

Farmers

My hometown is a mid size city in upstate New York. In the 1950's it sat in the center of dairy farm country that would eventually wither into fields of weeds. My mother's English family had at one time owned a farm some twenty five miles away, ruled by an autocratic old man who treated his sons as slaves. This was according to one of them, my mother's father. My Dad's Irish Catholic family arrived in our city in 1824 and has since never touched a farming tool. Working the land would bring too many memories of English overlords and starvation on the ould sod. In Ireland they might spend the day in a pub crying over their poor prospects. In America they had to be at the factory at 6 a.m. and were told it was a blessing to live in poverty while fully employed.

I left Utica at age 19, but I often returned to my birthplace for a weekend through my thirties and forties. When friends or friendships began to die off, my compass lost its way home. We all come from somewhere. We all go somewhere else.

Some years prior to cleaning up my act, my older brother Paul and I often spent Saturday lounging on two wobbly stools at the bar of the LBJ tavern on the road to Oriskany. Or we might be found sitting on the running board of his '34 Ford pickup truck in a garage next to The Villa restaurant on Leah Street in Cornhill. Here he made only token progress as he toyed with rebuilding the rusty vehicle that had either made life easier for a farmer thirty-five years before or unduly complicated his days by continually breaking down.

On the weekends when I was there to help, we made more progress on the cases of beer lining the back wall of the dilapidated old garage than we did on the Ford. Sometimes we locked

up the garage and headed to the south side of the city and a favorite watering hole called the Uptown Grill. I particularly remember a late September afternoon as the day turned cold and crisp. As we entered the establishment our noses met the cozy aroma of a furnace just fired up for the first time that fall, a hot dusty smell rising up from the radiators.

The Irish-style bar featured photos of race horses adorning the back wall above a multitude of bottles of spirits. Among the pictorial arrangement of horse flesh were two featured photos at the top of the wall, each horse wrapped about the neck with a garland of roses. Mr. Walsh, the restaurant's owner, got upset with us when we referred to them as Donner and Blitzen.

A favorite topic when brothers meet are shared memories, although many times one of us might say to the other, "Do you remember when we ..." and receive a blank stare in return. But more often we struck a vein of shared recollection and each of us took turns mining the gold and polishing it without guilt.

Long ago we discovered that our overnight visit to a farm at ages seven and nine in the summer of 1949 produced in each of us an identical epiphany, a weekend we would never forget. A poet might say we were struck by an abiding image that became etched into our minds. But to us it was simply a special memory to last a lifetime. The visit to Uncle Ed and Aunt Ida's farm would provide fond memories to pull out and re-live whenever we got the chance.

"I'll never forget our visit to Uncle Ed's," I said as I reached in front of Paul to grab the beer nuts. The old pendulum wall clock behind the bar struck three o'clock as we stood drinking beer on a Saturday afternoon. Mr. Walsh provided no stools. And for some reason, no ash trays.

"Me, either," said Paul. "What exactly do *you* remember?"

"Everything," I answered. "We drove all day to somewhere near Fulton."

"We left Utica early," he said. "It took all of Saturday morning to get there. I think we were near a town named Onionville."

"It seemed like we were there for a week," I said.

"Just Saturday and Sunday," he said "But we did a lot."

"We brought Grandma," I said.

"Ed and Ida were her distant relatives," said Paul.

"You and me and Grandma in the back seat," I said

"All the way to Onionville," said my brother. "There must be a reward in heaven for that."

"She gurgled," I said.

"At both ends," he said.

"Hey," I said, "remember the pond?"

"It was a lily pond," he said. The shallow piece of water was suddenly vivid in my memory. It was no more than 20 feet across.

"Out in front near the road, over toward the barn," I said.

"And we wondered," he said, "if a frog could really sit on a lily pad without sinking it."

"Grandma would have certainly sunk it," I said.

"We waited there for a frog to show up while Dad unpacked the car," he said. "We were always helpful."

"You asked Grandma to sit in the pond," I said. "She laughed and asked you why."

His face became animated like an earnest nine year old. "I told her it would be better than the best ... the best fart in a bathtub ever!"

We laughed loudly and from up the bar near the beer taps Mr. Walsh gave us the evil eye. He wiped his hands on a bar towel and began to move in our direction. His trip was interrupted by a waitress from the restaurant side of the business seeking drinks for her customers.

"Grandma was not a fan of toilet humor," I said.

"She chased me around the yard," he said, "and would have run through the lily pond to catch me."

"Poor frogs," I said.

As we talked I was amazed that both of us recalled so many details of a visit from almost thirty years before.

"Do you remember riding the sulky mower with the sickle bar sticking out?" I asked.

"Yup," he replied, "with the hired man. His name was –"

"Skizzer," I shouted.

"Skizzer," Paul shouted.

"Who would name their kid Skizzer?" I said.

"And do you remember watching them milk the cows?" he said. "Uncle Ed had 31 milkers."

"Yes," I said, "with an 18,000 pound Rolling Herd Average"

"You're full of crap," Paul said. "No seven year old would remember a Rolling Herd Average thirty years later."

"Well, *about* 18,000 pounds," I said, "give or take."

"We had chicken and dumplings for supper," Paul said. "Aunt Ida said the bird was fresh killed early that afternoon. Right out in the barn."

"I remember," I said.

"But you wouldn't eat it," he said, "because you'd been playing with the chickens that morning."

"That's not true," I said. "I remember every tasty morsel. Besides, you don't play with chickens. They bite."

"I didn't know that," he said, pouring beer from my bottle into his glass. "They looked so cute."

"I had to explain to Estelle and Monica why their friend was missing," I said.

"Who?" said Paul

"The remaining chickens," I said.

"You're full of it," he said.

"But," I said, "*you* wouldn't eat any of the bullheads Uncle Ed raised in the pond." I sounded triumphant like a younger brother.

"Of course not," he said, "they'd just signed a truce with the frogs."

"Stop drinking my beer," I said.

"Hey, remember that old lumpy bed we had to sleep in?" he asked.

"Yeah," I replied, "it was Skizzer's and he offered to sleep in the bunk downstairs off the kitchen."

"You wet the bed," said Paul.

"I did like hell," I almost shouted.

"I can still remember waking up thinking someone was pouring water on me," he said.

"Maybe the window was open," I said.

"Maybe you stood up in bed when you –"

"I did not wet the bed!" I shouted.

Behind the bar, Mr. Walsh began to move down our way. He never liked anyone getting

loud in his establishment. This was an Irish bar. Customers were expected to stand there and get loaded without making a lot of noise.

Paul and I put on innocent faces, like those we practiced our entire boyhood for Dad when he heard us arguing at night and showed up in our room.

"I *did* eat the watermelon," I said.

"We never ate a watermelon before," said my brother. "You asked for a fork."

"For defense," I said. "I thought I saw legs underneath it."

"Tony Talerico from Taylor Ave. told me he almost choked to death on the seeds when he first tried watermelon," said Paul. "But he was trying to eat the watermelon on one side of his mouth and store up the seeds on the other so he could spit them out at Bobby Jones."

"At a high velocity," I said, "like a burp gun."

"He got pretty good at it when we were in the Marine Corps together," said Paul.

"Remember getting up at dawn?" I asked.

"Sure," he said, "more milking."

"And Sunday was Uncle Ed's day to pick up all the other farmers' milk cans and take them to the Dairy League," I said.

"Aunt Ida said he chose that day to get out of going to church," said Paul.

"They were Protestant, like Grandma," I said.

"We wondered if it was a sin to miss church if you were Protestant," he said.

"You asked Grandma," I said.

"And she told me Protestants didn't have as many rules as us," he said

"Except for drinking," I said.

"Yeah, some of them," he said. "Good thing it's not a sin for us Catholics."

"Would it matter?" I said.

"No," he said. "Not at this point."

"Dad was upset when he found out there was no Catholic Church within miles to go to on Sunday morning," I said.

"He probably thought we'd all go to hell," Paul said.

"Grandma said God had better evidence than that to kick him off heaven's invitation list," I said.

"But Dad was a stickler for the rules," said

Paul. "He told me once when I was a teenager I should tell the priest in confession if I had impure thoughts about Mary Lou Kowalski."

"Who was she?" I said.

"Some girl I liked who became a nun," he said.

I laughed. "Maybe you should have told *her*, not the priest."

"I don't think she liked me enough to marry me," said Paul. "When she caught me looking at her in class, she'd stick her fingers down her throat and pretend to throw up."

"That could be a sign of a bad marriage coming up," I said.

"She carried it too far one day and ruined her test paper."

"Impulsive," I said. "Not good for a wife."

He sighed. "I probably shouldn't have tried to kiss her when we were up at the blackboard together working on algebra equations."

"But it's understandable," I said. "Those Greater Than symbols always reminded me of girls."

He finally finished my bottle of beer, ordered another from Mr. Walsh and paid him from the few bills I had put down in front of me on the bar.

"That was some truck Uncle Ed had for the milk can run," Paul said.

"He said it was 'war surplus.'" I said. "No wonder we won."

"We all rode up on the front seat," I said.

"You and me and Dad and Uncle Ed driving," said Paul.

"It was a huge truck," I said. "The top of the dashboard was over my head. All I could see were puffy white clouds up through the windshield."

"I don't know if Uncle Ed could see much more," he said. "Don't you remember he forgot his glasses?"

"That's right," I said. "Dad had to read the road name signs to him."

"Uncle Ed kept saying, 'Jack this can't be Onion Ring Road, it ain't bumpy enough.'"

"So he did a three point turn, or tried to," I said.

"Drove us right in the ditch," said Paul.

"Good thing we were near a house with a phone."

“Skizzer came and pulled us out with old Donner and Blitzen,” I said. “Too bad we never got to ride those horses. Why go to a farm if you can’t ride the horses?”

“I thought he called the horses Dancer and Prancer,” said Paul.

“No,” I said, “that’s what he called us when you and I were running around the house looking for the bathroom.”

“Mom wasn’t pleased when Aunt Ida told her it was out in the back yard,” said Paul.

“A two-holer,” I said. “Uncle Ed said it was more modern than the old one. A big improvement.”

“I suppose,” he said.

“If you had a bad cold and couldn’t smell,” I said.

“Ah well, it was a great weekend,” said Paul. “Except for the ride home.”

“Fog as thick as milk,” I said. “Dad got out and walked ahead while Mom drove along slowly so he could make sure we stayed on the pavement.”

“Only through one or two really deep dips in the road,” said Paul.

“Good thing we weren’t on the Thruway,” I said.

“Wasn’t built yet,” he answered.

“The fog scared Grandma,” I said.

“Scared the gas right out of her,” he said.

“She erupted,” I added, laughing.

“Maybe that was the real reason why Dad got out and walked ahead of the car,” said Paul.

Mr. Walsh made his way down the bar to us again. “You boys want another?” he asked. His grey eyebrows arched and he looked like he wanted us to say no.

We decided it was time to leave. Outside, autumn’s late afternoon sun was quickly heading down in the sky. We walked across the street to our parked cars in the small shopping center opposite what was then King Cole Ice Cream.

“Would you ever want to live on a farm?” Paul asked.

“Yes,” I said. “It can afford a healthy and wonderful life. I picture myself sitting around the old kitchen in the morning waving goodbye to my hired hands as they go out to the barn and fields to do all the work.”

“This has a familiar ring,” he said.

“I remain behind in the kitchen to flirt with

the young milkmaid. In the afternoon after a brisk ride on Donner or Dancer or whoever, I casually wait for my factotum to arrive back from the city with baskets of cash from the sale of our milk, cheese and whatever else you grow on a farm.”

“You always liked someone else doing your work for you,” he said.

“You should remember,” I said, “that on the few occasions when Mom insisted we wash the supper dishes, it was *you* who always made me dry the silverware and the glasses while you took the easy job of drying the plates.”

“We were a good team, though,” he said.

“We mostly talked her out of it, said we had too much homework to do.”

“Or that Sister Hyronica said we should watch *The Lone Ranger* that night,” I said, “because the episode had a Christian message.”

“Mom believed you, even when the show was about a mine explosion,” he said, “and you told her it was the silver mine where Judas’ thirty pieces of silver came from.”

“She didn’t really believe us,” I said.

“You’re right,” he said. “She just loved us.”

“She was a pushover for sure,” I said.

“I wonder how many times in our boyhood we actually did the dishes,” he said.

“Eighteen times,” I said. “I counted them.”

He made a scoffing noise. “You’re full of—
“Manure,” I said. “Cow manure.”

Paul stopped walking abruptly and looked at me.

“You pushed me into that cow pie near the barn when we came home from the milk run. Don’t say you didn’t.”

“Not on purpose,” I said. “I was running from Estelle and Monica. They knew I ate their best friend.”

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