

Steve,

Well, I guess it's high time that I wrote you. The idea of doing that is not new to me, but the exigencies of age and my own potential infirmity tell me that I had better do this now while I still can and before fate takes away the opportunity.

More than sixty years --- sixty-three, actually --- have slipped off the calendar since you left and I just want to be sure that you know how things have gone in the interval.

It was a cold, damp week-end in September when your trouble seemed to begin. I recall that Mom and Dad had gone to Winnipeg for a day or two, and that you and I were alone at the farm. Earlier rains had postponed the harvest at our place, but the radio forecast called for better weather after the week-end, and we were quite certain that the threshing crews, friends and neighbours all, would be in our fields soon for the harvest.

The day Mom and Dad were to return from the city, I remember that you and I had to go to the northwest corner of our home half-quarter, come late afternoon, to bring in the cattle from their day of foraging out in the open range. The day was drizzly, and I can see even now in my mind's eye the rain-slicked trail with sodden yellow leaves dotting its grey, muddy ruts. It was a chilly, soggy kind of day, and we were glad to be done with it. We were already gone to bed in the upstairs bedroom we shared when Mom & Dad got home, and it was not until the next morning that I had said to Mom that you'd thought you'd had a bit of a temperature during the night, possibly the result of a chill earlier that day.

Your fever did not abate despite Mom's ministrations, and the following day Dad offered to take you in to see the doctor in Arborg. You came downstairs in your "go-to-town" clothes --- I especially recall your light-yellow colored shirt with a streaky, fine-lined, grayish-brown, rectangular patterning. You appeared flushed and weak, and said so, asking me to please do up your shoe laces. I want you to know that I remember this now as the very last thing I ever did for you, and I expect it will be one of the last things to ever leave my mind ... you sitting on a kitchen chair and me on my knees fumbling with laces on your shoes. It is the last time I touched you, and I never saw you again after that morning.

When you and Dad got to the car, I noted that you did not elect to drive, but went instead to the passenger side, leaving the driver's seat for Dad. This confirmed for me that you had to have been feeling really unwell, as driving was something I know you just loved to do.

Dad returned later in the day without you. He explained that the doctor in Arborg had recommended that you go directly to the hospital in Gimli, from where, it turns out, you were ambulated to Winnipeg. This we learned from Dad's very next phone call to see how you were doing and this is when new and nasty words began to embed themselves in the family lexicon: polio, poliomyelitis, paralysis, iron lung. Suddenly, the radio and newspaper items that talked about the scourge of this disease became a full and solid reality for us.

In the week that followed, Dad, and then Dad and Mom, travelled into Winnipeg to see you. They returned with no good news. You were running a high fever and in an "iron lung" mechanical breathing apparatus, a life-support necessity as paralysis had rendered your body unable to breathe on its own.

The following days are a kind of a blur for me. I was kept from attending school as there was a good deal of concern, though few facts, about the communicability of the dread disease. The doctors ordered some vaccine for all immediate members of the household, just to take no chances of its spread. When not with you in Winnipeg, Dad drove the seven miles into town to make his daily call --- this was well before the days of a phone in every home in our area, and that convenience was located only in several places of business in Poplarfield --- for an up-date on your condition. One day Dad came home to announce that we would all be going in Winnipeg to see you, "all" now including our brother, Bill, who had come home from his job in Saskatchewan to be at home during this crisis.

But that never happened. The day before we were to go into Winnipeg, Dad, Bill and I drove into town for the daily phone call to your hospital. We were no sooner out of the car in front of Bailey's store where the public phone was located when I heard, quietly whispered among a group of "town" boys, that Steve Marykuca had died. This was confirmed to Dad by adults in the store who had received this information only shortly before our arrival there.

I have no clear recollection of what followed, except that something somehow seemed to have closed. I do recall that we left at once to take this devastating news back home to Mom, and that Dad and Bill stopped at the homes of several neighbours and friends to ask them to come to our house as we knew that Mom would need that comfort, small --- and seemingly incongruent to the magnitude of the loss --- though it could be.

The funeral followed as it had to, and the entire community came together -- then, before and after -- to deal with the tragedy of your death. Mike came in from British Columbia. John couldn't be contacted in time for him to come to the funeral from his job in eastern Canada. As you would expect, relatives, friends, neighbours and acquaintances came from far and away to express their compassion and condolences with kind words of comfort and tears of sympathy.

*But you were gone. There remained only your things, the precious few that you had, and the fresh mound of dirt in the community cemetery, which our eyes searched out unfailingly every time we had occasion to drive by, --- even to this day, by the way --- this perhaps in compensation for the fact that we were denied a last viewing of you as health authorities, preferring to err on the side of caution, had ordered a "closed coffin" funeral.*

*I cannot recount here the private grieving of those you left behind as I cannot know it, but I do wish to tell you about Mom. For many, many weeks, months and in fact years, it was rare to see her without tears on her cheeks or just waiting to overflow. Her heart-rending sobs are forever indelibly etched in my mind, and although they eventually subsided into a deep and silent anguish, I know that not one day of the rest of her life went by without you being in her thoughts. Just how completely she was overtaken by her grief only came clear to me in late November of that year when one day she commented, seemingly surprised, that the leaves were all gone off the trees. It was only then that I realized that she had been in a kind of walking coma, completely away from the world, from the moment she learned of your passing until that day, about two months later, when she noticed that the trees were bare, and volunteered her observation.*

*The pain of loss receded, though not quickly, and life went on, although marked indelibly and forever by the memories we all keep of you deep in our hearts.*

*Slim*