When We Were Kids

Winifred Jeanne Louden

My dad was an old country doctor, and we lived in a funny place down in southern Indiana called "The Hollow." I don't think it really ever had a decent name; it had been called "The Hollow" since Adam," my dad said. There were eight of us. Mother and dad liked big families. Besides there had to be somebody to dig the gardens and take care of the stock and stay with mother—dad was away so much of the time.

I used to talk funny—like country people—but Jane (she's my wife) and I have lived away so long that most of it has left me—except sometimes when I get to thinkin'—like now—.

We used to have some dandy times when we were kids. We used to work and play and fight like heathens—and mother—we just took her for granted. You had to have a mother to wash your clothes and cook your meals and fix bread and sugar and milk when you came stormin' in starved to death. There had to be a mother to rock the babies when you went out fishin' or playin' ball behind the cornfield or up in town on Saturday nights. There had to be a mother to teach you a prayer or you were liable to go to hell. There had to be a mother to bake ginger-bread and fry the chickens when there was company—to wash the dishes, to milk the cows and churn the butter and nurse all the kids through the measles, the whooping cough and the chickenpox—and the typhoid fever that you got from the well-water. There had to be somebody to feed the stock and to take care of the hogs when they got sick. They was allus gettin' sick—them or the jerseys. Once when one of the jerseys had a calf, there was nobody to help her but mother. All of us kids were scared of her. I remember mother on her hands and knees beside the sick cow; the little calf was too weak and little to eat, but mother sat there for three hours and squeezed hot milk and sugar out of a rag down its throat, but it got weaker and weaker, and finally mother came in crying and said it was dead.

Barney was my youngest brother. Barney loved gardens. Once when he was only ten years old, dad knew he was so crazy for a garden, so he gave him an acre of land down by the river for his birthday. You'd have thought dad had given Barney China. He was so happy that when dad told him at the breakfast table with all of us settin' around watchin' to see what he'd say, Barney just got white as a sheet, and dad got scared and started to get up, but mother knew—mother always knew—she put her hand on dad's arm, and finally Barney got up from the table and went out the kitchen door, and we all watched him, and he walked down through the grape harbor, passed the chickens, and the barns, climbed the fence, and we lost him as he went through the fields, and then we saw him as he came out again clear down by the road to town. He looked so little in his overalls. I saw mother wipe her eyes.

Dad said, "Well, by golly, if he ain't goin' down toward the river."

And when dad went to town he saw him settin' there just alookin' at the land and the river. Dad said it looked plumb sacred.

But Mary Ann—Mary Ann was fourteen and had her hair done up and pronounced her "i-n-g-'s"—she said that if mother didn't do something with that boy that she certainly was—that he was certainly...
The losing his mind. (Mary Ann was always saying “certainly” like that).

But mother—mother—just laughed at Mary Ann and told her to let Barney alone.

Anyway when spring came, Barney just lived down there on the land. He was only ten, but he took old Betsey and the plow down and plowed every inch of that ground. It was rich lowlands on the river, and Barney was proud as a king. He planned everything just like it was a picture. Every day he worked there. If it didn’t rain, he’d carry buckets full of water up from the river and water the plants.

Old Mr. Crim that al’us used to win the prizes at the state fair came over one day and told dad that he b’lieved he was agom’ to git beat this year—that he never saw such tomatoes as that kid had. The bean vines was seven feet tall and the poles as sturdy as oaks, and the cabbages as big as mules’ heads. His little stuff, too, was just about as goll-clern good as any he ever saw at the fair or anyplace else—the radishes and onions and beets.

Mother said maybe she’d can some if Barney wanted her to, and send to the fair, and then was when old Mr. Crim got the idea and told Barney that by golly he would jist take him to the state fair himself and haul all his stuff besides—in direct competition besides. Barney worked like a slave after that; dad was afraid he’d kill himself.

It was about three days before old Mr. Crim and Barney was gettin’ ready to go when one morning Nancy came in scrammin’ and said that Barney looked like he was dyin’. Mother said where and got scared because Nancy was a pretty sensible kid.

“Down by the river—in the garden!” Nancy screamed.

And mother ran all the way with me after her and Nancy after me. When we got there we saw Barney on his hands and knees in the garden. The long fresh spikes on the onions were withered and brown and lying all over the ground; the lacy tops on the carrots were shriveled and brown and layin’ on top too. The radish rows were ragged and torn like someone had gone through them with a knife. Barney was on his knees and when mother saw his face, she fell down beside him, but Barney couldn’t speak. Finally he got slowly up and started walking back to the house as if he hadn’t heard or seen us. We followed him, and Nancy was cryin’. It was awful. I’ll never forget it.

All day Barney hadn’t said a word. That night when dad asked him about it real gently and put his great hand on his shoulder, Barney just said, “I guess God got mad and pulled it up.”

Rob hadn’t come in to supper yet, and it was nine o’clock. Finally he came, and Jed Hobbs—next farm to ours—was with him. Jed had pulled Barney’s garden up because in church before Gretchen Williams that lived in town and had long curls and was all the boys’ “sweetheart girl”, Barney had pulled out the thread from a patch on the seat of Jed’s pants and when he walked the patch fell off and the bare skin showed. And Jed had run all the way home that way with Gretchen looking and then laughing and covering up her eyes and then looking again. They said the preacher went out to see Mrs. Hobbs about it and the Missionary society talked one whole afternoon.—I don’t think Barney ever got over that. I don’t think Jed did either—about the garden I mean.

Uncle Tom lived in town and was the undertaker. Us kids used to have some swell times with the “stanhope”. Anybody that’s city-bred ‘ll probably look blank at what a “stanhope” is. The “stanhope” was a great, high, two-seated buggy, and
It was Uncle Tom's funeral carriage. It was the biggest, blackest and shiniest buggy I ever saw in my life, and it was drawn by four sleek black horses that knew how to arch their necks and lift their knees almost as high as their noses.

Whenever there was a funeral, mother would let us boys wear our checked suits, and Mary Ann and Nancy put on fresh aprons and hair ribbons and we all went to town and set out along the curb in undertaker's chairs in front of Uncle Tom's undertaking establishment down town on the square. Along about four o'clock we'd hear the janglin' of the harness about a block away, and pretty soon Uncle Tom'd come tearin' around the corner, and we'd watch him prance those four beauties clear around the square so he could drive up in front of the "establishment" (we al'us said the 'establishment') on the right side of the street.

Then he'd climb down and laugh and kiss Mary Ann and Nancy and shake hands with us men and holler out, "Well kids, she's yours 'till six o'clock. Don't nobody drive but the boys—and Rob, if I hear o' you racin' those mares lickety-split over that bad stretch up there on North Main, I'm agoin' to lock you up in the wood-shed the next time there's a funeral." Then he'd give Bob the bag of chocolate caramels and lift Mary Ann and Nancy up on the back seat. Rob and Barney and Ned and me'd set upon the hub of the wheel, then on the top rim of the wheel itself across to the floor-board and from there upon the front seat. Rob'd take the reins, slap them down on them broad backs, and the horses'd step about a little, pull a little—then nervous as cats and proud as kings on thrones, we'd swing clear of the curb and out onto the square. We always had to drive around the square once, before going up Main Street, so everybody could see us, and so that we could see how we looked reflected in the store windows as we passed. Many Anne had explained that this was certainly the only way to get a real prospective on ourselves—and to see us as others saw us—or something like that. Mary Ann always talked just like a book.

Rob always slowed down a little when we neared John Rhymans meat market because Rhymans had the only plate glass window in town where we could get a whole view of ourselves at once without having the standhope cut in two by a door or made lopsided by two windows of different heights. Yes, I guess old John Rhymans had just about the best piece of glass in town for lookin' into as you went past.

Always when we'd come around in front of the 'establishment' again, there'd be Uncle Tom a-standin' on the curb smilin' up at us and wavin' and a-yellin' to Rob about goin' lickety-split over them holes. And we'd wave back and shout 'till we was clear out of sight around the corner. Usually we'd stop and pick up Gretchen Williams and Mary Tucker, the Judge's granddaughter, and George and Dick Newlon whose pop owned the furniture factory, and anybody else that'd help Uncle Tom's business or were special friends of any of us.

Sometimes we'd spend the whole two hours in town, Other times we'd go a little ways into the country; Rob and Ned and I and sometimes Barney—we'd trade different things with George and Dick to let them drive awhile—or they'd trade stuff with us I mean—or Ned got a peach of a pocket knife once with Dick's initials on it in silver by lettin' Dick drive only from the cheese factory to the cemetry, and I got this here Eversharp pencil on a drivin' swap.

When I get to thinkin', like now, I—well,—we used to have some dandy times when we were kids.