

“What is important,” Papa explained when she asked him the same question, “is your mind. After good schooling, you will become an adult and can work in the store.” These words disappeared to that place where the snow and ice went: into the big black hole. She couldn’t imagine working in the store. She’d rather stay home. She read in her room for hours, or she stared at her mute dolls propped up along the shelf on the wall.

Papa had been gone for over a month. Apollona was old enough to get her own breakfast and catch the ferry to school. Aunt Gudrun stayed with her and prepared meals. Her aunt spent the time knitting and complaining about farm and store problems. Apollona did her homework in her room. Expecting her brother the next day, Aunt Gudrun caught the ferry to be with her family. Anna arrived on the same ferry coming back. She had left her husband in their village home to spend the night with Apollona and her father.

Apollona didn’t care it was her birthday. Anna came specially to bake her a cake. Apollona didn’t care about that either. She sat in her room sulking. As it grew darker, she heard Papa downstairs calling to her. “Come my little Appa, I have a surprise for you.” She would always be his “little Appa.” She was ten years old now, not a baby anymore. She came down the stairs and walked slowly around him. There was nothing behind him and nothing in his hands. He spun around toward the hallway saying: “Come!” She tagged along and began to sense excitement. There was a box on the floor. “Open it! Open it! And a very happy birthday to you!” Papa and Anna were smiling and urging her. She slid down on her knees and ripped open the top part. A black shiny snoot shot up. “Oh, a puppy!” She lifted him out and engulfed him in her arms. A golden puppy licked her on the chin. She buried her nose in his soft fur, taking in the sweet puppy smell. “Thank you, Papa, a million thanks!” She put him on the floor and he wobbled comically. She grabbed the old blanket in the box and he bit it for a tug-of-war. This playful little life welled up in her and filled her with joy.

Papa was delighted: “Name it, my daughter!” Apollona lifted the puppy and pressed his furry, warm body against her. She thought for a minute and blurted out: “Filler up!” Papa asked why she would choose such a strange name. “Oh, because he can push out the cold wind and fill you up with the sunshine.” Papa laughed, and soon all three of them were laughing. Apollona and her Papa started playing with “Filler up.” She asked him if she could kiss the puppy, if he could sleep with her, and if he could Papa interrupted the string of questions by putting his arm around her shoulders to calm and reassure her: “Appa, my dear, it’s your puppy, so as long as you don’t hurt him in any way, you are free to love him. What he said next was something she would remember forever: “Now listen to me, my dear, he’s not going to take my place. Oh, no! I’m not going to be away from now on, unless you go with me.” Apollona beamed despite tears trickling down her cheeks and glistening like snowflakes. Inside, she was as warm as hot cocoa.

The Dead Spot

Mickey Redus

It’s been over twenty years now since I first looked out this window. I sat at this same scarred, oak table, in this same worn, spindle-back chair and gazed out on our little home. It’s funny that I think of “home” as outside the window. Inside, inside our

house that is, was surely our home as well. But so much of our “living” took place outside that it just felt right to consider it home. Anyway, I sat, sipped some steamy, black coffee from my favorite cup and watched God’s creation wake up and come to life for another day. The pecan trees, already ancient, were leafing out and dropping their “worm” blooms. The fig tree was thick, green, and covered with big leaves. The bird feeders were filled and supplying breakfast to an ever growing assortment of birds—sparrows, house finches, chickadees, cardinals, several species of doves, and even a few hold-over gold finches, starting to turn bright yellow. Oh yes, and the squirrels. The squirrels, hanging in various acrobatic positions, were raking out seeds with great enthusiasm, searching for the particular delicacy they craved at the moment. Most of the birds didn’t seem to mind. They would congregate on the ground beneath the feeders and enjoy the “manna” that fell from above. And fall it did. The squirrels were pests—“rodents,” “tree rats,” and general nuisances. Yet I couldn’t bring myself to trap and relocate them. And so I watched them.

One of the highlights of my early morning quiet was looking out this portal. But the yard. . . .

In those early days, the yard was a veritable mess—the grass was sparse and scraggly. It had overgrown the sidewalks and the brick walk out front. There was a prodigious variety of weeds. Attempts to tame those rampant plants might coax them into taking on characteristics of a yard, but within a day or two, they would persevere and regain their riotous character. So, we took on the challenge of the yard. Families need a yard. We dug and cut and planted and weeded. We spread dirt and fertilizer and herbicide and mulch. We poured countless hours and dollars into the effort, and slowly it began to pay off. The grass thickened and eventually became lush and beautiful. We reclaimed sidewalks and the brick walk—mowing, edging, weeding, and trimming. And I sipped coffee from my aging mug and lovingly admired our little domain.

And then came the rope swing. The pecan tree right outside my window was “perfect,” I was told by an excited, little voice. “There’s a limb about a mile up there that we could tie it to.” The branch, more like twenty-five feet up, was high enough to provide a nice long arcing swing. So the rope went up and the swinging began. Through thousands of swings, with tough, little, bare feet dragging as brakes, the damage began. The lovely, hard-won grass beneath the swing began to thin. Two little drag paths formed and dirt appeared. Alas.

Then home plate was established. The rest of the diamond was there, true enough, but the grass in those areas bounced back resiliently enough. Home plate, there under the rope swing, however, suffered the ravages of hard use. The digging-in of small tennis shoes carved ruts. The countless swings and frustrated responses to failed attempts to hit the ball took their toll. The pounding of bats on the ground, the close plays at home, the slides, the victorious jumps and the inevitable arguments all contributed to the demise of the grass.

By the time the soccer goal appeared, there was already a considerable dead spot. The soccer games and practices just extended the range and depth of the excavation. The once green and grassy spot outside my window went on to serve as an arena for back flips, a location for a campsites and campfires, the starting point for slack lines, the landing pad for zip lines, and the place to wash ratty, old cars that were the pride of their young owners.