

Lasting Love

A short story
By Leslie Gould

It hadn't cooled off all night. At five a.m., when Peggy's husband Eli left for his construction job that would take him outside of Lancaster County for the day, the air was still as heavy as a down comforter. Peggy walked to the road with him, holding his calloused hand, thankful for how hard he worked for her and their nine children.

He was tall and lanky but still as muscular as when they'd married nineteen years before. He wore black work boots, a straw hat over his dark hair, and a tool belt slung over his shoulder. Eli kissed Peggy quickly as his *Englisch* boss approached in his big truck, coming over the rise with the first light of the day.

An hour and a half later, Peggy stood at the backdoor of the farmhouse and handed a jug of water to her oldest daughter, Sarah, and then the little icebox of fruit and cheese to her second daughter, Becky. They would come back to the house for lunch, but a snack would do them good halfway through the morning. A week ago, it had been cold and wet, and they had worn rain slickers to stay dry. Today, the heat would be nearly unbearable.

The girls each thanked her, and then Sarah kissed her cheek. Peggy watched as they strode across the lawn toward the cornfields, walking nearly shoulder to shoulder, their white *kappes* bright against the blue sky. Their hips swung a little as they matched each other stride for stride, their maroon dresses swaying at the hemline. One of them must have made a joke, probably Sarah, because both of them

laughed as they tilted their heads closer to each other. Sarah was the loudest. She was talkative and gregarious, like her father. Like David, Peggy's first love.

Becky was quiet and subdued, like Eli.

Both girls had joined the church last month after taking the nine classes of instruction. Peggy wasn't surprised that Sarah had waited for her sister. The two were inseparable.

As they disappeared into the field, Peggy turned back toward the house. She didn't have any sisters her age—just two who were nearly twenty years older than she, both middle-aged women by the time she was a teenager. She would have been less likely to confide in them than her own mother, had her mother still been alive.

Peggy had been eighteen when Sarah was born. Nineteen when she married Eli. Twenty when Becky came along. Then came the boys, one right after another in a three year span, Matthew, Mark, and Melvin, and then the younger girls, Isabelle, Tabitha, Linda, all two years apart, and finally Stephen, who had turned three last spring. At thirty-eight, Peggy didn't imagine she was done bearing children. If she was, so be it. If not, she knew the Lord would provide the additional strength she would need.

With Eli working longer hours at his construction job, it was up to the children to take on more and more of the responsibilities of the farm. The older boys had already done the milking and were now mucking out the barn. They needed to clean the chicken coop and mend the fence next. Eli would inspect their progress when he got home.

That left the laundry, housework, gardening, and cooking to Peggy and the younger girls. She would be glad when the de-tasseling of the corn was done and Sarah and Becky would be around the house more. And it wasn't just their work she missed—she missed their jokes, their laughter, their teasing, even of her. It was Sarah's doing, really. Peggy feared without her oldest the rest of them would be too serious, too stuck in their ways. Sarah was the one who would start a song or a game. She was the one with the quick response to coax a sibling out of being grouchy. She was the one who would tease Eli about his bald spot or the gray in his beard and make him smile after a fourteen-hour day.

“Come with us, Mamm,” Sarah said. She stood in the kitchen doorway after lunch, the water jug in her hand. “Izzy can do the dishes and put Stephen down for his nap. Tabitha and Lindy can help.”

Peggy smiled. It had been a lifetime ago that she had de-tasseled corn. But she enjoyed it back then. She had always preferred outside over inside work as a child. Even now she would rather work in the garden than cook dinner. Better yet, she liked to be out running errands in her buggy, the wind in her face, her beautiful sorrel dashing down the road.

“We'll only work another couple of hours,” Sarah added.

Peggy glanced at Izzy. Her curly red hair was poking out from under her kappe, and her apron had chocolate smeared across it from the brownies she'd made the night before. She was eleven and plenty old enough to be in charge. By the

time Sarah was her age she was watching all of her younger siblings when Peggy ran errands.

“Come on, Mamm,” Sarah said. “Becky and I’ve been missing you.”

Becky nodded in agreement, smiling just a little.

Peggy thought through her afternoon. The mending could wait until tomorrow. They could barbecue for dinner; it would be too hot to cook inside anyway. She could go out and work with the girls for a couple of hours. She was pleased they wanted to spend time with her still. When she was their age she mostly wanted to be with her friends and David.

“All right,” Peggy said. “I’ll just grab a scarf and my work gloves.”

“Tell Stephen he has to obey me,” Izzy said.

The little boy began to cross his arms but stopped as Peggy frowned at him. She was afraid her youngest, with so many older siblings waiting on him, was getting spoiled.

“I want to help Matthew,” Stephen said.

Peggy shook her head. “After your nap.” He could tag along while the older boys mended the fence. “But only if you obey your sister.”

“Do you know you grow when you sleep?” Sarah knelt beside Stephen’s chair. “If you take a long, long nap, you might be nearly as tall as Melvin when you wake up.”

Stephen sat up straighter. “I’m almost as tall as Melvin now.”

Izzy snorted.

“Stand up,” Sarah said to Stephen.

He complied and she measured his head against her, stopping at her waist.

“We’ll measure you again after your nap, after I get back,” Sarah said, giving her youngest brother a hug.

The older boys were climbing the oak tree when Peggy stepped out the back door with Sarah and Becky. Mark’s hat fell from his head and landed on the lawn. He jumped down and retrieved it and then waved at his mother.

“Get back to work,” she called out. The boys still needed to spread the fresh hay in the barn and then clean out the chicken coop, before they started on the fence.

Her oldest son, Matthew, dropped from the tree too. “It’s so hot,” he complained. His face was red and sweaty.

“*Ya*,” Peggy responded. “For all of us.”

Melvin hung from a branch, swinging back and forth, until Mark grabbed him around the waist and pulled him down. The two collapsed in a heap on the green grass and started to laugh.

Matthew took off his hat and swatted at them. “Come on now,” he said. “Let’s go.” The younger boys scrambled to their feet and took off after their brother. Peggy never knew what to expect from her boys. Most days they were cooperative and hard workers. Other days they would get a hair-brained idea, like jumping from the barn roof onto the trampoline when she was off running errands. Usually, when Peggy arrived home, it was Izzy who would whisper to her what had gone on while she was gone.

“Mamm?” Sarah called out to her. She and Becky waited at the edge of the field. “Are you coming?”

Peggy nodded and increased her stride, adjusting the cotton scarf around her neck and then pulling on her gloves. She stepped from the lawn into the field, brushing against the corn stalks. Her skin was completely covered, except for her face, to ward off corn rash. She remembered that well from her teenage years.

Even though it hadn’t rained all week, the soil was still soft. In the mornings the dew was thick, by mid-morning steam rose off the fields, and by afternoon hot, sticky air hung between the rows of corn.

Peggy walked between her daughters. Sarah was to her left and Becky to her right. Already Sarah was yanking a tassel. Eli had been planting seed corn for several years now. The idea was to remove the pollen-producing top part of the plant, the tassel, so it couldn’t pollinate itself. Then pollen from the other variety of corn, grown a few rows over, would pollinate the plant. The result was corn with characteristics of both varieties.

Sarah jumped and grabbed a tassel on a high stalk. Peggy reached for a tassel in her row and then another and another, working out a rhythm. The field smelled like damp laundry but also sweet. She remembered now how she used to dream of rows of corn every night during the summers of her youth.

She’d worked as a de-tasseler year after year with friends of hers. They’d all gone to school together and lived close by. Four of the girls were sisters. David was their older brother. He farmed with their father and started courting Peggy when

she was sixteen. Everyone was sure they would marry. Everyone but David, as it turned out.

Sarah began singing. “Es sind sween weg in dieser Zeit...” *There are two ways in this our day...* Becky joined in and then Peggy. *One narrow, and the other broad...* Peggy smiled at Sarah’s choice of song.

David had loved to talk and sing and joke and tease. He was a happy person and always laughing. He was confident and able to joke at his own expense, about how short he was—he was just a bit taller than Peggy—and how slow he was to pick up farming. He enjoyed life and people. She thought him sincere. That was why his decision caught Peggy off guard all those years ago.

They’d planned to be married the next November. She’d already joined the church and David, who was almost twenty-one, was going to join the next Sunday. Sure, she knew there were things that had kept him from making the decision until then, but they loved each other, or so she’d thought. Then he came and sought her out in the middle of July when she was working for his father, de-tasseling the corn with his sisters. David stood with her at the edge of a field and said he was leaving. He asked her to come with him. She sank down to her knees, the corn stalks towering over her, and begged him to stay. He said he couldn’t.

It was two months later that she was sure she was pregnant with Sarah. David was long gone by then, off in Philadelphia working in a restaurant. He’d written her two letters, asking her to meet up with him. She hadn’t answered. When she told her older sisters she was expecting, they took over, telling the bishop, and then taking turns having her live with them. She repented, was banned from the

church for a month, and then embraced again. One of the elders tracked David down in Philadelphia, but he still wouldn't come home. Even though his mother, father, and sisters must have known the baby was his, they never sought out Peggy or acknowledged Sarah. Neither did David.

Eli, who lived twenty miles across Lancaster County from where Peggy grew up, took her away from all of that. He worked with her brother-in-law in construction and also helped his father farm. Eli was older, twenty-eight at the time. He was shy and quiet but a hard worker and a good man. He was kind to Sarah from the beginning. He was the only father she'd ever known. He was a good husband too.

Still, from time to time, Peggy thought of David. She thought of him when she shopped in town, wondering if he ever visited his family, if she might run into him in one of the stores or see him driving along the road. Sometimes, after all these years, she still found herself peering into passing cars, looking for him.

And she thought of him now, in the cornfield.

She never thought of what her life would have been like if she had left, only what it would have been like if he had stayed.

"Mamm!" A tassel from Sarah's direction came flying across the row of corn at her. Peggy ducked and laughed.

"What are you thinking about?"

Peggy winced. "Being seventeen."

"You can remember that long ago?" Sarah teased.

“Barely.” Peggy plucked a tassel and shot it across the top of the stalks at her daughter, aware that sometimes memories from the past were more vivid than the present.

Sarah knew someone other than Eli had fathered her. She knew Peggy had thought she would marry that man. Peggy had told it as a cautionary tale. Sarah loved and respected Eli, but in a normal way, not as if she owed him anything. Eli had never made Peggy feel indebted either, even though sometimes his mother had, talking—always—about what a good man Eli was to treat Sarah as his own. The old woman died seven years before, and her husband followed her in death a year later. Peggy had nursed both of them through their last months of life.

Sarah was talking over Peggy’s head now with Becky about a friend of theirs who was being courted by a young man from Ohio. “I would never do that,” Sarah said. “How can she think about leaving her Mamm and Daed and brothers and sisters and going so far away?”

Peggy swatted at a horsefly that buzzed around her face. The sun was hot against her kappe. She pulled her scarf up over her mouth and nose.

“Mamm looks like a bandit,” Sarah said. Becky laughed and Sarah held two tassels in her hands like guns.

“Sarah,” Peggy chastised. She didn’t know where her children got some of their ideas. She’d monitored the books they read all these years. She knew the girls sometimes watched movies with their friends on Saturday nights during their running around time, before they joined the church, but she didn’t know what kind of movies.

Sarah tossed the tassels to the ground and laughed. She was twenty. A woman. Peggy was done raising her. She hoped the right young man would start courting Sarah soon, a young man who hopefully had a farm. That was what she wanted for Sarah—the same blessing she'd been given.

Peggy fed Stephen early but held dinner for the rest of them until Eli arrived home. Matthew barbecued T-bone steaks from the steer they'd butchered two weeks before, and Izzy had made a blackberry cobbler that heated up the kitchen.

"What's the occasion?" Eli asked as he sat down at the picnic table on the lawn, all of the family crowded on the benches, Stephen already in his pajamas.

"Mamm didn't want to cook," Izzy piped up. "She spent the afternoon in the field."

Eli folded his hands. "Really?" He smiled at her.

Peggy nodded. The children chatted away, but Eli was silent as he ate. They were halfway through the meal when a car turned into the driveway.

"It's probably a lost tourist," Peggy said as she stood. She knew Eli was tired. She didn't want him to leave the table.

But when she saw the car and driver as she peered around the hedge, her knees grew weak. It had Pennsylvania plates. The man inside looked to be around forty. He had short, blond hair and a mustache. Her heart raced. Sure it was David, she quickly turned back toward the table. Now that he was so near, she had no desire to see him. And even less desire to talk with him.

"Matthew," she said. "I got up too fast. Could you go help the Englischer?"

She sat back down at the table and passed the pickled eggs to Eli.

Matthew was back in no time. “He was looking for someone named Margaret. An old friend—he wanted to know how she was doing. I told him he had the wrong place.”

Peggy didn’t respond as she noted the sound of the car pulling back onto the highway.

Eli frowned. “Margaret is your mother’s name.”

Matthew blushed. “No. It’s Peggy.”

“It’s a nickname,” she said and then smiled at Matthew. No one called her Margaret any more. “It doesn’t matter,” she said.

No one at the table but Eli and Sarah would think to wonder who the man was. She glanced toward her daughter. She was cutting the rest of Linda’s steak and didn’t meet her mother’s eyes.

The children cleared the table and did the dishes while Eli and Peggy walked through the barn and then out to the chicken coop and fence. Eli approved of the work the boys had done. As they stopped at the edge of the field, she took his hand. He put his arm around her and drew her close, tucking her head against his shoulder. The breeze stirred the stalks of corn, and in the distance, through the open door of their home, they listened to the laughter of their children.

That night, as Eli started to snore, Peggy thought of David’s words to Matthew, about him wondering how “Margaret” was doing. But he didn’t say a word about wondering how his daughter was. If Sarah ever asked about David, ever wanted to meet him, ever even had questions about his family, Peggy would look up

one of his sisters and find out how to contact him and take Sarah by to see her relatives. But Sarah had never voiced an interest in any of them.

Peggy kicked her leg out from under her cotton nightgown. She'd seen David, and although it had made her heart race she'd been pleased that she honestly hadn't wanted to talk with him. In that instant the past seemed twenty-one years ago—it was no longer more vivid than the present. She smiled. She'd no longer look into passing cars, no longer wonder what might have been.

Her smile faded into disappointment. She'd been a fool. Why had she bothered to dwell on her first love all these years? It had done her no good. In his sleep, Eli reached for her hand, and she turned toward her husband.

In the morning, when the alarm went off, Peggy rose quickly, dressed, fixed her husband's breakfast, and packed his lunch. As she walked with him to the road in the pale light, the children still all soundly asleep, Eli took her hand again.

She wanted to tell him how she felt, but tears lodged in her throat. Finally she managed to say, "You are my lasting love."

"Ya," he answered. "I know." He held her close for a moment but then pulled away as the truck came over the rise.