

A Spark of Life

“It was the worst,” she said. “...the worst electrical storm that Nebraska had up to that date.” Her sky blue eyes flashed and her quavering voice rolled over the description of her birth, just as the lightning and thunder once had over the Nebraska farmlands of long ago.

The portrayal of her birth; how her father commanded his young ten-year-old son to get up, bridle the horse and ride to the neighbors to phone the doctor, despite the early morning hour and raging thunderstorm, reminded me of an old Gun Smoke episode I had seen as a kid. *Ah, nothing like a good story.* I thought.

Thus came Austa Rose into this world, in the month of July, 1924. “The ‘firecracker child’ they called me,” she chortled. “I believe that storm started ‘a spark of life!’”. In her slight mid-western accent, she continued the proud tale of her birth, “The doctor traveled twelve miles to deliver me.” She, the eighth child born into the family, ultimately became the only surviving daughter amongst a passel of sons.

Four generations have elapsed since her arrival and she related to me the many changes she had witnessed, “I’ve had many experiences, as a child, a teen, and a married woman of fifty-nine years, with eight delightful children of my own and many grandchildren and great-grand children.” She paused briefly, and sat quietly at the table of our weekly artists’ group, absorbed in her personal thoughts. A very devout Christian, she praises God publicly for her blessings and gives her love freely to all. Sporting a baby-blue fleece coat and azure scarf, topped with a royal blue barrette, and her short white coiffured hair framing her gentle face, I know not to let her

adorable appearance fool me. There is one sharp, tough cookie under that vibrant palette. Her bright eyes flashed and I sensed her recognition of a captive audience in me. I returned a grin and she continued with her story. “As a child, I had a lot of freedom to play, but didn’t have many toys. One doll was all I had. Money was so scarce. My mother dressed me in outfits made from men’s old suits, but I was so pleased with how I dressed.” She emphasized with pride.

I listened politely, smiling and nodding, while attempting to overhear a conversation at the other end of the table regarding a local artist’s show. Austa’s unwavering cadence carried her away from our little café meeting, back to her country childhood. I settled into her narrative and sipped my Americano.

It seems necessity, as in most cases, motivated her family. For example, she and her siblings walked four to six miles, to and from school, each day. Occasionally an older brother would let her ride behind him on horseback. However, when a blizzard blew in, her father hitched the horses to the wagon and made the rounds picking up the kids in the neighborhood. Her entire body shook with laughter and she flushed as she conveyed how they would sit on the hay huddled under woolen blankets. “This gave the older kids an opportunity to hold hands or steal a kiss.” She whispered in slight embarrassment. Was this a divulgence of an apparent secret?

Plausible, I mused and giggled along with her amusement. *Was she an observer or participant?* I pondered. I would not put it past her if she were both. I now realized she had lured me into her tale and I surrendered to her charm, picturing the youngsters in their chilly delight.

“Have you written these stories down, Austa?” An idea flashed, and I interrupt.

“No, but people say I should.” She replies, diverting her eyes from me.

“Well, you should.” I persisted and explained that a local magazine is looking for women’s stories of what their idea of their personal utopia might be, the theme this month, “My-topia”. I had a clue where and when her “My-topia” might be by the countenance of her accounts. She said she did not hear me, and she was deaf. I knew she wore a hearing-aide and repeated myself.

“Oh!” She exclaimed, her hearing became pretty darn good then. “Will you help me?” she added. Last year, I assisted her in editing a short story for a writing contest. I am unable to refuse her radiant smile. I consented. She promised to give me something in writing next week at our meeting.

Two weeks passed before her text was in my hands. I knew immediately it was too lengthy for the article guidelines and a bit disjointed. However, here were classic accounts of her youth on the farm and the challenges her family had faced. I attempted to recount it as best I could in her provincial essence.

She began with recalling her birth, and went on to describe how her mother made her the lovely outfits. From an early age, grownups scolded her for not paying attention and accused her of constantly daydreaming. In actuality, she was deaf in one ear. She said she had always been a dreamer, so compounded with her partial deafness her initial schooling had a very rocky start. Realizing an education was essential for her survival she compensated for her handicap and eventually became a good student. Her partial deafness gave her many challenges but she managed to conceal it quite well. It was not until she turned fifteen that her mother finally learned her secret.

There were horses on the farm, which Austa adored, and still does today. Saddling and

bridling them gave her just as much pleasure as riding. Riding with her friend from the neighboring farm was the best of all. They rode across grazed pastures and fields of goldenrod to the rural mailboxes to retrieve the mail, and they made up “tricks” by standing in shortened stirrups pretending to be riders they had seen at the circus.

Her brothers were very protective of her, although she was not exempt from their bits of lighthearted harassment. Like the time her two younger brothers dared her to ride a freshly trained, “green broke”, horse her father had worked with. No one was to ride him until father gave his approval. No matter, Austa saddled and bridled the big brute and took the dare. That day, the milk cows needed herding in from pasture. She calmly rode out of the barnyard, to her brothers’ disbelief and amazement, and headed off towards the cows. The decision to give the horse a run was not her best. With a firm kick in the flanks, he launched as a bullet from a rifle and she bounced as a ball trapped beneath a ping-pong paddle. Frightened that he would rear and throw her, her fright turned to terror as they approached some cliffs. “I did a loud and earnest prayer” she wrote, “and I pulled hard on the reins and yelled, ‘Whoa!’” Miraculously he obeyed her command. Having regained her composure and her breath, she slowly turned him towards the cows, who had witnessed the display. After rounding them up without incident, she peacefully drove them home. Her brothers stood in astonishment. Her father never knew.

She had written more of her experiences with horses and living on the farm for the article but I was compelled to include how her family handled themselves during their tough times; The Great Depression.

Their lives took a dramatic change when she was sixteen. Through the 1920’s and 30’s her parents struggled through dust storms, The Great Depression and a flu epidemic that ravaged

the country. They lost two baby girls through those years and she felt her parent's grief but held hers inside. Swinging on the old school swing helped sweep her worries and grief away. It was her pleasure and delight during her elementary school years. Growing up on the farm and experiencing farm life made her comprehend life's ups-and-downs, that you just need to go on with it. It was near starvation that finally drove her family from their farm. There was not much to eat. The family survived on milk, from several cows they owned, and eggs, laid by a few chickens her mother raised. That was about it. Leaving the farm was the hardest decision her father ever made. The farm was his life and he wept for its loss. At this time, only four children remained at home and she remembered how her seventeen-year old brother drove the entire way from Nebraska to Idaho. Once settled there, she attended a school with one-thousand students. This was culture shock for a country girl. After graduating high school, she went on to attend a Bible college in Seattle. There she met the love of her life. The passing years of their life together graced them with the pasturing of eight churches and the rearing of eight delightful children.

Our Thursday art group convened and Austa stayed briefly. She had another engagement and had to dash away, busy woman on the go, doing things. I gave her a brief hug and let her know I continued to work on her manuscript, whittling away to 1200 words or less. It would be finished for her to proof in a few days. Her enthusiasm for this project had not diminished and she was anxiously awaiting my product. The deadline was upon us!

Back on the computer, my fingers tapped at the keys deciding on how to keep the integrity of Austa's story intact while maintaining the charm in which she had written it. I could hear Austa's soft, yet strong, melodic voice, speak to me through her words on the pages. This

was Austa at her best.

Fifty years passed before she returned to Nebraska and her childhood haunts. Grass, trees and wildlife had replaced the dust and barren landscape of “The Dust Bowl”. Five of her brothers made the journey with her to visit many of the places they once roamed. They stopped and walked a mile to the old homestead. The barn had burned to the ground and the house had collapsed in despair. However the old water pump, where they had drawn water, still stood. The ancient elm tree by the creek, since struck by lightning, sustained its hold on life. It was a tree of many memories, of swings and picnics by the creek. In the pasture where as children, they had ridden their horses, yellow buttercups bloomed and contented cows mooed. All this made her weep and her youngest brother as well. She decided to walk back to the house. “I wanted to think, to remember.” She wrote.

I paused here. Simple words painted such striking pictures and evoked deep emotions. As I read the last paragraphs, the dreamer she described herself as being was well illustrated. The mental image of her standing at the front of the old farmhouse played in my mind as she went on to portray her next encounter.

As if in a dream, the house appeared to transform into marble and she imagined her parents walking out to welcome them. She could hear their voices, “Dinner’s on the table. We have waited a long time for you.” Then the old pump became a crystal geyser.

At length, she and her siblings said their farewells and returned to their respective homes. After this vivid experience, Austa concluded her story with a poem she said rang in her mind:
“Life is a fragile thing (my mother did say)
Do handle it with care.

It will lead us to other places

Tho, we do not know where.”

“One of my sons put the words to song and sings it to me each time I see him. It makes me laugh and cry.” She said to me the next time our group met.

I told her how much I enjoyed her tales and emailed a copy for her to proof. Her bright eyes twinkled ecstatically as she again recounted her experience at the homestead and disclosed that her oldest brother, with whom she had traveled to Nebraska, died shortly after returning from their trip.

Of course, there is more, much more. Her family and I have encouraged her to continue her writing and her painting. I believe that as long as Austa continues to produce and wishes to be productive she will be here with us.

“I wonder at the past,” commenced the last paragraph of her essay, “how I grew up in the midst of storms in life and managed to capture ‘the spark of life and the light of living’. When I join my family on the other side, I imagine riding my horses over green pastures, similar to my Nebraska landscape.”