

THE MENNONITE MACHINE

Ashley Jensen

NSL Reads 2nd Annual Writing Competition

October 1, 2015

2nd Place

Adult Division

*'Tis a gift to be simple, 'tis a gift to be fair,
'Tis a gift to wake and breathe the morning air.
And each day we walk on the path that we choose,
'Tis a gift we pray we never shall lose.*

Julia sat quiet and still waiting for the bus to pull out and take her back to that simple life she had left just one week earlier. The words of her favorite childhood tune cycled themselves through her thoughts. It seemed like years and a great expanse had separated her from those days and those times and she wondered how she had come to see the world so differently in such a short time.

She should have seen it coming, she chided herself. There had been plenty of clues along the way that life was changing. Getting faster. More hectic. More complicated. But as a child in Cantril Iowa, she never could have imagined this.

Her home, until nine months ago, was the small Mennonite community on the southern border of Iowa. Her home sat back from the main road in Cantril by several hundred feet. That was the perfect amount of space for children to play

any number of their favorite games. She and her five brothers had grown up there. All summer long they played outside from dawn until dusk. Her brothers loved sports and as the only girl, she was swept along with them playing volleyball or basketball or soccer.

When her best friend Ancke was available, she would come too and the girls would make up games to keep themselves anchored to the front yard where they could watch the stream of cars that came from all over Iowa, Missouri and Illinois to shop at their very own Mennonite store. She marveled at the vehicles, and wondered about the people inside them, but she never once thought to wonder what it would be like to ride in one herself.

As she grew old enough to help with the sewing and the cooking and the handcrafts, she no longer had the luxury of sports or watching those cars coming to shop at her store. She had hours of work to do to produce the handi-work they had come to purchase.

But one thing never changed. At dusk, after a long day working or playing, the family would sprawl out on the floor, the couch and her parents' bed that graced the living area in their small cabin-like home and they would listen to Papa read. He had done this since her infancy and had not missed a day since in all her

fifteen years. His voice was silky-smooth and beautiful as he read from The Holy Bible by candlelight. It was all they could do to keep their eyes open to climb into bed.

And so life was simple. All summer long she would work and play outside. In the fall, she would go to school for the morning hours and then return to her schedule of work and play for the afternoons and evenings. This was the life she led. Until Auntie came one day and whispered to her sister about the Hochschule in Kalona.

She'd been to Kalona before and she'd heard that they had a high school, but she never would have guessed that Papa would send her there. Still, Mutter und Papa considered it. This surprised her and she began to consider it too. She had always loved reading but what she loved most was being outside and everything that the great outdoors offered her. She loved to move and to run and to be—as long as it was outside. Could high school really be good for her? Could she possibly find her place so far from home and in an environment so different from the unhurried, gentle flow of Cantril?

But one day it was decided. Julia would go. It was 76 miles away and by carriage, this could take upwards of three hours. So Papa's decision to send her was not of

small consequence. He arranged to have her stay with a second cousin that lived on the outskirts of Kalona. Their children were much younger and Julia could be a big help to them in the afternoon and evening. Of course, during the day she would attend Iowa Mennonite School on 540th street. Once a month Papa would make the long drive there and back to visit her with Mutter and her younger brother. On holidays she would go home.

And so life began as a sophomore at Iowa Mennonite School. At first, she had much to learn. People here were the same but markedly different also. To an outsider, the small embellishments on the girls' bonnets might not be noticed, or the more vibrant floral designs of their dresses. But Julia noticed. She watched at first with wonder, but over time became used to these colors and found them to be quite beautiful. So it was with the electricity too. At the school, there was electricity. Even some of the homes were starting to put it in. She had never seen the need for it before. Back in Cantril, they had studied and read when it was light—with the exception of the holy word, which was worthy of a candlestick if necessary. But here in Kalona, teachers wanted to start every day at the same time. Even in the bitter cold summer months. 2014 life was changing.

Over time, Julia was able to get used to this new schedule. She figured out how to wake up early even in the dark. She craved the outdoors, but she was enjoying all that she was learning and loved her teachers. She found several more distant cousins and that helped ease her into friendships. These new friends encouraged her to get involved. With only 110 students spanning 9th through 12th grade, there weren't a lot of clubs to be involved in, but one day she heard about basketball try-outs and decided she had a decent shot.

Only 9 girls tried out for them. Every one of them made it and surprisingly all but one demonstrated reasonable talent and experience. Coach Yoeder was strict but this was okay as she had vision and it inspired Julia, along with the others to really try hard. After winning several games in a row Coach Yoeder quickly ramped up to having basketball practice every weekday. Games were on Fridays and Saturdays. Sundays were reserved for Sabbath worship and recovery. Julia's life felt very fast paced as she ran from home to school and back. On and off the court, she was in a hurry. So it just seemed natural to start accepting rides home from basketball practice from her teammate Nancy. Nancy was one of the few non-Mennos in the school and Julia was fascinated by the very existence of Nancy in her life.

Whenever possible, Julia tried to learn what it was about Nancy that brought them together. Occasionally she even mused that some of Nancy's "machines"

were not just convenient but actually life enhancing. It was especially nice now to arrive somewhere in comfort and "put together" just as she was when she left home.

The increasingly hectic schedule built up for several months. Their basketball team continued to perform well--far above expectations of everyone involved.

Then, on March 17, 2015 Julia heard the news: they had made it to the State Championship! What a thrill! In all the excitement that followed, no one thought through the implications of a one week trip to Des Moines where they would stay with host families as they competed and were honored in various events surrounding the state championships.

It wasn't until they were headed out--*on a bus, no less!*--towards a new paradigm that it occurred to their leaders and parents and to some degree the girls themselves that life was changing. Their worlds would never be the same. She was now part of a world of machines and electronics and conveniences that she had never imagined. In nine short months, Julia had grown accustomed to their existence, their worth, and now...*their essentiality?*

And that is what she was pondering as she sat, motionless, in her own world almost watching, as a spectator would, her paradigm shift. She asked herself what

it meant to be human. What was truly important. She pondered her own worth and purpose, her background, her religion, her history, her family...

And then she decided: Machines, too, were a gift from God! To be ruled by them would displace all that she believed to be good and true. But to follow the path of her heart every breath of every day with the help of a machine --if it served God's purpose-- was no different than using the plants, the animals, the works of her own hands. She could see beauty in each creation--even these higher order metal ones that required years of school and degrees to understand or to build. She decided to live *in* the world. From that day forward she would never think it at odds to say "a Menonnite Machine." She began to hum to herself as she drove back to Kalona, back to Cantril, back to her world without machines.

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free
'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be,
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.

When true simplicity is gain'd,
To bow and to bend we shan't be asham'd,
To turn, turn will be our delight,
Till by turning, turning we come 'round right.

'Tis the gift to be loved and that love to return,
'Tis the gift to be taught and a richer gift to learn,
And when we expect of others what we try to live each day,
Then we'll all live together and we'll all learn to say,

'Tis the gift to have friends and a true friend to be,
'Tis the gift to think of others not to only think of "me",
And when we hear what others really think and really feel,
Then we'll all live together with a love that is real.

The Earth is our mother and the fullness thereof,
Her streets, her slums, as well as stars above.
Salvation is here where we laugh, where we cry,
Where we seek and love, where we live and die.

When true liberty is found,
By fear and by hate we will no more be bound.
In love and in light we will find our new birth
And in peace and freedom, redeem the Earth.

(Words of song from http://www.constitution.org/col/lyrics/simple_gifts.html)