

4 My Father's Hands

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Preview

The man described in the following selection is strong, kind, intelligent—and illiterate. Looking back on his father's life, Calvin Worthington paints an unforgettable picture of a good man whose life—and death—were tragically shaped by his inability to read.

Words to Watch

upside (1): on (slang)

hunkering down (1): squatting close to the ground

lair (1): den

towhead (2): someone with light blond hair

unsurpassed (5): unequaled

infidel (9): someone who does not believe in the religion of the speaker or writer

nitroglycerin (12): a medicine used to combat the effects of heart disease

brow (13): the top edge of a hill

gnarled (13): twisted

anguish (16): pain and suffering

1 His hands were rough and exceedingly strong. He could gently prune a fruit tree or firmly wrestle an ornery mule into harness. He could draw and saw a square with quick accuracy. He had been known to peel his knuckles upside° a tough jaw. But what I remember most is the special warmth from those hands soaking through my shirt as he would take me by the shoulder and, hunkering down° beside my ear, point out the glittering swoop of a blue hawk, or a rabbit asleep in its lair°. They were good hands that served him well and

failed him in only one thing: they never learned to write.

My father was illiterate. The number 2 of illiterates in our country has steadily declined, but if there were only one I would be saddened, remembering my father and the pain he endured because his hands never learned to write. He started first grade, where the remedy for a wrong answer was ten ruler strokes across a stretched palm. For some reason, shapes, figures, and recitations just didn't fall into the right pattern inside his six-year-old towhead°. Maybe

he suffered from some type of learning handicap such as dyslexia. His father took him out of school after several months and set him to a man's job on the farm.

3 Years later, his wife, with her fourth-grade education, would try to teach him to read. And still later I would grasp his big fist between my small hands and awkwardly help him trace the letters of his name. He submitted to the ordeal, but soon grew restless. Flexing his fingers and kneading his palms, he would declare that he had had enough and depart for a long, solitary walk.

4 Finally, one night when he thought no one saw, he slipped away with his son's second-grade reader and labored over the words, until they became too difficult. He pressed his forehead into the pages and wept. "Jesus—Jesus—not even a child's book?" Thereafter, no amount of persuading could bring him to sit with pen and paper.

5 From the farm to road building and later factory work, his hands served him well. His mind was keen, his will to work unsurpassed°. During World War II, he was a pipefitter in a shipyard and installed the complicated guts of mighty fighting ships. His enthusiasm and efficiency brought an offer to become line boss—until he was handed the qualification test. His fingers could trace a path across the blueprints while his mind imagined the pipes lacing through the heart of the ship. He could recall every twist and turn of the pipes. But he couldn't read or write.

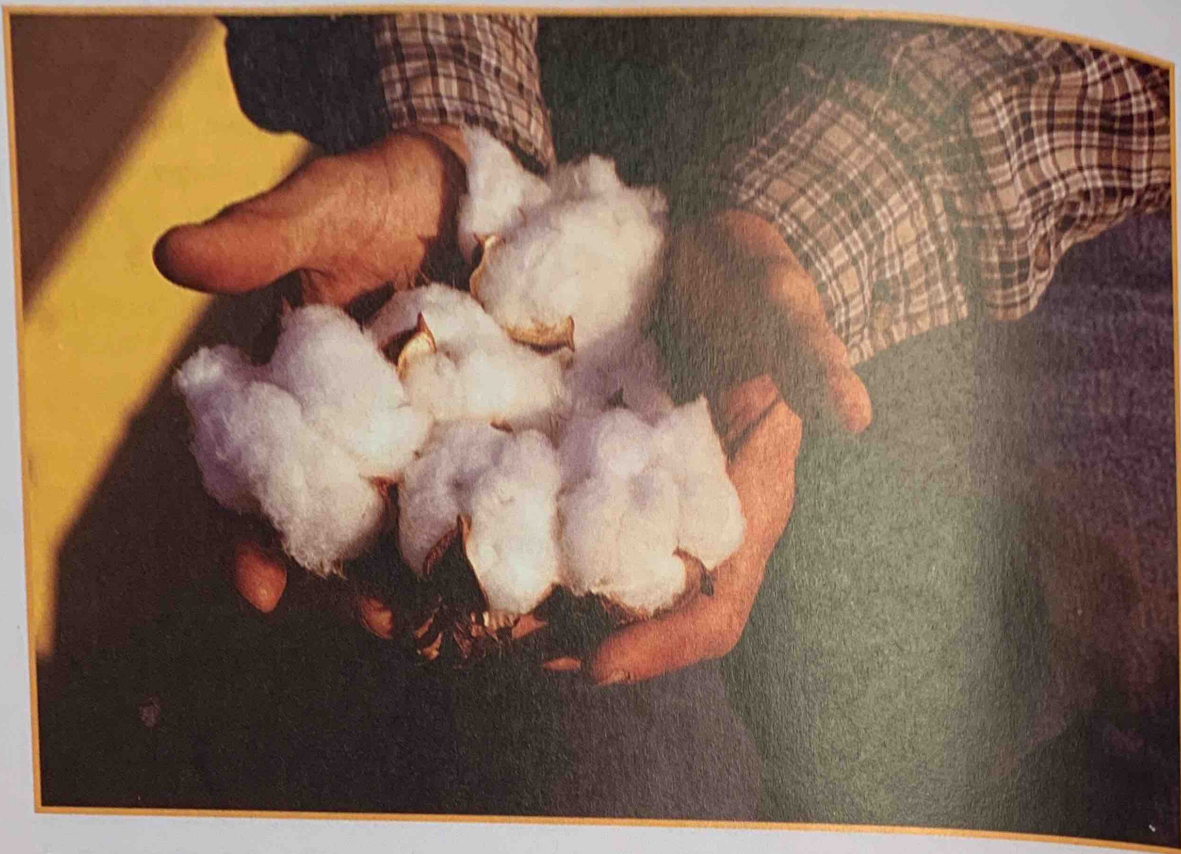
6 After the shipyard closed, he went to the cotton mill, where he labored

at night, and stole from his sleeping hours the time required to run the farm. When the mill shut down, he went out each morning looking for work—only to return night after night and say to Mother as she fixed his dinner, "They just don't want anybody who can't take their tests."

7 It had always been hard for him to stand before a man and make an "X" mark for his name, but the hardest moment of all was when he placed "his mark" by the name someone else had written for him, and saw another man walk away with the deed to his beloved farm. When it was over, he stood before the window and slowly turned the pen he still held in his hands—gazing, unseeing, down the mountainside. I went to the springhouse that afternoon and wept for a long while.

8 Eventually, he found another cotton-mill job, and we moved into a millhouse village with a hundred look-alike houses. He never quite adjusted to town life. The blue of his eyes faded; the skin across his cheekbones became a little slack. But his hands kept their strength, and their warmth still soaked through when he would sit me on his lap and ask me to read to him from the Bible. He took great pride in my reading and would listen for hours as I struggled through the awkward phrases.

9 Once he had heard "a radio preacher" relate that the Bible said, "The man that doesn't provide for his family is worse than a thief and an infidel° and will never enter the kingdom of Heaven." Often he would ask me to read that part to him, but I was never able to



find it. Other times, he would sit at the kitchen table leafing through the pages as though by a miracle he might be able to turn to the right page. Then he would sit staring at the Book, and I knew he was wondering if God was going to refuse him entry into heaven because his hands couldn't write.

10 When Mother left once for a weekend to visit her sister, Dad went to the store and returned with food for dinner while I was busy building my latest homemade wagon. After the meal he said he had a surprise for dessert, and went out to the kitchen, where I could hear him opening a can. Then everything was quiet. I went to the doorway and saw him standing before the sink with an open can in his hands. "The picture looked just like pears," he mumbled. He walked out and sat on the back steps, and I knew he had been

embarrassed before his son. The can read "Whole White Potatoes," but the picture on the label did look a great deal like pears.

I went and sat beside him, and 11 asked if he would point out the stars. He knew where the Big Dipper and all the other stars were located, and we talked about how they got there in the first place. He kept that can on a shelf in the woodshed for a long while, and a few times I saw him turning it in his hands as if the touch of the words would teach his hands to write.

Years later, when Mom died, I tried 12 to get him to come live with my family, but he insisted on staying in his small frame house on the edge of town with a few farm animals and a garden plot. His health was failing, and he was in and out of the hospital with several mild heart attacks. Old Doc Green saw him weekly

and gave him medications, including nitroglycerin^o tablets to put under his tongue should he feel an attack coming on.

13 My last fond memory of Dad was watching as he walked across the brow^o of a hillside meadow, with those big, warm hands—now gnarled^o with age—resting on the shoulders of my two children. He stopped to point out, confidentially, a pond where he and I had swum and fished years before. That night, my family and I flew to a new job and new home, overseas. Three weeks later, he was dead of a heart attack.

14 I returned alone for the funeral. Doc Green told me how sorry he was. In fact, he was bothered a bit, because he had written Dad a new nitroglycerin prescription, and the druggist had filled it. Yet the bottle of pills had not been found on Dad's person. Doc Green felt that a pill might have kept him alive long enough to summon help.

15 An hour before the chapel service, I found myself standing near the edge of Dad's garden, where a neighbor had found him. In grief, I stopped to trace

my fingers in the earth where a great man had reached the end of his life. My hand came to rest on a half-buried brick, which I aimlessly lifted and tossed aside, before noticing underneath it the twisted and battered, yet unbroken, soft plastic bottle that had been beaten into the soft earth.

As I held the bottle of nitroglycerin 16 pills, the scene of Dad struggling to remove the cap and in desperation trying to break the bottle with the brick flashed painfully before my eyes. With deep anguish^o I knew why those big warm hands had lost in their struggle with death. For there, imprinted on the bottle cap, were the words, "Child-Proof Cap—Push Down and Twist to Unlock." The druggist later confirmed that he had just started using the new safety bottle.

I knew it was not a purely rational 17 act, but I went downtown and bought a leather-bound pocket dictionary and a gold pen set. I bade Dad good-bye by placing them in those big old hands, once so warm, which had lived so well, but had never learned to write.