

WASHINGTON CATHEDRAL
Mount Saint Alban Washington 16, D. C.
Woodley 6 – 3500

Tuesday of Holy Week, [March 27] 1956

Dear Grandmother:

I was very glad to hear again from Dad in his last letter that you were home once again and seemed to be showing some improvement. Actually, your physical condition is still a burden for you to carry and probably must continue to be for some time yet; but put up with the doctors and the drugs and the routines as graciously as you will, the thought still is constant that none of the fuss and the bother is really going to change things very much. That thought is constant because it is true, and the truth, once admitted, will yield to no comforting deceit of those around us. It occurs to me that these words may mean very little to you, and that I really do not know you very well. I wish very much that I knew you better, although even then, I could be of no help to one so uncomplicated.

There were very many things that I thought about between the ages of eight and fourteen – things that all boys think about, much as what they are going to eat next – whether or not they are going to have to work on Saturday instead of play – who they will be seated next to in class the following year – what they are going to do in the long summer months of no-school. It was the last thought that was always the most wonderful for me, for summer meant the farm – your home.

The many trips “out home” during the winter months, with the excitement of the bad road, and whether or not we would get stuck this trip, and the excitement of starting the sleepy, cold drive back to Freeport in the winter dark, wondering if we had timed it just right to see the night train, “The Hawkeye”, winging its way as a slow earth-bound comet of light just before we got to Elroy....all of those trips were a continuing series of milestones that marked the weeks until the end of the school year, and the beginning of the wonderful days on the farm.

The Farm (in capitals from here on, certainly) meant certain smells. Smells that were almost impossibly exciting as they got stronger and stronger from the paved road on towards the mound....There was a certain smell, impossible to recapture in memory but instantly recognized, to the corner where the church stood up the road on the left branch. This was the very church where my Mother had played the organ and gone to Sunday School....impossible for an eight-year old to visualize, but not impossible for him to feel. There was the wonderful smell of the pasture lot (sometimes in corn) when you were allowed to scramble out of the car and open the gate. The next smell was of clothes....Grand-dad’s overalls and your apron, and the sharper smell of the strong young uncles, not much older than I, really, but at that age, very much older.

The Farm smells were the sharpest and best smells...of cold dew on deep pasture grass, an ear of corn clutched in a little hand, the brain controlling the hand wondering if there really would be enough nerve that morning to ride that monstrous Dick back to the barn in the crisp morning air. (The secret joke of the two horses named Maude and Dick---your parent's names are the same).

...Smells of kitchen in full production on Saturday. Of breads and cakes and pies and cookies (always cookies)...of fresh milk and cream! (Do you know that milk in bottles, homogenized, has absolutely no smell whatever?) The smell of a drawer full of junk belonging to the boys, in the big lofty bedroom upstairs. The wonderful treasure in those drawers...knives, key-rings, things won at carnivals and fairs, souvenirs of a trip to Chicago, old leather wallets and worn decks of cards...the wonderful smells of them. (That's why I never really make much of a fuss when I find one of my own children going through the top drawer of my dresser, for I know well the excitement of exploring such a treasure chest.)

The smell of the windmill area as you drew the water, was entirely different from the smell of the woodpile as you stacked the lengths in your arm. (I remember the excitement inside each time I found I could carry one more stick than before....last year my small arms could only hold five, this year seven...my, I'm getting strong.)

The smells of the machinery shed, the garage, the barn, the corncrib. The longest and deepest smelling done at the tank as the horses snuffled in gallonous drinks. That hot, early morning smell of the summer day when you knew that thrashing was getting under way and you watched the men, and bigger boys than you, leave on the wagons at six....not today, Wayne, you'll just get in the way....help Mother around here today, we'll be here tomorrow and you better have things ready.

The smell of the hot machinery, and the smell of the dusty chaff and the clean grain in the sack, and you finally old enough to hold the sack upright under the spout this year, (but Stanley can throw it on the wagon). Next year I threw them on that wagon too, all day in the hot sun, and never missed a sack.

The smell of the fresh eggs in the pail. (The little brain wondering if it will find the courage this time to direct the hand out toward that nasty old one that pecks, to steal the protected egg beneath....oh well, Dave can get it, he's not scared!) Then there was the mystery of the cellar...the smells of the crocks of cream, the bacon and ham, the molding jars of canned goods, thousands, or was it only hundreds of them...the smell of the cooking breakfast after morning chores, the smell of the back porch on washday – the orchard in fall, with the odor of rotten apples, winey in the air.

These are the memories of the smells.

Then there were sounds....

The sounds of the greetings; of your voice....”Well, Maude! And Dick – I declare! And Wayne – my, what a big boy he’s getting to be – I declare!” And then his voice, the gruff laugh of approval: “You’re a long way from home!” Again the low chuckle as he looks approvingly at the grown-up daughter and allows himself to be briefly embraced.

The sound of paper stripped from the proffered chew of tobacco to the male grandchild, and the grunting laugh at the wrinkled nose and the refusal. The eternal game is played out, and the visit begins.

The sound of young boys’ voices exploring what is new and different since the week or the month before. New animals to see, and to hear. New chores to do and new games to play. The sound of the big reunion days, practically any Sunday afternoon. The newest babies on display in the back downstairs bedroom. The newest pieces played by the grandchildren on the piano in the parlor. The card games going on downstairs in the winter night while you huddled under the blanket upstairs listening a moment before sleep at the laughter coming up through the floor grill, with so little heat from the stove below. The thud of the knuckles on the table as the Jacks slammed home and home again, and the chuckles of delight when Old Nick made his appearance at a critical moment.

The sound of the Monday morning in the summer when one awoke to hear already the birds trilling and the sounds in the kitchen below. The realization that parents had gone the night before and that it would be a whole week before you saw them again was only a momentary pang before you leapt from the bed with the cry, “Why didn’t you call me?” Then the gruff chuckle, and the delighted taunt, “Boy, you can’t sleep half the day around here. Where have you been all morning?” (And the just-risen sun verified the clock on the wall, ticking away at 5:30 of a summer morning.)

The sound of the animals eating, or about to eat. The sound of the loaded wagon – with corn, with hay, or manure, or barley – squashing its way through the dust toward the barn. Giving that wonderful rest from the loading and the unloading....the air clean and clear in the bright, hot day.

The rain sound on the roof, and knowing that these were the days for work in the granary repairing the harness, or in the barns cleaning, and also the days for getting the chores done a little early and popping corn after supper. The sound of the axe, of the hoe, of the churn, the washer, the kitchen sounds.

These were some of the sounds.....the memory of a few.

Then there were the people.....Grandmother and Granddad, and the Boys.

How many things you did for me when I was little. They were all the little things that Mothers do very well, but that Grandmothers do even better. There was the time I fell and ran a nail on the stilts into my left hand...no, it was my right, for I just looked at the scar....and you fixed it up very well with iodine. How I hated the iodine and how very glad I was that you were there stronger than I, to make me bear it. Fingers pinched in a gate, a fall from a haymow, a toe smashed with a stick of wood....they all heal, don't they, but they heal better with the start of love and sympathy. Where in the world did you find those limitless wells of it for all your children first, then all those grandchildren after? You didn't have to find it at all, really, for it was your very nature to love us and for that there was no complicated formula for getting along or understanding.....just the nature of your being was its explanation.

There was manliness to be learned. For manliness is learned. One is born as a man, true, but manliness is learned by custom and example. There was always a lesson in manliness available with Granddad and those stalwart sons of yours around. One just knew how to act in pain, in happiness, in anger, in work, in play, merely by observing how men acted. A small boy inadvertently broke wind at the table, and the small boy snickered...the small boy was sent away, brusquely and with curtness likened to an animal. The small boy returned at the next meal, an older boy, and not quite so small. A small boy dropped a pail of eggs and, scared, hid the remains away, returning to say that he had found none. A not-too-patient Grandmother quickly extracts the truth and punishment for lying is meted out. An older boy may drop more eggs but he will never again lie to those around him. A small boy, angered because he is not allowed to play ball, heaves a bat, clipping Earl in the shin, and is quickly clobbered on the head for it. His tears are dried away with patience and that love ever present, but he is told that anger not controlled is always dangerous - "See, now Earl has to be punished!" – and the game is no more fun for anyone that day.

The small boy is now a man, of sorts...and that man writes to you today to say these things while there is time. Were we face to face, he could not say them...there would be you and there would be me....changed from those days. No, not really changed, but no longer able to realize that earlier relationship. There has always been a large part of you and yours in my life, and there always will be. I hope I shall see you again, but no matter, for what I have written is true, and that truth would not be changed by any meeting.

May God bless you and keep you for ever,

Love,

(signed) Wayne

AFTERWORD

I received a lovingly transcribed type-written copy of this letter after Wayne's death in 2003 with the accompanying hand-written note:

October 2, 2003

Dear Mark,

I am sending you a copy of this letter that your father wrote to Grandmother Logemann. She died in May 1956. Phyllis Reeser [Wayne's sister] suggested I do this. She said you might not have a copy of it. I have always treasured it. I am Stanley's ex-wife.

I send my sympathy to you on the loss of your father.

Sincerely,

Jean Logemann

Wayne was born in 1921, so the time described here would have been c. 1929 – 1935. By his own account the "Great Depression" didn't really affect life in the rural Midwest that much: The Farm was largely self-sufficient. I don't know what its products were or what the market(s) for them were like, but one can surmise that their basic nature and the needs they fulfilled were steady even if prices were low.

Mark Dirksen

May 22, 2014