

Anything, and Everything, Goes

by Nancy Martz

Mother stayed alone in the farmhouse for 18 years after Daddy died, although she was terrified the whole time that home invaders would break in and murder her in her bed. She stuck butcher knives in all the doors and windows and slept fitfully, awakening breathless and tensed at any creaking and sighing of old floor boards, or of neighboring farm dogs suddenly barking in the night. Yet we knew her rock solid attachment to this home. She was only six when her mother died of rubella and her father drank away any claim he had on his five kids. He had left them one night outside a train station in Sioux City while he took to the bars. Police found them after midnight huddled together on a bench and took them away forever from my grandfather abruptly ending their so brief experience with a home of their own. The county split them up, and my mother became a child laborer in a doctor's home. There she cleaned, cooked, laundered and ironed and was introduced as the maid. She also was bossed around by the doctor's same age daughter whose hair had to be brushed 100 strokes every night. She grew up with one change of clothes at any time and had developed long before the doctor's wife sewed her a homemade bra.

So decades later when the day finally came that Mother decided to leave her farmhouse, it was a shattering turnabout that left her as vulnerable as if she were six again. Over the fifty eight years of her farm life, she had remodeled and repainted and re-carpeted numerous times, adding new cupboards, windows and lighting. Daddy had been a real people person and loved socializing and going places, but whenever he tried to move Mother out of her house for vacations, it was like plowing 40 acres with a claw tooth hammer. To his pleadings, she would always say, "My house is my vacation" and take off for the local wall paper and paint store. We did go on three major vacations to Canada, Colorado, and fishing in Minnesota when I grew up, but Mother always had to be courted and cajoled and finessed into it.

Decades later, before she left the farmhouse for the last time, she set up a sale. I wasn't there for it as I had too many responsibilities at the college that week, but I heard about it from certain relatives for years after. Not only did she sell furnishings and appliances, but she let people take cupboards, carpets, windows and frames. I no longer wince that she sold the antique ceramic ceiling lights in my old bedroom upstairs and the delicate grape-etched crystal wedding goblets that she always thought too fancy to use. She let strangers strip the house of her 58 years of devotion. Then she called the town fire department and told them to come out and burn the rest down for practice.

It's been over twenty years now, and all of the relatives are dead who whispered prolifically about the unhinging of my mother. She's gone now, too, and I'm left with a wistful and tender understanding I've nurtured over the years. But it is too hard to go back to the farm now and see the rows of soy beans and corn where her vacation once stood.