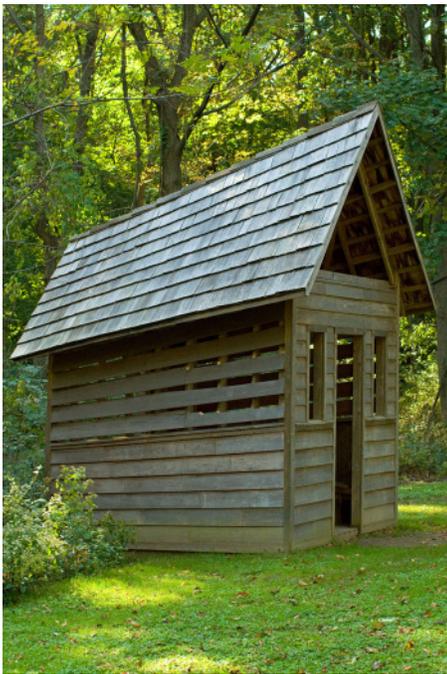


This I Believe

Love Is Stronger Than Death

I found the shirt hanging on the back of a chair in the cook shed when we came home from the funeral. It had been a beautiful day when he last wore it. We had cut the last of the corn, gathered pumpkins, and picked the last of the green beans. Then he took the kids down the ridge to pick apples, and the warmth of the day combined with the heat from his labor forced him to remove it.



There it hung on that old, straight-back chair, mocking me with its emptiness. With a cry, I snatched it up. It smelled of sunshine and fresh air, that wonderful outdoorsy scent of my husband emanating from this final source. I buried my head in it and cried, as I had been unable to cry before.

My children gathered around me, their small hands patting, trying to comfort me. These four beautiful children were now my only reason to go on, and from them I drew the strength to dry my tears.

My husband, Dusty, had had a heart condition, one that could be controlled with medication,

the doctors told us. "He should live to be an old man." When he lay down in the yard that lovely fall day, he was only forty-one years old. Our idyllic mountain home became a lonely, haunted place.

Days passed slowly without Dusty there to laugh with me, read to me while I cooked supper, and rub my back until I fell asleep at night. When things got really rough, I would slip out to the cook shed, bury my face in his shirt, and cry out my sorrow and frustration. That was as close as I could get to the lost half of me.

Then the day came when we had to go out for groceries. It stormed while we were out and delayed our trip home, so we went to bed right after our return.

The next morning, I went out to the cook shed for a few moments of meditation before the children woke up. Some of our goats and sheep had taken shelter in the shed from the previous day's storm, and they had knocked Dusty's shirt off the chair and trampled it underfoot. I grabbed it up, but its wonderful, comforting smell was gone.

Fifteen years have passed since my husband's death. My children are grown, and I have to admit that they turned out pretty well. I still catch myself thinking, "We didn't do half bad, did we, Honey?"

I heard someone say of a departed husband, "I loved him." How do you get to the point where you can speak of that love in the past tense? If that love is past, why does the memory still have such power to invoke both happiness and sadness?

I believe that as long as I am alive, Dusty's memory will live in me. I see his eyes

peeking out at me from my grandson's face. I find something of his spirit in each of our children.

My husband's death affected our family greatly, but his life impacted it more. He will live as long as one of us is alive to remember and to love him.

And sometimes on a warm fall day, I catch that outdoorsy scent of fresh air and sunshine, and my face is buried in Dusty's shirt once more. Although I know he sleeps, I hear his shout of laughter somewhere just ahead, and I think he waits for me.

I believe that love is stronger than death.

Opal Ruth Prater and her late husband, Dusty, raised their four children on several hundred acres of land about three miles from the nearest blacktop, with no electricity or running water. Ms. Prater still lives among her beautiful southwest Virginia mountains, with her children and grandchildren close by.

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