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Cows Do Not Dream

MY BOOTS LAY FLAT UNDER THE PORCH LIGHT, kicked off the night before. The duct tape used to patch them flickered when the wind blew. I slipped them on, dried manure shattering over the ground, and followed my father into the morning darkness.

The dry cow pasture started at the edge of the lawn and beyond that, fields and hedgerows sloped into a gully. At that hour, nothing stirred in the valley. We were solitary creatures trudging towards the barn, my smaller shadow behind his larger one. Our boots scraped the worn path from the porch to the milk house in the same strides, knocking the dew off the grass around us. I was in my early teens, but I too brought a cup of coffee that spilled over the sides.

We tapped the end of the stalls to stir the cows to their feet. Cows do not dream but wait patiently for someone to compel them towards the parlor. Only one ceiling light worked, and it put everything below it in a filmy haze. The rafters were high and the lights in them were wider than what a man could put his arms around. The company that installed them did not know farming or what it would become: that if a farmer could not fix something himself then it would not get fixed. My father, though, did change one bulb. To reach it, he extended the bucket of the loader tractor to its limit and climbed it with his tallest ladder. The only thing that kept the ladder in place was the smooth slope of the bucket as my father dragged the heavy light up the rungs. The fact that the ladder held and my father did not lose his balance was a quiet miracle, one of the many that sustained him each day.

The cows' hooves knocked against the concrete as the cows moved, and the things we shouted at them echoed under the tin roof. We yelled

come on and *let's go* and sometime sang parts of country songs. My father called them beautiful bitches as he struck their thurls and pushed them towards the holding area. Sometimes a cow would not get up. She was either sick or not, but it didn't matter. It is the same for both the cow and the farmer: Once you cannot stand, you are dead, and until then you must keep moving. That cow would be hit. The most stubborn of cows would shake their ears and snort and take the beating. Eventually, though, the cow would rise because she had to. She would be given calcium or made to swallow a magnet, and perhaps sent to the sick pen if that would help. And if she didn't need it, she would be called a bastard because we knew we would have to hit her again the next day.

In the holding area, cows stood in all angles and directions, like something that had to be put back together. They chewed their cuds and gazed at things we could not see. If the air was particularly cool, steam would rise off their backs in the darkness. Wash water crashed through the milkers that lined both sides of the parlor pit, shaking violently on their hooks. The floor was still damp from the last milking. We restacked the paper towels and filled the dippers with iodine and made sure the radio station was clear, although it was never turned off from the night before.

After the wash cycle, the vacuum pressure was flipped on, and a pulse ran through the parlor. I started at the first cow, dipping her teats in iodine, and then went to the next one. My father followed after me with brown paper towels, wiping the udders clean. His hands worked with a consciousness of their own and he did not have to look at nor think about the things he did. Iodine spilled over my fingers and splashed onto the front of my shirt when a cow kicked at me, and the bitter smell lasted the rest of the morning. Manure dried in the hair of our arms, but we did not pick it off. When we finished one row of cows, we went down the other and then slipped the teats into the milkers.

After all the milkers were on, we had a few moments to lean against

the pipeline. The constant throb of the vacuum pressure filled the space between us. Those who don't know any better believe that the rhythm of farming is seasonal, going from plowing to planting to harvest, but that's only what people see from the road as they drive by. The real cadence is a daily one, as the morning moves from milking to feeding cows to feeding calves, fieldwork, and then milking and feeding again. Then another day. This rhythm is driven by the throb of the milkers, filling the chest and replacing the heartbeat.

When every cow had a milker hanging below her, I sat on the rusting steps and had the thoughts that a twelve- or thirteen- or fourteen-year-old would have. After it's over, a childhood is not chronological, but something pieced together over and over again to find what is needed. My father left to scrape the freestall alleys, since they didn't have any cattle in them. He pushed the manure towards the grates at the end of the barn with the skid-steer bucket. The shit is supposed to flow through the grates and slip into the manure lagoon, but a handful of years after the freestall barn was built, the tiles beneath the ground collapsed. Afterwards, he had to bucket the manure and dump it outside the barn. When it rained, cow shit stretched across the back driveway.

By the time he finished scraping, I had milked one, maybe two groups of cows and let them back inside the freestalls. He navigated the skid steer around them, sometimes tapping the back of their hocks gently with the end of the bucket to get them to move. A few years later, my father would be crushed by the arms of the skid steer in a freak accident that would break his back and tear apart his organs. He would use the last of his strength to drag himself through the manure in the alley until he made it to the parlor, where he waited to die alone. However, he did not know that yet on this morning, as he drove the skid steer up the lip of the concrete and spilled a little behind him. I did not know it, either, sitting on the parlor steps and watching the cows milk out, thinking that someday I would be a farmer, too.

My father and I passed the time by talking. He told me what fields he wanted me to plow that day and how to plow them. Because I couldn't interpret his directions, he would take a brown paper towel out of his back pocket and draw the shape of the field. His fingers ran up and down the paper in the direction I should drag the plows, lengthwise first, and then perpendicular for the headlands. He always remembered where the dead furrow was left last year. Afterwards, he'd tell me about a movie he watched and then, unable to help himself, explain the entire plot. It was often a zombie film. At first my father did not care for zombies, but he would inevitably take an interest in what I liked, if only to give us something to talk about in the parlor. We analyzed the starting rotation of the Chicago Cubs and thought about what the Bills would look like next season. Sometimes we repeated conversations we already had, and we both knew it, but we said it all again anyway.

The parlor's corners had cobwebs that didn't get washed away by the hose at the end of the milking. The walls yellowed with age; we nailed wooden boards over spots where the bull rubbed his head until he pushed it through. Iron dividers that separated the cows rusted and flaked, the debris collecting at the mouth of the drain. Once in a while, my father had to push a long rod along the duct to free the water.

There were things we didn't talk about. We didn't talk about bill collectors or the future of the farm. We never said out loud the things we were afraid of, and we didn't talk about what anything meant. He never mentioned emotions. We talked about my dreams and ambitions, but never his. My father never told me why we farmed. It must have been implied, because I never asked.

Once, I opened the parlor door and found my father sitting on a five-gallon feed pail with his head in his hands. At certain points during the milking, one of us might leave briefly to feed calves or get another cup of coffee, but the milking would continue. It had to, because the day turned on first getting the cows milked. That person would return

and fall into the motion of dipping and wiping the teats, and then putting the milkers on. My father must have heard me enter, but he didn't look up. He never complained about the things he had to do and the ways he had to do them. He never let what farming had become show on his face, being the shield our family stood behind. Of the things to come in the years ahead, my father on that pail would remain one of the most heinous images of my childhood. There was nothing to say about what he must have been feeling, because we did not have names for such things.

I moved past him, to the end of the parlor, and climbed the steps to the holding area. I put my hand on the tailheads of the cows I passed, in a way that I could not put my hand on my father's shoulder. A heifer might startle and push into the animals in front of her, but most cows would shift their rear legs out of my way or ignore me entirely. There was a metal screen on the back wall, caked with manure, and I looked through it to the valley around us. The first light of the day cast our hill into pools of shadow. The trees along the hedgerows and the electric poles and the goldenrod in the ditch were still the shapes of things and not the things themselves. Perhaps that is what a childhood is, the chance to see the world at a remove before having to step into it. Nonetheless, the future awaiting my family and those like us would not stay abstract for long.

This Is the Picture on the Postcard

MY FATHER CHECKED THE TAILGATE of my grandfather's pickup and wiped away the dust, making the dents more apparent in the sunshine. There was a bolt sticking out at the loading dock of the feed store. "He backs into it every time," he told my mother. They laughed at getting old. We all kicked off our boots on the porch and went inside.

Breakfast at my grandparents' was a performance that was often the same, as if the regularity of farming also governed the life around it. My grandfather would start telling us about an article he had read in an agricultural journal and then suddenly walk to the bathroom, his arms swinging from hunched shoulders. He would then come back with the magazine folded to an inside page and point to the title. After he sat down someone would make an observation. "If it doesn't stop raining, we'll never get the corn in," or "Fuel jumped again—damn, it never stops." The remarks changed little. Farming, at that time, was the best it would ever be.

I always sat on a stool next to my grandmother. Because the metal legs were long, I had to lean down to reach my plate. I'd wear a pair of my grandfather's barn jeans, the waist folded over a few times. Mine were caked with manure and iodine and left on the bench in the back room. My father did the same, although his borrowed pair didn't quite fit him either. We ate buckwheat pancakes and breakfast sausage. My father and I put homemade peach jam and maple syrup on the sausage, even though my mother said that covering meat with sugar was a bad habit my grandmother had given us. My sister was on a stool, too, on the other side of my grandmother.

During these conversations, my grandmother would hold a stern face with one elbow on the table and occasionally open her palm, as

if it held something to complement what the men were saying. She would offer, “How can they expect anyone to survive? The farmer is always going to take it down the throat,” and follow that with, “The price of feed is crazy.” Sometimes, if nearing the end of a topic or if my grandmother’s complaint felt like a cadence, my grandfather would push both hands in front of him and conclude, “It’s all just a game,” or “We can never win.” To this my father would nod, three times at least, and maybe four times.

My mother had to wedge her way into these conversations. She was college educated and worked both on and off the farm, either of which might have made my grandparents a little suspicious of her. She would not sit quietly, however. If she could not remark on the wetness of a particular field or the price of beef, she would introduce another topic. If my grandfather told how his brother hauled a load of Amish women to another part of the state in a cattle trailer to get impregnated, she would explain that it was because the Amish were genetically bottlenecked. If my father felt like he needed to intervene, he would say, “Well, they’re good workers. They work hard.”

In the small silences between discussions, we found ourselves staring out the window at my grandfather’s farm, the view mostly the same over the years. Emily, our border collie, crouched in the back of our pickup. Whenever someone turned the key, she spun in circles and barked at the tires. Across the driveway, the loader tractor would be parked next to the calf hutches, its antennae flickering above it. A barn cat might be sitting on the front wheel, tucking itself between the tread and closing its eyes against the breeze. It would wrap its tail around its legs and pin its ears back, concentrating on its sleep. Empty teat dip drums were piled outside the milk house door. One of them might rock back and forth on its side when the wind caught it. The dirt underneath the tractor was stained from its air conditioner dripping. The tractor’s bucket was raised high, poised.

Our family's history starts with a pond on top of a hill. It was first dug by my great-grandfather, Clair Dennis, as a watering hole for cattle during the Great Depression. He lived and milked there for two years without electricity. Because the milk carts, pulled by horses, could not make the climb, every day he hauled his milk down the hill in metal cans.

Since the hill was the highest point in the county, the wind tore over it in winter. Hunters and neighbors still sometimes talk about the gusts they meet there. When electric lines finally passed through the bottom of the valley, Clair moved to the home I grew up in. His final words as he left the pond may have been "Good riddance."

Clair didn't go far to find a wife. Beneath some brush, remains of an old stone foundation mark where my great-grandmother Esther was born. It is two hundred yards from the house Clair and Esther moved into. My grandfather, Andy, was born in their home forty-six years before I was. I have a few pictures of my grandfather and his siblings as children. The woodshed behind them eventually became our kitchen.

Andy married a redhead named Sharon and they moved to the northern part of New York State, where he worked as an artificial inseminator in the dairy industry. After only a year, Clair asked him to come back home. Esther had chronic emphysema and required more care, and Clair needed help building a new barn. My father was born in a house one hundred yards away, where Andy and Sharon lived. Clair and Andy were meant to farm together, but the father and son, as the story goes, couldn't get along. The details of how the agreement went bad are unknown by now and may never be discovered. Instead, Andy and Sharon bought the next farm over when it came up for sale.

When my father was still in high school, he took over Clair's farm and paid all the cousins their share. A hired hand milked in the morning and my father milked at night. Not long after graduating, he met my mother, the daughter of a German immigrant, at the bottom of the other side of the hill.

My grandfather, Andy, and my father, Rick, had separate herds but shared the land, the equipment, and the jokes about all the money they weren't making. Aunt Kelly lived in the house next to my grandfather's farm, and my grandfather later put a prefab next to the pond to retire in. On the border of Allegany and Steuben Counties in western New York State, there's a stretch of road that starts at the top of North Hill and extends over a mile. All told, it includes five houses in a row that all had Dennises in them one time or another. At one point, the land that we owned stretched even farther. In the end, there is a geography to our family. Because, like Clair, my father married a neighbor, much of the family on both sides is within two miles. Every Sunday with good weather we met at the pond to enjoy the breeze.

Everything we did was the continuation of something before us. We milked cows and fed calves because our parents and grandparents did these things. The Dennises pulled plows through the same piece of ground as the men in our family before them, and although the tractors and plows we used changed, the nature of how we farmed didn't. We put corn in the dirt in the spring and then chopped it in the fall. We cut hay and made silage in the summer. We speculated how other farms were doing. We did the predictable things we knew to do, like follow high school basketball teams, have family reunions, and drink Miller High Life after a day in the field. The Dennises grew up, married, and got old, all the while farming. It was bigger than all of us and something that couldn't be broken.

The morning my parents laughed at his tailgate was a few years after my grandfather's accident, which became one of the ways time was marked in our family. He had fallen in the milking parlor and hit his head on the concrete floor, but on this day, we might have still believed that he had recovered. I was sixteen or seventeen, but because there were still only four chairs, I had to sit on a stool. Our mouths tasted like syrup and jam. There was likely a crinkled farm journal next to my

plate, creased to an article about tractor safety or judging cattle or something else that was supposed to make me a better farmer. The adults had already complained about the price of milk. I can't remember what the weather was like on this day, nor any other specific details, besides what happened next. However, my grandmother would have opened up her palm with a lament. My grandfather would have thrown up his hands and declared it all a game. My father would have nodded.

And then my grandmother turned to my grandfather with her hand on her forehead. "Andy, why is our tractor going down the road?"

My grandfather shrugged, put down his fork, and then seemed to realize the content of the question. He pushed himself out of his chair and staggered to the window, his knees snapping as he walked. My parents got up quickly and my sister and I hopped off our stools. We crowded together until we fit the width of the glass and could hear each other breathing. We stared down the cracking blacktop road that split our land in half. Our loader tractor went past us in high gear with the silhouette of someone we didn't know, in the direction of the John Deere dealership.

My father rushed to the back room and pulled his boots over his bunched-up pant legs. My grandfather's jeans sagged on him. He ran down the driveway, pumping his arms. He moved awkwardly, stepping on the flat part of his feet to keep the boots on, scraping over the gravel and kicking up dirt. He jumped into our truck and sped down the road, Emily dashing back and forth in the bed.

My grandfather returned to his chair and watched out the window. His elbows rested on the table, his fingers balled up. His arms had an old tan that darkened his skin and faded his age spots. His nose curved and his ears drooped loosely behind his hair, as if everything were being pulled towards the ground.

"I'm sure it's just a misunderstanding," my grandmother said, quietly.

My grandfather looked ahead with an empty stare.

We heard the heels of boots striking concrete on the porch and then saw them heaved into the lawn. The back door opened and snapped shut. My father walked into the kitchen, slammed a dirty toolbox on the counter, and sat down in his seat. He turned to my grandfather. “You didn’t say you were four payments behind.”

Everyone stared at the toolbox on the counter. Two rusty bolts stuck out of the back, one with a bent washer hanging on it, swinging quietly. Dust outlined two handprints where the box had been thrust off the frame of the tractor. It was soiled and left grease smudges on my grandmother’s counter. The dangling washer rocked inside the bolt’s thread and held the attention of our family.

A Trail of Gum Wrappers

AN OLD ROUND BALE HAD GROWN DARK sitting in the weeds of a hedgerow. It had probably been rained on before it was baled and wasn't needed that year. A red-tailed hawk landed on it and was tearing apart a frog.

The hawk shifted to watch me as I passed by, but never took flight. I was bent forward, gripping the steering wheel. I stared into the dirt in front of me, at the boundary between the ground that had been disked once and the ground that had been disked twice, trying to keep the front left tire parallel to that line. As the overturned ground dried in the sun, though, the border was sometimes hard to interpret through the dusty windows of the cab.

The plates of the disk rattled behind me. Because I was only thirteen, I went slow. Disking the plowed ground was one of the first types of fieldwork I was asked to do. I was in the tractor that would be repossessed a few years later, but I only knew that the ache from sitting in its cab all day made me an adult.

I looked up and found my grandfather at the edge of the field with the five-row planter. Its green paint and yellow seed boxes looked regal over the pale dirt around it. He slowly lowered the marking arm. Then he started planting corn. I was coming down the field and could watch him in front of me.

I was five when my grandfather and I stood at the base of his silo. He looked down at me and told me to never climb a silo with a wrench in my pocket. He said that it could fall out and kill someone on the ground. "I'm not giving you hell or anything," he said. "Just telling you." The silo was over eighty feet tall. I had no intention of climbing it, nor bringing a wrench.

The first time we passed by each other in the field, only a few disk-lengths away, he waved. This was before his accident. There was an overlay of friendliness to him that made him easy to be around, and that's how most people knew him to be. However, he was also deeply pragmatic. What he showed the world wasn't what he thought of it. Sometimes, if you watched him long enough and he didn't know it, you could see him making calculations.

In some fields, a red or blue handkerchief flickered inside a hedgerow. It would be tied to a branch along the edge of the dirt. When plowing or disking, especially if it was sod ground, the tractor operator got jostled in the seat all day. This could be hard on digestion. It was impractical to drive the machinery back home, even if one could make it in time. Instead, whenever my grandfather's intestines got upset, he went into the hedgerow or edge of the woods and then wiped with his handkerchief. When he was done, he tied it to a branch. The summer rains had cleaned it by the time the corn had to be chopped in the fall, so he took it home again.

I drew back on the throttle as I neared the end of the field. The engine noise lowered in pitch as the tractor slowed. Heat lifted off the hood and blurred everything around it. Sometimes dust built up on the outside of the windshield and then streaked down the glass. No matter what fieldwork we did, the pattern of doing it was the same: around the field four times and then up and down one side, turning around on the headlands that had already been worked. My grandfather had planted corn along the outside of the field. The fine marks left by the drills lineated the dirt. I had been told to go over the whole field twice. I turned around on the headlands as I had before, my wide disks pulling through the rows of planted seed.

My grandfather was hesitant about me doing fieldwork, fearing I would make a mistake that would be costly. My father told him that I had to learn somehow. I'm not sure if my father said that to me as a

confidant, being the only other person standing in the field at that time, or to gently indicate how expensive mistakes with machinery could be. Usually, when my father disagreed with my grandfather it was in private. Only as an adult did I realize that it was sometimes on my behalf.

From what I can remember, Grandpa Dennis wasn't the type of grandfather to get down on the floor and play with children, nor entertain long conversations with them. He had lines he repeated as jokes, and the few times we were alone together he slipped into giving me advice on how to put an insulator on a fence post or a gate on a hinge. Not knowing how to spend time with children, he reverted to treating them like small adults. To compensate, though, he would play modest pranks. He might pretend to throw my sister and me into the pond at a picnic or put potatoes in our boots when he visited. For years, whenever we came to his house and walked into the living room, he would be standing around the corner, waiting to yell *boo*. He continued to jump from the corner, even into my early teens when I had to pretend to be surprised.

Instinctively, I wanted to emulate my grandfather. I wore a Pioneer Seed hat in the cab like him. The green fabric had white sweat crystals in the headband. I said "gawd" when I was exasperated and "sine" instead of "something" because that's how he talked. I carried a handkerchief in my back pocket. A few times I also tied it to a branch. He was the quintessential farmer, looking the part, and that's who I wanted to be. He chewed Wrigley's gum and ate York Peppermint Patties, and when I climbed into the tractor with him as a child, I'd finger them out of the cubby hole by the armrest. Years after he was gone, I sometimes found Wrigley's gum wrappers in the dirt I turned over while plowing.

For my grandfather there was farming and not farming, and that which was not farming was vague to him. He did what one might expect of a grandparent, going to the school concerts my sister and I were in, and sometimes to our basketball games. Once he sat in the stands

during my first year of Little League. Afterwards, he told me that my team might have won if I had made the throw to home. It was hard to hear, but he wasn't wrong. Much later, at the age of twenty-five, I had a personal essay accepted in *Progressive Dairyman*. Agricultural magazines didn't usually publish creative work, but the editor had a literary background. My grandfather saw my name in one of the farming journals he had always read and was proud. "You keep doing what you're doing," he told me. "You just keep doing it."

I turned the tractor from the far headlands and started down the field again. The planter was stopped at the other end. My grandfather stood at the bottom of the steps with his hands on his hips. He looked at the ground and squinted. Because it took a while to reach the end of the field, I had plenty of time to watch him.

The Ford rocked back and forth after I pressed the clutch. I pulled the parking brake, climbed down, and met my grandfather between our equipment.

He looked into a distant hedgerow and then at me. "You disked where I had already planted. Now that corn won't grow."

He spoke evenly, without anger showing. It was only because I knew him that I could tell he was annoyed. Later, it seemed obvious that I should not take the disk over planted ground, even if I didn't get to disk that part a second time. Instead, I had followed the directions I had been given verbatim, a habit that would later haunt me.

"Well, now you know," my grandfather said, heading back towards his tractor.

When the past becomes history, it transitions into a set of facts that hold little emotion. Grandma Dennis's father died well before I was born. I knew he liked to read and fish, and that was all I needed to like him. On my mother's side, Grandpa Kramer's father was a lieutenant for the Germans in World War II. The family narrative was that he was forced into it to keep his wife and children safe. It doesn't matter if that

is true or not. I have no bad feelings towards him because it is only a chronological detail. I never met him.

In the company of a child, everything is immediate. A person's prior life and the decisions made in it don't exist for them. Grandchildren want to admire their grandparents. They're made that way. While the past doesn't matter to them, however, sometimes the future is more complicated.

Night Sets on a Wild Dry Cow

WE MET AT THE TIN BARN AFTER EVENING CHORES. The heifers and dry cows stood by the feeder wagon in the last light of a summer evening and watched us. We threw our gloves on the seat of the tractor and started moving gates. My grandfather had driven the John Deere there, but my father and I had walked. Around us the distant shadows of gray squirrels wove through brush and undergrowth as they headed towards their nests. After the usual greetings, no one spoke. The right moment to talk would be later, once the dry cow was inside and we could put a boot on the hitch or lean on the back of the trailer. Then we could tell about our day for a few minutes before heading off. Now, we tied gates together with chain until it ran out and then used twine.

Because there were three of us, it meant that my father knew this dry cow would be difficult to separate and bring home. There were probably only a few days before she would have a calf and return to the freestalls. Most cattle mellow with age. They begin to understand what is put before them, which is to calve, to milk, and to dry off before freshening again. Still, every once in a while, there was a cow that railed against this agreement.

The cow stopped chewing her cud when the gate opened. She was a deep-barreled Holstein, probably on her third or fourth calf. Her eyes were already wide and flighty. No sooner had my father pointed her out that she alighted with the rest of the heifers and dry cows towards the end of the pasture, pushing herself into the middle of the herd.

In summer I wore shorts with barn boots. Cow shit often clung to my legs and the hair was rubbed off my shins. A few days into the warm weather I stopped noticing the rubber slapping on my bare skin. My

father lifted the last gate while my grandfather slotted its pins into the hinges of the previous one. Then my father swung it open. The channel the gates created narrowed towards the trailer. The three of us headed into the pasture. In the silence I heard my boots again.

The tin barn was down the road from where we kept our other non-milking stock. It stood at the beginning of a large gully between my father's and my grandfather's farms. When the leaves changed, the colors set the type of background found on postcards and paintings. Often the cattle there watched us walk into the gully with shotguns during deer season, turning their heads in unison as we passed. Some would follow and then put their necks over the wire and stare at our backs until we were gone. Because we were inside the fence this time, however, they knew we were coming for one of them.

We reached the back of the pasture and allowed the cattle to bend around us, putting the herd between us and the trailer. The cattle trotted ahead and then eventually turned as they neared the barn. Part of knowing cattle is using angles to make them move in the right way, and we winnowed out the animals around the dry cow and allowed them to scamper past. Whenever the dry cow turned, whoever was closest to her put up his hands and shouted. It was muddy near the barn from cattle traffic. It gripped at our feet and made our steps heavy. Often someone chasing cattle would run out of their boot and step into the mud with their sock.

We carried sticks made out of stiff plastic piping, the kind to strike cattle with and not hurt them. We closed in on the big dry cow. She turned and faced me with bulging eyes. I yelled and swung the stick and shouted at her not to do it. Instead, she put her head down and pushed past me. The plastic echoed off her skull as she went by.

The feeder wagon's metal frame was painted red and held a glare from the low sun. It had a long rack that kept enough hay for two days. Inside were a few half-eaten bales and a piece of twine that got overlooked. It was surrounded by the shapes of hooves.

A cow that got past someone is harder to get. We walked behind the group again and tried to close in on her and move side to side as she darted. We rushed her so she couldn't turn around or have time to think, pushing her to keep trotting towards the barn. She was quick, however, and bullheaded. My father and grandfather yelled at me—*Hit her, hit her*—when she headed my way, but she lunged through us, her brisket bouncing off her chest. My father threw his stick at her after she passed. It glanced off her side. She flinched and kicked her rear legs in the air.

The sun was lowering, putting the tops of trees into silhouette. Our faces were red. It takes a while to hook and unhook the tractor from the trailer, and to try to catch her the next evening would be a failure made worse by the cost of time already spent. We headed towards the back of the lot and tried again.

We got the cow past the feeder wagon, the length of which narrowed the ground we had to cover. We converged on her, shouting and flashing our sticks. She had started to pant, a pale mist rolling from her nostrils. We told her to be good, to make good decisions, and to not be the things we called her. There wasn't much space between my father and the edge of the wagon. It seemed that we finally had her.

Then she turned and faced my father.

The dry cow rushed at my father and struck her head into his chest. He grabbed it as he was pushed back. He took a few quick steps, trying to keep his balance. Then she thrust him into the metal corner of the feeder wagon and scraped him along it.

It was the first time that I saw my father cry. He lay in the mud, tucked into himself. I had never watched an adult in pain before. Not real pain like this. My grandfather stood over him with his hands on his hips. Occasionally, he shifted his weight from one foot to another. "You're all right, aren't you?" he said. My father couldn't answer, only sob while my grandfather stared off into the distance.

I was sent to the house to fetch the pickup. The tractor wouldn't fit all of us. I was about to run off when my grandfather told me to wait. "Don't call the ambulance or get anyone upset," he said. "Your dad is fine."

My grandfather's features faded in the dusk. Although he was standing next to me, he seemed farther away. In that moment, I thought he was heartless. My father, the toughest person I knew, was writhing on the ground, and my grandfather had turned away.

What I didn't realize then was that my grandfather had a father at one time, too. That fact shaped him. The details of their relationship were few and didn't reach me until later in life. My father said that Clair was strict, but that he liked my father, so he must have had some good feelings towards my grandfather as well. I do not know what Clair died from or how long it took, but it occurred in a hospital and my grandfather watched it. He avoided hospitals and funerals ever since.

I was too young to understand the things that haunted him, and the moment was too big. The only thing I could do was run.

I sprinted up the dug road behind the barn. My heels slid up and down the back of my boots, the skin growing hot and tender. I was out of breath by the time I got to our lawn. I couldn't drive a truck yet, so I had to go into the kitchen.

My grandmother was in the living room with my mother, which was unusual, but she must have been waiting for my grandfather. I told them that Dad was hurt. They asked if he needed an ambulance. I said I thought that he did.

My father sat at the kitchen table when the ambulance arrived. He stared blankly at the wall. His face was pale. In his eyes it was apparent that he had been crying. The ambulance crew was made up of local volunteers who knew my father, which added to his embarrassment. They were obligated to take him to the hospital for a checkup and said it couldn't hurt to have things looked over, anyway. Occasionally, they

glanced at us for support. My father sat there stoically, pulled into the bleached kitchen light. He was not the jovial, bantering person the ambulance volunteers knew him to be. Instead, it would be the same confused and defiant look that would appear on my grandfather's face in the years to come.

A child knows that farming is dangerous. I was told of everyone in the area who had died from rollaway wagons, tipped-over tractors, or having clothing caught in the PTO shaft behind the tractor. Death is a vague concept, though, especially at the age I was then. However, to see someone injured was another matter. It was the first time I realized that pain was natural to farming. To be a farmer meant eventually getting hurt. In the end, some come out of it and some don't.

Eventually the ambulance crew made my father sign a waiver before they left. The sound of the truck climbing the hill in front of the kitchen table seemed to linger before fading away.

"He just got scared," my grandfather said, nodding towards me.

I wasn't sure if he meant it as a defense or an accusation. Because I didn't think that I had done anything wrong, I shot back: "Well, I knew you wouldn't do anything."

He looked me over slowly. It was the first time I had spoken to my grandfather that way.

Childish Things

FOR A FEW WEEKS IN SUMMER, black tadpoles lined the shores of the pond, their tails flickering every time my shadow passed over them. At the age of four, I caught them in a plastic bucket. I put the pail in the water and brought it up again, carrying around the pollywogs that got washed into it. Later I learned to fish and turned over old stumps for worms or ran along the ditch grass, catching grasshoppers to put on the end of the hook. There were largemouth and smallmouth bass, and then eventually bluegills we put in to feed them. Every time I saw a bobber disappear into the pond, I knew again that the world was a good place.

Both sides of my family were farmers and teachers. The talk was mostly about farming. We used to play volleyball, especially at organized family reunions that included relatives from farther away. There wasn't much space between the pond and the dirt road, and occasionally a child was sent to fetch a ball in the water. In later years, we played Wiffle ball instead, maybe because it didn't require setting up a net. The bases were marked with shoes and hats. Sometimes the grandparents took a few swings.

Someone from every couple grilled hot dogs or hamburgers over the old tractor rim by the side of the pavilion. The fire was started by chunking up a log, pouring diesel fuel over it, and dropping a match. For most of my childhood I didn't realize that fire could be made any other way. I had seen charcoal on commercials showing suburban families enjoying themselves in a public park. As a small boy, though, I thought that life only existed on TV.

Our Harvestore silo stood at the bottom of the hill. It was the iconic symbol of farming in the eighties and nineties. It towered over the rest

of the buildings and finished the idyllic image of the family farm: red barn, green fields, blue silo. At eighty feet, it was the tallest thing I knew about. The fact that my father had to climb it was incomprehensible. For many years, he dragged a six-foot by six-foot star to the top at Christmas and lit it from a handful of extension cords duct-taped together. On winter evenings we knew where our farm was when we turned onto the hill.

Back then, we could look into the valley from our pond and see three silos across the distance: my father's, my grandfather's, and one on my great uncle's old farm. The silos were visible from miles away when the houses and barns weren't. They lined up perfectly, anchoring our family to the valley.

Harvestore silos stored silage or high-moisture ear corn and were connected to large bags at the bottom. Ours bags were in our feedroom, next to the haymow. During the day the methane gas from the fermenting grass expanded into the plastic, and then the bags contracted at night when the gas cooled. It seemed like this: If the farm had a heartbeat from the vacuum pump in the parlor, then it had its lungs in the feedroom.

Eventually farms became bigger and farmers began using bunker silos instead. Harvestores made better forage, but it was quicker to get silage from a bunk, which was just two open concrete walls. That, and the unloading mechanism at the bottom of the tower sometimes broke. Still, a Harvestore silo required the type of man who had it in him to climb it, and that meant something.

We had a tiestall barn until I was ten. It was the type of barn common for farmers with blue silos. The cows were milked in the stalls and then let out to pasture at night. Barn cats ran up and down the aisle with their tails up, slinking along the rafters or sleeping in bundles in the corner of the barn. Because each cow had to be fed individually, we knew them all, including their personalities and histories. Our farm

was called Hill-View Acres. As per convention, all registered calves born there started their names with Hill-View Acres and then took part of the sire's and dam's name to make their own. Considering the prefix, a name mattered, and the cattle that bore it were the farm's banner. Even the cats had their own aliases.

There is a picture of my father in a polo shirt. I had never seen him wear one in real life, as in public he seldom wavered from a dress shirt over a T-shirt and a ball cap. He is young, probably in his early twenties, and holding the halter of a big-barreled Holstein named Hill-View Acres Sexy Suzy. At the time, many farmers still classified their best cows, having the Holstein Association come to the farm to give the cattle individual scores based on the quality of their traits. Sexy Suzy "classified excellent" three times—a rare feat. The picture was professionally taken, as there was a woman who went to farms to take photographs of excellent cows so they could be hung on kitchen walls. This was a big moment for my father. He apparently decided that a polo shirt was the most formal thing he could wear while working with cattle.

There weren't any other kids within walking distance, so Grandma Dennis filled the void of a best friend. She had satellite TV and let me watch Cubs games on WGN when I didn't have to work. She made chocolate chip cookies and macaroni 'n' cheese every week because they were my favorites, and if it had been a while since my last visit, she called to tell me that she had just made one of those things. She was a faithful playmate to all my phases, from Magic the Gathering cards to wanting to make a pie out of the fish I caught at the pond. She cooked all her dishes without onions because I hated them, although she got me to eat them later in life by insisting that they would make me a better lover.

At home I played with our hired hands in between the times they had to milk. Ace and Brody were identical twins, just out of high school, and near 300 pounds each. Being brothers, they didn't mind ribbing each other, even if the other wasn't having it. Once their argument escalated

to where they took hunting blades out of their trucks and started swinging them. They eventually settled it. They always showed up to milk, and that was what mattered.

Sometimes I played Wiffle ball with Ace and Brody in the lawn, one person pitching and the other behind the batter to catch. Other times we played basketball in the shop. At one point the shop housed the shredded newspaper used for bedding. It narrowed the space where we could dribble, and first we had to sweep the loose paper away. The rafters were low, so every shot had to be flat. A stray ball often bounced between all the clutter like old barn fans or plow parts on one side of the shop, or off the wall of newspaper on the other. The twins always boxed me out and made it tough to get a rebound. Afterwards they went to milk, sweat pouring down their faces.

As a last resort I played with my sister, who was three years younger than me. We turned over rocks in the creek, looking for crayfish to put into our bucket, or chased each other around the walnut tree in the lawn. We wandered around the farm, getting on tractors and pretending to drive. I told her that I could climb the silo, but she said that I couldn't and dared me to. I stood at the base and looked up at all the steps it took to reach the top. I pointed out that the ladder started too high from the ground and I couldn't reach it, or obviously I would climb it. We walked through the tiestall barn, and I'd pick out my favorite cows. I made sure she knew that they couldn't be her favorite cows, too.

Often during my childhood, I went to bed with cow shit in my hair. It didn't bother me, because the next day I woke up early and got more manure on me. "That's money," Grandpa Dennis would call it, every time someone got splattered on their skin. Whether that made sense or not, we did have money back then. We had enough grain for the cattle, and all the equipment worked. Bill collectors were rare in our driveway. Instead of sending lawyers, every Christmas the feed companies mailed calendars with naked women on them.

At some point, after eating, everyone at the pond would be sitting in a plastic chair and holding a Miller High Life or cup of iced tea. The conversation might swing around a few times to old topics, but when there was a lull, someone, maybe my father, might lift himself up and take a walk around the pond. Nearly every time he stopped at the far bank and looked down the valley, at the lives we had there. His hair was still full on top and he'd likely be wearing a Buffalo Bills shirt. Probably, since it was the nineties, he had jean shorts on. His legs were pale because he always wore pants while working. He could have been thinking about any number of things, looking over the silos.

Up to that point, my father had done nothing but farm his entire life, and that would remain true for many years. However, the most unlikely thing about my father was how much more he was than just a farmer. He had a social intelligence that was rare. It wasn't required for the type of work he did, but it drew people to him. Those who knew my father liked him. He also had a gift for finding humor in the mundane parts of life, and so even though most of what he did was to milk cows, feed them, and do fieldwork, he always had a story to tell.

Because my father had the type of face that made people comfortable around him, they told him their stories. The hoof trimmer, middle-aged and recently divorced, explained how his date grabbed his penis at a movie theater. It was too much for the hoof trimmer, so he went home soon after but returned to the theater the next night to finish the movie alone. One hired hand detailed how he had sex with his wife and immediately afterwards felt compelled to explain that while he loved her, he also loved his new girlfriend. I was in the living room once when a horse trainer broke down in front of my father, saying that he had fallen in love with an underage blind girl. At this point in his life, all the drama around my father belonged to other people.

I don't know what my father thought of his life back then. I don't know if it was harder or easier than others, or if he considered it to be

one way or another. Any challenges he had would have been ordinary to either being a person in the world or a farmer in our valley, and they would have felt natural and expected. Whatever they were, he wouldn't have complained.

Eventually my father would have stood at the bank of the pond long enough to be conscious that other people might be watching him. He would then take his hands out of his pockets and walk back to his chair, fading into the sepia glare of the sun.

Internalized

THE COLDNESS HAD RECENTLY MOVED in that winter day. A few flurries fell half-heartedly from a gray sky. The mud around the barn was stiffening but still gave way under our boots. Without the sun or the comfort of snow on the banks and the tops of trees, it was a day stripped down to only what we had to do in it. I was ten and I had to feed the barn cats.

Some of the cats were drop-offs. People in town no longer wanted them or found them left over from tenants and didn't have the grit to kill them. They drove by our farm at night and threw the housecats into a nearby hedgerow. Sometimes they were eaten by coyotes before they found their way to our barn. The cats piled on top of each other in the corners of the tiestalls to keep themselves warm on cold nights. They spent nights wary of foxes and opossums, and sometimes were stepped on by cows. Some were friendly and some weren't. Regardless, the milk they got was poor recompense for the world they faced.

I reached into the bag of milk replacer—we called it calf nip—until I found the plastic cup inside. It matched the others in the kitchen cupboard because that was where they ended up. The powder smelled like cake mix but tasted much plainer. I eyed and adjusted the calf nip in the cup until it was an inch from the bottom. Then I stirred it in a bucket of warm water and poured it into the frying pan without a handle. I didn't need to call to the cats because the sight of me lifted them from the chaff and brought them scurrying to my feet.

Afterwards I went to find my father. I listened to what machinery was being used to figure out where he was. If nothing was running, then maybe I could hear him singing.

I found him in the shop. He had a broken roller chain on a vise, tapping out the pin of the ruined link with a chisel. It probably belonged to the manure spreader. The work bench next to him was covered in tools and parts lying haphazardly over each other. At the very bottom, over the wood, was decades of dust that had turned dark and muck-ish. It half-buried old nails, washers, and nuts of various sizes. On the floor were old toolboxes and five-gallon buckets filled with partial sets of wrenches and sockets. Things like reciprocating saws, grease gun cartridges, and pipe clamps littered the floor around him. Whatever my father needed in the shop he found quickly, which was an improbability I witnessed over and over.

I busied myself by walking through mud puddles in the driveway, breaking the thin layer of ice with the front of my boots.

“Ready for lunch?” my father asked.

Because his jeans had iodine stains in them, I knew he had not gone to the house after the morning milking. In the dusk-like shadows of the shop he had reconnected the chain to make it circular again and hung it on a nail sticking out of the wall. He started towards the house and then stopped suddenly.

“We better put the skid steer away first.”

I followed him across the driveway, sometimes having to lunge forward to keep up with him. The dried goldenrod on the bank scratched against itself whenever there was a breeze. It was the time of year that a crow could call out and we would notice it and maybe follow it across the empty sky. Old tires lay against the side of the barn, their rubber cracking. The trees around us were bare and spindly. We could see, by looking beyond our farm, the orange coats of a handful of hunters spread across the valley.

The skid steer sat in front of the barn at an angle, two equidistant tracks leading to its wheels. Before feeding the cows, my father had to drive it out of the barn to make room to bring the tractor in. It was good

practice to keep it under cover and only took a moment to put it back in the alley. I rocked on my heels to keep my toes warm and rubbed my mittens over my nose. In the house I was going to stand in front of the woodstove for a few minutes once I took my coat off.

My father turned the key of the skid steer. A screech echoed inside, and then a thump.

My father shut off the machine but sat there for a moment. Then he raised the safety bar and climbed out. He pushed on the latch on the back of the skid steer, leaning his weight on it to get it to give, and then swung back the metal housing.

Small, disjointed organs protruded across the length of the radiator. The tissue was pink, nearly bright, and folded in on itself. Because the engine had only been on for a moment, it was clear that the thin wisps of steam were animal in origin. A matted fringe outlined a parcel of flesh, and from that I could tell what cat it had been.

My father picked up a long tendril of intestine and held it between two fingers. He stared at it, as if he, too, were surprised that a few seconds ago that had been a cat we saw slinking through the barn or sidling up to the milk dish.

I looked at my father wide-eyed with a fleeting emptiness, waiting for his guidance on how to react. He knew that he had to be a father in that moment, and he didn't have long to decide how.

My grandfather, as I imagine it, would have shrugged and said, "That's life." And he would be right, either in the way that our lifestyle was not short on uncomfortable sights or that the lives of barn cats often ended in mutilation, whether by being run over or jumping through wall fans. Or, a generation ago, my grandfather might have told my father to buck up if he started to cry. Those would have been the examples my father would have had at hand. That's how most farmers' sons his age were taught.

Instead, my father threw the intestine at me.

It landed on the front of my coat and stuck there.

The piece of bowel stretched lengthwise across my zipper, the top of it hanging over my collar. I pulled my head back, both to try to look at it and to keep it from touching my skin. It was musty, and closer to the smell of earth than I expected. I peeled it off me and held it in my hand, the end of the tissue twisting gently.

Years later, that day would be flooded with retrospection. My father knew, as most fathers would, that it was up to him to shape the moment. Instead of looking to shield my innocence or lessen my hurt, or even callous me against the world ahead, some instinct told him that there was a more important message I needed to know: that sometimes farming is absurd. It can be un-clinical and illogical, and to most people it wouldn't make sense. And, despite all that, we have to keep doing it.

I threw the intestine back at him. He ducked and the string of entrails fell over a tractor rut behind him. Then he scraped up a handful of pulp from the radiator grooves and flung it at me. Viscera fell over my shoulders and knit hat.

We threw the dismembered cat at each other until we went in for lunch.

book, and when not to. Some of them gave me the odd job at their family companies when they could, if only so I wasn't a complete burden to my wife. Kennys Bookshop in Galway, Ireland, has stood their ground against Amazon and other corporate giants in the book industry, and for over eighty years has supported authors in a way that is as admirable as it is generous. The Kennys family has kept this writer off the streets more than once.

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Thanks to Jon Fisher for allowing me to throw shade at his cat. I'm sorry that I had to cut that part out of the book, but allow me to memorialize Beatrice here. I can't say that I liked your cat, Jon, but I respected her.

I have much respect and awe for Dr. Richard A. Levins and Dr. Ron Cotterill, not only for the policy information they provided, but for the work they did throughout their lives in trying to address a system that did not favor the family farm. They're my type of heroes. In the same way, I am glad for the time that Pete Hardin, editor of *The Milkweed*, volunteered in letting me pick his brain. His journalism has served the American family dairy farm for a long time.

Some things were true while writing this book that weren't accurate by the time it was published. I describe Canaseraga as a town at its end. For years, that felt like a fact. However, the last few times I went back it seemed like there was a different energy to it. There's now a flea market that brings people out on the weekend and a café that serves gourmet plates that would rival the best in any city. The café is always full, for that reason, and because it is a place where people can find each other and be a community. Tom Capwell still makes a chicken wing pizza in

his grocery store that is the best a person can get. Canaseraga is a town that is doing more than persisting, and one that has always been good to my family. I hope they still consider me one of their own.

And another amendment: my cousins have started fly-fishing. I'm not the only one in the family with waders anymore. They take me out to the river when I am home, and the time in the water with them means a lot to me.

Island Press has been an exemplary partner in this project. They put in the hard work to prepare the book for readers and respected its vision the entire way. I owe my editor, Emily Turner, something big and expensive, although I can't think of what could possibly compensate her for her patience. I also have awe and appreciation for the thorough copyediting work of Mike Fleming.

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