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How Dear to This



by Louise W. Christopher

Art by Elmer Smith

THEY WERE DRIVING 50 miles out of their way, but if it meant so much to six-year-old Butch and her husband, Ken, Janet Whiting resolved to keep silent. Butch plied Ken with excited questions. At last he was going to see the setting of those bedtime stories about bareback rides to the country school, the old swimming hole, Skunk Hollow where his father as a boy had trapped in order to sell pelts—all very real to Butch.

As they neared the old Whiting farm, Janet looked at the flat Midwest fields, the miles of telephone wires straight as bars of music on a page.

"Best farm land in the world," Ken said.

"I'm sure of it," answered Janet, laughing.

"That's the very spot where the schoolhouse stood," said Ken, "I guess."

Butch was wide-eyed. "The one that burned to the ground the time you ran to get the farmers?"

Janet looked at the dry weedy patch of fenced-in land. A signboard read, "Lots Cheap."

They passed a deserted hot-dog stand boarded up for winter. "That's new, and that road," Ken laughed sheepishly, "it wasn't here then."

Janet didn't dare meet his eyes. Dreading the next few miles, she realized it was for Ken she felt concern, not Butch. Could Ken possibly think it would all look the same, that nothing had changed since he left Illinois at the age of 12?

He speeded up. "Funny how you forget," he said. "This must be about where I fell off Dolly and broke my arm."

Butch beamed up at him. "And you had to walk miles and miles, didn't you, Dad, with the old bone sticking out?" Ken nodded, grinning.

THEN THERE it was, Sunny Hill Farm. But where was the hill? Janet felt only pity. Don't let him be hurt, she prayed.

She was surprised at the smallness of the house. Behind it was a dilapidated barn in need of paint, a

weedy garden, and two rows of what Butch called "pig tents." It was all very drab and unappealing. "Is that really it, Dad?" Did Janet detect disappointment in Butch's voice?

"What a wonderful view!" she managed.

When the car stopped, she noticed a trestle table in the side yard. The farm family was eating noon-day dinner. A mangy-looking dog bounded up, followed by a woman and twin boys.

"Did Beauty look like that?" said Butch, pointing.

Ken shook his head. "Beauty was a beauty."

The woman's manner was friendly. "If you're looking for the Swenson sale, it's down that way."

"No," said Ken, "I used to live here. Name's Whiting."

Janet added hopefully, "Perhaps you've heard of old Judge Whiting?"

"Can't say's I have," said the woman, "but you're welcome to look around." She was leading them to the house, disinterested.

"Ken, do you think we should?" Janet asked. She saw the farmer and hired hand out near the barn.

"No bother," said the woman.

The kitchen was cramped, with a giant television set in one corner. Ken smiled wryly.

They took a hasty look around. The sink pump was gone, of course; also the wood range, the wall-box telephone, the bird cage from the dining room bay, and the grandfather clock that never failed.

Butch pulled at his sleeve. "Can I see the attic, Dad, where you stored that old skull?"

The woman apologized. "Ain't no attic, sonny. Remodeled."

Ken patted Butch's shoulder. "I'll show you the barn. I bet there are still plenty of kittens." His voice, full of assurance, was also nostalgic.

Janet remembered the tales about jumping in the haymow, the runaway horse, the seven cows Ken milked, as she watched Butch dashing for the barn. She lingered in the kitchen pretending interest in the freezer. Suddenly above the stove she caught sight of a dimly brown oil painting of the Old Oaken Bucket. Underneath were inscribed the