

Harmony

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The tattered wood creaked beneath my feet as I tiptoed across the straw-covered floor of the old white barn. I stepped carefully, aware that one wrong foothold could land me in the abandoned chicken coop below. I grabbed the rusty sled that had been propped against the worn wall for so many years and began my descent down the wooden ladder. As I walked the old gravel road, now compacted with snow, I observed the wheat field to my left. It looked foreign as it sat fallow and covered in white. I wondered how many mules and horses my great grandfather had traded for that land back in 1918. I continued my walk past the empty pastures blanketed in snow and heard the trickle of the hidden creek while the cows huddled in the corral seeking warmth. As I trudged up the hill towards the ranch house, my muscles felt fatigued from carrying the heavy sled, and I saw November's bitter cold in the breath that crystallized in front of me.

"Emily, hurry up!" one of my cousins shouted. I looked up the hill to find the voice but only saw Cheyenne, my aunt's black German shepherd, running and playing, and covered in splotches of snow.

"Where are you guys?" I asked in confusion. Then I heard a distant sound of friction that grew stronger each second. I jumped to see my cousins flying down the hill, right past me, on an air mattress usually reserved in the closet for houseguests. I couldn't believe it. I had hiked all the way down the hill, around the big cow pasture, and all the way to the barnyard in snow up to my shins to find an actual sled, and now they were using some household amenity that hardly took two minutes to dig out. My disbelief

lasted for a few seconds. Suddenly I forgot about my aching muscles and numb toes because I was with all of my cousins. As an only child, these cousins were like my siblings. We slid down the hill again and again. On every ride we let out carefree laughs and untroubled whoops that solidified our close bond. We never expected that we would soon be violently ripped apart.

Each one of us had come from the same unified and hard working family. Our grandparents, the current residents of the farm, had five kids. Each one trudged down the hill every morning at 5:30 to feed their impatient horses and cows. Every summer they worked the long days of wheat harvest by driving the open cab combines; every night they undressed to find little stinging red scratches from the wheat chaff that had pelted their faces all day. This annual harvest was the family business, a business that brought great wealth and opportunity. It was these riches from farming however, that left my family ripped in two over who would get how much of that golden growing wheat.

Our ranch adventures ceased after that Thanksgiving. Sometime over the next year, the small disagreements within our family that had been smoldering in the backfields for many years, ignited like dry wheat from the spark of an overheated and rusty tractor engine. The rift swelled like wildfire and led to a lawsuit that smothered me with isolation and left me more alone than I had ever felt. While the fields sat calmly and followed their lifecycles as an intertwined unit, my life longed for such harmony back in the busy city. The family tension diverged my focus from my studies to the sobs of my mother that leaked through my bedroom wall as she dealt with the nasty e-mails and phone calls from siblings and lawyers. She too struggled to accept that a family once so full of love had turned into animals that tear each other apart over dinner.

The fight still survives five years later, but my parents and I continue our occasional weekend escapes from the city even though we are categorized as “loyal” to that “side.” We drive the same four-hour route to get there, but I no longer hear my heart pump adrenaline through my body as it had when my cousins and I ran from barn to barn during intense games of hide-and-go-seek. Instead I walk the gravel road alone. My summer stays at the ranch no longer overlap with those of my cousins; the pool remains empty and the fire pit neglected; the marshmallows never make it out of the bag. Despite this isolation, I continue my adventures unaccompanied, as the demand for the open fields remains in my blood. I still wake up early to help feed the animals and muck the stalls. I romp around shin deep in cow manure to help herd the cows into the shoots for their yearly shots. I still feel the gravel crunch beneath my feet as I try to catch the frogs on the side of the road, but soon find it pointless, as I have no one to show my catch to. At the end of the day I pull off my boots and gaze into the bright twinkling holes in the sky, the same open sky that we all used to stare into.

There comes a moment on every visit when I stare out into the dark fields and hear the laughs of my cousins off in the distance from those nights when we played cards and drank grandpa’s homemade milkshakes. The memory soon fades as the cool night breeze carries away their cackles and instead rustles the wheat in front of me. As the wheat radiates its glow in the moonshine, I hear the bullfrogs croak their mating calls while the crickets hum in the background. The peacock makes his voice heard occasionally from down in the barnyard with a yelp resembling that of a young boy, while the pheasants ruffle their wings in preparation for the vulnerable darkness. A heifer offers a reassuring “moo” to her calf as night sails on the smooth horizon. I listen to

nature's orchestra. I watch in fascination as the arc of a shooting star seems to mimic the howl of a lone coyote off in the distance. Goosebumps appear on my arms and a tear rolls down my face when I think of the beauty that my cousins are missing because our family cannot grasp nature's simple idea of harmony.