

6-7-96

Alf

Alf was a grown-up, a big person, and a particularly fascinating one to me. I knew him during the years I was seven to maybe ten. All adults were "grown-ups" or "big persons" to me, but only a few were truly fascinating. I can still see his slight build, maybe even skinny, probably ill-nourished, but demonstrably strong, not unlike my picture of Ichabod Crane. He was our occasional yard man.

His arrival about breakfast time was an event that could have been accompanied by marching bands and cannon salutes so far as I was concerned. Usually, the first indication I had of his presence was the squeak of his rickety wagon, made of odds and ends of unpainted lumber and apparently held together with bits of baling wire. The bed of the wagon contained miscellaneous pieces of wood and metal as well as its primary load of a pick and shovel and, occasionally, a half load of chocolate-colored top soil.

Alf sat enthroned on the slanting seat that bridged the front of the wagon. It was held up by x-shaped, rusty iron supports on either side. But most important to me were the reins with which Alf controlled his bony horse, "Homer," and, in my mind at least, every bit as important as Alf himself. Alf always drew the wagon up against the curb in front of our sidewalk, parking in what I had been told was the wrong side of the street. He settled Homer in for the day with a bucket of food (oats?) and began his day's labor.

I have no idea how Mother or Daddy contacted Alf, but he always knew what he was expected to do and wasted no time in getting on with his chores, although he always seemed to have infinite patience and time to listen to my questions and even, occasionally, to answer one. I didn't care; I knew that before the day was over, he would give me a ride in the wagon, going counter clockwise around the block. Occasionally, I was privileged to hold the reins as Homer pulled us at a deliberate, creaking pace. Alf never had much to say, but I thought his very presence was mysterious and exciting. The attention he paid me was exactly what I wanted. Homer was a noble beast despite the bony, sloping appearance of his back and the slow, plodding pace he set.

Alf put in a good day's work, spading Daddy's garden and Mother's flower beds. He must have spread the top soil from the wagon onto the front yard to encourage the green turf that was Daddy's pride. He would shovel the dirt from the wagon bed into a wheel barrow and dump it in neat piles about the yard before carefully raking it into the grass as top dressing.

So far as I was concerned, the most memorable chore that Alf performed was ridding the privet hedge on the west side of our yard of the inevitable wasps' nest. I don't remember there ever being more than one nest. His method was simplicity itself. He approached the nest and warned me to stand back a safe distance. Carefully, he placed his left hand high under his right arm next to his chest, pushing aside the strap of his faded denim overalls. After a few seconds of holding that position, he removed his hand and placed it next to the wasps' nest, ignoring the presence of the swarming, angry insects. If a wasp ever

stung him, he certainly ignored the sting. A few would fly away immediately, but most either dropped groggily to the ground or sleepily clung to the nest. Then Alf removed the nest, took it to the back alley, and firmly crushed it. A few wasps revived and swarmed about looking for their nest but soon gave up and disappeared. Where they went, I don't know, but our hedge was free of their stinging presence until their relatives returned the next summer.

Alf was a man of few words and I was a shy child who had little to say most of the time, but our relationship seemed to suit us. Mother said she couldn't understand why I bothered him all day, but she allowed me to follow him about as long as I didn't interfere with his work. The ride around the block in that creaky golden chariot was well worth it.

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