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Where the Green Grass Grows (True Spring and Summer Stories from a Wisconsin Farm)

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Where the Green Grass Grows

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Where the Green Grass Grows

**True (Spring and Summer) Stories from a
Wisconsin Farm**

(Book Number 4 in the Series)

LeAnn R. Ralph

The Impossible Dream

I could hardly believe it. Here I was, walking along the sandy cowpath in the lane between the Bluff and field, clutching a fistful of birdsfoot violets. Often when I came home from school, my mother asked me to do a job around the house—take clothes off the clothesline outside, go to the basement to get a pan of potatoes for supper, or put away the sheets and pillowcases she had ironed that afternoon.

But today, Mom had asked me to pick some violets.

And since it was such a sunny, warm May afternoon, more like summer, really, rather than spring, I jumped at the chance.

The open spot on the south slope of the big wooded hill behind the barn was so purple with violets I could see them from the school bus when we were still a quarter of a mile away.

In school we had learned that the state flower was the wood violet but that another kind of violet which grew around here was called a birdsfoot violet. Our teacher told us they were called birdsfoot violets because the frilly leaves growing close to the ground looked like a bird's foot. I liked birds. Many birds lived on our farm. Barn swallows and Baltimore orioles and robins and sparrows and sometimes rose-breasted grosbeaks that came to eat the oats scattered on the ground by the granary.

Up ahead in the warm afternoon sunshine, the cows lounged around the barnyard, some standing, some lying down, flicking their ears and tails to chase away the flies. As I reached the barnyard gate, I stopped and switched the violets from one hand to the other. My hand felt sweaty from holding the violets, and I didn't want to ruin them before I got back to the house.

"Mooooo-oooo," said one of the Holstein cows standing in the middle of the barnyard. It was Sweetcorn, the cow who had given birth to her calf on the sidehill in Dusty's pasture one summer and then could not get up afterwards. She had been so sick, she hadn't wanted to eat anything until Dad thought of cutting stalks of sweet corn for her from the garden.

The cows had been back in the pasture earlier today—as they were every day—but they were in the barnyard now because they knew it was almost time to come in the barn for their supper of ground up corn and oats with molasses mixed in to make it taste extra-good.

“Mooooooooo,” said Sweetcorn again, stretching her nose toward my hand.

“Oh, no—no, no—you can’t eat Mom’s violets!” I said.

Sweetcorn followed me to the wooden fence by the stock tank.

“Dad will let you in the barn pretty soon,” I said.

I climbed over the wooden fence, and when I climbed down off the other side, Sweetcorn stood there watching me.

“Moo,” she said.

I heard the crunch of tires on the small stones in the driveway and turned away from the fence in time to see Loretta’s car before it disappeared on the other side of the garage. I hurried past the granary, and when I reached the gas barrel, I could see my big sister opening the porch door.

“Hi, Loretta!” I yelled.

I waved the fistful of violets at her, and she waved back and then went into the house.

As I started toward the house again, I looked down. A few of the violets had fallen out of my hand when I waved them at Loretta. I stopped to pick them up, carefully tucking them in with the other violets. Mom said she wanted me to get as many violets as I could carry, so I didn’t want to waste any of them. While I was kneeling on the ground, one of the barn cats came to see what I was doing and sniffed at the flowers in my hand.

“Mom wants these so she can make tea,” I told the cat.

“Meow,” she said as she gazed at me with her green-gold eyes.

When I stood up, the cat trotted in front of me, and as I headed for the porch steps, she laid down in the narrow strip of shade by the light pole where the yard light was mounted. She stretched out her front paws and yawned.

“Is this enough?” I asked, holding up the violets as I walked into the kitchen a minute later.

My mother sat by the table, paging through the newspaper.

“I certainly *hope* it’s enough,” she said.

For the past few months, my mother had been having trouble sleeping. She either could not fall asleep, or else she would wake up in the middle of the night and could not go back to sleep.

I never had trouble sleeping myself. Almost as soon as I crawled in under the blankets, I was sound asleep, and I didn't wake up until my alarm clock went off in the morning. A couple of weeks ago my mother had read in a magazine that a tea made from wild violets was supposed to help a person sleep, and ever since she had read the article, she had been waiting for the violets on the Bluff to bloom.

"What should I do with them?" I asked.

"Put them in the sink," she said, "so I can rinse them off."

Although Loretta had only arrived home a few minutes ago, she was already coming down from upstairs, dressed in an old pair of pants and an old shirt.

"What are you going to do?" I said as I set the violets in the sink.

"Rake that section lawn of by the lilacs," Loretta said. "I should've done it a long time ago, but it's been so cold and rainy for the past couple of weekends."

She went to the sink and peered down at the flowers.

"Do you really think the violets are going to help?" Loretta asked.

"I have no idea," my mother replied. "But it's worth a try. What harm could come from violets, after all?"

"I suppose so. They *are* only violets," Loretta said. She turned to me. "Do you want to help rake?"

Raking, as far as I was concerned, was the most tiresome chore in the whole wide world—put the rake down on the grass, pull it toward you; put the rake down on the grass, pull it toward you. Over and over and over again.

I looked at my mother, hoping that for once she would come up with something else she wanted me to do.

"Go out and help your sister rake," Mom said.

A sinking feeling settled in the pit of my stomach.

That's what I was afraid she would say.

"No, wait," Mom said. "Before you go out, I want you to help me. I've never washed violets, so I don't know if they're going to fall apart. If they do, it might take two hands to put them on the dishtowel."

Ever since I could remember, I had been watching my mother work in the kitchen with one hand as she held onto the counter with the other to keep her balance.

“Help Mother with the violets, and then you can come out and help me with the raking,” Loretta said. “I have a surprise for you.”

“A surprise?” I said. “What kind of surprise?”

“If I told you, it wouldn’t be a surprise!” Loretta said. And with that, she went outside.

“Do you know what the surprise is?” I said to Mom.

She shook her head and shrugged. “When it comes to your sister, I suppose it could be just about anything.”

I watched as my mother put her hands on the seat of the chair, one on each side of her and pushed herself up until she was standing on her feet. Bent from the waist, she grasped the edge of the table with one hand and reached for the stove with the other.

When my mother had gotten a firm grip on the stove, she shuffled her feet until she was close enough to lean down and pull open the drawer.

“Here,” she said, holding out a small saucepan. “Would you fill this with water?”

I took the pan to the sink and filled it nearly to the top.

“Good,” Mom said. “Now would you please set it on the burner.”

I put the pan on the burner. My mother reached to the back of the stove and turned the dial to high.

“By the time we’re finished washing the violets, the water ought to be hot enough to make my tea,” Mom said.

She reached for the counter next to the stove and, shuffling her feet as she went, made her way along the cupboard until she came to the sink. She turned on the cold-water faucet, leaned on the sink against her forearms and began to rinse the violets.

As I stood by the sink next to my mother, I thought about her idea to make violet tea. One time Mom had said that when she was a little girl and was going to school at the country school a mile from our farm, they used to make May baskets out of strips of paper woven together. If the violets were blooming by the first day of May, they would put violets in the May baskets, along with whatever other spring flowers they could find growing in the woods.

Putting violets into May baskets seemed like a good thing to do with violets.

But how could little purple flowers help anyone sleep?

My mother rinsed the violets under a thin stream of running water, and as she laid them in the empty sink, I picked them up and put them on a clean dishtowel. The violets did not fall apart when they were rinsed, which I didn't think they would because they didn't fall apart when it rained, but still, they were soggy and hardly looked like violets.

"HMMMMM," Mom said, "now I wonder if I am supposed to use just the flowers? Or the flowers and the stems?"

"What did the article say?" I asked as I folded the dishtowel over the violets.

My mother frowned. "It didn't say anything about *how* to make the tea. It just said, among other things, that wild violets are supposed to help you sleep."

She shrugged. "Well, if the flowers are good, the stems must be good, too. Would you please get a bowl out of the cupboard?"

I opened the cupboard door in front of me, reached for a bowl and set it on the counter while my mother pulled the dishtowel back. She picked up the violets, by twos and threes, and laid them in the bowl.

"Would you please put that over by the stove for me?" she asked.

I set the bowl on the counter by the stove. The water in the little saucepan was already boiling, and my mother inched along the counter until she came to the stove. She turned off the burner and poured some of the boiling water over the violets.

"Now what?" I asked.

"Now I have to let them steep," Mom said.

"Steep? Like a hill is steep?"

"No. It's the same word, spelled the same way, but it means they have to soak in the hot water for a while," she explained. "I'm going to let them sit there until supper, so you might as well go out and help your sister rake."

Oh, yes, the raking.

I had forgotten all about the raking.

After one last look at the violets floating in a steaming bowl of water, I went outside, and with my hand on the railing Dad had made out of a piece of old pipe, slowly walked down the steps. Even though it was a sunny day, the railing felt cold under my hand, and I wondered how cold it would feel during the winter.

As soon as I got around the corner of the house, I saw that Loretta was busy raking leaves into a pile by the lilacs. The silver maples at the edge of the lawn and the lilacs in the middle of the back lawn left plenty of leaves to rake up every spring.

From the tops of the silver maples, Baltimore orioles were singing—*tweet-tweet—tweet-tweet—tweet-tweet-tweeta-tweet*.

I stopped and closed my eyes for a minute to listen. Ever since Dad had pointed out how much birds liked to sing in the springtime, I heard birds singing everywhere.

When I opened my eyes, all at once, I saw something unusual.

“Hey!” I said. “What’s that?”

Loretta was raking the lawn with a rake that did not look at all like the rakes we had used before. It had a long handle with something that looked like a big wire fan on the bottom—the kind of fan that you would use to fan your face when it’s hot. The other rakes we had used before were made of thick tines like the teeth on Dad’s drag, except that the tines on the rake were curved and the teeth on Dad’s drag were straight.

“For years we’ve been struggling to rake the lawn with those old garden rakes,” Loretta said. “I decided to buy a couple of rakes that are meant to be used to rake the lawn.”

“Garden rakes?” I said. “You mean there’s different kinds of rakes?”

“Yes,” she said. “Those other old rakes are meant to smooth out the dirt when you plant the garden or after you hoe the garden.”

“They are?”

I had never seen any other kind of rake—and did not know there was any other kind of rake.

“I bought two,” Loretta said. “The other one is over there.”

I turned around, and sure enough, another rake just like the one Loretta was using leaned against the house.

Curious to find out how the rake worked, I took hold of the handle, set the wire fan in the grass and drew it toward me.

When the rake reached my feet, I couldn’t help wondering what was wrong with it. I had been helping my sister rake the lawn for quite a few years, so I was pretty sure I knew how to rake—except that *this* rake didn’t seem to be working right.

So I tried it again.

And then again.

“Am I doing this the way you’re supposed to?” I asked.

Loretta stopped raking and watched me.

“I don’t know if there’s a wrong way to rake. Unless you turn the rake upside-down,” she said.

I pulled the rake toward me one more time.

“But this is so easy!” I said.

The new rake glided through the grass and pulled the leaves from last year along with it in one, smooth pass.

The old rakes caught in the grass and required so much effort to pull them that my arms grew tired after only a few minutes.

Loretta smiled. “Like I said—I don’t know why we’ve been struggling with those old garden rakes for so long.”

We only had to finish the lawn around the lilacs and some of the front lawn. In no time at all, with both of us working at it, the raking was done. Before he cleaned the barn tomorrow, Dad would bring the manure spreader behind the house to pick up the piles of leaves and old grass that we had raked up, and then he would spread the piles out in the field.

Loretta and I put the new lawn rakes into the machine shed, and then we went back into the house, where my mother stood by the cupboard, using a slotted spoon to fish the violets out of the bowl.

“They don’t look much like violets anymore,” I said.

The violets had become a lump of green mush with a few streaks of lavender. I had been wondering if the tea would turn a pretty purple color, but it really didn’t look like much of anything.

My sister picked up the bowl and swirled the liquid. “Now what do you have to do with it?” she asked.

“I don’t have to do anything more with it—except wait and drink a cup of it before I try to go to sleep,” Mom replied.

“What do you think it tastes like?” I asked, staring into the bowl.

My mother shrugged. “As long as it’s not bitter, I don’t really care.”

After we had finished milking in the evening and had fed the calves and had turned the cows outside, I could hardly wait to get back in the house so my mother could tell me what the violet tea tasted like.

“Are you ready to drink your tea yet?” I said as I came into the house.

“No,” Mom said, “I’m not ready to drink my tea yet—not until after I’ve watched the weather.”

“The weather?” I said, turning to look at the clock. “But that’s a long time from now.”

Although I was usually in bed by ten o’clock, under the circumstances, Mom said I could stay up to watch her drink the violet tea.

When the weather forecast was finally over after the ten o’clock news, my mother picked up her crutches and went out to the kitchen. I stood by her elbow and watched as she poured the violet tea into a cup, and then I set the cup on the table for her.

“Aren’t you going to warm it up first?” Loretta asked. She, too, had come out to the kitchen when the weather was finished.

Mom shook her head. “I don’t think it will make much difference.” She picked up the cup of tea.

“Here goes,” she said, taking a sip.

“Well?” I asked.

“Hmmm,” my mother said, shaking her head. “Not only doesn’t it look like much of anything, it doesn’t taste like much of anything.”

“It doesn’t taste like *anything*?” I said.

“Not really,” Mom replied. “It just sort of tastes a tiny little bit the way grass smells when you cut it.”

“That’s it?” I said.

“That’s it,” she said, “and if it doesn’t taste like much of anything, I don’t suppose it’s going to do much of anything, either, although, as long as the cup is full, I guess I might as well drink all of it.”

The next morning, I woke up at the usual time, and it was while I was pulling a shirt over my head that I remembered Mom’s violet tea. I hurried down the stairs, or hurried as fast as I could without slipping on the narrow steps, and when I came down into the kitchen, my mother was sitting by the table.

“I feel terrible,” she groaned.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, pulling out one of the kitchen chairs so I could sit down.

“I didn’t sleep very well,” she said, leaning her head on her hand and running her hand through her hair.

“Why not?” I said.

She looked at me with red-rimmed eyes, as if she had been crying, except I knew she hadn’t been crying. This is the way Mom looked when she hadn’t slept very well.

“All night long, I dreamed I was being chased,” she said.

“Chased by what?” I said.

“I dreamed I was being chased by...well...I feel ridiculous saying this,” Mom said, “but I dreamed I was being chased by...well...by pink elephants.”

I was pretty sure that I had been listening to every word Mom said, but maybe not—because for just a second there, I was almost positive that my mother said she had dreamed she was being chased by pink elephants.

“They were everywhere,” Mom continued. “Big ones and little ones. Life-sized and miniature. In the barn. In the garden. In the house. Under the bed. In the closet. Down in the basement...”

“What kind of pink?” I asked. “Were they pretty?”

Mom stared at me, eyebrows high on her forehead. “Were they pretty? What kind of a question is that?”

“Were they a pretty color of pink? There’s all kinds of pink, you know. Dark pink. Light pink. Pink that’s almost red. Pink that’s a little orange, although I don’t like that kind of pink. And sometimes it seems like pink might have a little blue mixed with it.”

My mother began to laugh.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha,” she chortled. “Hee-hee-hee.”

Mom put her head down on her arms. “Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha,” she snickered.

My mother lifted her head and looked at me. “Ohhhhh...ha-ha-ha-ha-ha. Tee-hee.”

After a few minutes of helpless giggling, she was able to talk again.

“The pink elephants weren’t even real,” she gasped, wiping the tears out of her eyes. “They were stuffed toys.”

“You dreamed about being chased by life-sized stuffed toy pink elephants?” I said.

My mother nodded. “The big ones were out in the barn. The miniature ones were in the closet. The medium-sized ones were in the basement.”

“Did I just hear you say that you dreamed about pink elephants?” Loretta asked as she came downstairs.

Mom nodded. “Yes, pink elephants. Lots of pink elephants. All kinds of pink elephants. Pink elephants everywhere.”

“Are you going to try the tea again?” I asked. “I can go and pick some more violets for you.”

My mother shook her head. “No, no. Once was enough. The article said the violets would help you sleep. But it didn’t say anything about strange dreams.”

“If that’s the side effect, I suppose it’s not worth it,” Loretta said.

“Not worth it a bit,” Mom replied. “I slept all night, but since I feel like I spent the whole night being chased, I would rather lie awake. I think it’s more restful.”

The pan with the rest of the violet tea was still sitting on the countertop.

“Can I taste the tea?” I asked.

My mother shook her head. “Absolutely not. One person dreaming about pink elephants in this house is enough.”

“Mom?” I said. “Why did you dream about *pink* elephants? Why not purple ones, seeing as violets are purple?”

“And why elephants?” Loretta said. “Why not cows? Or horses?”

My mother rubbed her eyes. “I wish I knew,” she said. “As far as I can tell, there was no rhyme or reason to it.”

I turned to look out the kitchen window. From here, in the early morning sunshine, I could see some of the violets on the Bluff.

“Would it be all right if I picked more violets when I get home from school today?” I said. “So we can have them for a bouquet on the table?”

Mom stopped rubbing her eyes. “I would love a bouquet,” she said. “Just as long as no one asks me to make tea.”

Right away when I came home from school in the afternoon, I went to the Bluff to pick more violets. Usually Mom only allowed one excursion to the Bluff each year to pick violets. She said we had too much work to do to waste time picking flowers. I also knew that in another week, the violets would be gone. Then we wouldn’t have any more until next year.

And as I plucked the violets out of the purple sea covering the hillside around me, I found myself thinking of my mother’s pink elephants.

Who would have thought that violets could make you dream about pink elephants?

Not Mom, that’s for sure.

If she had known, she wouldn’t have made the violet tea.

But if she hadn't made the tea, then I wouldn't be out here right now picking more violets. I would be back at the house—putting away the sheets and pillowcases my mother had ironed this afternoon.

And I don't have to say that I would rather be picking violets.

Do I?

...Gently Down The Stream

Mom held out an envelope. “Here. Set this by Dad’s plate so he will see it when he comes in for breakfast.” Before I took the envelope, I turned my hands this way and that, to make sure they weren’t so dirty they would smudge the white paper.

Only a few minutes ago, I had been out in the barn carrying milk and cutting the long grass beyond the barnyard fence. Every morning and every evening we cut grass for the calves. Dad said it was good for them to eat some grass. If Dad cut the grass, he used the big scythe. If I cut grass, I used the little hand-held cutter that looked like a miniature scythe. When we gathered up the grass in big armfuls and put it in the manger by the calf pen, the calves acted like it was the best thing they had ever eaten. Dad said that to the calves, fresh grass was like the way we would feel about eating birthday cake with vanilla ice cream.

“What’s wrong with your hands?” my mother asked when I had finished inspecting my fingers.

I shook my head as I reached for the envelope. “Nothing. I just want to make sure I don’t get it dirty.”

Mom shrugged. “I don’t think it would matter if you *did* get it dirty. Dad will be more interested in the cash, anyway, I have a feeling.”

Even though Father’s Day was one whole week away, we were going to give Dad his present now. For a long time my father had been saying he would love to have a fishing boat, and over the past several months the surprise had been almost killing me because—we were getting Dad a boat for Father’s Day.

Well...we weren’t actually getting him a boat. We were giving him the money so he could buy a boat, although from the amount we had managed to save, it wasn’t going to be a very big boat. Nothing at all like the motorboats I saw out on the lake pulling water skiers.

Sometimes when we went over the bridge on our way to town, we could see motorboats on the lake. Dad said he would never be able to own one of those boats, seeing as they cost as much as a tractor. My father liked to stop at implement dealerships ‘just to look,’ so I knew how much tractors cost, and I knew we didn’t have enough in the envelope to buy a tractor.

I never said anything to Mom, but I wondered if Dad was going to be disappointed because he couldn't get a big boat.

Since April my mother had been setting aside a little cash every week, such as a couple of dollar bills she received as change when she went to the grocery store. "If I take out some now and then," she'd said the first time she put money in the envelope "it won't be so obvious."

I had no idea why my mother was worried Dad would figure out we were saving money for his Father's Day present. Mom wrote out the checks to pay the bills and took care of all the bookkeeping herself.

Besides my mother's grocery money and the money Ingman and Loretta put in the envelope, whenever Mom paid me fifty cents for helping her clean the closets or for washing the windows or for scrubbing the basement steps or for cleaning out a cupboard, I would also put money in the envelope for Dad's Father's Day present.

All along, my mother said she wanted to give Dad the money before Father's Day so he could go shopping and would have his boat by the time Father's Day arrived. At first she had thought maybe Loretta or Ingman could buy the boat, but then she wondered where we would hide something that big so Dad wouldn't see it.

I held up the plain white envelope. "Shouldn't we write something on it?" I asked. "Like Happy Father's Day?"

"Oh, shoot," Loretta said.

My big sister was coming down the stairs. She had been sitting in her bathrobe, with curlers in her hair, drinking coffee and talking to Mom when I went out to the barn. While I was outside, she had taken the curlers out of her hair, and now she was dressed in a pair of light pink shorts with a light pink blouse to match.

I only had to look at my sister to know we didn't have church this morning. Our parish had three churches. The big church in the country on the other side of town held services every Sunday. Our little church and the other little church took turns every other Sunday. If we were going to church this morning, my sister would not be dressed in shorts.

"I should have gotten a card for Dad after work on Friday," Loretta said. "But I never gave it a thought."

"Well, since we don't have a card, we can write 'Dad' on the envelope, and then, if you hurry," Mom said, turning to me, "you'll have to time to draw a picture to put inside. You can write 'Happy Father's Day' on the picture."

“That’s a good idea,” Loretta said.

I looked at Loretta and then at Mom.

A picture?

I was not very good at drawing pictures—not like some of the kids in my class at school. A couple of them could, with a few strokes of a pencil or a crayon, draw a picture that looked just like the thing they were drawing. When I tried to draw something, the more lines I put on it, the worse it got.

“I’m not very good at drawing,” I said.

“That doesn’t matter,” Mom said. “It’s the thought that counts.”

I turned to look at the kitchen clock. Dad would be coming in for breakfast soon. When I had left the barn, he was in the middle of rinsing the milkers. I knew he would not turn the cows outside until after we had eaten breakfast, but he always scraped the manure from the back of stalls and fluffed the bedding before he came to the house.

Dad had probably already started to fluff the bedding.

I didn’t have any time to waste.

My mother tore a sheet out of the notebook where she kept the farm records. It wasn’t the kind of paper we used in art class at school, but it was going to have to do.

I went to the catchall drawer and got out my box of crayons. When school was over for the year, I would put the crayons in the drawer, where they stayed until the end of the summer, or until Mom decided they took up too much room—whichever came first. Then I would take them upstairs and dump them into the brown paper bag with the other crayons from other years.

I pulled out a blue crayon and started shading in the bottom half of the paper. The picture would have to have water. And a boat. And people in the boat fishing. And a round sun with long yellow rays on the upper half of the paper.

A little while later, the picture was finished. The people in the boat were only stick figures, but I could barely draw stick figures, so I knew better than to try to make them look like people.

I had no more than finished writing ‘Happy Father’s Day’ in black crayon across the middle of the sky when Loretta spoke up. She had been standing watch by the kitchen window.

“Quick. Dad just came around the garage,” she said.

I folded the picture, stuffed it in the envelope, set the envelope by his plate, gathered up the crayons, pushed them back into the box and stashed the box in the catchall drawer.

I turned around in time to see Dad walk into the kitchen.

He stopped short by the door and looked at Mom, Loretta and me. My mother sat at her place by the table, a cup of coffee in front of her. I was still standing by the catchall drawer, and Loretta stood by the sink.

“What’s the matter with you?” he asked.

“Why?” I said.

“What would make you ask that?” Mom said.

“Nothing’s the matter with us,” Loretta said.

“You look like you got caught with your hand in the cookie jar,” Dad said.

He gazed at us and then shook his head and shrugged. “So. What’s for breakfast?” he asked. “I see you’ve already got the plates out. I suppose you want eggs or pancakes.”

Dad always asked what we were having for breakfast. If Loretta was not at home, he would make eggs or pancakes himself. If Loretta was home, she would make breakfast. It wasn’t that my mother could not stand up long enough to make eggs or pancakes—but it was much easier for her if Dad or Loretta made breakfast. And today, it was going to be Mom, Dad, Loretta and me at the table. My big brother was working the seven-to-three shift at the creamery this week.

“How about French toast?” Loretta said.

“Sounds good,” Dad said. “We haven’t had that in a while.”

As he turned toward the bathroom so he could wash up, he glanced at the table. “What’s this?” he asked, taking a step closer to look at the envelope tucked under the edge of his plate.

“What’s what?” Mom said.

“This,” he said, pulling out the envelope.

“Oh, that,” Mom said. “It’s your Father’s Day present.”

“I thought Father’s Day was next weekend,” Dad said.

“It is,” Mom said. “Wash up first, then you can open it.”

Dad laid the envelope on the table by his plate. He returned a few minutes later smelling of the Ivory soap he had used. While he was in the bathroom washing his hands and face, Loretta had begun to mix milk and eggs and vanilla and cinnamon to make French toast.

My father poured a cup of coffee for himself, sat down by the table and reached for the white envelope with fingers that were as deeply tanned as his face. The tan extended all the way up his forearms and past his elbows to the point where the short sleeves of his blue workshirt rested against his arms.

“Should I open this now?” he asked.

My mother nodded.

I had only tucked the flap inside the envelope, and with one wide thumb, my father flicked open the flap.

“What’s this?” Dad asked as he pulled out the sheet of folded paper.

He opened the paper and held it up so he could see it better.

“Nice picture,” he said. “A boat and two people fishing.” He looked over at me. “I suppose you made this?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

“And it says ‘Happy Father’s Day’ on it, too,” Dad observed. He looked over at me again. “Thank you very much.”

“You’d better look and see what else is in the envelope,” Mom said.

Loretta finished putting two slices of French toast into the frying pan. She turned away from the stove so she could watch Dad.

My father reached into the envelope and pulled out a couple of tens and a few twenties. My mother, I noticed, had exchanged the ones and the quarters in the envelope for larger bills.

“What’s this for?” Dad asked, holding up the money.

“Your Father’s Day present,” Loretta said.

“I’m sorry, but you’ll have to buy your own present,” Mom said.

“My own present?” Dad said.

“Don’t you get it, Daddy?” I said, pointing to the picture.

My father frowned. “Get—what?”

Mom drew a deep breath. “The money is for a fishing boat!”

Dad’s eyes widened with surprise.

“A what?”

“A fishing boat!” I said.

“A fishing boat?” Dad said, as if he had never heard of such a thing.

“You’ve always talked about how you’d like to have a fishing boat someday,” Mom said.

“We thought maybe you’d better buy it yourself, so you can get the one you want,” Loretta explained.

My father loved to go fishing. He did not often have the opportunity during the spring and summer and fall when he was busy with

fieldwork, and if we did go, we fished from shore in one of several spots by the river, sometimes for a little while after milking in the evening and sometimes on Sunday afternoon. Although the lake was not far away, there was no good place to fish from shore because either the bank was too steep, or someone had built a cottage. You couldn't very well just walk into a person's backyard and go fishing, Dad said.

As I sat there looking at Dad, all of the possibilities seemed to dawn on him at once.

"A boat!" he exclaimed.

"We were so poor for years and years that we couldn't have even thought about it," Mom said. "But now we can."

"A boat!" Dad said.

"We saved money for a long time," I said.

"Since April," Mom said.

"April!" Dad exclaimed.

"We wanted to buy one and surprise you, but we didn't know what you wanted. And besides, we had no place to hide it," Loretta said.

"A boat!" Dad said.

Loretta turned and flipped over the two pieces of French toast.

"I guess I'm going to have to go shopping tomorrow then, aren't I," Dad said.

"Why can't we go today?" I said.

"It's Sunday," Mom said. "The stores are closed on Sunday."

I had forgotten that it was Sunday.

"Can I come along when you go shopping tomorrow, Daddy?" I asked.

"If you want," he said.

Loretta put two more pieces of French toast on the plate in the oven so the toast would stay warm.

"Do I get to go out for a boat ride, too?" she asked.

"Sure," Dad said. He took out his billfold, tucked the money inside, and then pinned his shirt pocket shut again. Some of Dad's workshirts were so old that the buttons wouldn't stay buttoned, so he used a safety pin to keep the pocket closed. After the billfold had been safely pinned back into his shirt pocket, Dad looked at each of us in turn.

"I've been wishing I had a boat for a lot of years," he said. "And I know just the one I want!"

The next afternoon, when Dad had finished cutting hay after dinner, he was ready to buy his fishing boat.

“What’s it going to look like?” I asked as I pulled the pickup truck door shut and settled against the seat.

“Small enough to fit in the back of the truck,” Dad said.

“Why does it have to fit in the back of the pickup?” I asked.

“Because then I won’t need a trailer for it. We can put it in the truck and go when we want to, after milking or on Sunday afternoons.”

None of the boats I had seen on the lake could fit the truck.

Several hours later, just in time to put the cows in and feed them before supper, we returned home.

“I’m going outside to see your boat,” Mom said after we had come in the house.

Dad had left the truck parked in the driveway, and we both waited in the kitchen while my mother made her way down the steps.

“Look at that,” Mom said as she stood behind the truck and inspected Dad’s new boat. “It’s so shiny and clean,” she said, reaching out to touch the smooth aluminum surface.

“And we got two oars!” I said.

The oars rested in the back of the boat. I leaned forward and picked one up so Mom could see it.

“And,” Dad said, opening the pickup door and reaching inside, “we got two life preservers and two floating cushions.”

The life preservers were bright orange. One cushion was blue and the other red.

“Are you going to take it out of the truck before you feed the cows?” Mom asked.

Dad shook his head. “No-sir. It’s staying right where it is. We’re going for a boat ride tonight after milking!” he said.

Later that evening when the milking was finished, Dad and I drove down to the lake in the truck while Mom and Loretta followed in the car. We asked Ingman if we wanted to go, but he said he would rather rest because he had to get up early for work at the creamery tomorrow.

Loretta parked the car so Mom could see the boat landing. The sun had started to drop toward the horizon, but it would be a while yet before dark. Overhead, the sky was a crystal clear blue, and from the trees on the lakeshore came the trilling songs of red-winged blackbirds and the twittering of robins.

“How come we’re going out in the boat here, Daddy?” I said.

The boat landing was not very far from our farm, but it was the not the boat landing where we went ice fishing in the winter or where Loretta and I sometimes went swimming on hot Sunday afternoons. This landing was little more than an open spot along the shoreline.

“We’re going out here because it’s closer to home, for one thing,” Dad said. “We really don’t have all that much time this evening.”

“What’s the other thing?” I asked.

“No big speed boats on this part of the lake,” Dad said, “so we can take our time getting used to the rowboat.”

“Why won’t there be any speedboats?” Loretta asked.

“Too shallow. But it’s just right for us,” Dad said.

Dad, Loretta and I pulled the aluminum boat out of the back of the truck and carried it to the edge of the lake.

“Have fun!” Mom called out from the car. She was sitting with the window rolled all the way down. “Don’t forget your life preservers!”

“Nuts,” Dad said. “I forgot about the life preservers. I suppose you’d better wear them.”

“What about you, Dad?” Loretta asked.

He pointed to a blue cushion sitting on one of the boat seats. “I’ve got the cushion,” he said.

Loretta went back to the pickup truck and retrieved the two orange life preservers. She handed one to me and put the other one on herself.

“You get in first, kiddo,” Dad said.

While the back of the little aluminum rowboat bobbed around in the water, I crawled over the seats to the other end and sat down. Then Dad got in. And then Loretta pushed us out a ways farther before hopping in herself. “And awaaaaay we go,” she said.

The evening air was cool and calm, without a breath of wind. Dad picked up one of the oars and used it to push the boat out a bit farther. He fitted first one oar into the oarlock and then the other into the opposite oarlock. He began to row with just one oar, and when he did, the boat turned around. When he rowed with the other oar, the boat turned the other way.

“See how that works, kiddo?” he asked. “When you pull with one oar, the boat goes one way. When you pull with the other oar, it goes the opposite way. The next time we go out, when we’ve got more daylight, you can learn how to row the boat.”

“Can I, Daddy? Really?” I said.

“Yup, really,” he said.

Dad straightened the boat out and rowed away from the landing. The marshy smell of the rushes growing along the edge of the lake mingled with the scent of warm air beginning to cool off as the sun dropped toward the horizon. The oars creaked in the oarlocks in time with Dad’s rowing—*creak-crock, creak-crock, creak-crock*.

“This is so peaceful,” Loretta said.

“Tis, isn’t it,” Dad replied.

As for me, I could only look around with wide-eyed wonder. I had never been in a boat, and I couldn’t decide which I liked more: the way the boat slid through the water or the swirls made by the oars.

All too soon, we headed toward the boat landing, and a few minutes later, we were all back on shore.

“How was it?” Mom asked as we walked toward the car.

“It was heavenly!” Loretta said. “So peaceful.”

“I didn’t know Daddy could row a boat so good!” I said.

“Of course he can row a boat,” Mom said. “He’s an expert. He won a rowing contest once.”

I could feel my eyebrows creeping up on my forehead.

“You *did*?” I said, turning to stare at Dad.

“And as soon as Dad got into the boat, Aunt Othilia said she knew he was going to win,” Mom said.

Aunt Othilia had been my mother’s aunt, my grandmother’s sister. I did not remember her, although there was a picture of me when I was a baby, sitting on her lap. Aunt Othilia had come from Norway when she was a young woman.

“How did Aunt Othilia know he was going to win?” I asked.

“I wondered the same thing myself,” Mom said. “She just kept insisting that by the way he handled the oars, he looked more at home in a boat than any of the others.”

My mother smiled. “It took me a while to figure it out,” she said. “Aunt Othilia grew up in a seaport in Norway, so I’m sure she saw boats of all kinds.”

“And Daddy won!” I said.

“Oh, yes,” Mom said. “He was the best of any of them.”

“Nothin’ I like more than a row boat. You can go where you want to with it, and you can take your time,” Dad said. “But this is a better boat than that one was. Much better.”

“Why is it better?” I asked.

Dad grinned. "Because it's mine."

I looked at my father for a few seconds before I grinned back at him.

And here I was worried Dad would be disappointed if he couldn't have a big motorboat.

Then again, I never knew he had once won a rowing contest.

And that, of course, made all the difference in the world.

Sea Monsters and Giant Frogs

My legs were much too long for the swing that hung from the clothesline. Dad had tied the rope shorter so the swing was higher off the ground, and the shorter ropes helped a little, except that now the ropes were so short, the swing could not move back and forth very much.

Dad said someday soon he would make a swing in one of the silver maples that grew along the fence by Dusty's pasture. He even knew which branch he was going to use.

But so far, in between cutting, raking and baling hay and milking cows and going to town to grind feed, my father hadn't had time. If I wanted to swing, I was left with no choice but to use the one hanging on the clothesline.

I sat down in the swing, wrapped my arms around the ropes and tilted my head back. If I couldn't swing, I could at least look at the sky. The summer sun felt hot on my face, and I could hear sparrows chirping by the granary. Not loud, fast chirps, but slow, lazy, quiet chirps, as if they were daydreaming about something else besides the pieces of oats they had found in the grass by the granary door.

I put my feet flat on the ground and pushed until the swing was as far back as it would go. Then I picked my feet up, and—as I watched the blue sky streaked with a few hazy, white clouds—sat still while the swing moved back and forth, back and forth, back and forth.

When the swing came to a stop, I pushed off again.

The sun was so warm, and the back-and-forth of the swing was so soothing, that soon my eyelids began to feel heavy. Maybe it wouldn't be such a bad idea to close my eyes for a little while...

All at once, my eyelids snapped open.

What was that?

I looked toward the machine shed and then the other way, toward the house.

There it was again—

"Meooooowwwrrrrr!"

"Where are you kitty?" I called.

“Meoooooowwrrrr!” replied the cat.

The barn kitties used different meows for different reasons: *“Hi, I’m hungry! Please feed me!”* and *“Hi! I’m happy to see you! Please pet me!”* and *“I’m lost! Where are you?”* and *“Go away! I don’t like you!”* The cats used the ‘go away’ meow when two of them were having a difference of opinion. That’s what Dad called it—a difference of opinion. The ‘go away’ meow would bring Needles on the run to break up a cat fight.

But this meow was different from anything I had ever heard before. It sounded scared and forlorn.

“I’m coming kitty cat,” I said, stepping away from the swing.

“Meoooooowwrrrr!” said the cat.

I followed the sound and walked past the little pump house and then past the end of the garage.

Once I reached the other side of the garage, I could tell where the meow was coming from. I trotted across the driveway and looked over the edge of the silo pit.

“Kitty!” I gasped.

In the bottom of the pit, one of our barn cats sat crouched on a floating board.

“Meooooooooooooowwrrrrrrrrrr!” said the cat.

The big round hole in the ground had been next to the barn for as long as I could remember. At one time there had been a silo above it, but all that remained now was an open concrete pit with water in the bottom. As each season passed, more rain and melted snow had filled the bottom of the silo pit. I had no idea how deep the water was, but it was deep enough so that a few old boards floated on the black surface.

The cat was so wet that I couldn’t tell which one it was—not until she tilted her head back to look up at me, and I saw the little white patch on the underside of her throat. It was one of last year’s kittens, a small brown tabby I called Violet.

After I had brought the kitten into the house to show my mother and had left her alone for a few minutes, she had scampered into the living room and discovered one of Mom’s African violets. When I finally found her, she was sitting on the floor, one outstretched paw batting at a leaf she broken off the plant.

I thought Mom was going to be upset about her African violet, but much to my surprise, she told me to get another flower pot from underneath the kitchen sink. She filled the pot with potting soil, stuck

the leaf down in the dirt and then watered the pot. “Now I’ve got another African violet,” she’d said.

I leaned forward over the side of the pit so I could see better, and all the while, the cat watched me with her light green eyes.

Last week it had been hot and humid, but this week it was cooler, so at least the water in the pit was not quite as stinky. That was one of the things I did not like about the silo pit. On hot summer days, the silo pit smelled like those puddles in the corner between the barn wall and the milkhouse where the cows liked to stand in the shade—stagnant water and mud mixed with cow manure and urine. The silo pit wasn’t that bad. But almost.

The other thing I did not like about the silo pit was the clumps of bubbly-looking green algae. I was pretty sure it was algae, anyway. We had learned about algae in science class at school. Sometimes, too, I wondered if *something else* lived just beneath the surface, a sea monster, maybe, like the Loch Ness monster. One of our books at school had a picture of the Loch Ness monster. Or what someone had claimed was the Loch Ness monster. I figured something that big could not fit in the silo pit. Although, then again, maybe it could...

“Kitty-kitty-kitty,” I called out as I leaned against the side of the pit. Instead of smooth concrete, like the barn floor, the silo pit was rough with small stones that reminded me of the candied cherries and red, green and yellow bits of citron rind in Mom’s Christmas bread. Dad said the silo pit was rough because the concrete had been mixed with river gravel, but that the barn floor was smooth because the concrete had been mixed with sand.

“*MEE-OWWW!*” exclaimed the young cat. She tried to stand up on the floating board, but when she moved, the board tilted forward.

Violet returned to her crouched position and stared up at me again with her light green eyes.

Violet’s eyes were not the only sets of eyes staring up at me. That was the other thing I did not like about the silo pit—the giant frogs. Only a few feet away from the cat a huge green speckled frog sat on a different board. One time I had counted six of the big frogs, sunning themselves on the boards floating in the pit. If they had been small, like the little speckled frogs that lived in the creek below the driveway, it would have been one thing. But these frogs were bigger than my hand. Dad said they were bullfrogs.

For the past few years, Dad had been talking about hiring someone to fill in the silo pit. “If we’re not gonna have a silo, there’s no sense in keeping the pit,” he’d say. “Makes it hard to get around there with the tractor. And besides, it’s kind of dangerous having an open pit like that.”

But so far, the silo pit remained—rotting boards, frogs, algae, and whatever else might be living underneath the black water.

“How did you get down there?” I asked. “Were you walking around the top, Violet? Or did you jump at a bird flying past?”

Cats would rather not step in little puddles on the driveway, much less jump into something with enough water to float boards.

“Meow!” Violet said. Her expression seemed to say, “Don’t just stand there. Do something.”

“I wish I knew how you got down there,” I said.

As I stood looking at the cat, all at once I realized that *how* she had ended up in the pit was not important. What really mattered is that now she could not get out. Sure, cats were good climbers, but even the best ones could not climb concrete.

I thought for a minute or two.

Would it be possible...?

No. Anybody could see the pit was much too deep to reach the cat from the top.

What about the stepladder?

No, that wouldn’t work, either. If I could somehow lower the stepladder into the pit, and if I could also somehow manage to climb into the pit by myself, I would never be able to get out again. The stepladder would not be tall enough to reach the top. Then Violet and I would both need to be rescued. If the sea monsters or the giant frogs or the green clumps of algae didn’t get us first.

Of course, the *extension* ladder might be tall enough.

I turned to look at the barn. The extension ladder leaned against the outside wall by the door going into the haymow. Instead of using the built-in ladder nailed to the wall inside the barn, we used the ladder outside during haying season.

I turned back to look at Violet.

Yes, the extension ladder *would* work. I could climb down, get hold of the cat, and then climb back up.

No...that wouldn’t work, either.

The tall, two-sectioned ladder was much too big and too heavy for me to carry. I would not be able to get it down from the side of the barn by myself, never mind move it to the silo pit. Bringing the extension ladder would require someone taller and much stronger—

“Don’t worry kitty. I’ll be right back.”

“Meeeee-ow-rrrrr,” the cat replied, as if to say, “please hurry.”

Dad had not gone to town to grind feed, and he was not out in the field cutting hay because the weather forecast predicted rain tonight, so I knew he was most likely around the buildings somewhere.

I ran to the barn. Both the upper and lower doors had been propped open. But the barn was empty, except for a couple of sleepy cats blinking up at me from the straw.

Where else could Dad be?

I ran out the door and jogged across the driveway to the machine shed. After the bright sunshine outside, the windowless shed seemed dark.

“DAD! Dad? Are you in here?”

“No. I’m over here.”

I turned and saw my father standing in the doorway of the granary, holding a broom in one hand.

“What’s the matter? What’s all the yelling for?” he asked.

I sprinted for the granary. “Daddy! There’s a kitty in the silo pit!”

My father set the broom against the doorframe.

“There’s a cat?” he asked. “In the silo pit?”

“It’s Violet,” I said. “And she’s floating on a board. And she’s really scared. And the only way to get her out is with the extension ladder. Please, Daddy, you’ve got to bring it. I can’t carry it by myself.”

Dad nodded, and without a word, headed toward the barn, with me right behind him.

At least I *thought* Dad was headed toward the barn.

When he veered off toward the garage, I almost ran into him.

For a man who claimed that he was not as young as he used to be, Dad was quick on his feet. He sidestepped around me, continued toward the garage, went to a pile of old planks and picked one up.

“What’s the board for?” I asked.

“To help the cat,” he replied. He turned on his heel and headed toward the silo pit, the plank balanced on his hip.

I hurried to catch up.

“But Daddy,” I said. “What about the ladder?”

“We don’t need the ladder,” he said.

“Then what are you going to do with the board?”

“You’ll see.”

When Dad reached the pit, he pushed the plank over the edge until one end rested in the water and the other end leaned against the top. Then he maneuvered it around until it was next to the board where the cat was still sitting, wet and miserable.

As Violet saw the plank coming toward her, she carefully rose to her feet. The movement caused her board to tip in the dark water.

“Kitty-kitty-kitty!” Dad called.

“Me-ow,” said the cat.

She extended one paw toward the plank but then withdrew and walked back and forth on the floating board.

“Kitty-kitty-kitty,” Dad called again in his most coaxing voice. “You can do it. Come on, now. I know you can.”

Once more the cat put out her paw and withdrew. Then she carefully sat down on the board and stared at the plank.

“You call her,” Dad said.

“Violet,” I said. “Violet-kitty. Kitty-kitty-kitty.”

Violet looked up at me with her light-green eyes. “Meow!” she said.

“Come on, Violet-kitty. Kitty-kitty-kitty.”

Violet crouched. And then, while I watched with disbelieving eyes, she hopped the short distance to the plank. She quickly climbed out of the pit, just like she was climbing a tree.

When Violet reached the top, she jumped to the concrete lip, leaped to the ground and shook herself. Water droplets flew in all directions. She shook herself again, sat down and began to lick her feet dry.

I turned to stare at Dad.

He winked. “Cats are good climbers. And a board’s a whole lot easier to carry than the extension ladder.”

My father reached down and patted Violet on top of the head. It was the only part of her that wasn’t wet.

She paused with one foot held in front of her mouth and looked up at him. “Meee-owww!” she exclaimed.

Dad laughed. “You’re welcome.”

I bent down to give Violet a pat on the head, too.

“Dad? How did you know Violet was saying thank you?”

He shrugged as he began pulling the plank out of the pit. “What would *you* say if someone helped you get out of a place like that?”

Over the next few days, I was relieved to see that Violet seemed none the worse for her experience, although I also noticed that whenever she came out of the barn, she crossed to the other side of the driveway instead of walking past the silo pit.

A few weeks later, Dad hired someone to demolish the pit. When my father announced that the silo pit was going to be filled in, I began to feel sorry for the bullfrogs. My father said the pit was too deep and that we would never be able to catch them to set them free.

On the day the man came to fill in the silo pit, I watched from the kitchen window as a bulldozer pushed in the sides and then crushed the larger chunks of concrete into pieces to fill in the hole. Mom said it was too dangerous for me to be outside while the bulldozer was working, so I had to be content to watch from inside the house.

After the bulldozer finished, all that remained of the silo pit and its bubbly clumps of green algae, the giant frogs—and whatever else might have been living beneath the black water—was a smooth patch of gravel that had been hauled in to level out the top.

“Should have had that old thing filled in years ago,” Dad said one evening while we were on our way to the garden he had planted between the driveway and the pasture fence. To get there, we had to walk right past where the pit used to be.

After the milking was finished in the evening, Dad often liked to visit the garden to see what was blossoming and what was ready to pick and what could be eaten right then and there—peas and green beans and tomatoes and ground cherries and carrots, although we took the carrots to the milkhouse first to wash them. The round, red sun had almost reached the western horizon, and in the clear sky above us, barn swallows flew back and forth, catching mosquitoes.

“Seems kind of funny without the silo pit,” Dad said.

I glanced at Violet, who followed along beside us. I wondered why the barn cats liked the garden so much. While we pulled weeds or picked vegetables, the cats would either sit on the lawn and watch, or else they would stretch out in the shade of the corn or the potatoes.

“What’s so funny about the pit not being here?” I asked.

“It’s odd,” Dad replied. “Because I was so used to seeing it. Gonna be a while before I stop expecting the pit to be there when I walk around the corner of the barn.”

Dad stopped abruptly. “Oh, nuts,” he said.

“What?” I asked.

“I *knew* there was something else I wanted to do—and I keep forgetting,” he said.

“What’s that?”

“Your new swing,” Dad replied.

From here, I could see the swing hanging on the end of the clothesline, but I could not see the tree branch on the other side of the house where Dad was going to put the new swing.

“I bet Violet doesn’t care about my new swing,” I said.

“Huh?” Dad said.

“If I’d had my new swing, I would have been on the other side of the house when she fell in the silo pit,” I said.

Dad looked at the tabby cat sitting underneath the arching leaves of the corn plants with her tail curled around her front paws.

“What does that have to do with it?” he asked.

“If I was in back of the house, I don’t think I would’ve been able to hear her,” I said.

“Oh, I suppose you’re probably right,” Dad said. He paused. “Well, it’s like they say, I guess—no time like the present. Should we put up a new swing?”

“Could we?”

He nodded. “I think we’ve got time before it gets too dark.”

“Come here, Violet,” I said.

The cat left her spot beneath the corn. When I picked her up, she snuggled down in my arms and began to purr—loud, raspy and rumbling.

Dad smiled. “You’re a happy cat, aren’t you.”

Well, one thing about it, anyway. As we walked over the new patch of gravel by the barn, I knew I would never have to worry that Violet would fall into the silo pit again.

I still couldn't help feeling a *little* sorry for the frogs, though—now that they were gone.

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