied that there was someone else in his life—I asked her if I could speak to my dad. She said to him, "Your daughter's on the phone..."

I heard his reply, "Tell her I'm not here."

That same steel-framed door that was slammed in our faces so many years ago was slammed in my face again, as it has been over and over again each time I've tried to reach out to him.

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*In my dream...I'm standing at the old farm house door, looking down the sidewalk, seeing Dad coming up from the barn. I walk swiftly to greet him. My arms opened wide; his are too. Our arms wrap each other in a grizzly bear hug. I look up into those big, brown, cow eyes, now grey with age, and I tenderly say, "I love you, Daddy." He replies, "You, too, Penelope." The dam broken, our lives are inundated with a flow of unending words... and then I wake up.*