The Farm

by Alex Wylie

barn's burnt down - - now I can see the moon (Masahide)

It was time to sell the farm. I still loved farming after fifteen years and was making a good living, but I was beginning to tire and could not see myself ten years down the road keeping on top of it all. My children miraculously fit into farm life. They did not seem to mind being dragged from their beds to hold gates open in the middle of the night while I chased fence-busting cows back into the pasture, or lunches discussing cow nutrition with the feed salesman. But I feared I was missing my kids' childhood – always late for pick-ups and soccer games, and falling asleep reading to them. I now solely owned the farm, which had grown to over 250 head and 600 acres owned and leased. I'd been managing it myself for the last six years. I also knew all the business reasons why it was good time for me to exit. The numbers worked; I'd end up with a good nest egg after all was said and done. Farms were selling well. If I stayed, I needed to modernize (more debt). And there was a part of me that wanted to try something new. I could be so logical and clear, but underneath I was untethered and grieving. The farm had been my life and had become my identity.

I was twenty-three when my husband and I bought the farm, stocked and equipped, with 60 cows to be milked that evening in May. The farm was hardly a show place or quaint by Vermont standards. But its 340 acre did have some good loamy soils along with the predominant Champlain Valley clays, and a sturdy barn. And it was in our price range. When we looked at the place in the late winter we fretted about the distant sounds we could hear from Route 7, half a mile as the crow flies from the farm. I do not ever remember hearing Route 7 again. Our life farming drowned out all else along with the drone of the milk pump, the pulse of the milking machine, the pelting of corn silage coming down the silo chute, or one of the 23 motors (I actually once counted them).

The farm was our livelihood. I did work off farm for a few months in the beginning as a teacher and then again part-time a few years later for a year, but farm life suited me and that was it for the next 15 years. Working the land, fencing the land, harvesting the crops was farming to me. The farm had to pay the mortgage, feed the cows, grow with our ambitions, keep us intrigued and keep food on the table. I'm a city kid with a couple of summers of camp under my belt and a father who found any excuse to get outdoors when he could, but I began to see the land through the eyes of a farmer. A big spreading maple in our day pasture was the shade cows needed on hot summer days. Farmers before us had intentionally spared it while clearing the pasture. Now our cows lounged under its majestic spreading limbs. Utility and the sensory are closely intertwined–-rarely one, without the other. Walking through a stand of alfalfa was for me about tons per acre, wondering when to chop (rain in the forecast?), hoping that the stand would last through the winter snow pack, and planning the corn rotation that would use the

nitrogen fixed by the alfalfa. This along with the cool early morning dew from knee-high alfalfa soaking through my pants, a warm sweetness in the air, and the low sun on the deep greens of the leaves. And, of course, there was also the twice-a-day milking.

Milk in the tank is the payoff of dairy farming. It all starts with sun, water, soil nutrients, seeds, then hay and corn crops, and ends in the cow's rumen then udders. So much to balance and pray for: rain, sun, heat, high-protein crops, healthy rumens…. Farming is a dance with nature, and you are not in the lead, so you have to be good at reading your partner and adjusting your steps. Sometimes I'd forget that there was even music. Once again hay almost ready to bale was rained on. A crop that was once worth something was now worthless after three long days on the tractor mowing, tedding, and raking. Corn seed rotted in the ground during an especially cold and wet spring. A dead calf and a down cow both on Christmas day – the list could go on for a long time. Perhaps I should have been wondering what kept me in the farming business. But the next day there would be heifer twins from my best cow. I was totally immersed in the diversity of challenges. I got to be veterinarian, soil scientist, bovine nutritionist, laborer, milker, accountant, tractor driver, manager of people all at home on our own farm. I knew our land intimately – every nook in the pasture where a cow would hide a calf, which was the best corn land, and every seep where a tractor could get stuck. It was my ground.

One morning after the sales contracts had been signed, I slipping out of bed at the usual 5 a.m., putting a new t-shirt next to my skin but pants, shirt, and sweatshirt were recycled from yesterday. A quick cup of Taster's Choice freeze-dried coffee and then out into the pre-dawn. It was a misty morning – really more of a fog – one of those you get when cool air and warm earth collide. I was first to the barn. Turned on the lights. It was so calm – a few cows left in because of sore feet were only mildly interested in my arrival, the comforting, warm, sweet, moist smell of silage, manure and fresh sawdust, and the soft clinking of neck chains. Then on to check the cows in the calving pens and the heifers in the freestall – all good. I struggled a moment to get the barn door open, but then it slid up on its own. No cows in sight; the fog was dense. So quiet. I called, "Come Boss, Come Boss."

The milking herd began to appear slowly out of the mist, messengers bringing solace, the gift of my deep connection to the land, especially land that is touched by man and animals - cultivated and pastured. This gift could not be sold or lost. It was part of me. I was not going to be on my farm for much longer, but the grief and anxiety lifted on that misty morning. The back fence with the corn stubble came into sight. The stranglers made it into the barn. I could feel that my life would not float away but stay grounded. With the clanging of stainless steel in the milk room, the clattering of the silo unloader, and the coaxing of cows into their stalls, I was back to farming for now.

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