Endless Days

Agda Gronbech*

*Iowa State College

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By Agda Gronbech

CORA opened her eyes that morning on a world that seemed waiting for something to happen. Black shadows were turning to gray and beginning to leave the east bedroom that she shared with her sister Amelia. A slight breeze lifted the curtains stealthily and retreated to let them settle again into the precise folds to which they were accustomed. Cora lay for a long time hearing no sound except her sister’s heavy breathing.

For more than fifty years the two of them had shared things—big things like deaths and births and marriages; trivial things like raking leaves and airing bedding and churning butter. Cora turned in bed and looked at Amelia. She had a sudden desire to waken her so they could talk about what was going to happen today. No need to waken her so early, though. How tired she seemed—and how old. Gray strands of hair were in the braid that hung beneath her muslin nightcap. Her face was pinched and wrinkled.

CORA crept out of bed quietly, moved to the window and kneeled before it heavily. It had been just such a summer day twenty-six years before when Sister Ella, young and beautiful, had married Geoffrey. Somewhere out there across the gray gloom of early morning was Ella’s grave. . . . She stared through the mist so intently that it reluctantly gave up disjointed snatches of pictures from the past: Geoffrey and Ella proudly presiding at the wedding feast that followed the church service, Ella in white lace, two gold rings on her slender third finger. . . . Ella holding her baby for the christening—relinquishing the precious bundle while she sang in a clear, sweet voice from the choir. . . . Ella, thin and pale, wasted by the fever—dying—calling for her baby. . . . Little Dorothea growing to take her mother’s place—every new baby-word doubly treasured—her first school day a solemn occasion. . . . . . . Geoffrey coming to ask for Dorothea after
he married again. . . . . Amelia and Cora shutting the door against him, fighting to keep the best that life had given them. . . . . Geoffrey claiming his right in court, taking her with him to Linn Grove. . . . . Stark loneliness—emptiness for fifteen years.

Cora looked long at the stars, fading at the horizon to give way to a brighter light forming there. She was trembling so she could hardly get to her feet—trembling with the realization that today little Dorothea was coming. Little Dorothea who was twenty years old and about to be married! Mist formed in faded blue eyes and fell silently down wrinkled, tired cheeks.

SHE left the window and began to dress swiftly. Every time she raised her arms, a sudden pain shot between her shoulders. Washing the kitchen ceiling yesterday must have done that—but no matter about the pain if the kitchen looked as ready for today as did the rest of the house. And it did look ready, she observed as she entered it and started to prepare breakfast.

"Today she come, yah?" Osmund almost frightened her; she hadn't heard him before he stood in the doorway. The whole of his short, thick self seemed to beam; his face had not lost its Norwegian ruddiness through twenty-five years of living in the new country. His flat, thick lips were parted, waiting for her reply.

Cora said only, "Yes, today."

"I go milk early today, so milk be long time in cooler when she come. She like cold milk, yah."

She watched him cross the lot to the milk house, his short legs accenting every step. She thought of the wife that he had left so many years ago in Norway. Would he ever go back to her—or would the letter that came regularly once a month continue to be all that connected him with the past?

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Cora heard Amelia moving around upstairs and called to her, trying to hide the quiver of joy in her voice: "It didn't rain, Amelia. The roads will be good."

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“It’s pretty dusty,” came the answer. “We’ll have to go over all the furniture again before Dorothea comes.”

After breakfast Amelia carried great armloads of bedding outdoors to air—in case Dorothea could stay overnight. Cora dusted, a cloth protecting her nose and mouth from the dust which made her coughing spells worse. She stood long before a large gold-framed photograph which hung in the north parlor, dusting it over and over again. She thought: “That was when we were all here, before Ma and Pa went—or before Adolph got the flu at Fort Snelling or Paul was killed when the barn door was torn off its hinges in the great cyclone or Oscar and Delia were married and moved to town—or Philip was in the sanitarium.” She looked carefully at the last figure in the group. “That was when Ella was here.”

She must surely come soon now. Everything was ready. The house was immaculate. Preparations for dinner had been carried to the final stage—that of dishing up and serving, which couldn’t be done until the car drove in the gate. The sisters had exchanged their usual everyday attire—drab calico dresses and aprons—for clean dresses and clean percale aprons. Cora, trying to see Amelia and herself through Dorothea’s eyes, realized with a pang how shapeless their low-belted dresses were.

Osmund was reading the morning paper out in the shade in front of the house. He wore a new blue shirt under striped coveralls. “Yah, I see her first when she comes,” he said laughingly.

Amelia held the oven-door open while they both peered into the savory interior, where a whole chicken, lavishly filled with sage dressing, was roasted to the right degree of brownness.

“It’s done,” Cora’s voice hardly concealed her excitement.

“And it doesn’t take long for it to get too brown,” Amelia added. “I think we’d better take it out and make the gravy.”

With due ceremony the fowl was transferred to a platter in the warming closet and Cora went to the pantry to look through the boxes of spices for curry powder. It was a long
time since they had taken the trouble to find the curry for flavoring chicken gravy.

**WHILE** Amelia stirred the gravy, Cora stood at the kitchen window anxiously watching the road. “There’s a car now!” And after a moment, “It’s turning off the highway, too.” Amelia joined her sister and they stood together intently watching the approaching car.

“It’s Larson’s car,” Amelia said shortly.

“They went to town once before today,” Cora offered. She moved to the stove and moved the kettle of sweet soup toward the front. There was no better beginning to a meal than hot *sud soup*. She stirred the tapioca and dried apricots and prunes from the bottom of the kettle. The odor of the hot fruit liquid rose in a cloud of steam.

Amelia was mashing the potatoes now, her face growing red with the exertion. Conversation dwindled. The potatoes were seasoned with much butter, reheated, and carried in a hot covered dish to the parlor, where the dish was smothered with pillows to keep them steaming hot. The soup was covered and pushed to the back of the stove again. The fresh homemade bread was cut, and butter was brought from the well in the milk house. Occasionally a car came and Amelia and Cora stood together in the kitchen window until it speeded past on the highway. Then they would return to their work, avoiding each other’s eyes.

At one o’clock Amelia silently started setting the table in the kitchen for three without removing any of the dishes already set in the dining room—and Cora helped her, and called Osmund when it was all ready.

Only Osmund ate, and only Osmund attempted to make conversation. “Today I fix the pasture fence along the highway. Maybe the pigs not try to hitch-hike so much then.”

He finished and rose to take his old straw hat from a hook in the corner of the kitchen. He paused uncomfortably at the door. “Maybe Dorothea come for supper,” he said quietly.

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**NEVER** had an afternoon been so long. For the first time there was nothing that needed to be done. The sisters
exchanged few words. Cora wanted to ask Amelia if she thought Dorothea might still come, but Amelia's face, as she sat darning a pair of Osmund's work stockings, was forbidding. Finally Cora went upstairs into the room that had been Ella's so long ago and seated herself on the floor in front of a small carved chest. She laid the things one by one in her lap: a bunch of letters, two or three books, a doll, a small jewelry box, and a large box at the bottom which held Ella's white lace wedding dress. So often in the last month she had anticipated the moment when she and Amelia would give these things to Dorothea.

How long she had sat there looking at these old keepsakes and rearranging them in their chest, Cora didn't know. Suddenly she was conscious of music—a melody which was tinny and tuneless, played by hands that trembled. Amelia had not opened the piano for years! Cora sat there tensely, recalling days when music had been a part of their every-day—when Pa had led the choir in church, and Amelia had been the first organist, and all the rest of them had sung in the choir, except Cora herself, who stayed home Sundays so that the great Sunday dinners were properly prepared for any and all guests who might come. And after dinner everybody gathered around the piano and sang hymns and Paul played the violin. How full and happy those days had been—and how far away. She could distinguish the melody now, and she said the words aloud—"Oh Thou who changest not, Abide with me."

It was late in the afternoon when Nels Jensen's hayrack rattled into the yard. There was a rickety old portable corn sheller in it. "He's been to another sale," Cora thought as she and Amelia watched him approach the house. Nels Jensen's yard was filled with old machinery he had bought at sales and never used—but he was a good neighbor in spite of this queer extravagance.

He asked for Osmund at the door. "Thought mebbe I could git him to help me put in some hay tomorrow," he said as he walked away after he had learned where to find Osmund. He came back after he had gone a few steps.

"Almost forgot to tell ya—Ben Jacobson was up to Linn
Grove yestidday. Told me to say if I saw ya..."

Cora felt Amelia stiffen beside her and her own heart was beating so hard she could hardly distinguish what Nels was saying, but she caught parts of it:

"He said to say Dorothea won't be coming... Her pa was in an accident and she's stayin' at the hospital with him."

SUPPER was a silent meal. Even Osmund said nothing except that he would do the milking alone tonight. Afterwards the sisters were in the yard waiting to clean the separator when he had finished the evening chores. It was almost dark. The sound of the engine in the pump-house pounded monotonously. An occasional car on the highway lighted the house and yard indistinctly and sped past, leaving a greater darkness. Cora, who had been standing behind her sister's chair, put her hand hesitantly on Amelia's shoulder. After a moment she felt the abrupt pressure of Amelia's hand, quickly followed by a hard, tired voice, "We'd better pick the cucumbers for pickling tomorrow."

Cora assented. Her eyes followed the zig-zag path of Osmund's lantern as he came toward them from the barn. She rose mechanically, following Amelia to the milk-house... following Amelia mechanically through endless days that were coming.