LEARNING TOGETHER

By Terry Knickerbocker

Cal lived a half-mile or so up the road from my folks’ place. He lived alone and stayed pretty much to himself but sometimes he would be seen walking to or from town. I was a young boy and would wave to Cal when I saw him walk by and he would acknowledge me with a slight nod of his head. That was the extent of our communication.

Daisy, our milk cow, developed an uncanny ability to escape from the fenced pasture and it became my duty to round her up and bring her back home. On one occasion she was headed straight for Cal’s place. With halter and lead in hand, I picked up her trail and followed with my head down. I was deep in some thought, when suddenly I heard “hey boy, would you be lookin’ for this here cow?” Startled, I froze for a moment then looked up to see Cal holding old Daisy with his belt looped around her neck. He wore the biggest grin and he stuck out a huge right hand, “welcome to my place.”

“Let’s get the halter on her and put her in my barn while you rest and have a cold glass of milk with some cookies. You’re the young man who always waves to me whenever I pass your house. Sure wish everyone was as friendly.”

We put Daisy in the barn with some hay to eat and then went to Cal’s house. It wasn’t large but adequate enough for a bachelor. On the porch Cal asked me to remove my shoes as he also did, then we entered through the kitchen door. He motioned for me to sit at the kitchen table. While Cal poured a glass of milk and placed a couple chocolate chip cookies on a plate, I looked around the single room.

The interior was beautifully fitted and finished all natural wood including the floors that shone like glass. I could see why he asked me to remove my shoes. The sparse furnishings were also finely finished wood except along one wall stood an old bookcase containing a set of leather-bound books of classic literature. In front of the bookcase was a well-used rocking chair with dried and cracked leather upholstery. Beside the rocker stood a small old table with an open leather-bound book and a pair of eyeglasses on it.

Cal noticed I was looking around as he placed the milk and cookies in front of me. “I built and finished this house and everything in it” he said. I asked about the old bookcase and rocker and he thought for a moment before answering. I saw tears moisten his eyes as he said “Those belonged to my mother. She loved to sit and read those books and I would often play around her and listen to those stories as she read them aloud. She told me she would teach me to read and some day those books would be mine. I had just turned six when Dad and I came home from cuttin’ firewood and found her sittin’ in the rocker, her head laid back and her eyes closed. The book on the table lay open on her lap with her glasses just as they are now. My Dad nearly lost his mind so I had to take care of him. I developed a knack for working with wood but I never went to school and never learned to read and write.” Cal walked to the bookcase and ran his huge hand across the spines of the books. “Sure wish I could read those.”

I ate the cookies, drank the milk, thanked Cal then led Daisy home all the while thinking about what I had just seen and heard. I told Mom and Dad about Cal and how much he wanted to learn to read. Mom said “You’re a good reader. Why don’t you help Cal learn to read and write?” Over the next couple years I would go to Cal’s place after school to do my homework and help Cal learn. There was always a glass of milk and cookies waiting for me.

I grew up, went off to college, moved to a big city and started a family of my own. I spoke often with my mother and she would tell me if Cal had been seen walking to or from town. One phone call she said Cal hadn’t been seen for a few days so she and the neighbors went to check on him. They found him sitting in that old rocker, his head laid back, eyes closed. On his lap lay an open leather-bound book and his glasses. On the small table by the rocker was a sheet of paper on which was written, in an unsteady hand, the title of each of the books. A line was drawn through each title ….. except one.