

Chapter 1

Vallee Views

Memories of Dad are as Sweet as Fresh-Mown Grass



“Be careful, Mom,” cautioned my daughter. “Read the directions, Mom,” said my son. “Don’t chop your arms off, honey,” came from my husband.

Considering the comments were from those who knew me best, I had to take heed.

I am my father’s daughter and love to chop and chip, weed, and

feed. Growing up in the Midwest in the 1950s a man’s house was his castle, and his yard was big and long and green. Dad had a great lawn, and all the kids pushed the mower back and forth for endless hours, keeping the turf neat and tidy.

Early on Saturday mornings, the sweet smell of grass permeated the air, along with the roar of lawnmowers moving across the green sea of dew-drenched grass. Occasionally I get a whiff of that special scent and it takes me back to lazy summer days under the willow tree.

After Dad retired, my parents moved to Arizona and built a house high on a stubby Arizona mountain. No great green expanse of lawn framed his dream house. Instead, there was scrub, brush, and trees that begged to be trimmed.

A little stream ran through his property, meandering past some giant gray boulders with patches of soft green moss. It was quite different from the flat green lawn, but it was his paradise.

He bought some great yard toys – a chipper/grinder and a chainsaw on a stick. He was very proud of his new toys and enjoyed watching my mother cringe as he demonstrated his prowess. He wasn’t a young man anymore, and she worried. Still, it kept him out of the house and busy during his long retirement years.

After he died, I purchased my chipper/grinder. Early on an overcast Saturday morning, I cut the huge box apart and carefully laid the parts out on the patio. First, I read the directions from cover to cover to reassure my family as well as myself.

I sat on my haunches next to the monster machine as a slight drizzle moistened the instruction booklet. While I struggled to fit the heavy metal parts together, I felt Dad around me, and it gave me comfort.

The chute for the chipper was long and narrow, designed to jut out at an angle from the base of the machine. Attaching the chute seemed impossible at first, so I read the directions several times. They instructed me to reach deep into the chute with one hand and hold the nut while I tightened it on the outside with the other. This put my back in a position that even a yoga instructor couldn't assume.

After struggling interminably, I finally got both wrenches in the correct position when the nut came off and fell, along with the washer, into the housing that contained razor-sharp blades. I heard them clink as they landed far beyond my reach. Oh, no!

I imagined Dad reclining in a lawn chair on a great green lawn high in bright blue heaven, watching me struggle, all alone and wondering what to do. I remembered his admonition to do a job right or don't bother to do it at all. Another of his axioms was never to quit in the middle of a job.

Two hours later, I had disassembled the chipper/grinder and started over. I tilted the heavy base of the machine toward me till the nut and washer fell out. I grabbed them and began to reverse the process, reassembling them safely and carefully.

Four hours later, I got the machine assembled and pulled the cord to start the 6.5 horsepower engine. I struggled to get it to work, realizing how Dad made it look easy, I tried to shove a branch in the shredder side, but found I had to push hard to make it catch in the blades. Finally, the great crunching sound was followed by a whoosh into the mesh bag. Success!

After much practice, I have bonded with my chipper/grinder. Now, I toss the branches in and feel satisfied with each whoosh and crunch. I wave at people who walk by; some stop to watch.

My mulch bin is bulging with chipped and shredded branches and leaves. My yard is now a renewable resource, and the scent of chopped evergreen branches, as well as memories of my dad, are as sweet as fresh-mown grass.