

## Christmas Eve in Grandpa's Pasture

by Cammie Corlas Quinn

I've known a few perfect moments in my life. They are gentle as snowflakes before they alight upon the ground—unhindered by fear, by doubt, or by sadness. They embody everything that is good. When reflected upon in future years, they offer abiding peace.

One such moment occurred in 1965 when I was eight years old. My family—my father, my mother, and four of us children—were climbing into the family car, departing my grandparents' farm late on Christmas Eve. The two-mile journey to our house would take less than ten minutes, but the piling factor—babies and bottles and coats and presents—always extended the trip.

We'd celebrated around Grandma's and Grandpa's Christmas tree in the customary manner. Grandpa, an immigrant who came to America on a ship from France in 1909, bought the fifty-acre farm during the Depression with a loan from a sister who had married well. Every dawn and dusk he tended a small herd of Black Angus cows. He also worked full time at Pillsbury Mills in Springfield. I never knew exactly what he did there, but as a child I assumed he made doughnuts because he always brought home white paper sacks full of brown cake doughnuts. He labored elbow-hard, stockpiled items that might be useful for the next Depression, and saved his cash in a barrel buried in the barn because he didn't trust the banks. He wore denim overhauls with a hundred pockets and buckles, and a crinkly Pillsbury cap with a shiny black bill. He didn't say much to me; he mostly smiled like a proud grandfather.



Grandma, the daughter of French immigrant coal miners, worked in the house, always obeyed Grandpa, and knew where to find five-leaf clovers. She kept a Velveeta box full of pointy-sharp Indian arrowheads she'd collected every spring when Grandpa's plow upturned the soil in clumps big as calves. She walked two miles to town whenever Grandpa was too busy to drive her, carrying a long stick to ward off mean farm dogs. She spruced up the white frame farmhouse (it was so old that the siding covered a log cabin) with small paintings of peaceful creeks meandering through timber, brushstroked with warm browns and gentle blues by our family friend, Fred Crumbaugh.

Sometimes on Sundays, *Bonanza* played on the console television in the living room. But on Christmas Eve, the tree took center stage, decorated with pencil-thin plastic candles sprouting fake flickering orange flames, and with tinsel draped in waterfalls over fragrant pine boughs. Presents for us kids tumbled in ornate papers at the foot of the tree. Once in a while during the evening festivities, I glanced above the living room couch out the windowpanes at the velvety blue darkness. Somewhere out there, in the barnyard and in the pasture, the cows loomed in the early winter darkness. But I felt safe inside the warm house, shielded by adults who bore no fear of cows.



Late that evening, after we'd opened the gifts (usually stuffed animals or coloring crayons) we donned our coats, stocking caps, and mittens for the trip home. We tromped through the kitchen past the large tin breadbox and the cement stairs that descended to the cobwebby cellar, then outdoors onto the sidewalk that led beneath the porch roof and under the apricot trees, to the white picket fence and its gate that swung on squeaky hinges into the wide and dark pasture.

The lights from distant farmhouses seemed to me like pictures I'd seen of lights on a ship in a dark ocean. Dad flailed the car doors open like inside-out pockets. As he piled in the presents, we tunneled into the car. I waited my turn in night air that stung my skin and carved my lungs with draughts of sharp perfection. My mother cradled my baby sister against her chest in a bundle of blankets, folding her in warmth that could never be truly known without the surrounding cold. The cows were out there in the darkness somewhere. Sometimes on Sunday afternoons, they blockaded our car at the precise moment we wanted to depart. But tonight I felt sheltered, even though I could not see ahead of me.



At that moment I glanced up at the stars. Never had they seemed so bright. They bowed low, as if genuflecting in concert just for me. I could've touched them, I was sure of it, because when you are surrounded by love, heaven is closer. For a moment I held onto this sensation—only for a moment—but it was long enough to last a lifetime.

Every Christmas I think of this special moment, when heaven came so very close to the ground in my grandpa's pasture. In all my schooling and church-going years, none of the wisdom of scholars or preachers has quite attained the pinnacle of this night. Even though almost half a century has passed, I am still certain that I almost touched God when I was eight years old.