



### THE OLD PLACE

My nephew, Little Harry, (We called him that because my Daddy, his granddad, was Big Harry) had learned medical terms about radiation, chemical treatments and all sorts of drugs. I listened to this foreign language but what I needed most was just to hear him.

“Uncle John, how are you doing?” His voice became barely audible and never carried the strength of his earlier calls. “I just wanted to tell you that I’m doing all right.” Even though he declared that all was good, his shortness of breath and long pauses told me he was filled with pain. “I sure would like a visit from you.”

I threw away excuses for not driving the 325 miles. It would be good to see Harry and visit the old family place that he now owned. And I would look for childhood tracks that remained on the farm.

When I arrived I learned he had been taken to the doctor’s office. This time alone allowed me to cross the pond levee and walk around.

My nephews, Don and Larry, kept the old place mowed to the manicured look of a golf course. Their older brother, Little Harry, wanted the farm looking nice but it's not easy for him to ride a tractor anymore.

At about six feet tall, he had been a fairly good-sized man, played football in high school and had always walked as straight as a soldier on parade.

Here in the ripest time during the miracle of spring, I stood on the edge of the hay meadow remembering every big rock, both creeks, and all the hills.

Early mist, that we called fog, rose from the field so often that we expected it everyday. I saw no fog but I bet it had been there earlier.

A breeze caused trees to wave at me from the far side of the pasture. Blimp sized, uneven white clouds blended in harmony with an unending blue heaven. Absorbing all the beautiful sights and the smell of the freshly mowed pasture took me back in time.

I left the field, followed the narrow gravel road down the little hill, across the dry part of our creek, and climbed the other side. I felt my yesterdays moving with me. Somehow, the quietness of walking back into my childhood slowed my steps. I knew my past would be there because I wanted it to be.

However, I missed the sounds most of all. There were no voices singing and no wood being chopped. I didn't hear calls to come to supper. No bucket banged against the sides of the hand dug well as we pulled the rope hand-over-hand to the rhythm of a squeaky pulley bringing sweet cool water.

No cowbells told where milk cows grazed, no dogs barked, and no one yelled just to break the morning calm, and no echoes came back to us from neighbors.

Today, not even a trace of the yard fence remained. I found a few mostly buried bricks where the walkway used to carry friends, family, and visiting strangers to our front door.

The old house still stood, somewhat, but I did not find what I had kept in my memory. The front door was nearly rotted away. Glass in the windows still reflected back to the outside but did not tell the history that was inside. I pressed my face against the glass of Mama's favorite viewing place. One quick look inside was more than enough. The dust of time covered stuff and abandoned things. There was no life – just memories that too had settled into dust.

The tin roof was holding up pretty good. I remembered that I was grown and gone before it was added to replace pine shingles that for years had invited sunlight, stars and moonlight, and rain through the cracks. Wasps often circled or stung our youth as if preparing us for stings later in life. Through the years, it had been fun for me to tell about my youth. No hills had been too steep, no creek too deep, and no tree too big to climb.

When I heard the car drive up at Harry's house, love picked up my steps. As I started back across the levee, I put my childhood thoughts behind and looked toward the far side of today.

What I saw was my Little Harry. I waived from a distance and then wiped away sudden tears. I stumbled slightly forward and then stopped. He was no longer erect as a soldier. His legs did not look solid under his body. I didn't want to see him stooped over, arms skinny, ribs instead of muscles, and weighing about 114 pounds. He seemed

to struggle just to hold his head high. His weak bent frame stood alone, but his welcoming heart was there to greet me.

We hugged and slowly walked into his house. I patted bones that should have been broad shoulders and told him that it was good to see him. His squeaky voice said he agreed. He needed to wipe uncontrolled spittle from his lips between every other word.

Faith in God gave him amazing strength and I called for that same faith to hold me. Our time together was always good. Today it would be the same.

Why did I decide to walk around the old place so late in life? Because I had loved there, because I was loved there, because I still had parts and pieces of my life there that needed to remain. Maybe I wasn't ready to carry away what I already had.

My old pictures didn't fit the new beauty. Were my old days real or did today hold all truth? The answer has to be that both worlds are the same. There are just some adjustments necessary. So, I will add today to my past and always know that Little Harry is still standing. My God, how great Thou art.