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Mother Finally Made It

Frank Zahn

I can still hear my mother talking about it—making things right for us at last by going back to the farm. It was during those days long ago when she felt so helpless because there was little food in the house, if any, for supper.

Her face shrouded in worry, she would rock back and forth anxiously in the rocking chair that belonged to her mother--Grandma Abell--and say aloud in earshot of my brothers and me, “Believe you me. I mean it as never before. Somehow, someway, I’m goin’ back to the farm where we can have good food and plenty of it. Yes, Sireee! I’m gonna make sure my family never goes to bed hungry again. I’m goin’ back, and nothin’ gonna stop me. And I mean nothin’!”

Holding back tears, she always added with little change in the wording, “No one goes hungry on the farm, and the food taste better than this stuff we buy in the grocery store nowadays. My mother and dad had thirteen of us children, and we never missed a meal—not one. We had lots of chickens—raised them up from baby chicks in the brooder house that my daddy built. There were chickens for laying eggs. There’s nothin’ like fresh eggs for breakfast. And there was always chickens for pan frying and old hens with lots of fat on them for stewing with homemade noodles or dumpling—not just for Sunday dinners but whenever it suits us.”

The worry on my mother’s face faded as she continued to remember aloud how it used to be when she was young and lived on the family farm just outside of Gardner, Kansas. Tears of joy came to her eyes as she remembered her mother and father—mostly her mother because her mother was one of those women who were always there for anyone, especially members of her family, who genuinely needed care and a helping hand.

Everyone admired and respected Grandma Abell. Dad never said much about anyone—positive or negative, but when Grandma Abell’s name came up in a conversation, he talked about her as if she were a saint—a wise and loving woman who truly lived up to her Christian faith.

Mother was a lot like her mother, and my brothers, my little sister, and I admired her for that, even though we had to listen to what had begun to sound like Mother’s empty promise of taking us all back to the farm so that we would never be hungry again.

“And that’s not all, not by a long shot,” Mother would continue. “I want some fat little pigs—at least six or eight—so that when they’re full grown, we’ll have slabs of bacon and hams smokin’ in the smoke house. A farm’s not a full-fledged farm without a smokehouse. Of course, we’ve got to have a cow for milk and cream for churning butter and a team of horses for plowing a field for a garden. I want a big garden just like the one we had back when I was a girl. We’ll plant and raise cantaloupe and watermelon and all kinds of vegetables. We’ll have tomatoes, potatoes, carrots, bush and pole beans, radishes, lettuce, green onions, cucumber, and cabbage.

And, of course, we have to have green peas. They're a must. And trust me, they just don't taste right unless they're taken right out of the pods when handpicked in mid-to-late May the way my brothers, sisters, and I used to do."

When Mother mentioned the peas, her remembrances aloud always ended as they had begun—abruptly. She would jump up suddenly from the rocking chair and head for the kitchen. Something for supper always occurred to her when she remembered the peas. No one knew why, and when asked, she said she didn't know why either.

More often than not, she ended up fixing fried potatoes and fried eggs in lard and slices of day-old bread with oleomargarine that she bought with money from selling a treasured item in her China closet to a neighbor. Fried cornmeal mush with sugar syrup or baking powder biscuits with milk gravy were frequent last resorts as well.

"It's not like dining at the Waldorf, but it's not all that bad," she would say. "And it will keep us goin' until I figure out how I'm gonna get us back to the farm. When that day comes, we'll never have to worry about something to eat again. It's gonna happen, and I got a feelin' it gonna be sooner rather than later."

My brothers and I couldn't understand how Mother could be so positive when there was so little to eat, but if we complained, she told us to be still, eat our supper, and be grateful for what we had. It made no sense to complain further, even though my younger brother Henry couldn't always resist the temptation.

Even with the best of intentions, the short of it is that Mother didn't make it back to the farm during her lifetime. And she passed away when she was seventy-six years old with only that one regret.

In the years to come, my brothers, my sister, and I had families of our own and prospered, and something for supper was never an issue. My daughter Deborah was four years old when Mother passed away, and even though she doesn't remember her grandmother, as fate would have it, she had her grandmother's dream of going to live on a farm for the last twenty of her forty-three years.

She started her farming experience in the backyard of her home just outside the city limits of Newark, New Jersey. She bought and raised three baby chickens—the legal limit in the area. She named the chickens Frida, Lola, and Roxy and referred to them as the girls. She fed them mash when they were young and introduced them to scratch as they matured into laying hens. She salivated each time she mentioned how delicious the eggs were for breakfast. I seriously doubt, however, if she will have the heart to kill, prepare, and use them to make chicken and noodles or dumpling when they become too old for laying eggs.

In raised gardens, she also planted and harvested amaranth; beans—bush and pole; beets; broccoli; Brussels sprouts; carrots; cauliflower; cucumbers; lettuce; peanuts; peas; hot and sweet peppers; potatoes; pumpkins; spinach; sweet potatoes; tomatoes; and herbs, including basil, oregano, thyme, and tarragon. She planted and harvested small amounts of each because of

limited space, and looked forward to having a farm with more space so that she could grow larger quantities and more varieties.

“When that day comes, and it will be sooner rather than later,” she said in a conversation we had on the telephone. “I’ll add corn and asparagus to the list of vegetables I grow. I have a fig tree now, and I’ll have one on the farm along with lemon, persimmon, apricot, apple, and pear trees. And, of course, I will grow lots of blueberries and raspberries.”

I marveled at how much like her grandmother she has become when she talked about her plans to buy a farm—a small acreage—and become more self-reliant.

“Self-reliance is important to me, especially when it comes to what I eat,” she said in an email. “But my dream of living on a farm is not just a self-reliance thing. It’s a health thing. I want to know where my food comes from. Once I had a moment when I was standing in Whole Foods where I felt disconnected from all the food there. It seemed so unnatural. And with large corporations like Monsanto turning our foods into Franken foods—foods that are genetically modified, I want control over the nutrients in what I eat—an the tastes as well.”

To that she added, “Plus, if—or rather when—the zombie apocalypse hits, I want to be ready.” The humorous remark must have been in reference to World War Z, one of Brad Pitt’s recent movies.

Unlike her grandmother, Deborah has never had to worry about something to eat for supper or for any other meal. Nevertheless, she felt a same need to put herself in a position where she controlled the quantity and quality of food available to her. And each time she talked about it, she became more anxious.

Was her grandmother more anxious than her? Yes, of course. Quantity to her grandmother was more of an issue than quality. But control though the self-reliance a farm provides made their dreams the same.

Deborah finally realized the dream when she and her husband bought a small acreage in upstate New York recently. The first thing on her agenda was buying baby chickens and raising them, especially those for laying eggs. The second thing was preparing the soil and planting a garden—actually a series of raised gardens for easier tending. What comes next remains to be seen.

I’ve always suspected that in some inexplicable way her grandmother was behind all this—the dream, the motivation, and the actual move to the farm. And if Deborah ends up buying some pigs and building a smoke house, I’ll know her grandmother was behind it for sure. But even without the pigs and the smoke house, the truth is that my mother finally made it back to the farm in the person of her granddaughter, my Deborah. And I’d be willing to bet that Mother is looking down from heaven with a more than contented gleam in her eyes. She might even sigh once in a while and say under her breath, “Thank you, Jesus. I finally made it