

Town Folk

We move from the New Hope Road to a house in town. My father buys the house in town from his boss, and at the same time he buys his boss's business – a barbershop. Becoming a barber was not my father's first idea. My father had the notion of going to college when he left high school, the first in his family with such a plan. He went to college for a while, but he and my mother started having babies and my father had to quit college.

When my father was in college, he and my mother and I lived in a little trailer that was parked in an aunt's backyard, but I don't remember the trailer because I was only a baby. Then my parents moved to a house across the street from the aunt's house, and I don't remember the house, either.

When my father quit college, he decided he would become a barber. He says he became a barber because he could get a license in only six months, whereas college would have taken much longer to get through. He didn't like college that much, anyway – all that schoolwork they made him do, he says. He never says if he likes being a barber, but in some ways he is suited to the job. He is good at talking with people and making friends and customers. He likes "shooting the bull" with people who come to the barbershop, and he tells many jokes – most of them my mother doesn't allow him to tell at home. He charges 75 cents for a haircut, and in most weeks he does well enough to pay for groceries and other things we need. He is especially proud when he has a good day or a good week, and he is quick to mention it to people, something that embarrasses my mother because she doesn't like bragging, she says. My father loves to work, and his talk about his big days is probably not so much bragging as it is just plain exuberance.

My brothers and I sit in the parked car with our mother outside a lawyer's office in town, while my father and his boss go inside to sign papers for the house and the barbershop. It is a proud day for my parents. They are becoming homeowners and barbershop owners all on the same day. My brothers and I are excited about moving to town, although the younger ones don't really understand what's going on. They bounce on the car seats until my mother tells them to stop bouncing and sit still, for goodness sake. It is hot in the car and we roll the windows down and hope for a breeze. Eventually, after what seems like a long time, my father comes out of the lawyer's office and gets into the car.

We drive to our new house and park in a gravel drive next to the old garage. The house is in an old neighborhood where most of the people are old people. The neighborhood is not the nicest in town, but it's good enough for us, we think. On the way to the house, my mother points out a school called Oliver Elementary.

"That's where you boys will go to school," she says. I stare at the building as we drive by, not sure I ever want to go to school. I think I would like to just stay at home with my mother and brothers.

The house is painted white and has a dark shingled roof. My father stands next to the car when we get out and looks at the roof awhile, squinting against the sunlight.

"You've looked at every inch of that roof already," my mother tells him.

We walk across the grass to the back door and climb some rickety wooden steps to go inside the house.

"I'll have to build a new porch back here," my father says, eyeing the tilted steps with a frown.

There is a room just inside the back door that my mother says will be divided into a dining room and a den. On the left side of a central hallway there is a kitchen. My father starts to examine the

refrigerator, water heater, and stove, still frowning. My brothers and I run down the hallway, past a room that my mother says will be our bedroom. A bathroom is off the hallway on the left. At the far end of the hallway, at what is the front of the house, there is a living room across from another bedroom where my parents will sleep.

My parents start talking about all the paneling they want to install and the new linoleum they want in the hallway; they have to do something about the light fixtures, according to my mother; and the water heater looks like a rusty bucket about to start leaking, my father says. There are cupboards to be painted, fences to be built, sidewalks to pour, and much else to be done. They go on and on, their many plans and ideas echoing off the walls as they walk through the empty rooms. There is happiness and hope in their voices.

My brothers and I run outside. The house sits on a large lot on a corner, with plenty of space all around for football and baseball games. There are trees we can climb. Our new house is different from the one on the New Hope Road, where we were nearly surrounded by open fields. Here, there are houses next door and across the street. There are many nearby streets and alleys to explore, and a set of railroad tracks a block away where our street ends. My brothers and I run about, looking into the garage and seeing which of the trees are best for climbing.

My parents come onto the old porch, where I hear my father saying how he will build a brick patio just over there behind the garage and how he will install an honest-to-God gas light, just like the rich people. We are moving up in the world.