

Please Don't Send Me Back

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Chapter 13

From Helpless to Helpful



Cooperation was crucial in my new family. Completing a task as a group built confidence and a sense of accomplishment, even though I often fought doing the work as I entered my teenage years.

“Come on, Kathy, it’s time to get up,” Mom said as she opened the door to my room and looked in. “Dad’s already in the field getting the corn. He’ll be back in about an hour, so we need to get going.” When I didn’t stir, she said in a stronger voice, “Come on, get up.”

Today was corn day.

Slowly I pushed the covers back, sat up, and stretched. I wanted to sleep a little longer, but I knew doing so would further frustrate Mom, so I got up. I also knew this would be a fun and busy day. After I got dressed, I went out to the kitchen.

“Well, good morning sleepy head,” Paulene said as she and her young daughter, Shelly, ate their breakfast. They were early birds like Mom. I was a late sleeper like Dad.

I ate my breakfast, including one of Mom’s delicious cinnamon rolls, which she usually reserved for Sunday mornings and when we had company. As I put my dishes into the dishwasher, I heard Dad’s old turquoise Chevy pickup. The motor thundered and stirred up dust as it raced down the lane, filled, I knew, with sweet corn.

It was a good and familiar sound, but suddenly the pressure was on. The job before us would be huge. I raced outside and saw the mountain of corn towering high in the truck bed. First, we needed to make sure we had enough containers, knives (to cut off the corn tops), and a tarp to catch the husks.

When everything was ready, Shelly, Dad, and I sat on the edge of the pickup bed. I grabbed up my first ear of corn and peeled off the husk. I enjoyed the cool early morning breeze and the smell of the fresh corn, although I always feared finding a fat, juicy worm inside the husk.

At this stage, the massive pile of corn seemed over-whelming, and I found myself wishing I could still be sleeping. As a teenager, I focused on the sleep I missed rather than the satisfying work. Still, I understood that I performed an important part of this job, along with everyone else.

My immediate attention was on the ear of corn in my hand. It was important to pull back the husk carefully so I wasn’t surprised by a worm. Sometimes only remnants of the worm were there—the slimy mess left behind after the top of the ear was devoured. I

carefully pulled back the husks and tossed them in the pickup bed, taking care to remove as many of the silk hairs from the ear as possible. The inevitable imperfection of my efforts always evoked scolding from Mom or Dad.

If the end of the cob was long enough, I could snap it off. But if it was too short, we needed to use the large butcher knife to cut it off. This was usually a problem for me. I hacked into the cob and corn juice sprayed by my clothes, face, and glasses. After a couple of unsuccessful whacks, I usually passed the ear on to a stronger grownup.

Finally, the back of the pickup was empty, and we moved on to the second task. The husked and cleaned corn would then go into a large black outdoor kettle, situated safely away from the yard and house, with a fire under it to cook. The kettle was Dad's domain, to make sure we all stayed safe and didn't catch fire.

While Dad boiled the cobs, the rest of us prepared cold water for cooling and more cleaning. Mom had kept the double metal wash tubs from the old wringer washer she had used before getting an electric washing machine. It stood off the ground on three-foot legs and was easy to use. Putting the hose in the tub, we filled it with water. This would be the first step in cooling the hot ears of corn.

Dad and Newt carried the cobs over to the first tub. After a few minutes of cooling, we moved them to the second tub of cold water, where we pulled off the remaining silk.

Mom believed we could get it all off. I tried but rarely succeeded to do so. After the cooling process, we were ready for the last task. We carried laundry baskets of cooked, cleaned corn to our downstairs kitchen. Here the corn would be cut off the cob, bagged, and put in the freezer for the winter. I wanted the job of cutting the corn off the cob because we did it inside where there was air conditioning. But the assignment to cut corn off the cob was not about letting a person cool off inside. It was about who would do the best job at getting all the corn cut off. Unfortunately, that person was not me, it was Newt. Working outside most of the time, he probably didn't care as much about going inside to cool off. But he cared about doing a good job with the corn.

After the corn was husked, cooked, cooled, cut, and bagged, our job was done. Preparing food like this for ourselves was much more satisfying than going to the grocery store in town and buying several cases of canned or bags of frozen corn. And the store-bought corn could not compare to our own harvest. Every time we pulled out a bag of frozen corn in the winter, I fondly remembered the summer day when we all worked together to prepare this produce that graced our family table.

Even though I often complained about the job, it was good for me to work with others as a team. Corn day provided me with the experience of being a member of this family, contributing to our common good, and enjoying the fun. Helping prepare and store food for our family was a new skill to learn, one I would do with my own children years later.

I fantasized about taking these kinds of skills back to Josephine. In my fantasy, David Cassidy took us both to California (what's the point of having a fantasy if you can't have a rock star in it). The trip would tear Josephine away from the abusive men in her life, and I would show her how to save money by growing food in our own garden rather than buying it at the store.

I didn't learn these kinds of skills living with Josephine. With Josephine, I lived in an atmosphere of lack—lack of safety, money, and food. Ultimately, I thought, it came down to a lack of skill. Josephine and her people may have blustered about being tough and having power, but they really didn't. Because of their alcoholism and poverty mindset, they had little control in the world. Their addictions and poverty had beaten them down, so they griped and blamed everyone else for their hardships.

My new family modeled a different way and attitude. I could learn to do things. Even though the work was long and we all got tired, many hands made lighter work. Yes, Dad and sometimes Mom were ill-tempered and grumpy, but they had a purpose in their judgment. Dad wanted us to do a good job and be good stewards of the harvest. His harsh judgment, though uncomfortable, was his way of helping us learn to do a good job.

That night, with the corn packed in the freezer, I lay in bed, bone tired and barely able to eke out my nightly prayers, but I felt safe and happy. I knew no one would come in my room to hurt me, which, even after multiple years with my new family, I did not take for granted. The day had been long, but the result was good. And I had been part of that good result. We had collected enough bags of corn to feed ourselves and the families of my older siblings. This sense of plenty for all was a substantial part of my gratefulness.

A deeper, unseen reality washed over me, too. I had experienced what it meant to enjoy being with a group and having fun working together. Bittersweet feelings also crept into my heart. I realized that the acquisition of new skills furthered the divide between my new life and the one with Josephine. Becoming part of my new family meant that I was losing my old family. In my old life, I learned to be helpless and rely on others. Now I was learning I could do things that really made a difference. Even though this birthing into my new family ultimately brought healing, it first brought growing pains.

“Thank you, God, for Mom and Dad,” I whispered as I closed my eyes and snuggled down into a new safety and a new sense of belonging and responsibility.