

# *Sketch*

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*Volume 7, Number 1*

1940

*Article 19*

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## Brown Boards

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# Brown Boards

Helen Stadlman

**D**AD brought the car to a stop in front of the red garage and pushed the door open with his knee to get out. Ellen had seen the rough brown boards just as Dad had turned down the driveway—the tall, shaggy boards that he had nailed side by side on the large east porch of the farmhouse.

Dad didn't say as he usually did, "Well, how's the old place look to you?" And Ellen didn't say as she usually did how swell it was to be home from college and how she wished that spring vacation were weeks longer instead of five days.

Ellen just stared at the brown boards that Dad had nailed close together enclosing the open porch on the east of the house. Mom had mentioned the boards in one of her long Sunday night letters to Ellen just after mid-terms. Ellen had often thought about the boards, generally after Mary had turned off the lights late at night in the dorm—how the brown boards must look against the white frame house. Then nearly a week ago she'd written the letter home to Dad. That was the night after she'd met Bill Harris in front of the Union, and he'd said, "Did you know Sis and I are going to be spending spring vacation in your old home town at the Allen's?" and she'd said, a minute later, "You must drop in on us while you're there." Naturally the Harrises expected her to invite them. After all they all ran around together in the same crowd at school, and then the Allens lived so close to home. Ellen had written to Dad that night right after dinner, saying that the boards had to come down off the porch, or she just couldn't ask the Harrises home. All the way home this afternoon, as she'd bumped along in the family car, she'd imagined that Dad had finally taken them down.

**N**OW Dad was starting to the kitchen with her laundry bag and the family's old battered suitcase. Ellen dug her purse and an old notebook out from behind the seat, where she had pushed them while riding, and climbed out. Partly because a late March

wind whipped over her and partly because she felt a bit strange here on her own doorstep, Ellen drew the fur collar of her coat closer around her neck and moved slowly up the walk. As she pushed through the space Dad had left between two of the boards, she smelled clean cobs and freshly split wood. Across the north end of the porch small pieces had been piled, and near them were larger chunks for heater fuel. The wood tans and black-browns made subtle designs against the planked background. Near the door, handy for Mom to carry in, were two wooden baskets of cobs. Ellen used to like the smell of clean cobs and wood, but today it was different; she thought only of what the Harrises would think when they saw those boards and then the wood and cobs piled inside. They'd come to the porch, there was no doubt of it. People never used the front door on the south side; they stopped their cars at the end of the driveway and came down the rough walk to the east porch which opened into the kitchen. If they apologized, Mom would say, "That's all right; just come on in," no matter what the kitchen looked like.

"HELLO, there," Ellen spoke as she pushed open the kitchen door.

"Ellen, how are you anyway?" Mom drew her tight and couldn't say anything more. Ellen noticed that Mom was crying more than usual. She felt Dad's eyes as she turned to get a drink from the water bucket. Well, he knew how much this had meant to her, and he hadn't answered her letter that she'd written nearly a week ago.

"Have you been as busy as ever, Mom?" Ellen had to talk.

"Oh, yes, I got two hundred chicks a week ago." Mom wasn't thinking about the chickens; Ellen knew that by the way she looked when she said it.

"Guess I'll go upstairs and unpack. My things are in pretty much of a mess." Ellen picked up her laundry bag and the old suit case and started up the stairs. They seemed narrow and steep after the broad ones at the dorm. Upstairs the low ceilings surprised her all over again. The flowered wall paper she'd picked out of the catalogue several years ago looked gaudy and loud.

Ellen spent some time separating soiled clothes from those that

needed repair. The slight odor of confined clothes had trickled through the small bedroom. Ellen opened the window to let the air blow through. She heard Dad bang through the door, failing to catch it with his hand, the tight, black spring slamming it abruptly. Ever since she'd been in grade school Ellen had been able to tell Dad's mood by the way he walked through that screen door. Instantly she had known that that was his answer to her. So that was the way he felt about it! She wouldn't invite the Harrises over, not until those boards were taken down. Perhaps they would forget about her invitation even though they had said it would be fun to see her place.

**E**LLEN could hear her mother puttering around downstairs, and thought she had better go down.

"Glad to be back again, Ellen?"

"Oh, sure." Mom looked tired. Many short, fine wrinkles margined her gray eyes.

The newness of being home and seeing it against recent college impressions made Ellen say, "Mom, why don't you get a new house dress? That one looks awful, and your —" Ellen stopped. Mom had always been touchy about her cotton stockings that turned pinkish after their first washing.

"Oh, it's been first one thing and then another. Paul's glasses had to be changed, and that took most of the money this winter; then there's your tuition money —"

A word lay silent in Ellen's mouth—little crawling fingers tightened closer around her throat as Mom continued, "Dad doesn't know whether there will be enough—prices have been so bad."

Bill and Harriet would like Mom even though her clothes were faded, but those tall brown porch boards with shaggy curling splinters she couldn't explain away.

The faint brightness of the March day had begun to dull and the wind—the last dregs of the brisk day wind—shook at the sills of the kitchen, little sounds that made Mom go to the clothes-room and take down her old plush coat to gather the eggs.

"I'll gather the eggs tonight, Mom, if you want to start supper." She had to get outside.

Once outside, Ellen hurried to the hen house to gather the eggs before it got too dark. She didn't want to think what Mom

had said about money or how tired Mom had looked. Before long she pulled the last setting hen off the nest, picked out the last egg, and turned back to the house. Through the dimness of the fast coming night, she saw Dad's tall, heavy figure walking to the door with full milk pails pulling from each arm. He'd have to ask her pretty soon if the Harrises were coming, and she'd have to tell him that she wasn't going to invite them. Mom would be hurt, but Dad had put the boards up—those homely, long brown boards.

Inside, Ellen hung up the old plush coat and marked down "38" on the calendar record of eggs hung on the wall. She let her body lean against the soft plush coat so that she could feel the wall. Of course the kitchen *was* warmer; she had already noticed that; the wind didn't blow out the green ruffled curtains at the bottom on the east window any more. For years they hadn't sat in front of the window because Mom was afraid they might catch cold.

THE kitchen had long been the warm center of family life; the wallpaper spattered with white hard spots of bread dough over the cabinet table, the wood box beside the old Monarch range, all made it the nucleus of family living. Tonight this deep intimacy of family life that rose greater than mere circumstances made Dad look at Ellen over the grayish linen towel he was drying his face with and say, "Are your college friends coming out?" The sentence almost leaped through Ellen's body and tensed her throat muscles again around her throat.

"No." The half smouldered coal of a word was briefly spoken. Why did Mom let the slices of potato fall so mechanically into the pan?

"Why not?" Dad knew why, and he was going to make her say why. He liked to get people in tight places and see how they'd react.

"I won't have them see that porch with those long, homely brown boards. Imagine what they would think!"

Her father's eyes blinked out at her; red was beginning to spread to his cheek bones.

"You're ashamed, aren't you, Ellen?"

"Now, Dad —" Mom's voice admonished.

“It didn’t matter that the boards made the kitchen warmer and that we couldn’t afford anything different.”

ELLEN rubbed her teeth over her lower lip until it felt hot and sore. Tuition money—was that why they didn’t have money for the porch? They’d never said anything. Dad had always written out the check, signed his name, and handed it to her; she’d thanked him and gone back to school—a silent, simple process, getting the tuition money had been.

The silence that hung in the room seemed filled with unspoken thoughts.

Dad’s voice came through the silence, more gentle than before. “We don’t like the boards any more than you do, Ellen.” Dad couldn’t have minded, or he wouldn’t have put the boards up. Had tuition really taken that much money?

Ellen looked at Dad; his tall form was stooped a little, and new gray hairs had woven themselves through the front shock of his hair. Ellen hadn’t quite realized that Dad wouldn’t stay the same—his tall figure, light brown hair, his easy stride—that he wouldn’t go on forever.

Dad had hung up the split linen towel and walked across the kitchen to sit down heavily in the old leather rocker. Mom took the black-handled knife and turned over the potatoes that had browned in the thin part of the skillet; the angry sputters of the potatoes being turned soon died down. Ellen remembered that those were the shoes Mom had said had hurt her feet last summer, but she was still wearing them. Ellen began to clear the papers and school books off the table so she could set it for supper. Short thought sketches passed quickly through her mind: seeing Bill Harris at the Union, writing the curt letter home to Dad, seeing those long, brown boards, Mom’s old dress, Dad’s stooped shoulders.

The quiet had lasted such a long while in the kitchen. Dad just sat in his chair, his back not touching the tufted leather back of the rocker. The brown boards had mattered more than anything else in the world to Ellen when she’d written the letter home to Dad. Brown boards—brown boards—a miserable, choked feeling pounded through her chest and throat and eyes. Ellen walked to

the back of the stove and took down a dishcloth to wipe off the table.

“WELL, Ellen —” Dad’s voice was more gentle than she’d ever heard it before. The kitchen was so warm and comfortable here with Mom and Dad. The brown boards had mattered so much! Long-restrained tears rolled down Ellen’s face as she wiped the table, her head bent far down over her cloth.

“I’m sorry, Dad.” Her throat wrung out the words that freed her whole being. The tears fell quietly on the table.

Several minutes later Ellen crossed over to the telephone near the door, picked up the phone book, and started thumbing through it.

“1617J.” She gave the number clearly and distinctly to the operator. The Harrises should be there by now.

“Hello? Mrs. Allen? This is Ellen, and I wondered if I might speak to Bill Harris.”

“Hi, Bill, how’s the town by now?”

“Seems swell to be back—Say, when would you like to come over for dinner?”

“Tomorrow night? Just a minute till I ask Mom if it’s O.K.”

Ellen turned to Mom, who was softly crying into the potatoes at the stove. Dad’s eyes crinkled slowly at the paper as he pulled his rocker nearer the stove and poked his glasses farther down his nose.

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## How An Afternoon Starts

Don Jackson

After dinner we are sprawled under a tree in the front yard, Dad, Joe and I.

“Boys!” It is Dad speaking.

“Uh?” We sleepily protest.

“Get the horses out.”

“O. K.,” mutters Joe.

There is a period of silence. Our collie stalks over to sniff at my hair. A couple of chickens, promenading in the grass, pause as if to wonder if pecking Dad on the ankle would be worth the excitement which might arise.