

# The devotion of Barbara

Scholarly sources:

Hawes, Joseph M. (1997) *Children between the wars: American childhood, 1920-1940*. New York, NY: Twayne Publishers.

Salmond, John A. (1967). *The Civilian Conservation Corps 1933–1942: a New Deal case study*. New York.

1930s farm life.

[http://www.livinghistoryfarm.org/farminginthe30s/life\\_01.html](http://www.livinghistoryfarm.org/farminginthe30s/life_01.html)

## Meet Barbara

Barbara Schmidt was fourteen-years-old in 1935. This was six years into the Great Depression that had left so many people in America and across the world financially ruined.



Barbara lived on a farm in York County, Nebraska. She was the ninth child of Daniel and Lizzie Schmidt, whose ancestors had come from Switzerland in the early 1800s. Traditionally, farm families had lots of children so they'd have help with all the chores.

This would sometimes change in good times when the economy was very good and land conditions allowed a good crop. Then the farm didn't need all the children as helpers and some could go out and explore the world on their own.

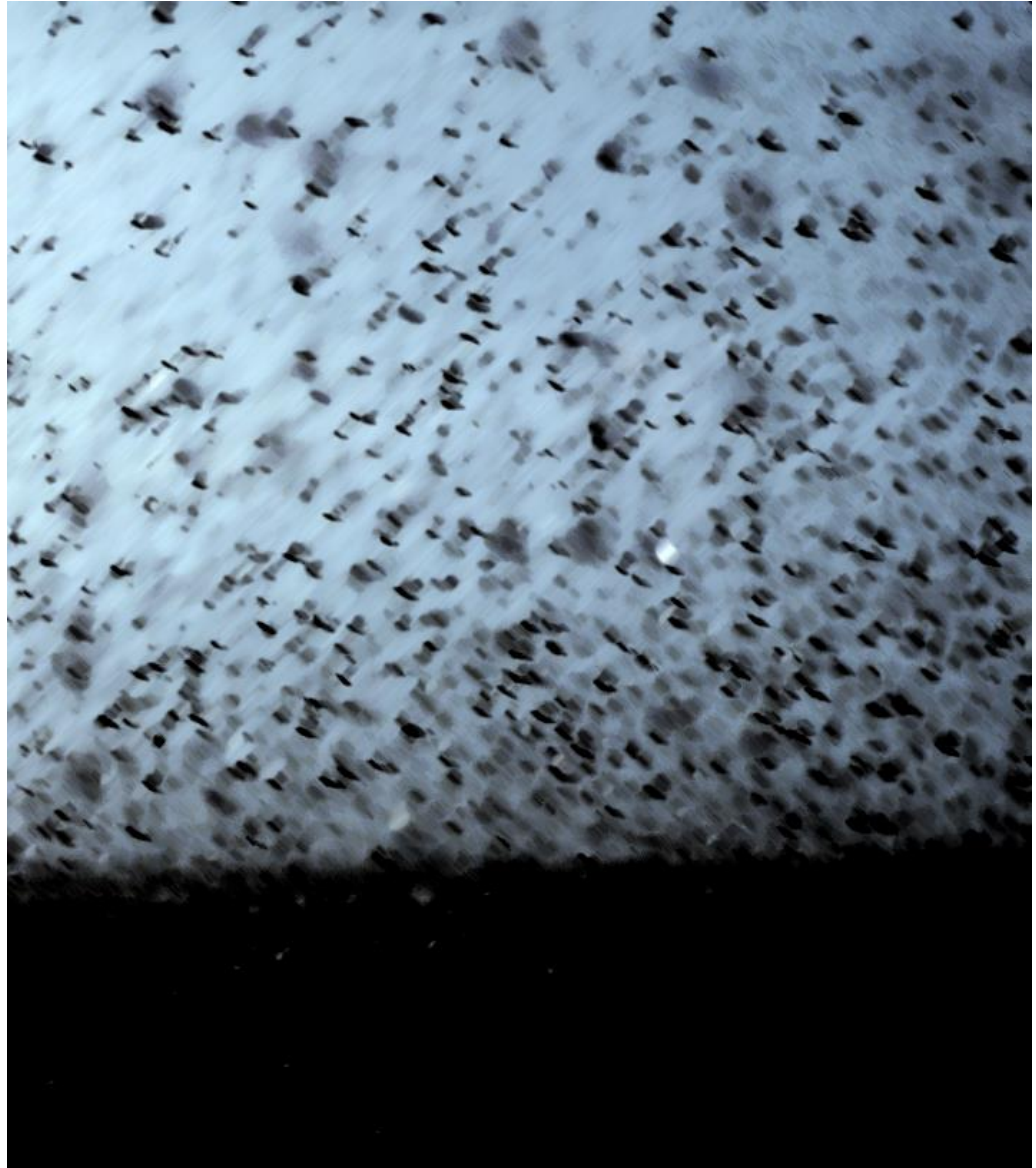


But the Great Depression was anything but good times. It wasn't just that no one had any money. It was also the time of the "dust bowl." Back in the 1920s, farmers were introduced to modern technologies like gasoline tractors, and as a result many had over-plowed their land and created soil that could no longer hold moisture from the rains.

This meant that much of their soil had become dry dust that just blew across Nebraska and all the plains areas.



To make matters worse, the conditions also brought swarms of locusts to the area. It was 1935 when the locusts first swarmed Nebraska. This followed a summer where the temperature had been over 100 degrees for more than 20 days.



And all this had taken place when the Schmidts had little help on the farm. Barbara's oldest brother Herman had gone to Europe and no one had heard from him in years.

Her second oldest brother Jacob had joined the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) as a landscape worker in parks. The CCC was a government program that put young men to work and sent home nearly all of their salaries to their needy families. The Schmidt family was grateful for this money.



But there were even more farm shortages. Several of Barbara's other siblings were down with dust bowl fever, which was a type of pneumonia caused by breathing in all that dust from the air.



Barbara knew that this was a time when she needed to practice extreme devotion—devotion to her family and to her farm. She milked cows, cleaned the chicken coops, fed the animals, and collected eggs before she even went to school each morning.

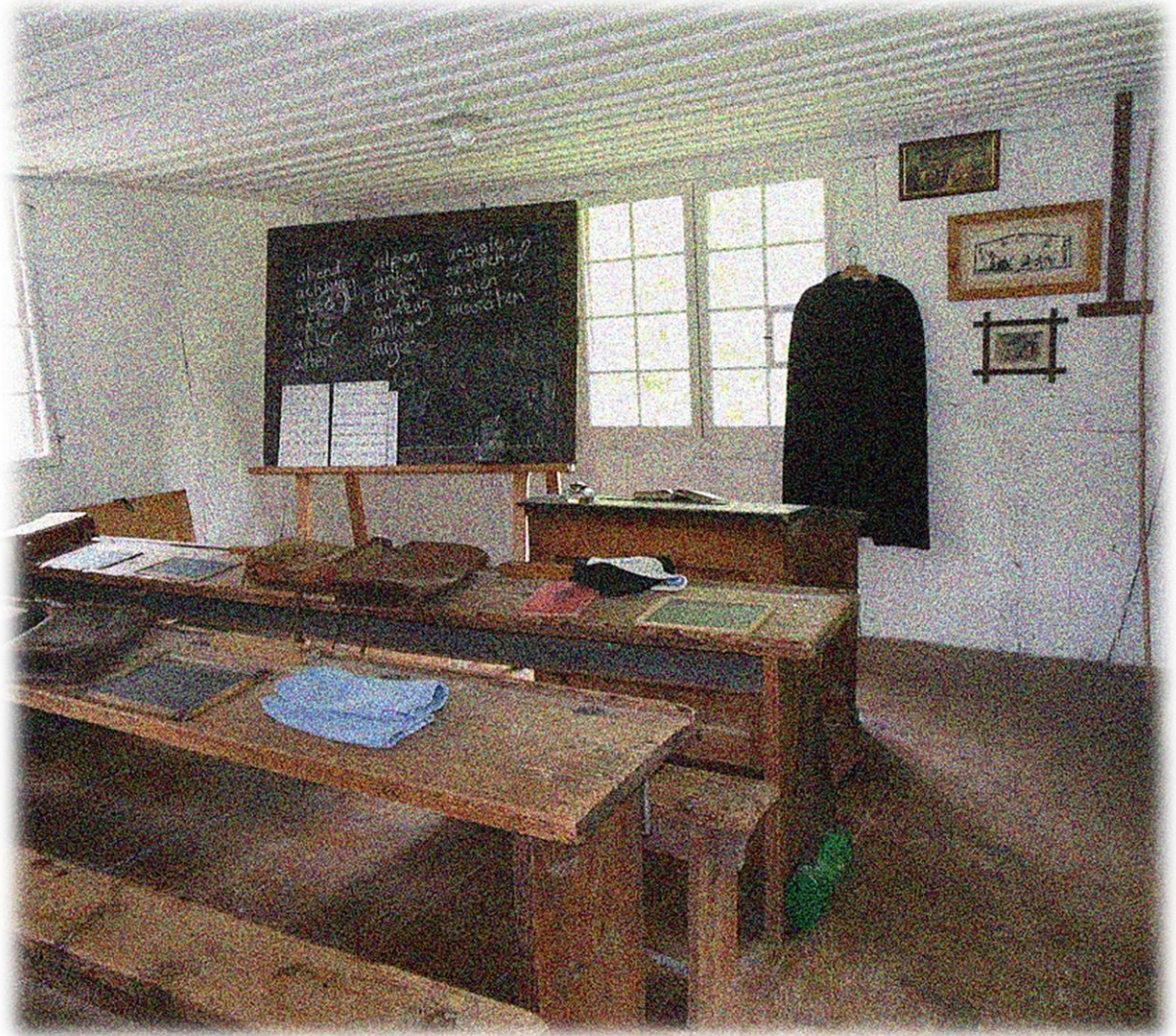




On her way to school she'd drop off eggs at the local grocery store. Before the *Great Depression* began, Barbara would be able to keep some of the money she'd be paid for the eggs. But this was a different time.



Now Barbara considered herself lucky just to stay in school.

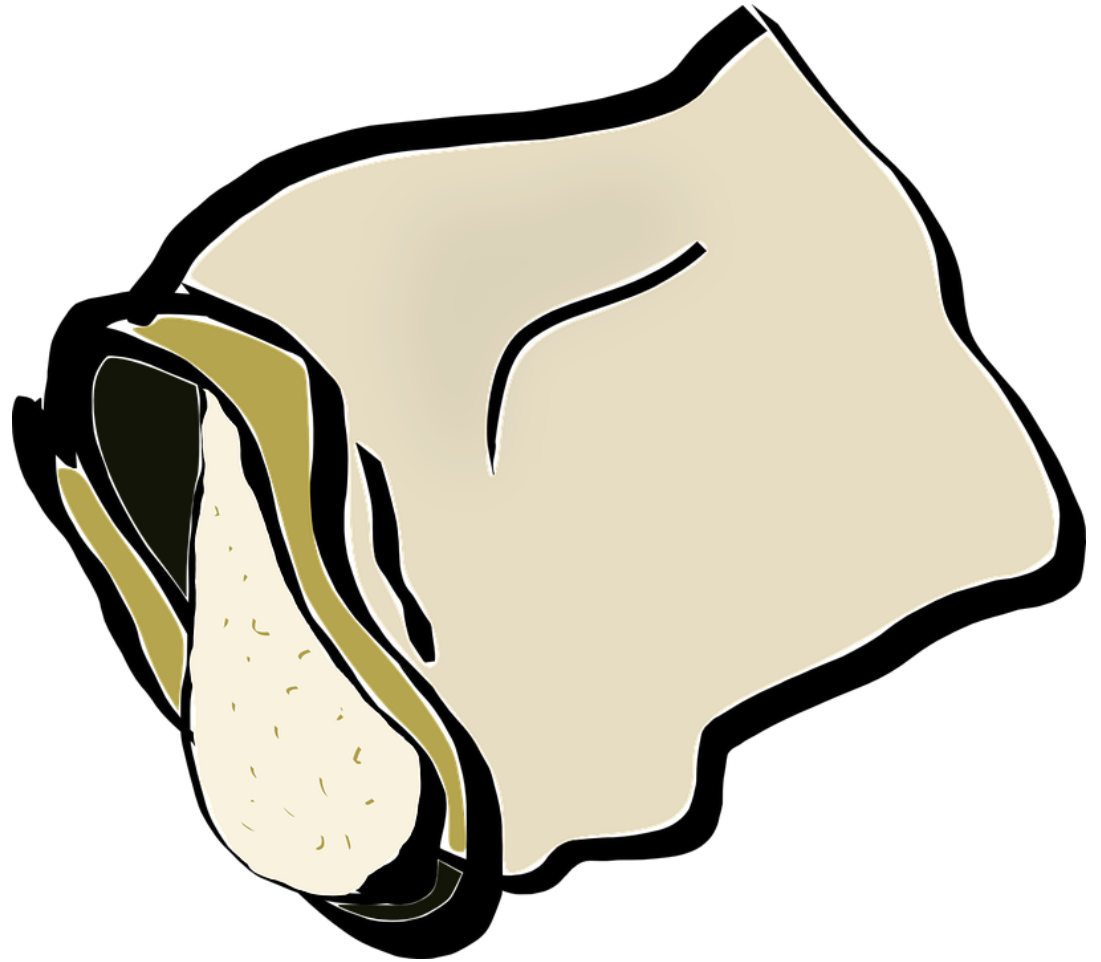


And when she came home from school she helped her mother and older sister with cleaning, baking, cooking, and canning.

Most of the time they did the wash by hand in iron tubs, but during the warmer months they took the laundry to the stream to wash.

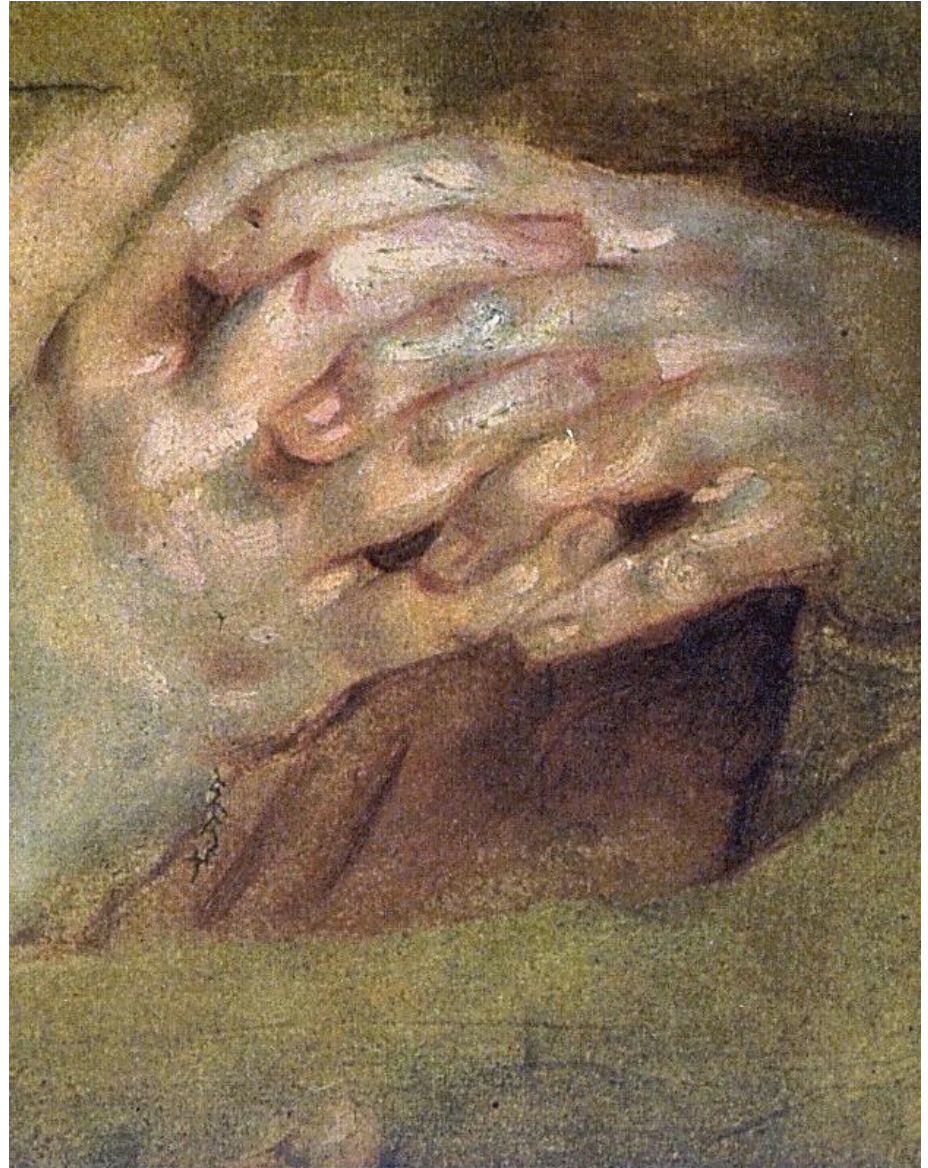


Barbara and her older sister  
would also help her mother sew.  
They made clothes for the  
younger children out of the cloth  
feed and flour sacks.



Barbara and her family were diligent Christians. At night, during family devotions, they would pray for help.

And one day during the summer of 1935 they believed their prayers had been answered.



They received a letter from the oldest son Herman who'd been living in Europe. He was coming home.

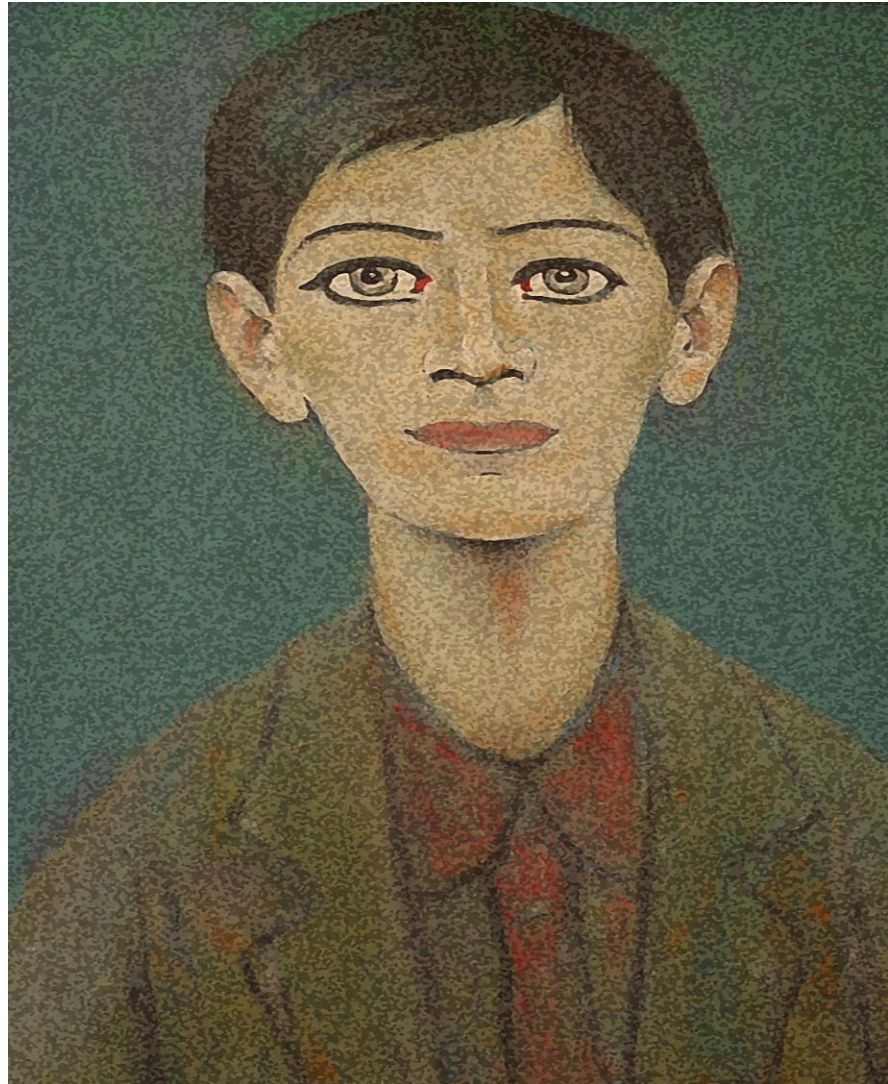
Herman had left home to join the Navy when Barbara was just a toddler. She only knew him by a picture she carried in her wallet. But she was overjoyed.



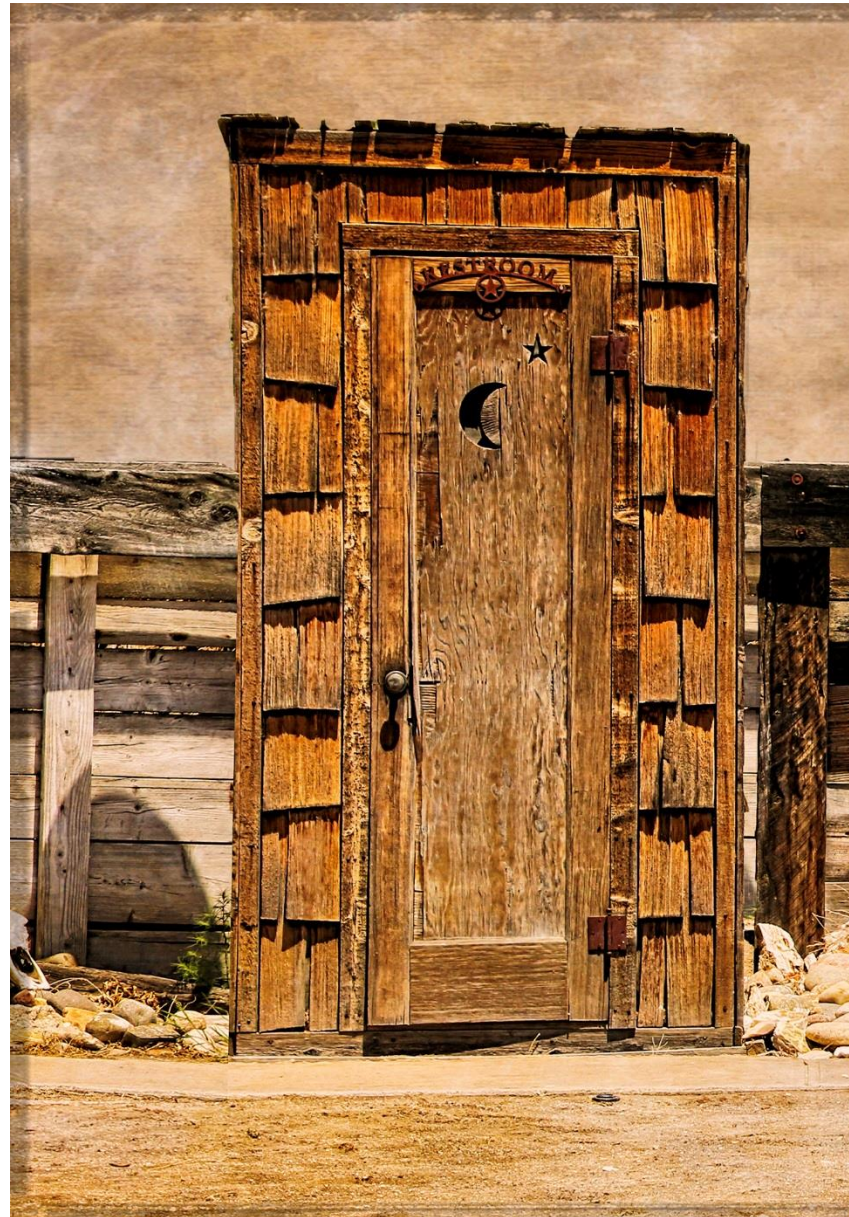
Of course, when Herman finally arrived he looked a little different. He was 34 now.

He had ordered gifts for all in the family. But before they learned about the gifts, the family asked him about his life in Europe. That afternoon he told them stories about all the countries he'd visited and how he'd set up an apartment in Portugal.

"How suave he seems," thought Barbara.



Later Herman asked to use the bathroom and was shocked to find out his family still used an outhouse.

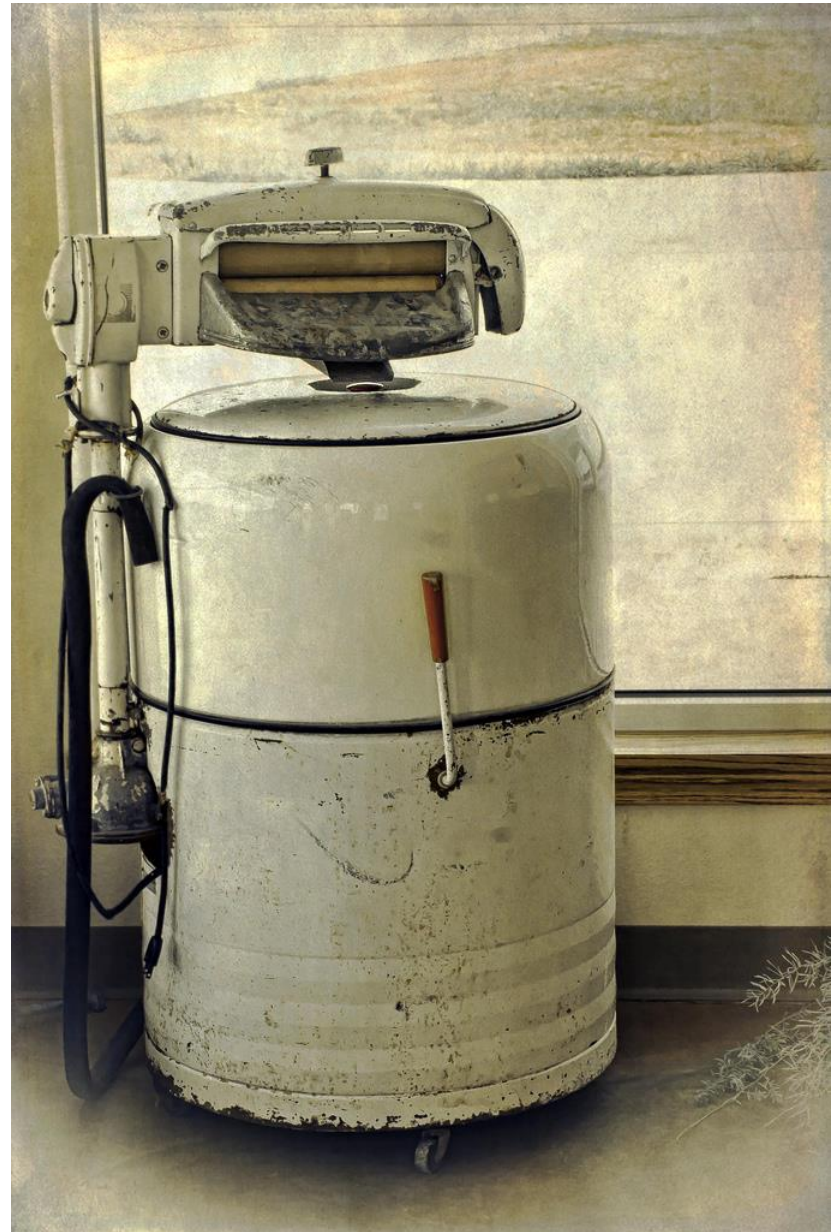




"But I've ordered a new washing machine for you, Mother," Herman cried. "What will you do with it without indoor plumbing?"

"Herman," interrupted Barbara, "the times here have been terrible. We can't afford plumbing."

Herman said that there had been some problems in Europe too, but the Depression hadn't affected Portugal as much.



"Well, I can cancel the order for the washing machine," he said. "I also ordered you a fancy Singer sewing machine, Mother."

"Herman, I just hope that this machine doesn't have a plug," replied Mrs. Schmidt as she mended the girls' slips by hand, "because you must know we don't have electricity."

Herman just shook his head in disgust.

That night Herman slept on a mat on the floor in a room lit by a single candle. He wished he were back in Portugal.



The following morning Herman followed Barbara around during her chores. Before Barbara went to school she dropped off the eggs at the market. She was paid a dollar for the entire supply.

"Well, at least you have this money, little sister," Herman declared. "Your clothes are really ragged."

But Barbara told him that she would bring the money home to the family. It wasn't for her.

"When I was a boy, I got to keep that money," Herman whined.

"But that was in different times, Herman," insisted Barbara. "In the 20s everyone had a lot."



Herman remembered. He described all the clothes he bought for himself back then with money he'd earned.



While Barbara was in school, Herman went shopping for her. He bought her two new dresses he saw on the store manikins—both with beautiful sashes.



But when Barbara came home from school and saw all the fineries, she didn't know what to say. "Herman, these things are lovely, but I can't keep them. I would worry about what others think if I had dresses like this."



"You see, Herman, already we are so shorthanded on the farm that our neighbors come to help. Today Mrs. Olson is cleaning our pig sty."

Herman was shocked. "But what do you wear when you go out dancing at ballrooms or go to the movies?"



Barbara laughed. "Movies? Ballrooms? There's no money for that! At most we might attend a church picnic once a year. "

Herman grunted.

"Besides, there's no time to do anything but work. In your younger years , Herman—back in the 20s—there was money to spend, crops were good, and not every child needed to be doing chores all day."





"You can say that again!"  
snapped Herman. "I remember  
having time to shoot craps or  
going to the water hole with Ed  
Schultz and Chuck Waters."



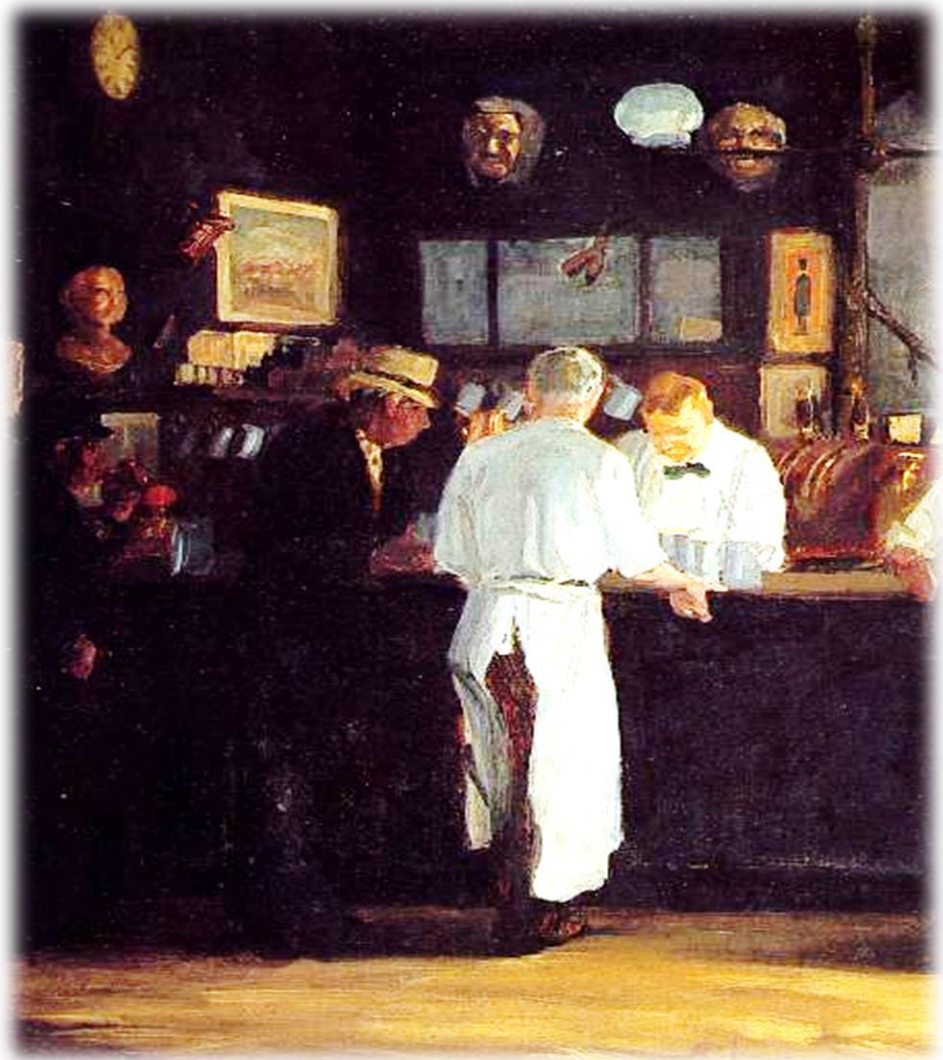
"And go to the bars of course," Herman added. "When we were older."

"I heard," said Barbara.

"We knew how to have fun back then. Not like this life you lead with all work and no play."

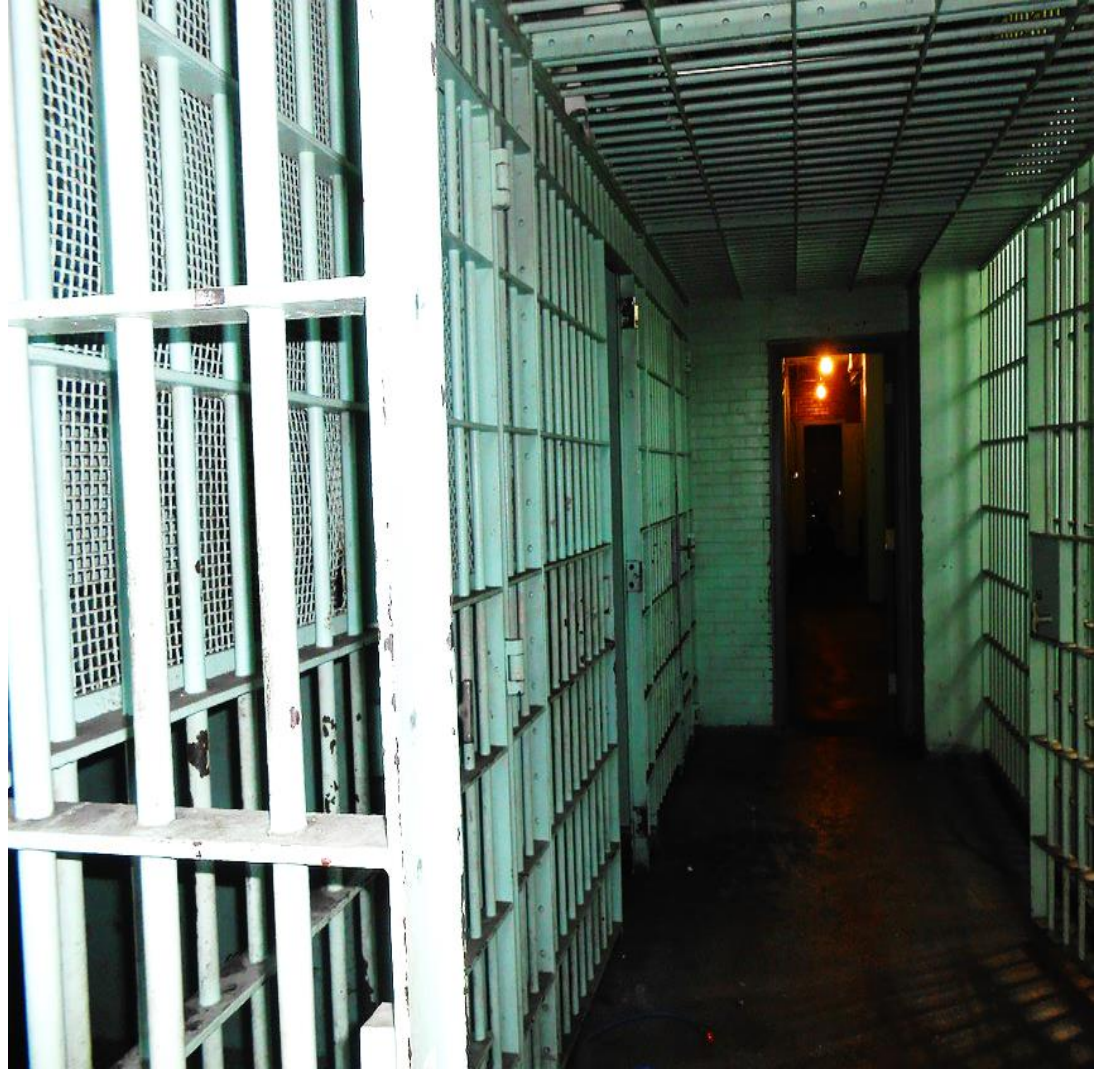
"Well maybe you want to pay those fellows a visit," snapped Barbara snidely.

"Well, maybe I will," he snapped back.



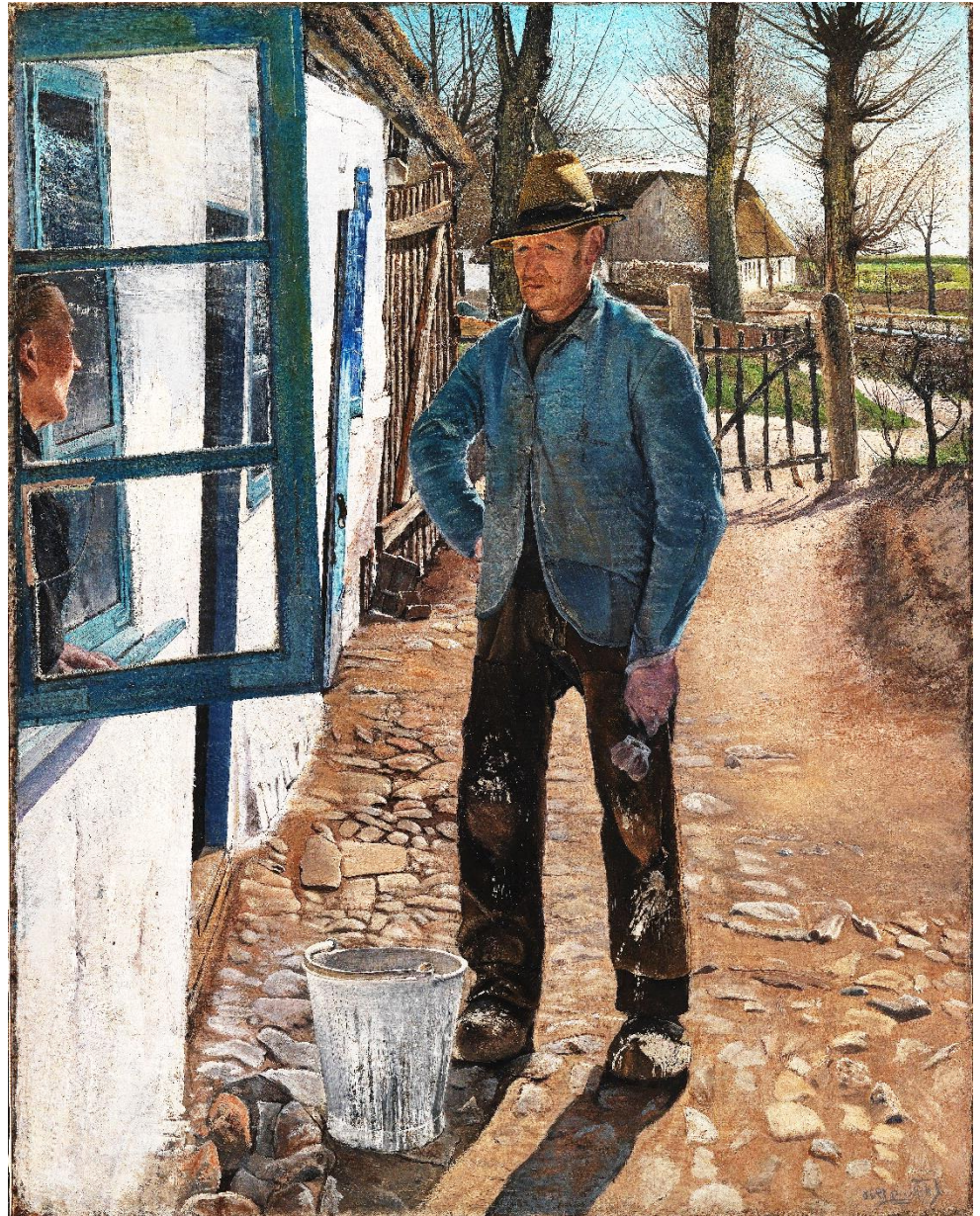
"Then let me tell you that if you do you'll find them in the state penitentiary. Both got sent up for bootlegging quite a few years ago."

Again Herman grunted.



"Herman," Barbara pleaded. "We thought you were coming home to help us, not just bring gifts. We need so much assistance on the farm right now—with Jacob away and so many of your brothers and sisters sick.

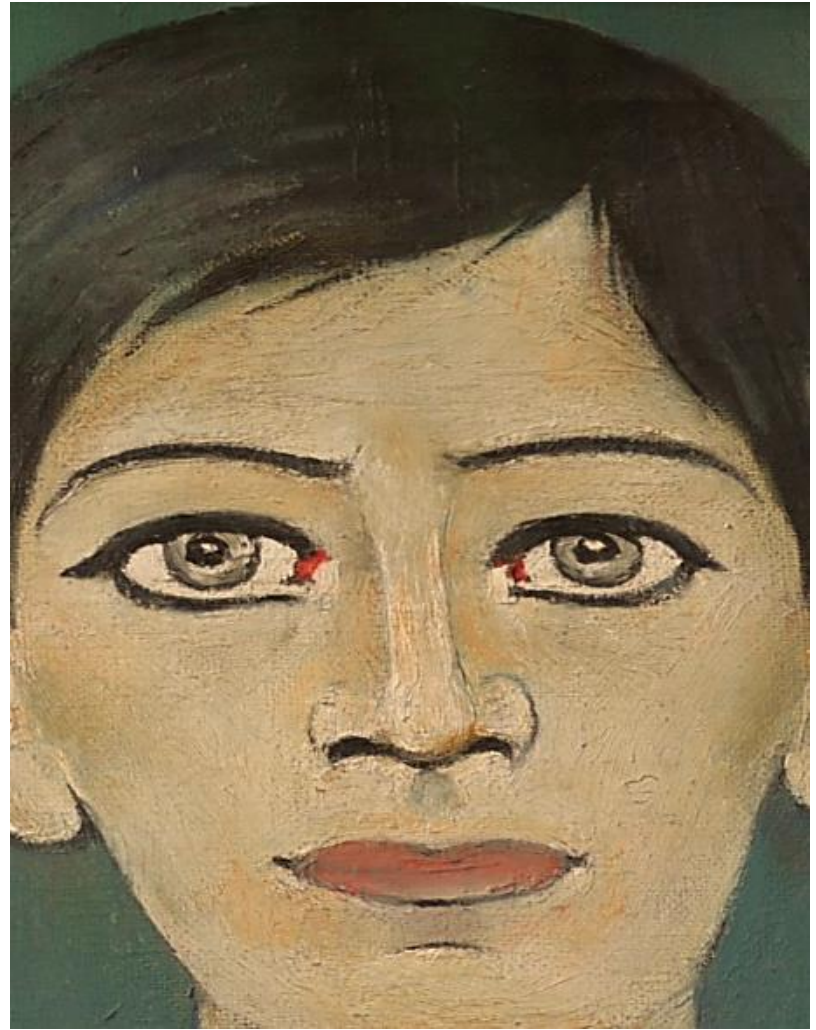
"Why this old house needs a painting so bad, Herman."



Herman thought about what Barbara had just said.

"Little sister, I truly admire your devotion," he replied. "But I'd only intended to come for a visit with plans to return to Portugal. See, I was raised in prosperous times when I could do what I wanted and not be held down by family obligations. I'm just not sure I could be like you at this point in my life."

And so it was that Herman packed his bags in three days and returned to Portugal. He'd promised to write to Barbara every week.



And he did.

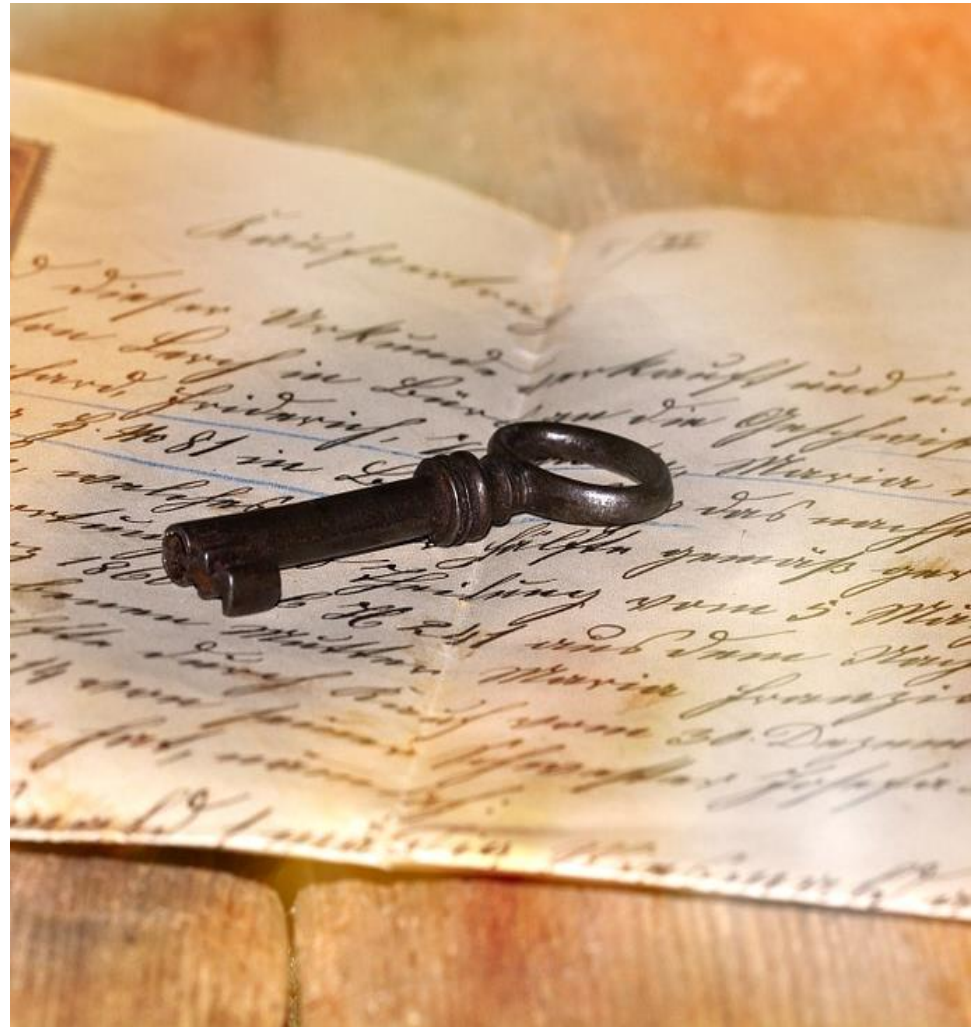
His letters first described all the fun he was having in Portugal. He sent gorgeous photographs of street life in Portugal.



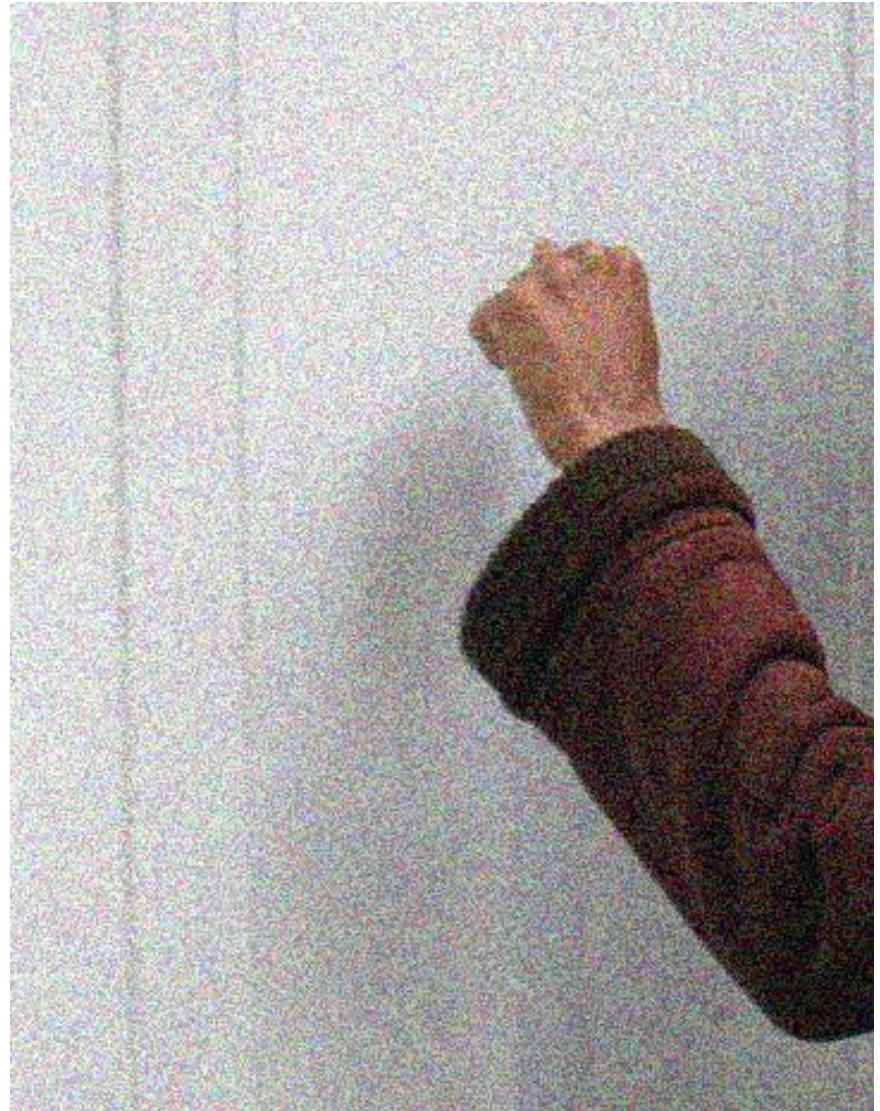
Then little by little his letters changed. First he began to complain that maybe he was getting too old for all the parties.

And then he began asking Barbara about news of the family . . . news of the farm.

And soon after this, the letters were about his childhood and all the wonderful things his parents had done for him.



And then one early March morning in 1936, Barbara heard a knock at the door.





She opened the door and found a trunk on the porch—one that looked like it had been all over the world.

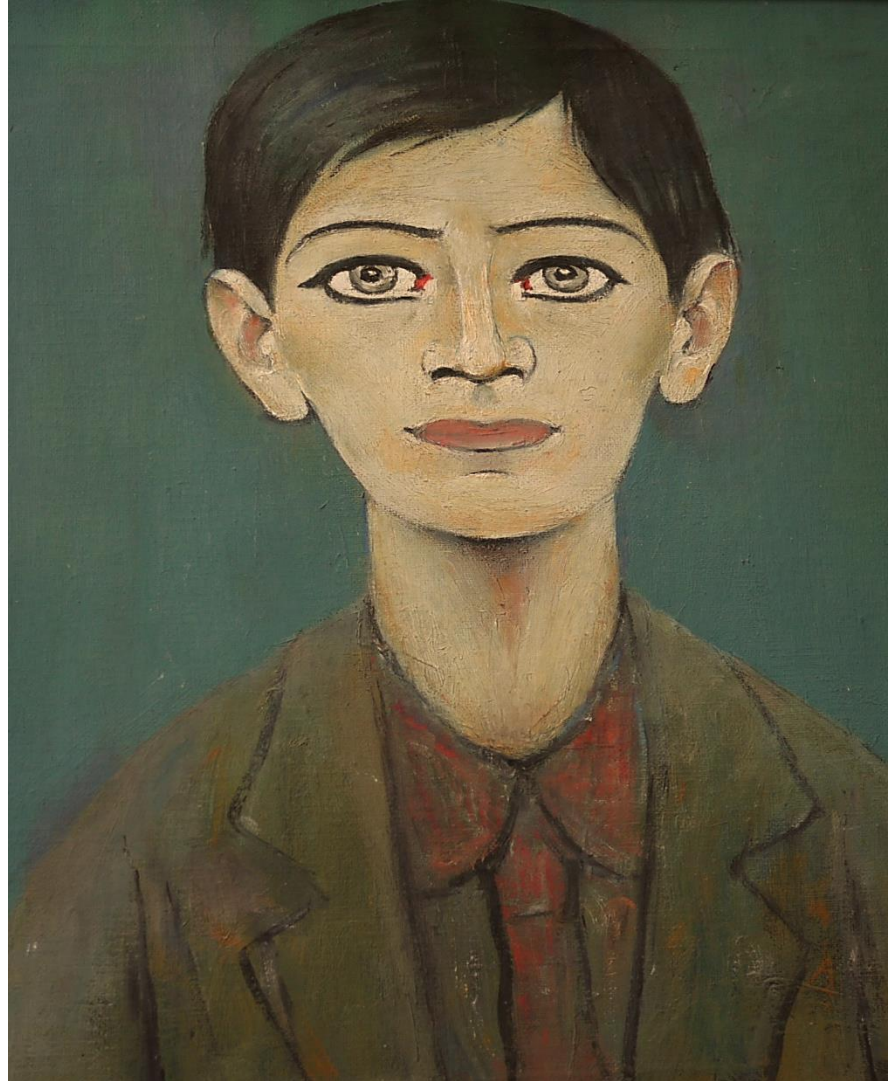


And there appeared the face of her oldest brother, Herman.

"Well, I guess this time I'm here to stay," he announced. "I'd better get unpacked fast if I'm to do my morning chores."

Barbara hugged him.

"And I have you to blame for all this little sister—you and your blasted devotion!"



The end

Let's talk!!!