Pigeon Toes

By

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My father was average height. His hair was brown and thinning, though he was still in his early thirties. His eyes were large and dark brown with thick eyelashes. His eyes were his best feature. I was his only child, a girl, and a small girl at that. I was fair, like my mother. My hair was thin, nearly white, and stringy. It wouldn't hold a curl. My feet turned inward. I understood I had a condition called pigeon toes. We two walked the streets of an old Denver neighborhood most evenings. The neighbors, sitting on their porches, knew us and waved hello. They smiled at the little twist step my father and I made every so often. They thought it was a game. They didn't know my young father was on a mission.

Our neighborhood wasn't much. Just a few old houses with a church on one corner and a small grocery store on the other. But in those days, I thought it was fine. Just two blocks away, there was a kind of Main Street that provided for our shopping. There were several stores on that street, but the one I liked best was the Rexall Drugstore. At night, its neon sign cast its glow on an old man and his tamale wagon. We sometimes bought six tamales for our dinner; and when the man lifted the lid and reached in with his tongs, the evening air was filled with steam and the smell of meat and spices. The old man wrapped our tamales in paper and put them in a sack. Often my dad carried his tamales in one arm and me in the other. I was still pretty young and, though I managed to walk the two blocks to the drugstore, sometimes my legs got tired walking home. Dad decided it was because of my pigeon toes. That's when he devised our little game. As we walked, he would sometimes call out, "Ready? Turn your foot out, step!" I would throw my foot to the side and step down. Sometimes he called it for the left foot, sometimes for the right. At first, he didn't call it often, and I would walk in anticipation of the call. He did the steps with me. As my legs got stronger, he'd call out a number. If he said 'three' we did three with each foot. As I got older and stronger our number increased. We sometimes went half a block before he'd make the call, and then we might do eight or ten. To me, it was a game. To him, it was a way to straighten his child's feet.

Often, on nights we didn't walk, we sang together. My father played the guitar and had a small repertoire of old Jimmie Rodgers' train songs. He taught several of them to me. "Peach Pickin' Time in Georgia" was my favorite.

"When it's peach pickin' Time in Georgia,
Apple pickin' time in Tennessee,
Cotton pickin' time in Mississippi,
It's gal pickin' time for me."

Dad always pointed at me when we got to that line. It was during this singing when he decided I had a sense of rhythm. My feet might not work right, but my hands did. That's when he taught me a little hand jive. We did it to the rhyme of Peas Porridge Hot, but we substituted the old cowboy verse his father had taught him.

Bacon in the pan

Coffee in the pot
Get up now, boys
And eat it while it’s hot

We started out slowly and got faster with each repetition until it felt as if our hands were flying. We considered the song and the rhyme our act and performed it for my mother and any relatives who would be our audience. When they applauded, I made sure my feet were straight, and I bowed.

In those days, *The Denver Post* was an evening newspaper and most people had it delivered to their homes. In my family, it was different. My dad extended our walks by several blocks to downtown Denver, where he bought his copy from the newsboy, Johnny. Johnny hollered out the headlines as he passed out the newspapers and pocketed his coins.

This sounds like a page out of Norman Rockwell’s America, but it was far from it. This was the early 1940’s, the years of World War Two, and the headlines that Johnny called out spoke of battles, and bombings, and death.

The newsboy’s voice was deep and gravelly, and I could hear it as we approached his stand on the corner of Sixteenth and Curtis Streets, in front of Neisner’s five and dime. There was a streetcar stop nearby and many people hurried from the buildings and rushed to catch the streetcar. Dad and I walked those streets year round, but I especially liked the wintry evenings when people buttoned up their coats and held out their coins to the newsboy in gloved hands. Not many people spoke to the newsboy—he was too busy calling out headlines to respond anyway—but my father always did. “Hi there, Johnny.” “Evening, Johnny.” “Thank you now.”

I was small—probably six or seven years old—and to me, the whole place was bustling with shoppers and working people, carrying bags and purses, jostling Dad and me, as they rushed in every direction with their newspapers.

Johnny kept a large rock on top of his stack of newspapers. He wore a canvas apron with pockets in the front where he dropped his coins. Mostly, he kept busy waving a newspaper, calling out, “Read all about it!” Then he would hand over a paper, drop the coin in his apron pocket, pull another paper from the stack, and slam down the rock. It was a routine I admired.

One cold, misty night, which will always stand out in my memory, he nodded and smiled briefly as my father said, “Evening, Johnny,” and, I noticed, gave him some extra coins. Johnny’s head was as large as my father’s. His hair was black and curly and tended to fall around his face. He had whiskers on his face. He lifted his rock with a small hand. As he turned back to his stack of newspapers that night, he was eye level with me. He looked right at me, and I started to smile and be friendly like my dad. But Johnny’s brief gaze was not inviting. Rather, I felt warned off. Perhaps there had been other children who had made hurtful comments. My dad squeezed my hand. “Want to look in the windows?” It was holiday time. There were decorations on the street lamps and colored lights and toys in Neisners’ windows.

As we stood there, looking in the windows, Johnny’s deep voice rang out again. ‘Read all about it!’ “Daddy,” I said, “Johnny is different.”

"He is," Dad said. "Johnny is a dwarf. He's a grown man. He just never got very big. He sells the newspapers to earn his living." We turned then, and walked away from the bustling crowd.

As always, I counted the traffic lights as we walked home. I breathed deeply as we passed the tobacco shop. Maybe the door would open and I would smell the pipe tobacco and cigar smoke. I jumped over all the sidewalk cracks—didn't want to break my mother's back. And that night, back in our warm house, my father drank his last cup of coffee of the day, as he read his newspaper. He passed me the funnies; and, as I stretched out on the floor, I wondered what Johnny went home to.

Once a month, we extended our evening walk beyond Johnny and his newspaper stand to the big, dark house where we visited our landlord and paid our rent. There must have been ten stone steps leading up to the front door and I walked them with dread. I knew that as soon as we rang the doorbell, we would hear the low growl of the big, black dog that waited on the other side of the door. Child that I was, I thought he should have been called Blackie. But no, his name was Anthracite, after some kind of coal.

Our landlord had a secretary named Audrey. She was a tall lady who lived in the house and seemed to do everything, because our landlord was old and sat in a wheelchair. Audrey opened the door and held Anthracite by his collar. She said it was very nice to see us, and I believed her, because she seemed lonely. It was always the same. Audrey and Anthracite led us down a dimly lit hall and into the room where our landlord sat behind a large desk. The only light came from a desk lamp with a green glass shade. The rest of the room was taken up with shelves full of books and big, overstuffed chairs.

We stood while my father paid our rent. He took the bills from his wallet, not leaving many, and handed them to the old man, who reached out with a hand so thin and curled it made me think of a bird. Anthracite dropped noisily to the floor beside the desk and Audrey began writing a receipt in a big book.

The landlord didn't seem interested in Dad's money. He dropped it on the desk. But he motioned for me to come closer. He always did this. Then he patted my head and smiled. My dad had told me our landlord didn't get much company and, like most older people, he enjoyed seeing little children. "Audrey," the old man said, "see if you can find a cookie for our little friend." And so Audrey went to the kitchen and brought out yet another two dried out Fig Newtons on a napkin. Dad helped me scoot into one of the scratchy, mohair chairs and he got comfortable in the other. He acted like we had all the time in the world. I nibbled at a Fig Newton and heard my dad ask the old man how he had been feeling. This opened up the familiar conversation where we heard about doctor's visits; and old medicine that wasn't working, and new medicine that might help; and hot water bottles and soup. My father listened, just as interested as he could be. Eventually he got up and tucked the old man's blanket around his legs. Then he gave Anthracite a good patting and said how lucky the old man was to have such a great dog. Then he reminded the man how nicely Audrey kept his house. I remember one night while all this was going on when I realized that my father had put a nearly empty wallet back in his pocket and the landlord had a stack of money on his desk, yet my father was the one who smiled.

We walked home by way of Johnny’s corner, where Dad bought his newspaper, then on to our own neighborhood and the Rexall Drugstore. We always stopped in on our rent-paying night. I had my choice of a chocolate bar. I spent a long time deciding, then I always chose a Baby Ruth. If Dad had enough money left, he might buy my mother a small trinket. Once he bought her a bar of pink soap shaped like a rose, which I thought was truly elegant. If he didn’t have enough for something special, he would buy her a chocolate bar too. We each got a treat of some kind.

The two blocks home were easy for me then. But still, I anticipated my father’s call. He could say five, ten, or fifteen. Any number, it wouldn’t matter, I was ready.