

window. When I get better I will spend hours breathing on the ice, trying to melt it, so I can see through the glass. I'll scratch little girl tracks on the wild frost patterns and my tongue will only have to freeze to the pane once or twice before I learn the safe distance.

I am alone most of the time, but every once in a while Dad comes in from the barn to check on me. I can hear him coming from a long way off because his frozen boots make loud crunching sounds as they pound down on the hardened snow. He comes in the porch and I can hear him stomp his feet and blow his nose and cough when the first rush of warm air hits his lungs. I am too sick to cough.

His face is wet from the melting frost around his eyebrows and nose hairs and little drops of water fall on me as he looks down into my eyes and says, "Let me get you something to eat. Please. You need to eat."

I shake my head "No." I'm sick and I'm sad and I'm too young to know the danger of being so little, so sick, on a farm so far away from a doctor. No cart to make the trip to town, even if we had to.

My father is not a nurse, not a patient man. A part of him, however, holds a fear that something terrible might happen to anyone of us three children. Even when he roars at us in a drunken rage or pulls off his belt to give us a thrashing, I know he has that fear and I think somehow that it's kind. Not patient.

He doesn't know whether he should hitch the horses to the old sled and go for help or whether he should try one more time.

"Please baby. I'll fix you something. Please try."

Normally he stirs canned tomatoes into overcooked macaroni and serves fried bologna on the side. But I can hear him on the porch again, breaking the ice on the top of the milk in the old cream can. He's making me soup, soup from a can with a red and white label.

He pulls up the pink clothes hamper that still has shirts and socks and

sheets hanging crazily out of the top. He sits down on it and holds out the bowl of soup.

"Please baby. Try, just for me."

Didn't I know how cold it was from the inch-thick frost on the windowpanes? Didn't I sense the trouble it would take to coax the horses into frozen bridles and hitch them to the sled? Leave me alone or take me along to get help. The trouble of it all.

"Please baby, just a little."

And he takes a spoon and fills it with soup. And he blows on it so it won't burn a little throat already raw. And he looks down at me with a fear that is the beginning of my sense of what he is all about. I open my mouth to swallow the pain, to swallow it down and he sighs and gives me more.

I know if he could he would tell me that he loves me. If kisses were his style he would give me a big one. But he gives me more soup and his eyes are wet and full of fear and hope and I get that tomato soup feeling again.

I am loved.

It is a learned thing that time can never take away. My father didn't live nearly as long as I wanted, but he lived as long as I needed.