

## THE STONE BENEATH

**T**he streets weren't always covered in asphalt. There was a time when nothing

showed for miles except the blood red cobblestone. I always enjoyed the clippity-clop of the horse-drawn taxis. The man would emerge first, stepping lightly down the small stairs, and then immediately turning with the utmost grace to offer up his hand for the lady. Her white glove would daintily be extended, hovering just above his, and then seem to float downward, until it was palm to palm. This would bring a smile from both parties – and of course me, standing just beyond the curb.

**T**he historical date has no importance here, but the time certainly does. It was

a time of innocence and youthful potential. I was to be a gentleman soon and being so close to this significant event, I took care to watch the cloaked men in business suits – how they moved about the small Midwestern town, and gestured to passersby, always with a simple nod and tip of their hat. My father instructed me in such matters from the elevated height of his old rocking chair, while puffing on his pipe – one of many, my

mother warned, that would be the cause of his premature death. “Lad,” he would say. “A man learns by watching, and a man leads by doing.”

**A**s a boy, this wisdom did not find its mark within the deep confines of my

brain. However, during the war, I recall how my father’s words made sense as I led a small group of young men, no older than I, into one of many battles. It was then my comrades had seemed to mean so much to me and it was then my father had never seemed to be so far away. I was barely in my twenties when he died, and my mother was already gone by then. A few months after I returned home from the war, she passed away. The cancer had been well on its way toward stealing the life from her before I left to become a soldier. Yet I never knew a thing. She had not wanted her illness to cause me distress when in the midst of so much adversity and made my father promise to keep silent. I nearly wept out loud when I learned that she worried I might forget to protect myself and those around me. Even while her own death was imminent, she thought only of others. She thought only of me.

**W**hen I was a child, I knew nothing of such loss. I would stand along a

bustling street of horses, buggies, and pedestrians. From my vantage point I would pretend to control all that happened around me, as if God had given me power over all in my sight for the afternoon. I would point my finger at a particular horse tied to a post and

command, “Dip your head!” Although the horse would seem unresponsive at first, I would wait patiently until there was a noticeable drop in the steed’s neck and then I’d exclaim, “You’ve done well, old nag!” I would excuse the horse’s delayed response with the knowledge that that my borrowed powers of deity were new to me, and decrees do take time to reach their destination. When I would tell my father of these mind games, he would reply, “That’s a fine thing. Now, point that powerful finger at your mother and make her hurry up dinner.” It was my father’s humor that helped get all of us through some very difficult times. Quite honestly, it was a sense of humor that could only last with a wife who had the patience of a saint.

**I** remember one particular occasion that required a full mustering of tolerance from my mother. My father grew most of our vegetables in this garden —large tomatoes, turnips, greens, and squash. Once, my father thought it would be quite funny to bring one of the horse-apples he used to keep the garden fertile into the house and place it inside my mother’s oven. It had been near dinner and the oven burned hot in preparation of our meal. Within minutes the smell of dung filled the kitchen and began to permeate into the rest of the house. My father told me to hide just inside the broom closet while he retreated to his smoking chair. Minutes passed and my mother made several trips between the kitchen and pantry, but never said a word. Approximately an hour later my mother called us to dinner. My father and I sat quietly staring at one another in quizzical confusion. Neither one of us dared to show our hand and ask our mother if she found the

lingering smell a bit peculiar. Still not a word from Mother when she sat down at the table. My father led us in grace and then mother dished up the meatloaf; first for my father, then for me. In unison my father and I sat frozen, staring into our plates. Before us was a heaping of meatloaf and a side of vegetables. However, something wasn't right. The gravy, which was smothered all over the meat, smelled a bit strange. Suddenly, my father looked up from his plate and directly at me. Through a grin that only two Irishmen can share when it's obvious they've been duped, we both simultaneously said, "Shit!" and laughed until we cried. Mother had found the horse-apple and decided upon a befitting use for it. Composing herself, she pulled her chair closer to the table, gave us both a look as if she were addressing parliament, and simply said, "Bon appetit." This sent my father and me into another fit of hysterics.

**I** found great joy in the time spent with my father. He often gave me nickels for a malt or soda from Benjamin's Sundry, but I would secretly set them aside, saving them for something special. A baseball glove. I had been using my father's old hand-me-down when we played catch. This year the fit was perfect and the glove had quite a few good years left. The new glove would be for my father, though, not for me. I watched as he winced every now and then when I rifled one home into his bare palm, but he never complained. With a set of two mitts, we could both play catch and I could show him my fastball. There would be an audible "Crack!" as the ball found my father's glove. He

would yell from where he stood, "Great Job!" and afterwards we would both drink lemonade while the sun slipped behind the field.

**N**ow the war is long past, my father is gone and I am much older. I stand atop the old street and wonder if the brick still lay underneath dormant and lonely. It was long ago when the horses and people greeted one another with familiar salutations and the stone chattered its welcome with every click of a hoof or shoe. The cars rush past with the tires barely touching the pavement, let alone acknowledging that they are rolling over what was once a better time. No one tips their hat or extends a sturdy hand for a lady. The wind blows the paper against the walls of the buildings, which have crushed the meek shops. The air smells sour and I realize that in addition to the streets, so much more has been enclosed. I keep reminding myself that it will all return to what it had once been. Workmen will clear the asphalt and bring the cobblestone back to life. Yet, my heart knows it will take more than this to save the once placid community.

**I** had hoped to take my own son here and show him what made up my day when I was a boy. We would sip our sodas and walk slowly down to the park. He would surely poke fun at the women with parasols and men with top hats. Those times never came to pass, but was just as well. My son is no longer a boy, but a grown man. He sits inside one of these tall buildings today and gives long presentations about things I know

little about. It is because of him I am here today. I had taken a taxi downtown and hoped to surprise him. As many times before, we would go for a stroll to the coffee shop next door or the fast food restaurant. I won't trouble him with what it was like years ago and the boring rhetoric of "how it used to be." I will sip my tea and listen to him talk of his business dealings and how busy he has become. I will listen and quietly think to myself while staring into his face . . .the streets weren't always covered in asphalt. But no matter –on this day, I am with my son and my love for him remains resolute as the stone beneath.