

Mert Pike

He backed his lawn tractor from the garage, stopped, switched the shift lever to forward, traveled ahead cutting a half-moon turn toward the road, stopped, then backed to within two feet of his house.

Bucket and squeegee in hand, he climbed up on the wooden toolbox firmly fixed to the rear of his lawn tractor. He did not use his cane that lay resting in a makeshift holder fastened to the side of the tractor hood.

He wiped the window with a wet cloth, then pulled the squeegee flush down the pane. The end of each pull elicited a slight mouse-like squeak.

He didn't interrupt his work to turn and visit as I ferried two meals through a large garage door and stepped onto a raised three-foot by three-foot pad of concrete, a landing, built to cut in half the distance from the garage floor to the door opening. A square of carpet lay on the neatly swept concrete pad. The carpet is old, but has kept most of its original color and cushion.

Two knocks on the door and his wife of 70 years calls to me. "Come in," Ora Pike says, sitting in her chair at the far end of their one-level home, facing him, watching him through the window as he spring cleans.

"Rusty?"

"Yes, Mrs. Pike, it's me. Meals on Wheels. I see Mr. Pike's cleaning the windows, huh?"

"Yes, he is." Ora Pike pauses for the amount of time I take to carefully set and arrange two shrink-wrapped platters with Spanish rice, green beans, and corn atop the immaculate surface of a circa 1950s kitchen table. Mrs. Pike's chair faces away from me and 30 feet separate us. Her voice soft, but strong, she informs: "You know, back in '71, when Merton had his accident, your father called and asked what he might do to help. I said, 'Well, you can come clean the windows.'"

When I considered a relevant period of time had passed since Mrs. Pike finished her thought, I threw my voice toward her direction, "Did he?"

"Yes he did. He came down and cleaned them."

"Huh. Yeah, he was a good guy like that, my dad."

"Yes he was."

"See you next week Mrs. Pike."

"Thank you."

Usually Mrs. Pike and I visit longer. Today I think she was a bit concerned about Mr. Pike and his spring-cleaning situation.

He's off the toolbox, standing on the ground. We most usually visit some, so we visit some.

"Delivered to Mrs. Nichols before you folks," I note.

While shifting his weight from one leg to the other, the broad smile on his face morphed into a look of concentration, "She was, I think, four years ahead of me in school. She must be . . .," he looked down, studying the ground as if the answer might be scrawled into the turf, "94 I'd say. Or thereabouts."

"You're 90?" I ask, with all due respect.

With the heft of a man who will no doubt live to be 100 years old, he answers, "I will be next month."

Why pay for college, why read, why surf the Internet, when you can ask old people stuff?

"Let me ask you something Mr. Pike. Other than an extra ache or pain in the morning, do you feel different now then when you were 50?"

Before the words "do you feel," are fully from my lips, he answers with a smile, "Not a bit. I feel the same as I did way back. Oh, I can't do the some of things I used to," he laughs, "but I feel great."

A few more convivial exchanges, and we're back to our jobs.

He repositions the tractor to the far end of the house, in front of where Mrs. Pike sits, and climbs up on the box.

Traffic holds me in the driveway, so I watch him, wetting the dirty pane with the cloth, wiping it clean with the squeegee, standing on the wooden toolbox he made and attached himself.

It's a precarious position Mr. Pike is working in. Precarious if you are standing on your own two legs. Mr. Pike is standing on two artificial legs.

In 1971, during sugaring season if I remember correctly, while spreading manure far off at the edge of a cornfield, Merton Pike had a very, very serious farm accident. Lost both his legs. He was 51.

For 39 years, with the deftness of a Russian gymnast, he has farmed wearing prosthetic legs; one attached below the knee, the other attached mid-thigh and hinged at the knee.

How does he do it, this Merton Pike? How does he climb up into the big farm tractor to haul hay, manure, and chopped corn? How does he drive, shop, blow snow with his lawn tractor, and rise to sing hymns at Sunday's service? And how does he clean windows while standing on a perch barely big enough to accommodate an overfed, underworked barn cat?

Back on the road I turn to take a last look at the spectacle that is Mr. Pike washing windows. Having turned to take a last look at me, he smiles, holding the squeegee and cloth in one hand, waving with the other. All the while, balancing.