

Navigating a Farmer's Passing

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Over the past twenty years, the drive from Sioux Falls to my rural childhood home near Le Mars, Iowa has become overly familiar, heading south on I-29. But once Dad began battling leukemia in Sioux City, the route changed, along with its frequency; no time to wait for the usual holidays and special occasions.

The original path holds certain landmarks: Beresford, the Spink exit, that perfect little cemetery to your left after you come off the interstate, Spink itself (“Blink and you’ll miss it,” Dad would say), Akron, Ruble (how was that dilapidated homestead ever considered a town?), and finally the farm. I don’t even enter the “Ice Cream Capital of the World” until we attend Sunday church or a Bob’s hot dog calls to me.

The new route meant driving past the Spink exit into uncharted territory. Sure, I’d been to Sioux City in my youth a few times, but never from this direction. No familiar sites to mark progress, and the destination being a hospital bed rather than a comic book shop creates a very different type of anticipation.

The one constant for both routes is Beresford, though we don’t usually stop there unless we require gas or food. Years before, during the familiar route, we had pulled into its Burger King drive thru. While our van idled in line, my wife and I stepped out, walking around the front to switch places, so our three kids could rattle off their choices to her as I can’t keep orders straight. In that moment, I glanced out into the nearby field.

It’s not often the rear parking lot of a fast food place is adjacent to a field, but it is in Beresford,

and I’d mainly noticed because of a large tree about a hundred feet into the field. If I were more flora-savvy, I’d say what kind of tree, but I can only say it’s one of those perfect types children scribble in crayon. Usually, its base was hidden by flourishing crops, deep snow, or tall spring grass, but now in late fall with the corn harvested and before winter blew in, a few similarly shaped stones sat revealed on that patch of earth.

“Be right back,” I said. “Wanna check out that tree. Surprise me with any meal deal.”

“Isn’t that trespassing?”

I shrugged and began to close the passenger door, noting our three kids’ confused expressions as one asked, “Will Dad get arrested?”

I trotted across the pavement, then the flattened corn stalks and husks, and stepped onto the brown grass near the tree’s base in about thirty seconds. As I’d suspected, the rocks were weathered tombstones. Who knew such a short jaunt could make you feel transported back in time and place? The tree, grass, surrounding field, and old grave markers would look almost too idyllic in a movie. Pioneering homesteaders couldn’t have asked for a more picturesque resting place—barring the aroma of Whoppers.

It hadn’t been hard for Dad to determine fieldwork wasn’t buried in my genes as it was for him. When I was young, he took me out in an open tractor and taught me to operate a hay rake. With him perched on the tire fender, I drove the machinery down and back once across the field. He said he’d now leave, and I could do the rest. Staring at him with bulging eyes, I exclaimed, “This *whole* field!?” He laughed hard at that, given it was a mere six acres.

Not a trip goes by now that I don’t glance at that tree when passing Beresford.

As the chemo failed and the inevitable

approached, more pictures were taken with Dad in multiple family arrangements; with Mom, their kids, me as his only son, grandkids, and more. Frozen moments with a now weak and bald man who didn't look much like a farmer or my father anymore.

Most touching to me were the large, gruff farmers, who came to his withering frame to offer their love and good-bye in ways that never actually included such words. They'd discuss weather, crop yields, market prices, and funny stories about each other or neighbors, making everyone laugh, until eventually it'd grow quiet. When the silence stretched out a bit too long, the visitor would slap his hands on his thighs with a "Well, I suppose...", then slowly and reluctantly stand before offering a tanned calloused hand to shake his white frail one, and exit before faces contorted too much. That is except for a farming brother-in-law of Dad's who, at that moment, looked Dad straight in the eye and said, "I'm gonna miss you," before quickly leaving.

Both Mom and I were present in the middle of the night when he passed, his breathing hard and him unaware of his surroundings. While it's a blessing to have an extended good-bye, it's strange once it arrives, as you've spent most of your tears over the past weeks. I no longer knew how to respond. I watched Mom stare down at him for a long time, wondering what one could say or do after knowing someone so intimately for decades. Finally, with a sad smile, she simply squeezed his hand and said, "Good-bye, my friend."

We gathered our things, including his Bible at his bedside, and I drove us back to Le Mars in silence, along a familiar route, but now different.

Funerals can somehow feel sterile and formalized, burying loved ones in designated plots among strangers, all lined up in neat rows, not unlike field corn. It's practical, yet somehow

artificial at the same time, and I can't help but wonder at how beautiful it must have been for those homesteaders--so tethered to a plot of land in life--to know they'd have the blessing of being buried in the same space. For us now, always on the move and often far from family, that's a foreign concept. But I can at least imagine what it may have been like from my upbringing, especially with Mom having been raised on the same farmstead where she raised her family, which is where her father did the same.

I can tell you many things about my father. About how when he spoke in hyperbole, he always used the number 27 (sometimes with thousand or million tacked on), or how he said he was born in "Missour-ah" (and if you ever said, "It's Missour-EE", then with a glint in his eye, he'd reply, "That's what I said. Missour-ah."), or how he continually proved that pliers and baling wire could solve a multitude of problems, or how he was an elder for decades at the same church, or how he grew his mustache in college and never shaved it off until the chemo forced it. But none of that can help you truly know him, no matter how many stories or pictures you're offered.

Even more so, there are no tales to tell of those buried under the tree behind the Burger King at Beresford; no pictures of them tucked away in scrapbooks, much less on social media. In a time of endless selfies and online posts, that may seem tragic, but I can assure you, they don't mind one bit.