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Book Excerpt: Give Me a Home Where the Dairy Cows Roam (Spring Cleaning)

By LeAnn R. Ralph

Book Excerpt: Give Me a Home Where the Dairy Cows Roam (Spring Cleaning) by LeAnn R.

Ralph

From the book: Give Me a Home Where the Dairy Cows Roam (trade paperback; Sept. 2004) LeAnn R. Ralph
<http://ruralroute2.com>

Chapter 3: Spring Cleaning

When I reached the top of the driveway after getting off the school bus one April afternoon, I couldn't help but wonder why Dad was standing on the stepladder next to the tractor.

I had never seen my father use a stepladder to fix a tractor. He didn't have to climb on anything to reach the engine. I also knew he wasn't filling the tractor with gasoline. The 460 Farmall was too far away from the gas barrel underneath the silver maple tree by the garage, so the hose wouldn't reach that far.

"What's Dad doing Needles?" I asked.

Our dog, Needles, had come to meet me, his tail going in circles. Needles was a Cocker-Spaniel mix we had gotten when he was a tiny cream-colored puppy with wavy hair on his ears. Within the first week, he had nipped my sister's ankles while she was hanging clothes outside to dry. She had exclaimed, "Get those needles out of here!" And the name had stuck. As Needles grew older, his color had darkened to light caramel.

At the sound of the word, 'Dad,' Needles' ears perked up, and his round, dark-brown eyes stared at me with sharpened intensity. Needles was Dad's 'hired man.' That's what Dad said, anyway. When my father worked in the field, the dog would either trot behind the tractor or, on warmer days, would find some shade at the end of the field where he could keep an eye on things. When we milked cows, he stayed in the barn, sometimes nudging aside the cats so he could drink some milk from their dish. And

when Dad went on an errand with the pickup truck, Needles often rode with him.

"What's Dad doing?" I repeated. "Go find Dad, Needles."

The dog, his feathery tail still wagging, spun around and took off toward the machine shed.

I stood for a minute, listening to the redwing blackbirds singing in the marsh below our driveway—on-ka-leeeee-eeeeee, on-ka-leeeee-eeeeee. From the pasture next to the barn, meadowlarks joined in—tweedle-ee-tweedle-eedle-um, tweedle-ee-tweedle-eedle-um.

As I turned toward the house, my books tucked in the crook of one arm and my jacket draped over the other, I still couldn't quite believe that the sun was shining. For the past two weeks, the weather had been cold and rainy, but today the dark clouds had gone away and the sun had appeared. During

afternoon recess at school, it was so warm that we had all taken off our jackets.

Last night at supper, Dad said he wished it would stop raining, and I knew this was the kind of weather he had been waiting for so he could plant oats and corn, although he wouldn't start for a few days, not until he was sure the fields were dried out and that he wouldn't get stuck in the mud with the tractor.

Although I usually went into the house right away when I arrived home from school, today I set my books on the porch steps. The house seemed bigger, somehow, now that the snow had melted and the grass was beginning to turn green. My mother said our house was nothing more than a glorified log cabin—and in fact, underneath the siding it was a log cabin that had been built by my Norwegian great-grandfather.

The rumbling in my stomach reminded me it had been a very long time since lunch. I liked to eat a snack right away when I got home from school, but with Dad working outside by the machine shed, curiosity got the better of me and I figured I could always eat a snack later.

When I drew closer to the machine shed, I saw a green bottle standing on the engine cowling next to Dad's elbow and a wad of rags hanging out of his back pocket. Dad was wearing faded blue work overalls, a blue short-sleeved chambray work shirt and brown leather work boots. During the winter, he wore long-sleeved plaid flannel shirts, but during the summer, he wore short-sleeved shirts.

"What're you doing?" I asked.

My father looked up quickly, as if he were surprised that someone had spoken to him. Needles sat beside the tractor, keeping a watchful eye on Dad.

"Home from school so soon?" Dad asked, reaching for his pocket watch. "Well, yes, I guess it is that time already, isn't it."

I had asked him once why he carried a pocket watch. He said a wrist watch would get too dirty from the dust and oil and grease and would probably stop working.

"Why are you standing on the stepladder Daddy?"

The four-sixty had been around for almost as long as I could remember. It had been brand new when Dad bought it. He called the four-sixty "the big tractor," and he called the Super C Farmall "the little tractor." He used the four-sixty for all of the heavy field work. Plowing and planting in the spring, cutting and baling hay during the summer, harvesting oats in August—right around the time of my birthday or maybe a little later—and for picking corn in the fall.

The four-sixty was the prettiest tractor I had ever seen, with its bright red fenders and the alternating red and white sections above the engine. The rear tires, as black and shiny as licorice, were much taller than me.

Sometimes when Dad went to our other place (a second farm that my parents owned about a mile away), he would let me ride on the four-sixty with him. It was tremendous fun to sit on the red fender, right next to Dad, while the wind blew through my hair and Needles trotted beside us.

Instead of answering my question about why he was on the stepladder, Dad grabbed the green bottle and tossed it in my direction.

I reached out with both hands and caught it up-side-down. When I turned it upright, I saw that the label had the letters T-u-r-t-l-e-W-a-x printed on it.

Turtle Wax?

"You're waxing the four-sixty?" I said.

Dad pulled another rag out of his back pocket. "Yup."

Now that I was close to the tractor, I could smell the wax, a bitter odor that reminded me of the way peach pits smelled. Every summer, Mom would buy a couple boxes of peaches to can. Homemade canned peaches tasted much better than the canned peaches from the store.

Several used rags occupied the little shelf on the front of the stepladder where Dad or my brother or sister put paint cans when they were painting. The shelf was knobby with drips of dried paint. Most of the drips were white because all of our farm buildings were white, although light blue drips from the kitchen and pale yellow drips from the living room were mixed in with the white drips.

I looked down at the bottle again. "But I thought this was for cars. And trucks."

Dad shrugged. "Well, yes, I guess it is."

"Then why are you using it on the tractor?"

My big brother, Ingman, waxed his car a couple of times a year, and my sister, Loretta, waxed her car

as well. But I had never seen Dad wax anything.

"I wanted to get this done before I start the field work," he said, "to help protect the paint."

"Protect the paint? From what?"

"The sun," he explained. "Sun's hard on the paint. Fades it."

I had to admit that the tractor did look nice. The red parts were bright and shiny, like an apple that's been polished, and the white parts looked as clean as puffy clouds drifting across a blue summer sky.

"The sun would fade the paint?" I asked. "Like the sun faded Mom's curtains in the living room?"

The curtains had been white with gold and brown patterns that reminded me of leaves drifting to the ground on a warm fall day. Mom said she liked the curtains because they were pretty and were made of heavy cotton and would be easy to wash. Except that after the first summer, the curtains didn't have gold and brown patterns anymore. They were mostly just white with pale brown streaks.

Mom said the streaks made her curtains look like they were dirty, so the curtains had been replaced with something Mom called "drapes" that were the color of ripe corn. Yellow was my mother's favorite color. Mom said if the sun faded her new drapes she was going to give up and leave the living room windows bare.

By the smile on Dad's face, I could tell he clearly remembered the episode with Mom's curtains.

"Yes, kind of like that," he replied.

He reached into his back pocket, pulled out another rag and held it up.

It was a piece of Mom's curtains.

"Mom's letting you use her curtains to wax the tractor?"

"Well, I don't know if she knows I'm using them to wax the tractor. They're not much good for curtains anymore, but they make dandy wiping rags."

I watched as my father rubbed a few more spots on the engine cowling. A breeze rustled the maple branches arched high above our heads. The maples didn't have leaves yet, but they were covered with fuzzy red buds that would soon turn into leaves. From the other side of the barnyard fence, one of our cows bellowed. "Mooooooo!" she said.

I turned toward the barn and saw a dozen of the cows standing by the fence, watching us. Most of our cows were black-and-white Holsteins.

Dad looked up and saw the cows too. "I guess they know it's almost time for their supper, don't they."

He climbed off the stepladder and turned to me. "Since they all seem to be expecting it, I suppose I'd better put them in the barn and feed them. And you should probably go in the house and change out of your school clothes."

"What's Dad doing?" Mom asked when I walked into the kitchen a few minutes later. She sat by the kitchen table with a cup of coffee and an oatmeal cookie and the newspaper spread out in front of her. We had lots of newspapers at our house. One that came once a week, and one that came every day. Mom was reading the one that came every day.

"How did you know I was talking to Dad?" I asked as I set my books on the table.

"When you didn't come in the house right away, I poked my head out the door to see where you were," she replied.

I might have known. My mother hardly ever missed anything that went on around the place.

"Dad just got done waxing the tractor," I said.

"Dad's waxing the four-sixty?"

"With Turtle Wax. And he used your curtains."

Mom frowned. "My curtains? What in the world is he doing using my curtains?"

She paused. "Oh—you mean the curtains I put into the rag bag. I knew he was doing something with the tractor, but I didn't know he was waxing it."

The hollow feeling in the pit of my stomach suddenly reminded me I still had not yet eaten a snack.

"What's for supper?"

"Meatballs and gravy and mashed potatoes," Mom said. "I suppose you're hungry right now, though, aren't you."

"I'm starving."

She turned to look at the clock. "I don't think you're starving in the literal sense, but we won't eat for at least an hour, so I suppose a couple of cookies would be all right."

Last weekend Loretta had baked a batch of oatmeal cookies. I reached into the canister on the counter. Usually my sister made ordinary oatmeal cookies, but this time she had added coconut.

After I had finished my cookies, I went upstairs to change my clothes, and then a little while later, Dad came in the house.

"I hear you've been doing y our spring cleaning," Mom said.

"My spring cleaning?" Dad replied. "Well, yes, I suppose you could say that. We paid good money for the big tractor and it doesn't hurt to keep it looking nice."

"I also heard you used my curtains."

"They're not much good for curtains anymore," Dad said.

My mother sighed. "No, they're not."

Dad grinned. "Especially not since you ripped them up into rags."

Mom turned and made her way over to the table, grasping the back of one of the kitchen chairs to keep her balance. It wasn't so much that Mom sat down. She collapsed. The polio hadn't left her legs with enough strength to allow her to sit down gracefully.

"Roy," she said to Dad after she had settled into her chair, "since when do you have time to wax the tractor, of all things?"

My father shrugged. "What else am I going to do on a beautiful spring day when I can't get out in the field yet? Those curtains were just what I needed to do the job. If you don't mind, I'd like to keep them out in the shed to use for polish rags."

"Well," Mom said, "I'm glad my curtains are good for something."

Although that was the first time I saw Dad waxing the tractor, it certainly wasn't the last. In the following years on the first nice spring day, he would get the four–sixty out to wax it before he started the field work.

Every year, Mom and Loretta did their spring cleaning, too, washing walls and windows and curtains in the kitchen, the living room, the bathroom and all three bedrooms.

From what I could see, Dad had more fun than Mom and Loretta.

Instead of cleaning the curtains—he used the curtains to do his cleaning.

LeAnn R. Ralph<http://ruralroute2.com>

News Release: Give Me a Home Where the Dairy Cows Roam

By LeAnn R. Ralph

Book Excerpt: Give Me a Home Where the Dairy Cows Roam (Spring Cleaning)

COLFAX, WISCONSIN — Did you know that since 1969, the United States has lost 85 percent of its dairy farms. And did you know that since 1969, Wisconsin has lost nearly 70 percent of its dairy farms?

"I lived away from my hometown in west central Wisconsin for 15 years. When I returned in the mid 1990s, I expected to be living in a farming community again. Instead, I discovered that many of the small family dairy farms like the one where I grew up had disappeared" said LeAnn R. Ralph, author of the books *Christmas in Dairyland (True Stories from a Wisconsin Farm)* (August 2003) and *Give Me a Home Where the Dairy Cows Roam* (October 2004).

Figures from the Census of Agriculture and from the American Farm Bureau Federation indicate that in 1969 more than a half a million dairy farms operated in the United States, but by the year 2000, only 83,000 dairy farms remained. And according to statistics from the U.S. Census of Agriculture, during the last three decades of the twentieth century, Wisconsin went from 66,000 dairy farms down to 20,000 dairy farms.

"That's why I decided to write stories about growing up on a dairy farm. Our farm was home-steaded by my Norwegian great-grandfather in the late 1800s, but small family farms are a thing of the past. They have pretty much disappeared from the landscape," Ralph said.

"My dad milked 20 cows and knew all of them by name. Nowadays the trend is toward corporate farms that milk hundreds of cows," she said.

Ralph's new book, *Give Me a Home Where the Dairy Cows Roam* (192 pages; \$13.95; ISBN 1-59113-592-3) is a collection of 20 true stories that took place on her family's farm 40 years ago. Story titles include "Taking the Bull by the Horns," "Spring Cleaning," "A Different Sort of Cow," "Dad's Favorite Recipe," "Popsicle Blues," "On Top of the World," and "Better Butter."

According to Midwest Book Review, Ralph's first book, *Christmas In Dairyland: True Stories From A Wisconsin Farm* "is a heartwarming anthology of true anecdotes of rural life on a Wisconsin dairy farm. Even though Wisconsin is still known as America's Dairyland, life on a family homestead is fast being replaced by corporate agribusiness, and the memories treasured in *Christmas In Dairyland* are quickly becoming unique milestones of an era needing to be preserved in thought and print for the sake of future generations. *Christmas In Dairyland* is simply wonderful reading and is a 'must' for all Wisconsin public library collections."

Ralph earned a Bachelor of Arts in English with a writing emphasis from the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater and also earned a Master of Arts in Teaching from UW-Whitewater. She worked as a newspaper reporter for nine years and also has taught English at a boys' boarding school. She is the editor of the *Wisconsin Regional Writer* (the quarterly publication of the Wisconsin Regional Writers' Assoc.).

Give Me a Home Where the Dairy Cows Roam and *Christmas in Dairyland (True Stories from a Wisconsin Farm)* are available through Barnes & Noble and

. For more information or to

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order the books, visit

or call LeAnn at (715) 962-3368.

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LeAnn R. Ralph is the author of the books "Give Me a Home Where the Dairy Cows Roam" and "Christmas in Dairyland."

News Release: Give Me a Home Where the Dairy Cows Roam

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