

DR. PETERSON'S ELECTRIC PUMPKIN FIELD

By Jack Stillman

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IT WAS A SAD TIME, for the influenza epidemic had taken its toll and death was no stranger.

First came the chills, then the fever and many of those who were stricken could tell that death was waiting in the wings. The epidemic of 1918 sometimes took whole families. Whether this was because of the strain of virus or because of the peculiar epidemiological conditions will never be known.

To Jonathan Ford, the tragedy struck twice. His wife had died soon after she was stricken and shortly thereafter his son had died.

Now, his twelve-year-old daughter Katherine lay on what he was certain was her death bed. No matter how much he tried to keep his spirits from sinking, as well as those of his daughter, he knew that she was fully aware that she might be dying.

"It is a strange thing to watch her, because she is not that sick," said Dr. Peterson on one of his visits to the Ford household. "She is simply dying because she does not believe she will survive. It happens. I have seen it before, but seldom in one so young."

"But what can I do?" asked the grieving father, who would do anything, pay any amount that he had, or commit himself to any promise to save his daughter.

"We can do nothing," said a resigned Dr. Peterson. "The matter is entirely in the hands of your daughter—and God's, I suppose. But she simply must want to live, which she apparently does not at this moment, or she will die."

They stood on the threshold of Ford's old farmhouse the sad, forlorn father who had been watching his daughter on her deathbed for days, and the frustrated country doctor who had so many patients that he hardly could give adequate attention to any of them, and who did not know how to instill the will to live in just one of them.

"I will return later," Dr. Peterson said. "In the meantime, give her some broth and try to get her to drink some tea — anything at all, if you can."

He turned to go and halfway down the front steps he turned and came back. "And, Jonathon, try to get her to talk. If she talks, it will help. But if she doesn't, you must talk to her. You mustn't, though, let her know that you are worried."

"But how can I do that?" asked Jonathan, who was a simple man, hardly accustomed to giving false impressions of any kind, much less in a situation which might even spell the difference between life and death for his beloved little girl, the only one left in his family, besides himself.

"You will find a way, I am sure, with God's help," said Dr. Peterson, who did not at all sound sure of himself. Nevertheless, he said it again.

"With God's help, you will find a way." And this time he sounded a little more certain.

As the hours turned into days and the days stretched endlessly into periods that saw no improvement in the Ford household, the dedicated father tended his sick child, foregoing all other chores.

From the window of his daughter's bedroom he could see his unplowed fields and he knew that soon it would be too late to plant anything. He spent his time preparing soup and broth and other dishes that he tried desperately to get Katherine to eat. She would take only a small amount, from time to time, but his feeding attempts always ended when she pressed her lips tightly and refused to take any more. She did not have the strength to shake her head.

"Very well," said her father. "But I'll be back and we will try again."

He would pick up the tray with its soup bowl still almost full and the cup of warm tea, from which she had taken only a sip or two. In the kitchen he placed the tray on the table and, as always, uttered a small prayer.

"Oh, God, help me, please," was all he could say.

Jonathan had never been a deeply religious man, for God had been good to him in his lifetime. He did not blame God for the death of his wife, nor for the death of his son. This simple man always had presumed that since he was a Christian, and probably a good man in his intentions, God would take care of him. So, he bowed his head, said his simple prayer, and returned to Katherine's bedroom.

The child appeared to be sleeping, as she did most of the time. He watched her from the rocking chair, where he spent so many hours contemplating his plight and that

of the frail little girl, who continued to hover on the brink of death. Remembering Dr. Peterson's instructions that he must get her to talk, he began another of what he hoped might be a conversation of sorts.

"I must begin to think about the plantings" he said. "It is way into spring and soon we must get it done. It will be just the two of us this year, but I've been thinking that it might be a good idea if we could get someone else to come and live with us."

He did not expect any response, for it had been this way for so long. He had talked and there was every indication that the child remained deaf to his every entreaty.

"I wish I had some idea who it might be," he said. "Maybe you will have some idea, Kathy. It's your house, too, you know. Do you have someone in mind?"

She lay like a corpse, saying nothing, as always. He had grown accustomed to that. He watched her gentle breathing. As he left the room, he said, "You think about that, Kathy. You may like for someone to come and live with us. It would be nice to share what we have."

Back in the kitchen, the depression weighed heavily upon him. He had come to think that perhaps his simple prayer was not enough. He began pacing, a habit which he had formed lately.

He paced in the kitchen, and he went into the living room, continuing to walk back and forth, trying to find, in his mind, some avenue of escape from the dilemma in which he found himself.

There was nothing he could do, but he must try. He recalled Dr. Peterson's words. He must get her to talk, to acknowledge him, to realize that she would live. Otherwise, she could not live much longer.

Jonathan sat in the chair in a corner of the living room and beside the chair was a small table upon which lay the family Bible. Unconsciously, he reached for it, thumbed through it thoughtlessly, seeing nothing, not even trying to read. Jonathan closed the bible gently and laid it on the table beside him.

"Not my will, but thine," he said aloud, and he knew that he had done all he could to save his daughter. It was not even in his hands anymore. It never had been, he realized.

He left the house and went to the barn, where he casually inspected his tools. It was time to plow the fields, if he were going to do it. He had suddenly become resigned to the fact that no matter what happened to his daughter, he must go on living.

As he prowled the cluttered barn, he came upon a bag of seed. They were pumpkin seeds from last year's crop. And he realized that he had bought no seed of any kind for this year's crops. He reached into the container and took out a handful of the seeds, letting them fall from one hand to the other, like the sand in an hourglass.

He returned to the house and went into the bedroom. His daughter lay as he had left her, with no expression whatever upon her pale face. As he stood there, contemplating the frail figure upon the bed, he thought again of the brief passage in the bible. It was so short that even he could remember it.

"Not my will, but thine, be done."

Jonathan did not realize it, but he continued to hold the pumpkin seeds, which he let drain from one hand to the other, and the little clicking sound that the seeds made was so faint that he was unaware of what he was doing.

He did not hear them, but Katherine must have, for she opened her eyes and when he looked at her again, she was staring at him. But then he saw that she was not looking at him, but she was looking at the pumpkin seeds, which he had been unaware of until that moment. Suddenly, he knew of her interest and he looked at the seeds in his hands.

"Pumpkin seeds," he said by way of an explanation.

Her expression did not change and he continued.

"But they're special pumpkin seeds."

She continued to watch and he realized that for the first time in many weeks that she was listening to him. She was interested in what he was saying. She was aware of him.

Trying to remain casual, Jonathan looked at the handful of seeds again and said, "You see, they're special. Dr. Peterson gave them to me. They're electric pumpkin seeds and they must be put into the ground right away, or they will not grow."

And with that, he left the bedroom and returned to the barn where he stood quietly while the tears ran down his face.

He pulled his plow from the clutter of tools piled in a corner of the barn. From a nail he took down the harness and went outside to the small paddock where he kept Nellie.

The mule had grown somewhat fat, with nothing to do but eat, but apprehension mounted as Jonathan threw on the harness and led the animal to the plow.

He chose the hillside most visible from Katherine's bedroom window and set about plowing the furrows, not in normal rows, but in a crisscross pattern. The field, when he finished, looked like a giant checkerboard. To some, it would have appeared strange, but to Jonathan the field looked quite natural. He felt that for the first time in many months he was completely aware of what he was doing.

He was planting special seeds —electric pumpkin seeds—and these had to be planted in a special way; otherwise, they would not grow. And if they did not grow, Katherine would be unable to see the spectacle he was preparing. He finished plowing the field across the top of the hill and returned Nellie to the paddock. When he went to the house, he went directly to Katherine's bedroom, where he found her awake, her eyes wide open and they looked at him quizzically.

Glancing out the window at his checkerboard field, he shrugged and said casually, "Well, that's the way you plant electric pumpkin seeds."

And he went into the kitchen to prepare her broth and warm tea.

This time she drank half the bowl of broth and finished almost all of the tea. He wanted to hold her in his arms, but he did not. He talked to her about the magic which would happen on the hillside outside her bedroom window, the only thing that had captured her attention in five long weeks.

"When they bloom, they bloom at night," he told her. "They will light up the sky. It will surely be a spectacle that no one has ever seen before."

Katherine turned her head to the window again and she was watching the hilltop when her father took the tray into the kitchen. This time his prayer was one of thanksgiving,

In the days that followed, Katherine's recovery became evident. She had learned to smile again and she talked to him, asking him mostly about what he had been doing when he was not tending to her and he told her all that he had done.

He had planted the corn and the garden was in, but he knew that she was not very interested in those ordinary crops which she had seen come up year after year. She was sitting up in bed now, with a bank of pillows behind her. And ever so often she would gaze eagerly at the hilltop where her father had planted the electric pumpkin seeds.

One day, as he sat beside his daughter's bedside, chatting happily with her, a stranger came to the door. When he answered the knock, Jonathan found a young man holding a black leather doctor's bag.

"I am Dr. Wetchell," the young man said. "Dr. Paul Wetchell. I am trying to help Dr. Peterson."

"Oh, yes, won't you come in," said Jonathan, leading the doctor to the patient's bedroom.

After he examined Katherine, Dr. Wetchell prepared to go and he told Jonathan he probably wouldn't need to see Katherine again. He walked outside and motioned for Jonathan to follow.

"I must confess that I am amazed," the young man said. "I did not expect to find her alive. Dr. Peterson told me the little girl was hopelessly gone and that I should come because you might need my help. But nothing is further from the truth. She is weak but she is well along toward recovering."

Jonathan thought for a moment about the pumpkin seeds and remembered that he had told Katherine that he had gotten them from Dr. Peterson.

"Thanks for coming by," he told Dr. Wetchell. "Tell Dr. Peterson I will come by soon. I must pay my bill and there is something that I have to tell him."

The young man hesitated and then replied, "Dr. Peterson died some days ago. He came down with the flu and he was not well enough to begin with. He simply had tried to do more than he could."

"I am, indeed, sorry to hear that," said Jonathan. "I can honestly say to you that Dr. Peterson had a great deal to do with saving the life of my little girl."

"Yes. He was a dedicated man," the young doctor said.

When he returned to Katherine's bedroom, she said, "He told me he was helping Dr. Peterson. I like him but I like Dr. Peterson. I wish that he had come."

"Dr. Peterson had many, many sick people to care for and he knew that you did not need him anymore, so that is why he sent Dr. Wetchell," Jonathan told her.

"Father?"

"Yes, child. Is something the matter?"

"No. Nothing is the matter. But when will the pumpkins bloom?"

"Soon," he said. "And I must see to them now, for I feel that I have not paid proper attention to them lately."

Jonathan stood in the pumpkin patch, its vines only beginning to grow. He did not know how to make a pumpkin bloom. He did not even know what a pumpkin would look like blooming. But he remembered that he had told Katherine that they would bloom and when they did, they would light up the sky.

A pumpkin field that would do that would only be a field of jack-o-lanterns. It would take hundreds of pumpkins, which were not even on the vines yet. It would be impossible.

As he pondered the tiny vines only just beginning to crawl over the earth, out of the tops of the little hills he had made for the seed, he felt that Katherine must be watching from her window.

He could feel her presence, knowing that she must be looking for a signal of some sort. He did not know what he would do, but those pumpkins must be made to bloom, in some way, and they must light up the sky. But even before that, they must be made to grow.

It was at this time that Jonathan noticed the cluster of gourds which he had hung high on the poles for the family of purple martins that would soon return. There must be fifty or more, each swaying in the breeze. They were not as large as pumpkins, but they were hollow and each had a hole cut in the side to permit the entrance of the martins. They would make fine pumpkins, he thought, as a plan began to take place in the recesses of his mind.

But the fifty small gourds would not begin to make a field of pumpkins. He would need hundreds. In the barn he found some fifty or sixty additional ones, which he had stored for drying, the holes already cut for another martin bird house. Now he had a hundred, but he still needed five times that number for his plan to work.

In the next two days, Jonathan left home on one pretext or another, telling Katherine that he would return shortly. He visited all of his neighbors and told them his problem, and gradually all of the purple martin bird houses in the valley disappeared

from all the farms into the back of Jonathan's old truck. He took them to his barn, where they made quite a large pile and then he began the next phase of the electric pumpkin project.

He did not know how he would accomplish it, but he knew it would work and he knew he must do it. He put one small flashlight bulb in each gourd and wired them into a sequence of one hundred lights each. These would be the first electric jack-o-lanterns anybody had ever seen.

When he finished each series, he hooked it to the battery in his truck and when he touched the two ends of the wires, all the lights came on. It took him three whole days to complete the wiring, and every once in a while he would walk into the pumpkin patch on top of the hill and he would assure Katherine with a gleam in his eyes that the electric pumpkins were, indeed, growing and that they would certainly produce the most magnificent blooms anyone had ever seen.

By this time Katherine had recovered to the point where she was feeding herself and even asking for more. Her mind became concerned with other things and she knew now that she would soon be well again. But she kept an eye on the hilltop pumpkin patch and asked her father, "When will they bloom?"

"Any time now. They're almost ready," he replied.

Jonathan had acquired the necessary batteries and had placed all of the gourds in the field, each one turned so that the light bulb inside would be facing the sky. It was a tedious task that took him all of one night, but now it was done. The electric pumpkin patch that he had promised his daughter was ready.

The following day was mixed with apprehension and excitement. Katherine was well on the way to recovery and she was allowed out of bed for brief periods. This was to be the night the pumpkins would bloom, although she had not been informed. Jonathan planned to throw the switch which he had rigged in the barn and the lights would be visible in the field. He would do this in daylight, shortly before dusk and the lights would seem to appear gradually, as the sun set and darkness came. Then the pumpkins would be in bloom.

At the appointed time Jonathan went to the barn, where he threw the switch. It was still daylight, so he could not see whether the lights were burning. He returned to the house to fix Katherine's supper, which she ate this time in the kitchen with her father.

She returned to the bedroom, where she sat propped against the pillows. Jonathan sat in his chair beside the bed. He stole a glance at the pumpkin field and he was aware that the lights were on. However, it was not quite dusk but it would be only a matter a minutes.

Suddenly, it seemed, she noticed the change in the pumpkin field and she sat staring, squinting for a moment in disbelief. The tiny lights were becoming more visible as darkness began to fall.

"Father! They are blooming! The whole field is blooming. Look at it. They are blooming!"

The child's excitement grew with the darkness, for the pumpkin field became brighter and brighter.

"Oh, they did bloom! They did bloom!" she said.

"Well, I thought I told you they would bloom, didn't I? It's an electric pumpkin field, just like I promised."

He smiled and was glad to see her so happy. "I want to go up the hill," she said.

"Not now. In a day or two, perhaps, but not now. You must remember you have been very sick."

"I know, but I am well now."

"Later, perhaps, in a day or so we will both walk up to the pumpkin patch."

They watched the field far into the night, and the hundreds of lights did light up the sky, just as he had said. Soon, her father, who had not slept for two days, fell into his own bed and was sound asleep.

Her fascination grew as she watched the spectacle and she suddenly got out of bed, wrapped herself in her robe and pulled on a pair of shoes which she had not worn in a long time. She felt wonderful, not at all like she had been ill. The hilltop beckoned and she went quietly out of the house and up the path to the electric pumpkin patch.

The lights grew even brighter when she approached them and then she could see them individually. It was with a start that she realized that they were not pumpkins at all, but gourds, each with its own little light.

Then she saw the wires stretched out through the field like some giant spider web. She knew her father had deceived her, but she did not feel exactly deceived. She stood

on the hill for a while and then she returned to her room, where she continued to watch the display of lights through her window.

The next morning, when Jonathan went into the kitchen to fix her breakfast, he found two places set at the table and eggs and bacon and toast already prepared. Katherine was seated and waiting for him.

"Well, this is indeed nice, but you shouldn't be out of bed," he said. "You must get your strength back."

"I feel fine, Daddy. It's nice to be up again."

He sat in the other chair and watched her as she began to eat her breakfast. Slowly he picked up his fork and did the same.

"You once asked me about getting someone to come and live with us," Katherine said.

"Oh, that was a long time ago and I was not even sure that you heard me," he said. "But, yes, I did give that some thought. Do you think you might like to have someone else around? It might be better, you know."

"Not really. I've thought about it. This is our house and someone else might not like it the way we do."

He watched her out of the corner of his eye while she continued eating and he thought that she did, indeed, seem happy at the moment. Her eyes were bright and her smile was genuine.

"I know how you took care of me, Daddy, when I was so sick. You did not have time to take care of me like you did, but you did."

She contemplated her plate for a moment, which was now empty. And then she looked at her kindly, loving father across the table, who was now left with only this little girl.

"And now, it's my turn to take care of you. I can do it. Don't worry. We don't need anyone else," she said with the air of one who had been an adult longer than he had realized.

"And, Daddy, you don't have to take me to the electric pumpkin patch, for I gather they bloom only once. And I know that all we would see in the daylight is a field of ordinary pumpkins."

"Quite ordinary, but again, quite special," Jonathan said.

"I only wish Dr. Peterson could have seen them, because they were beautiful," she said. "They really did light up the sky, didn't they!"

"Yes. They did. And I suppose Dr. Peterson knows. I am sure that he does."

"I suppose, Daddy, that since he is gone there will be no more electric pumpkin seeds."

"You're quite right. There are no more that I know of."

And he smiled at her and the love for this child was more evident than ever. "And in a way, I am glad, because they do require an uncommon amount of work. But I would do it again, if I had to. Besides, I had a lot of help, an awful lot of help."

As they watched through the kitchen window, the sun shone full on the electric pumpkin patch, the glow of the night before long gone, for the batteries were dead. The hilltop gave not a clue to its magical display of the previous night. The two, father and daughter, saw only a pumpkin field, its vines already covering the hillside.

"But I do wish I could tell someone," said Katherine.

"But why can't you?" he asked.

"Oh, Daddy, who'd believe me? Whoever heard of an electric pumpkin field?"