



1.

BELOVED COUSINS

Seven-year-old Nora was just starting to wake up, but she didn't realize it. A voice entered her sleep. It was a man's voice, but it couldn't be her papa's voice because it didn't have even a tinge of anger. It was a smooth fatherly voice that had a twinkle teasing around the edge of it, as if it was used to making people laugh and feel appreciated. It was ready to tell the next joke, like her pet dog, Fido's, tail was always poised for the next wagging. Nora began to think it sounded like Uncle Dan's voice.

"Hey, Little Girl," the voice said. "The sun's been up, had his breakfast, and gone off to play with the clouds already! You're missing out!" Uncle Dan always turned everything into fun. Phoebe, his daughter, was just like him. Nora's sleepy mind

smiled and got snugly, comfortable — ready to enjoy this dream. But then someone started shaking her — probably her five-year-old brother. *Leave me alone, Vernon! Don't stop my good dream!*

Too late. The good dream changed into a bad one. She was at home. Uncle Dan was outside the kitchen window calling to her, “Hurry up or we’ll go on ahead without you.” She looked out the fuzzy window and saw all six of her cousins in the hay wagon beckoning her to come. Phoebe’s arms were waving the most.

But Papa was shaking her. “No daughter of mine goes traipsing all over the county. She belongs at home.” She tried to pull loose from Papa, so she could run out the door, but her legs wouldn’t move. She turned to Mama for help. But Mama had her hands full trying to keep little Edwin from squirming off her lap, and Vernon from scooting off his chair. They wanted to go with Uncle Dan, too.

Her cousins were leaving. She tried to yell. *No! Don't go without me!!* But her voice didn’t work.

“Nora, Nora, wake up!” It was Phoebe’s voice. It sounded too real to be in a dream. Nora peeked through her sleepy eyelids. Then she popped them wide open in surprise! Bouncing over her was ten-year-old, grinning Phoebe, tiny ringlet curls dancing

about her freckled face, escaping from her freshly braided, red hair.

“Phoebe!” Nora looked around. She wasn’t at home. She was in Phoebe’s bedroom. “Now, I remember!” She jumped out of bed “I’m staying overnight here all by myself, without Mama, or Papa, or the boys!”

“That’s right! Your papa almost wouldn’t let you.” Nora remembered. Her papa had said the very words that were in her dream. Phoebe went on, “But somehow my papa persuaded him. And now we’re going to have lots of fun!” Phoebe took Nora’s hands and led her in a dancing jig on the hand-braided rug. It was the perfect expression of how they felt.

“Stop all that racket up there, Phoebe!” Aunt Ida called up the stairs. “That’s not going to help Nora get dressed.” They stopped dancing.

“Alright, let’s get you dressed, Nora. Breakfast is almost ready.”

“It is?” The smell of coffee, frying bacon, and simmering cornmeal mush told Nora it was true.

“Yeah. Mama said we had to let you sleep because we talked so late last night. I had to do all my morning chores without you.” Phoebe held out Nora’s petticoat to her.

"You did?" Nora's voice sounded muffled as she slipped the petticoat over her head.

"Yeah. I did my chores as loud as I could without Mama noticing. But you didn't wake up. I even told the dolls to wake you up, but see, they just laid here in a lump on the bed, right where I put them. Stubborn mules." She picked up the two cloth dolls scowled into their wooden, painted faces, and scolded them. "Just for that you'll have to stay up here until after breakfast dishes. That oughta teach you." She set the dolls nicely on the trunk leaning their backs against the wall. "Nora, you can play with Mabel's doll while you're here. She won't care. She hardly ever plays with her anymore." Mabel was Phoebe's 12-year-old sister. Nora couldn't wait to start playing. She put her dress on quickly.

After buttoning the back of Nora's dress, Phoebe handed her a stocking. "Here, I'll put one on, while you do the other one. That way it'll go faster." Nora sat on the rug and started putting on one. "Lift up your foot for me," Phoebe said.

Nora tried, but fell over laughing. "I can't lift up both feet at once!"

"We'll do it while you lie down then." Phoebe knelt down and began pushing the black, hand-knitted wool over Nora's foot.

"You're as wiggly as a little baby pig!" Phoebe told her.

"Well, you're tickling me!" Phoebe hung onto the wild leg until she fell in a giggling heap beside Nora.

Aunt Ida called up the stairs again. "Stop your fiddling around, girls, and get down here! Breakfast is ready." They got serious. Nora quickly pulled on her stockings, rolling them down to just below her knees. Phoebe helped her tie her shoes.

"Mabel will comb your hair after breakfast," Phoebe told her.

The girls were growing up together in Wisconsin in the early 1900's. Phoebe lived near the top of Gypsy Hill. Nora lived a half-hour away at the bottom in Pig Ground Valley. They saw each other only once or twice a month on church Sundays when the traveling preacher was in their area. Treasuring this precious time together, they bounded hand in hand down the stairs.

Uncle Dan was waiting at the bottom grinning mischievously, gazing right at Nora. A giggle welled up inside of her and spilled out. He was most assuredly about to tease her somehow. She was right. He grabbed her and hoisted her over his shoulder.

A thrill shot through Nora. It felt good to get this kind of attention. Her own papa never teased her. He hardly ever spoke to her or looked at her unless she was in trouble.

"Idy," Uncle Dan yelled out to his wife. "Look what I found in the stairway! The strangest thing: a sack of feed! How do you suppose it got there?" He didn't wait for an answer. "Never mind. I'll just carry it out to the shed quick." He headed toward the back door. "Be back in a minute."

"Papa! That's not feed. That's Nora!" Her cousins all yelled at their father. He ignored them and kept moving. The three youngest ran toward him. Ben, age seven, and Wesley, age nine grabbed his arms and pulled. Phoebe cut in front of him and pushed. He pressed against their efforts until all six of their shoes were scooting on the floor, gathering throw rugs with them.

"Uncle Dan!" Nora yelled, laughing, kicking the air, and hitting his back with her fists. "It's me, Nora!"

Marvin decided to join the efforts. At 14, he might be able to stop his father. He heaved his shoulder into his father's stomach and pushed with all his strength. Mabel felt too grown-up and proper to join in. Suddenly Uncle Dan stepped back causing

Marvin and Phoebe to stumble forward, and Wesley and Ben to fall on their rumps.

Uncle Dan stood quietly, studying his load, wrinkling his bushy eyebrows in mock confusion. "Well I'll be tied to a plow! This ain't no sack of feed!" He took Nora off his shoulder and held her. "Why, it's my favorite little niece!" He shook his head. "Land sakes alive, I got mighty mixed up there for a minute. I pertnear fed you to the cows! Why didn't anybody try to stop me?"

"WE DID!" They all yelled, laughing. Sheer joy shone all over Nora's soft, oval face. She was almost bursting with the ecstasy of what just took place. This was more attention than she could contain.

Uncle Dan looked at them all and let out a roar of laughter. "I got all of you this time, didn't I? Even you, Marvin, you almost fell down!" The whole family began teasing and jostling each other. A newborn baby's cry broke through the ruckus. Everyone fell silent.

"Now you've gone and woke the baby with all your fooling around." Aunt Ida hollered. Nora's smile disappeared. She expected the normal angry words to follow like they would from Papa at home. "I was hoping she would wait till after breakfast today." Aunt Ida sounded perturbed, but remnants of

a smile were still on her face. She headed toward the bedroom. Nora sighed, relieved that the fun morning wasn't ruined.

"No, Idy, you sit down. Let me get her." Uncle Dan said. Aunt Ida started to protest, but he stopped her. "Uh uh uh. I woke her. I'll get her." Aunt Ida stood still for a minute watching her husband with tired, grateful eyes. As she stood there lost in thought, she pushed strands of brown curls back under her prayer cap, straightened the cape of her dress, and smoothed her apron over her round belly. Suddenly she became aware of her children around her.

"Straighten up those rugs, and get to the table! The food's going to be awful cold, if we don't settle down and eat. Nora, you can sit here between Phoebe and Ben."

Uncle Dan came back from the bedroom carrying his little bundle of a daughter, grinning lovingly at his wife. It struck Nora as odd, but very nice, to see a man carrying a baby. And the loving glance between her aunt and uncle made her feel all warm and wonderful inside. She began to wish her papa would be more like Uncle Dan, and would look at Mama that way.

"How nice to have my wife and *seven* children around my table this morning!" Uncle Dan sat down

at the table's head and smiled at them all; true gratitude on his face. There was a sense of sacredness in the room as everyone smiled back and waited for him to pray. "Let's pray," he said reverently and bowed his head. Everyone else bowed their heads and closed their eyes. Uncle Dan's praying was very much the same as Papa's at home. He used almost the same words in the same slow, drawn-out, sing-song prayer-voice.

The smell of the food caused Nora's stomach to rumble, making it hard for her to tolerate the long prayer. She heard Ben sigh and scoot around in his chair beside her. But she heard no sounds from the older ones. She squinted her eyes into tiny slits to peek through without really opening them. She had discovered this secret technique at home. She was proud of herself. It was a way to peek during prayer without anyone knowing.

Wesley was scratching his neck, keeping his eyes closed. The three oldest, Marvin, Mabel, and Phoebe all had their heads bowed, and were as still as tree trunks. Nora bowed her head and decided to be as good as her beloved cousins.

Towards the end of the prayer, Nora could hear an almost chuckle in Uncle Dan's voice. She

wanted to see why, but she forced herself to keep her eyes closed.

"...Amen." Everyone opened their eyes and burst out laughing at what they saw. "Ow, Edith! It's kind of hard to pray when you're pulling Papa's whiskers!" The baby's tiny hand was pulling tightly on a straw-colored strand of his bushy, curly beard. "What do you think you're doing, Little One?" He said gently, looking into the baby's eyes. He worked at loosening her fist as he continued talking to her in a soft, talk-to-baby voice. "Trying to get the best of your papa already, are you? Well, it ain't going to work. No, it ain't. 'Cause I'm bigger than you, maybe not smarter, but bigger. That's right. Oh, you going to smile for Papa?" He switched to his normal voice. "Look at that. She's pulling my beard, giving me pain, and smiling about it!"

"Yep. That's how to handle him, Little Sister!" Marvin slapped his knee, laughing his half-grown up, husky-sounding laugh.

If a baby pulled Nora's Papa's beard he would be upset, but not Uncle Dan. Uncle Dan was laughing just as hard as everyone else. Aunt Ida chuckled as she helped him pry the little fingers off.

"Do you want me to take her now?"

"Naw. I can manage. A little whisker pulling don't hurt that bad." He held her farther away from his beard. "You eat yourself a good breakfast for once. I'll hold her till you're done." Aunt Ida gratefully complied.

"I guess you're going to have blond hair like Mabel's," he continued conversing sweetly with his little one. "I was hoping maybe it'd turn out red like Wesley and Phoebe's. Then I'd tell people I had triplets instead of twins. 'Course some might not believe me so easily as they do about the twins, bein's you're so much littler and all."

"Might not believe you, Dan? They might think you was 'one bundle short in your hay stack' as you always put it." Aunt Ida teased. Everyone agreed with her.

"And of course you got curly hair." Uncle Dan went on soothingly to the baby as if no one else was in the room. "No one in this family gets by without curly hair." Then with a twinkle in his eye, he gave Nora a quick glance. Next, he turned his ear to the baby as if to listen. "What? You say you see someone that's not a curly head? Oh. Well, that's not your sister. That's your cousin, Nora. She's not one of us. She comes from a mixed up family. They have a couple a

curly heads, a couple a straight heads, and.....a couple a crooked heads.”

“Crooked heads!” Phoebe and Nora went into a giggling fit.

“And long heads,” Marvin said when their giggles quieted. That got them going again. All except proper Mabel.

“And a bonnet head.” Wesley joined in the fun.

“And a Fido head.” Ben referred to Nora’s dog. The boys went on and on. Everyone was enjoying Uncle Dan’s joke. This was so different from normal breakfasts at Nora’s house. The only noise at their meals is her two little brothers jabbering – until Papa tells them to hush up.

“And hush heads.” She added to the list.

“Hush heads?” Aunt Ida asked. “Does my brother tell everyone to hush all the time?” Nora wasn’t sure who Aunt Ida’s brother was so she didn’t answer.

“Now, Idy,” Uncle Dan said, “No matter how we feel we have to be careful not to cause a little lamb to break the honoring commandment.”

“You’re right. I’ll control myself.” They smiled at each other. Nora had no idea what they were talking about.

The baby started fussing again. Aunt Ida took her into the living room to nurse her. Through the

big doorway, Nora watched the rhythm of the rocking chair, drawing more feelings of comfort and safety from its steady creaking.

Everyone was almost finished eating. Phoebe took the last slice of bacon just as Wesley, sitting next to her, started reaching for it.

“Hey! No fair, Phoebe, I was getting it first.” Wesley frowned, but his freckled face and light red eyelashes and eyebrows made it hard for anyone to take him seriously. “You ate plenty already anyway!”

“Did not. You had more than me.”

“Did not! That was MY piece. Give it to me.” He grabbed for it. They had a tussle and the bacon fell to the floor.

“Heehee. Serves you right. Fighting over a piece of bacon. Tch tch tch.” Marvin teased them.

“Wesley, Phoebe.” Uncle Dan spoke firmly. They stopped. He gave them a stern look. “Now, Wesley, pick it up and take it out to the cats.” Wesley sheepishly obeyed. As he got to the door he glanced back at the table.

“Hey, no fair, Papa! Wesley’s eating that bacon himself! I wanted it!!” She wrinkled her wide, freckled forehead.

“Pheobe!” Aunt Ida was upset. She was returning from the living room.

“You’d think we were starving these young’uns! Eating bacon off the floor!” Uncle Dan said.

“I declare!” Aunt Ida agreed.

“My, my,” Marvin mocked.

“Tch, tch, tch” put in Mabel.

“If you’re so hungry, Phoebe, have some more mush. There’s plenty of that.” Aunt Ida said caring-ly, but the frowning girl ignored her mother.

“Well, now,” Uncle Dan said when Wesley re-turned. “It’s time for our morning devotions. We’re ready for the story of Gideon. Phoebe, you stop your pouting and pay attention.” Phoebe took a long, deep breath in the attempt to reset her mood.

“I’ll get the Bible for you, Papa!” Ben jumped up and brought the large King James Bible from the living room. It was heavy for him, but his face showed the importance and reverence he felt.

“You’ll like the way my papa tells Bible stories, Nora!” Phoebe whispered. Her sour face was gone and her cheerful smile was beginning to reappear already.

They all listened quietly while Uncle Dan read. He stopped several times to explain things in his own words. He made the story sound exciting and even funny. He talked about the angel, about

Gideon’s uncertainty, about sending almost all the army men home, then about the dream of the loaf of bread rolling down the hill.

“Now the man wasn’t scared of no nice, soft loaf like Mama’s good bread, but a real hard loaf—a burnt one, like the ones Mabel made a couple a weeks ago.”

“Papa!” Mabel whined, but then couldn’t help but join the others laughing.

Phoebe was right. Nora was thoroughly enjoying this. Her father never read to them from the Bible. Grandpa told her Bible stories sometimes. But he hadn’t told this one all the way through. He told her about the fleece, but not about the dream, or the men winning the war by throwing pitchers down, breaking them.

“Can you imagine being so scared of 300 pitchers breaking that you start killing each other? Well that’s how scared God made Gideon’s enemies. When you don’t know God you can get real scared. But when you trust God to fight the battle for you, you’re going to be brave, and you’re going to win!” He closed the big book, turned to his wife and said, “You know what I think?” Without waiting for her to answer, he went on. “I think this story also shows that we’re supposed to enjoy life.”

“Enjoy life?”

“Yeah. You notice, God didn’t choose the men who were worried stiff, who held their weapons in one hand, keeping watch, while they got their drinks in little sips out of their other hand. No siree! God chose the easygoing ones who acted like there weren’t a care in the world. It was time for a drink, so they hunkered down on all fours and sucked themselves up a belly full of delicious water, enjoying it to the hilt, the way our young’uns always do. That’s the way I try to live. I try not to waste my vigor on worrying or fretting because I want to enjoy life!” He raised his voice for emphasis. Aunt Ida chuckled.

“I do declare! You get the most interesting lessons from your Bible readings! But I’m afraid you got it wrong this time, Mr. Deacon. God sent the ones that bowed down on their knee home. And the ones that put their hand to their mouth, He kept. That’s the way I always heard it. Ain’t no preacher I ever heard tell it your way, not my papa, or my grandpa, or Uncle Jake, or anybody.” Uncle Dan looked the passage over again carefully.

“Now wait a minute. It says “ ‘...that lappeth of the water with his tongue, as a dog lappeth,...’ and later ‘by the three hundred men that lapped will I save you...’” He looked at the children. “Now I

ain’t never seen a dog lap water from his hand. Have you, young’uns?” Everyone agreed with him laughing. “And have you ever seen a person do it—lap with their tongue from their hand?” They all yelled no and laughed louder. He turned to his wife again. “Who drinks that way? The ones sent home bowed their knee, it says, but the ones who lapped probably laid all the way down to drink, like the young’uns do. And they put their hand to their mouth afterwards to wipe it off. That’s what everybody does who drinks that way, right?!” Aunt Ida laughed.

“Oh, Dan. You don’t want to be teaching things different than what the church teaches, do you?”

“Are the church teachings or the Bible our standard of Truth?”

“The Bible, of course, but they’re looking at the Bible, too.”

“Well, it for sure says he sent the fearful home. And Jesus said He came that we ‘might have life and have it more abundantly,’ didn’t He?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I think we’re supposed to enjoy the life He is giving us abundantly.” Aunt Ida laughed at Uncle Dan again.

“I don’t know what they’d think of your idea on that either, Mr. Deacon!” She was teasing him.

"You won't go reporting me or nothing, now, will you, Mrs. Deacon?" He teased back.

"Don't be silly!"

Nora didn't know why they were calling each other Mr. and Mrs. Deacon. That wasn't their name at all. She figured it was some grown-up kind of joke.

Mabel and Phoebe each yawned. They were losing interest. Uncle Dan noticed. "Got some tired girls, huh? What's the matter? Didn't get enough sleep last night? Huh?" He had a twinkle in his eye. "Maybe you'd rather go back to bed instead of going on a picnic."

"What picnic?" Everyone perked up.

"Since haying's long since done, and it ain't quite time to harvest the corn, and gardening is almost done, your mother and I got our two heads together and decided you young'uns can have some fun." All the children were about to let out a yelp for joy, but he held up his hand.

"Hold your excitement a minute 'til you get all the instructions. All seven of you. Are you listening, Twins? Don't let that fire on your heads get you too excited yet."

"Papa!" Phoebe and Wesley whined.

Uncle Dan turned to Nora.

"What do you think of my twins, Nora? Perty special, huh. Will you watch them for me while

you're on the picnic? Don't let them get too wild like they did over that bacon, alright?" Nora laughed at her funny uncle.

"Stop your teasing, Papa, and get on with the instructions, so we can go!" Mabel begged.

"Alright. You girls have to help get the washing started, and you boys have to help me with a few things in the barn. Then your mother will help pack a dinner for you and you can get going." The children cheered with whooping and hollering.

"Hush just a minute!" Aunt Ida yelled. When they quieted down, she said. "One strict rule you must follow is you mustn't go swimming! Fall weather has come early. You're liable to catch your death of a cold if you go swimming anymore this year. Is that understood?"

"Listen to your mother! Alright?!" Uncle Dan added. They quickly promised.

They excitedly discussed where to go and decided to go up the hill, instead of heading down toward the church. They would climb up through the woods to the clearing at the top. It had big, beautiful rocks on it.

So after the breakfast dishes were done, the kitchen cleaned up, and the washing started, the girls helped Aunt Ida pack the dinner basket. They