

Coop

A Year of Poultry, Pigs, and Parenting

 HarperCollins e-books

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Recently I had an apparently deep thought. I scribbled it down quickly so that it might not escape the loosely woven sieve that is my brain. I then spent untold hours polishing the scribble until it was an aphoristic gem of original profundity. Shortly after that, I revisited an essay I had written seven years previous only to find the exact same observation, typed nearly word for word. I have reached that point in my life where every other thing I say is something I've said before. For instance, I regularly catch myself trying to describe the scent of dirt. I am repetitively waylaid by my affection for particular words. (The modifier "little" pops up like Whac-A-Mole in my rough drafts and is never completely eradicated.) Further amplifying the echo, bits and pieces of this book were worked out in shorter, previously published pieces some readers may recognize. I like to imagine this reflects the development of a "certain literary style" when in fact it is more likely I am developing "certain nervous tics." To say nothing of engaging in a freelance writer's favorite sport: *recycling*.

When I'm not repeating myself, I'm contradicting myself. For instance, in the book *Truck: A Love Story* I stated that my father never allowed us to have toy guns; lately I recall we were allowed to keep a pair of realistic-looking squirt guns given to us by a relative. I once wrote of a cow called Angie only to find out her real name was Aggie. (Other mistakes of bovine nomenclature have likely been made—I tell you this because the cows cannot speak for themselves.) The "ten-day" Wisconsin deer hunting season is only nine days long, no matter what I wrote in my most recent hardcover. Sometimes readers point out these contradictions. If they are offered in collegial spirit (we are in this together) I am nearly always happy to post them on my Web site as evidence that my head and feet are on a matching set of clay.

Finally, since I believe the term *nonfiction* depends above all on a reader's trust, I must disclose a few intentional partialities. I often change names to give friends and neighbors a veneer of privacy. I use the term *recently* with some latitude, and for the sake of forward motion I reference the lambing season of 2006 in the context of 2007. Finally, when I write of the church of my childhood, I do so knowing that some will object to the portrayal as either too critical or too benign, and all will find it incomplete, especially when the sect is small and history is spare.

I am grateful for anyone who reads my writing, even—or especially—with a critical eye, and one phrase never suffers from repetition: Thank you, reader.

At the earliest edges of my memory, my father is plowing, and I am running behind him. I see my feet, going pat-pat-pat over the soil, I see my father, left hand on the wheel, right forearm braced against the fender, head turning back to check the depth of the plow, then forward to gauge his progress. The soil is red and sandy in the high spots and dark and loamy in the low spots, where it curls from the plowshares like strips of licorice, leaving me this square, shin-deep trough in which to travel. I trail the sound of the little tractor, so close to ground I can hear the soft plop of the overturned clods. Now and then the plow slices the soil so cleanly that a chubby white grub drops into the furrow unscathed. The grubs are translucent white, their black guts dimly visible, as if through rice paper. Grackles and cow-birds flock the plow, pecking through the new-turned dirt. The grub will not last long. There is my father on his underpowered Ford Ferguson, and there is me trotting right behind him, and there is God above, looking down as I run the straight groove of the furrow, my life laid out on a line drawn in the earth.

In the company of our six-year-old daughter Amy, my wife Anneliese and I have recently moved to a farm. I would like to present some sort of grand agrarian charter, but the whole deal is predicated mainly on the idea of having chickens. We are not alone in this: These Troubled Times seem to have precipitated a fowl renaissance. Mail carriers labor under a groaning load of multicolored hatchery catalogs, the latest issue of *Backyard Poultry*, and perforated containers that peep. Drop the term *chicken tractor* in mixed company and behold the knowing nods. The online world is alive with Subaru-driving National Public Radio supporters trading tips on eco-friendly coop construction and the pros and cons of laying mash; my NASCAR-loving brother-in-law tenderly minds a box of chicks beneath a heat lamp in his garage; my biker bar bouncer-turned-Zen Buddhist pal Billy and his wife the certified nursing assistant are building their second backyard coop with an eye toward expanding into “ornamentals.” Anecdotal evidence to be sure, and a drop in the Colonel’s bucket, but something is afoot. The subject of chickens was raised between my wife and me fairly early in our courtship, and has sustained us. We are enthused by the idea of fresh eggs, homegrown coq au vin, and (at least until butchering day) a twenty-four-hour turnaround on the compost. In addition, it is my long-standing opinion that entertainment-wise, chickens beat TV.

Our move is also family-driven. We are assuming responsibility for a farmstead previously owned by my wife’s mother. Faced with an unexpected relocation, my mother-in-law wants to keep the place in the family. And in a bit of a flip, we are moving from a northern village to the country in order that my wife might be closer to the university where she sometimes teaches. This will save gas and time, although that glow on the horizon is a mall, and whenever we notice a Prime Commercial sign forty acres nearer, we review our escape plan from a place on which we have yet to pay the property tax.

We are also going rural in the hope that we might become more self-sufficient in terms of firewood, an expanded garden, and perhaps a pair of pigs. Whether through prescience or too much nervous reading, we have developed a low-key doomsday mind-set regarding the imminent future, and believe the time has come to store up some potatoes and teach the young’uns how to forage. Amy can already identify a coyote track, and I intend to see to it that she carry the phrase “slop the hogs” a generation further. To an extent, my wife and I are acting on positive recollections of our own

childhood—I was a farm kid from the age of two, and much of my wife’s childhood was spent on a farm just one valley over from the spot to which we have moved. But I hope we don’t burden Amy with the idea that living outside the city limits is an inherently pious act. That *rural* equals *righteous*. As a country kid, I took a while to round the bend on that one, but thanks to a blend of peak oil posts, Kwame Anthony Appiah’s *Cosmopolitanism*, and a week spent buying groceries at a bodega in Bushwick, I am well on my way to reconstructing all residual prejudice. Let’s hear it for sensible urbanism. Whenever I catch myself waxing unctuous on the subject of getting “back to the land,” I think of the Parisian Jim Haynes, who has said city dwellers protect the ecological balance of the countryside by staying away from it. And then there is Ben Logan and his touchstone book *The Land Remembers*, in which he wrote, “All around were reminders that the land was more important than we were. The land could do without us.”

This new place of ours is not far from where I was raised—you can throw in your *Essential Steve Earle*, go the speed limit, and arrive well before “Continental Trailways Blues”—but it feels far. I arrived at our New Auburn farm in diapers and departed at the age of emancipation. Spent a dozen years away, then returned to live in the village itself. Twelve years into my second citizenship, I was settled and content within the rough bounds of an area framed largely in terms of memories and gratitude. I was in the fire department, I never missed Jamboree Days, I shot the breeze with folks in the post office lobby, and I caught up on politics at the village dump. Over half my life, I have happily punctuated my return address with the same zip code, the nicely rhythmic *five-four-seven, five-seven* New Auburn, Wisconsin. The idea of forwarding the mail leaves me queasy and blue.

It would be sweet to noodle along in this minor key, but I’m stopping now because having pried my eyes from the compass mounted in my navel, I see the world is gray with the dust of diaspora and displacement. Any given moment, put your ear to the earth, and you will hear ten million shifting feet. Vicious herdings and abject decampments, perpetually under way and commenced at the business end of boots, bullets, and bulldozers. Whereas we have simply eased down the road a piece.

Our new farm is on hilly terrain, and when I come up the driveway I find myself reflexively checking the windshield to verify that my state park stickers are up-to-date. Having been raised a swamp and flatlands boy, I view all topographical rumples as exotic. I am more attuned to brush than vistas. When I walk the ridge, I can’t help but remember all those Louis L’Amour books I read as a kid, where some fool skylines himself and is culled by a Sharps 50. When we were tots, my friend Harley was orphaned by a tractor when it pitched on a hill and crushed his father, and I have conflated hills and farms with danger ever since.

The ridge runs from the house at an angle straying off the east-west axis. As a result, the first time I came here I got my directions wrong, and I’m still trying to rewire. My disorientation is exacerbated by the fact that some of the outbuildings align with the ridge, while others are set square to the four directions. I am regularly startled by the apparent repositioning of sunrise.

I am nervous about some of the newer houses nearby. They tend to be grand. Again, I must disabuse myself of reverse classism—orthopedic surgeons want chickens too—but I cherish a regular salting of trash heaps and trailers, signaling as they do that the neighborhood will tolerate bad luck and alternative preference. It soothes me that our screen door does not latch, and you can entertain yourself during downtime by dropping a glass marble beside the toilet and quietly betting as to whether or not it will clear the tub surround and roll clear out into the kitchen.

I first perceived my father as a farmer the night he drove home with a giant lactating Holstein tethered to the bumper of his Ford Falcon. There was no cart, just a cow on a rope. And Dad, motoring real slow.

It wasn't the sort of scene you'd see on the cover of *Hoard's Dairyman*.

We went to fetch the cow after supper, from a farm some three miles distant. Owning neither truck nor trailer suitable for transporting the beast, Dad chose the Falcon—a station wagon model with a nifty roll-up rear window and a naughtily noisy Hollywood muffler. This being a momentous event for us kids—six of us at the time—clamored to come along, and we made a carful. That said, I have not discovered any photographic documentation of the event. Perhaps a couple of the younger children remained at home with Mom. When we arrived at the farm, a man led the cow from the barn on a rope and halter. Dad cinched a granny knot around the bumper and set off at a stately pace. My smaller sibling knelt facing rearward in the seats, while my brother John and I sat backward on the lowered tailgate, legs swinging on either side of the Holstein's raccoon-sized head.

Three miles is not so far as the crow flies, but it is a fair distance when you are towing a Holstein behind a Ford Falcon full of jabbering rug rats. Dad rode the clutch and kept one eye on the mirror. The cow stubbed along reluctantly at first, all straight-necked and flat-eared, but eventually she calmed and found her road gear. For the balance of the journey she shambled along easy, following her nose through a faint blue haze. That Falcon burned a little oil.

As we neared home that night, John and I bailed off the tailgate to run alongside. The other kids hung out the windows, hair in the wind, arms dangling, all eyes on the cow. We tripped along through the lowering salt marsh mist, that sweet-brine scent still imprinted on my consciousness to a depth that zips me back to the far western corner of Sampson Township at first whiff. How happily and goofily we skipped, the scratch and scuff of the Holstein's hooves echoing among the roadside pines. Mom was in the house at the sink when we broke into the open, the blue station wagon rolling turtle-slow and trolling a lumbering milk cow through the lowering light and fireflies rising, John and I cavorting like redneck leprechauns, our father up there at the wheel thinking who knows what but proving that even the humblest man is capable of spectacle.

Lately—when we are driving to piano lessons, or washing dishes, or stacking firewood—Amy has taken to saying, “Tell me a story from your childhood.” She consistently uses the same formal phrasing (clearly enunciating “child” and “hood”), and I am tickled and troubled by the idea that to her mind my “childhood” has achieved epoch status. Of course I remember asking my parents the same question, and I remember my fascination at their stories of boxing matches on the radio, ice delivered to the house in sawdusted blocks, and ladies who cooked with lard. To a child whose first retrievable memories are pegged just prior to the Summer of Love, it seemed remarkable that my parents were born into a black-and-white newsreel world, with still shots provided by my mother's Brownie box camera, still stored in a long narrow closet upstairs at the farm.

“Tell me a story from your childhood,” says my daughter, and because I remember nothing before the farm, I tell her the first image I see when I think of spring is yellow dandelions in green grass beside a red barn. Ours was a classic Wisconsin homestead: white house, the red barn, a handful of simple outbuildings. All constructed from jack pine by second-generation Norwegian immigrants in the wake of the lumbering boom. The farm stood at the southern edge of what historians refer to as the cutover region. At one time the cutover was thick with century-old white pines, but by the 1900s they were long gone down the nearest river. As a short-term fix for the suddenly finite lumber supply, the loggers further stripped the land of lower-grade hemlock, cedar, and hardwoods. After the lumberjack

departed, the government encouraged farmers to settle the area, but the denuded sandy soil of the cutover was poorly suited to farming. Although there were many successful operations scattered throughout northwestern Wisconsin during my childhood, I came of age thinking of farming as a tough gig in which folks scrabbled and hung on—I was surprised in later life when I spent time in the Coulee Region to the southwest and discovered that farm families numbered among the prominent and well-to-do.

“Tell me a story from your childhood,” she says, and I tell her of waking on summer mornings socked with fog I could make myself believe the world had fallen away to leave our isolated farmstead floating through space—and how that illusion was gently undone by disembodied voices drifting in through the mist as our neighbors to the north called their cows to milking: “*M’bawssss... M’bawssss...*” I tell her how those same neighbors—a pair of bachelor brothers named Art and Clarence—still took the Norwegian newspaper and spoke of my brothers Jack and Jed and Jud as “Yack and Yed and Yud.” I tell her of old men with knuckle stubs where fingers should be, and if you inquired after the digits the story invariably involved firewood and a homemade buzz saw. I tell her of Mr. Kenner up the road who can still tell you about the Indians who blocked the narrow bridge spanning Beaver Creek and charged a cut of tobacco for passage. I tell her of winters when we kids wobbled through the fields on our skates to play pom-pom-pullaway on a frozen drainage ditch carved through the middle of the woods by men serving in the Civilian Conservation Corps during the Great Depression. I tell her how we learned to milk cows and how we did flips from the haymow rafters, whirling and dropping through the cold winter air into the giant pile of chopped cornstalks below. Once I overrotated and slammed my knee into my nose. I remember the warm blood flowing out both nostrils toward my ears as I lay on my back. My brother John looked down at me without alarm. Squeezing my nose and looking up past him, I noticed that the nails protruding through the roof were furry with frost.

“Tell me a story from your childhood,” she says, and I simply do not know where to begin.

My father recently joined the community choir. Sounds innocuous enough—sweet, even—but my immediate reaction was to phone my brother John and ask if he thought Dad might be smoking reefer. Four decades I’ve known my father, and he has led an avowedly quiet life. He works hard, he works quiet, he works above all to avoid any public act more conspicuous than renewing his driver’s license. And now suddenly he’s out there on tour (Chetek...Bloomer...Sand Creek...it’s all a crazy blur), ascending the risers to raise his voice in public. For the *Christmas* concert, no less. My father is deeply devout, so on the face of it singing about the birth of Christ seems a natural match, but ours was a church so fundamental that the December holiday was banned as dangerously contrived pagan silliness—although my parents would certainly state their case in terms more demure.

So when Mom told me Dad had up and joined the choir, it felt like a flip-flop on one of those *How To Tell if Your Child is Using Drugs* moments. You’ve seen the bulleted lists: *change in usual activities; change in friends; new hobbies; drastic change in personality; change in clothing choices* (forty years in overalls, and there he is doing *fa-la-las* in a white button-down and green bow tie).

Seriously. I’m gonna check his sock drawer.

When my father and the rest of the traveling choir perform at St. Jude’s, I attend with Amy in tow. St. Jude’s was the Catholic church in New Auburn. I say *was* because a regional bishop shut it down en route to earning a significant promotion. That was hard to take, even for a lapsed Protestant like me. When my brother’s wife was killed seven weeks into their marriage, St. Jude’s opened their doors for the funeral without regard to affiliation. And for years now, whenever a Lutheran or

Methodist event overflows the capacity of its respective church, the whole production shifts to St. Jude's.

In closing the door, the bishop cited economic concerns. It's always tricky when Men of God wield calculators. He showed up to do the job himself, I'll give him that. He looked pinched but resolute. I attended the final service out of respect for my neighbors, as it was their blue-collar tithing that paid for the shingles, the pews, and the bishop's remarkable matching cap and bathrobe. His decree has been ameliorated somewhat by the fact that the St. Jude's auxiliary continues to make the church available for weddings, funerals, and public events—including the community choir Christmas concert.

Huffing and stomping into the foyer from the frozen parking lot, we pack into the pews, cozy in our coats. We all do some swiveling, looking around to see who's here and who's where. On the stroke of the hour, the choir files out, the women in their dark green robes, the men in their white shirts and green bow ties. You see a lot of gray heads up there, and some cautious climbing of the risers. The men always look scrubbed up pretty good, with fresh comb tracks in their hair. Somewhere someone is still selling Brylcreem. The women look pleased and pleasant. My mom—wearing her bifocals and with her white hair up in a bun—is there, and so is my sister-in-law Barbara. Barbara's husband—my brother John—is in the back row stage right, his face windburned and bearded. Dad is also in the back row, stage left. Most everyone has a trace of kindergarten recital stiffness in his posture. The conductor is an animated fellow given to preacher-hopping during the rhythmic parts, and given to hand-waving during the hortative parts, but you grant him latitude because he has himself quite a job there, summoning hosannas from a pack of mannered Midwesterners. During warm-ups I note he sports a scandalous earring, but then he *is* the leader of the band.

And so they sing for us. I make it to the Christmas concert about every other year, and am always enchanted with the homemade joy of it all. I think of these neighbors getting their work done and hustling through supper so they can make rehearsal on time, giving up their evenings in, their television shows, their early-to-bed. Doing it as fall becomes winter, fighting the first snowy roads. Memorizing their lyrics and learning their parts, with no expectation of remuneration beyond smiling faces and afterward, coffee and cookies. I see the dump truck driver raising his voice to the ceiling panels, hear the administrative assistant weaving her harmony with that of the farm wife, and think at that very moment of the googolplex infinitude of electrified screens and bangety-bang speakers blasting away at the world, and we are blessed indeed to be in this small space, with our neighbors singing for us. The music swells from worshipful chorale to hand-clapping swing, up and down, the tempo of the piece following the tempo of the tale. The music builds and builds, soaring to the point where I am rocking in my seat and bobbing my head some when my gaze shifts to Dad in the backmost row, and it hits me as a soft shock that he looks small up there. Still the bright eyes, still the wrestler's physical alacrity, but he is favoring one knee, and after years of little change, his hair has gone gray and gone thin. Right around his pop-out ears—the ones Mom swears she never noticed until someone mentioned it—the hair is tufted and a tad askew, so that when he peers through big glasses to see the music and sings with his eyebrows raised like he's been surprised by the next note, he's all absentminded-professor-looking. But more than that, the oversize glasses and the green bow tie render him childlike, even as I realize: that's my dad, becoming an old man.

Here on the new place there is much to do. Most of our things are still in boxes. A goodly bunch of the rest of our things are still in the New Auburn house. As far as self-sufficiency, Anneliese and I are doing our best to aim low—some eggs, some pork chops, some firewood; if we can raise just a portico

of the heat and groceries by our own hand this first year, it will be an improvement on years previous. There is also the small matter of me nattering on about how I intend to be a subsistent man of the land even as I spend a quarter of the year ramming around the country with a trunkload of books. This is hardly proper behavior for a father, a husband, or a husbandman.

Also, we have a baby on the way. Due in early spring. Anneliese has proposed the tot be birthed right here in the crooked old house. The first time she brought this up, I laughed in a *Hahaha! Good one!* sort of way, and then, seeing her gaze harden ever so slightly, I said, well, yes, sure we could discuss that, sure! *Hahaha!* This time the *Hahaha* was a little higher pitched.

This morning while splitting wood, I attempted to clear my left nostril using a rustic maneuver known as the “farmer snort” and misfired badly. My Eustachian tubes have yet to assume their former diameter. I bubble-gummed an eardrum, shot fizz out both tear ducts, and may have permanently everted one eyeball. I believe I sprained my uvula.

The act of blowing one’s nose without benefit of Kleenex is a skill appreciated along a wide spectrum of background and endeavor—synonymous terms include *fisherman’s tissue* and *air hanky*. But I grew up calling it a farmer snort, because them’s my people, and them’s who taught me.

The lessons were not formal. Watch and learn, learn by doing. Same way I learned to spit. Although Dad nearly derailed me there. We were walking from Oliver Baalrud’s barn to the house for a lemonade break between unloading hay wagons when I puckered up and gobbled a stringer down my miniature bib overalls. I’d been watching Oliver all day. He was a diminutive Norwegian and an accomplished spitter—not big tobacco-ey streamers, just frothy little pips, but he did it constantly, and the flecks flew sharp and straight. Gosh, it was just the neatest thing. He could do it while talking pitchforking, or backing up the tractor. I wasn’t even in kindergarten yet, but I was trying to march beside my dad like a little hay-making man, and I guess I figured spitting would be the thing. When I goobered on my bibs, Dad didn’t break stride. Just looked down and said, “Don’t spit until you know how.”

Boy, that set up a conundrum. How you gonna *learn* if you don’t *do*?

I guess I got around it. Later, when I lost my milk teeth, the new set came in with a pretty good gap. This helps with the aiming, and has a rifling effect. Given a gift, you work with it. I can sit in the kitchen and knock a horsefly off your doorknob.

Executed smartly, the farmer snort is a source of transcendent clarification. In short, it really lightens your head, and consequently your day. Conversely, a snort misplayed can put a serious crimp in your karma. As with most things in life, your odds of success improve through focus and rehearsal. Determine your dominant nostril; visualize success; think *through* the snort—that sort of thing. I have encountered people who claim to be able to perform a hands-free double-barrel farmer snort. I am skeptical and not about to hang around while they prove it. The first time I saw my wife farmer-snort I felt a renewed flush of affection and thought, *Now there is a woman who can endure.*

I split wood because I boldly predict that next winter will be cold. Climatic creep notwithstanding, our house retains the long johns. Ever since I departed the home farm some twenty-four years ago, I have warded off winter with a twist of the thermostat. Now that we’ve moved to the farm, we have backup electric heat, but the preponderance of warmth in our house is generated from within a square steel box in the living room, and the thing must be fed. I have this spot where I like to chop; it overlooks a swale that breaks into the valley below. Now and then I pause to un-bend my back and absorb the view. I feel hardy standing here, muscular and flush with the full pulse of labor. There is sweat in my stocking cap, my typist palms are nicely sore from gripping the ax, and the splintered wood at my feet is tangible evidence of my attempt to provide for our little family of three. Our farmhouse—just up the slope from where I stand—is a mishmash of remodels and add-ons clad in scuffed aluminum. The windows are uncoordinated, and the floorboards are straight out of a carnival funhouse. Moving from the kitchen to the living room, you step up a four-inch riser; keep moving on the same plane around the central wall, and you will circle right back to the riser, having never stepped down. This creates a M. C. Escher effect and helps explain why my mother-in-law refers to the bathroom hall as “that

wheelchair ramp.” But at the heart of the structure is a log cabin built in the 1880s, and it is dead solid. ~~A few of the hand-squared logs are still visible along one side of the living room. They are the width of a boar’s back.~~ Pausing ax in hand to gaze off across the territory, I picture myself as some austere pioneering backwoodsman on the order of Abe Lincoln—albeit dumber, stubbier, and unlikely to alter the course of human events, unless you count snoozing at a stoplight.

It’s a good day for splitting. Fifteen below at dawn, and even in mid-afternoon the oak is frozen tight. Wet wood split in summer absorbs the ax with a punky *tunk!* You spend half your time wrenching the sunk blade free; the beveled steel cheeks press out a watery froth. Today at subzero, nearly every stroke terminates in a crisp *ker-rack!* The halves part neatly, releasing a scent like musk and cheese. The exposed wood is laced with crystals of ice that refract the sun and salt the grain with an interstitial twinkle.

I split a while, then stack a while.

The baby is due in early April, just over three months from now. After a slow start, I am astounded at the speed with which Anneliese’s belly is growing. Whatever is in there, it is a kicky little creature, and prone to nocturnal hiccups. Nearly every night when we lie in bed, Anneliese’s midsection begins to lurch sharply and at measured intervals. It is my understanding that the sensation is equivalent to the baby playing foosball with Anneliese’s innards. It is tough to drift off with a miniature single-stroke engine boing-boinging between your liver and bladder, and compounding the problem, ever since Anneliese became pregnant, she has been struggling with insomnia.

We do not know if we are having a boy or a girl because we have had no ultrasound, and barring some pressing sign or symptom, will not have one. Anneliese is defiantly self-directed in these matters, relying on a coterie of friends covering the spectrum from pagan shamans to a home-educated evangelical Christian nutritionist. I have gone to the medicine cabinet seeking an aspirin and come up with powdered kelp.

I am nervous about the baby business, but this is hardly news. I am nervous about everything—from last year’s tax calculations to the blinking light on the answering machine. Discussions in the arena of health care do not always go easy between Anneliese and me. Thanks to the holistic curriculum provided to me by the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire School of Nursing during the years I thought I knew what I wanted to do for a living, I am willing to give consideration to a wide range of alternative treatments, but remain decidedly partial to Western medicine. In part, this comes from my unwillingness to swim against popular tides, coupled with extreme trepidation about doing the wrong thing. My wife does not labor under the same unattractive state of wimpitude. In a marriage that has so far been everything I hoped it might be, our most difficult—even heated—discussions have been about medicine. Having said that, regarding neonatal issues, she has several advantages, chief among them being that (A) she is carrying the baby, and (B) since we are paying for prenatal care and delivery out of pocket, I am happy to go along with the economically attractive elements of her program.

Economy is as economy does, and having observed my progress at the woodpile for a month now Anneliese has lately begun lobbying for a wood-splitting bee, in which we invite the neighbors and get the whole works done at once. She says I shouldn’t be toiling out there all alone. I suspect she has also calculated my ax stroke to BTU ratio and fears that by next February we’ll be busting up the last of the kitchen chairs for kindling. “We can make chili,” she says. “Terry can bring his splitter, and we’ll get it all done in one day.” It’s a good idea, and indeed, our neighbor Terry has offered to share his gasoline-powered wood splitter. It’s a smooth little machine with a small engine and hydraulic ram

mounted on a steel I beam that rides on a set of trailer wheels. You just hook it behind your tractor or pickup and tow it to wherever it's needed. Once the wood chunks are placed on the I beam, the operator moves a lever forward and the hydraulic ram pushes the bolt of wood against a piece of beveled steel the shape of an ax blade. The hydraulic pressure is slow but inexorable, and even the toughest knot-bound snag comes apart into manageable pieces. The first time I saw an automatic splitter I was a kid, and it was an overbuilt homemade contraption. Nowadays you can pick 'em up at the Farm & Fleet, all painted and shiny.

The alternative is to flail away madly with a splitting maul, sweating like an overheated stevedore and likely working up a stellar case of carpal tunnel. My wife is right. My pecking away solo is silly, and my left arm has been numb for a month in a dermatome representing the ulnar nerve. But I'm not out here to be efficient. I'm out here to clear my head. To feel the ax rise and fall, to blow the breath out on the downstroke and drive through the bolt. To bring the blade down dead center and see the wood explode—the satisfaction is, I suppose, similar to what a golfer feels when connecting with the sweet spot. When you hit the wood just right, it doesn't feel like you've dealt a blow, but rather that the steel head has floated through the wood. When you miss, on the other hand—when you deliver a stroke that ends in a dead wedge, or kicks out sideways and caroms into the dirt—you're often left feeling disoriented, sometimes with the same numb-palm sensation as when you swing early and hit a baseball off the tip of the bat.

I want to split wood by hand for the same reason I want to have pigs and chickens. You want to eat meat, you raise an animal and kill it, or at the very least steal its eggs. You want to stay warm, you knock the wood into little chunks. Beyond that, there is the idea that primitive, meaningful work delights the mind. When undertaken in the absence of compulsion, I should say. One regularly finds that praises of an honest day's work are frequently sung by people in clean clothes. I am thinking more along the lines of the character created by Jim Harrison in the novel *Returning to Earth*, who says his blue-collar jobs “kept me grounded in actual life.” I am being selfish about the wood. Proprietary, even. When I chonk a chunk into the firebox, I want to stand back and claim it a bit. A man, being a man. Providing.

You take that ax in hand, and it frees your mind. Of course, too much dreaming and it will also free your toes. I am regularly dramatic with my wife about accumulated pending deadlines and backlogs and time spent on the road, only to have her look out the window and see me there chopping when I should be typing. In proposing the firewood bee, she is being eminently sensible, and that is where we part company.

If she brings it up again, I shall tell her I am freeing my mind.

The centerpiece of my parent's farmhouse is a stout Monarch Model 3755D wood-burning range. Carl Carlson, the man who homesteaded our farm, bought it as a wedding gift for his wife Charlotte when they were married in 1920. When he vetted the stove prior to purchase at the Farmers Store in New Auburn, the salesman demonstrated its durability by jumping up and down on the open oven door. Product testing of equivalent rigor is unimaginable in our stamped-tin age and will furthermore get you Tasered at the Best Buy. Behold the mighty nation gone slack.

When the Carlsons installed an electric range, the Monarch was banished to the basement. Mr. Carlson reattached the stovepipe to the chimney, and Mrs. Carlson used the stove to burn garbage and make lye soap. By the time my parents arrived, it was coated with rust and dinge. Looking as ever for ways to pinch pennies, Mom and Dad decided to move the stove back upstairs and use it to supplement the furnace heat. In order to do so, Dad had to disassemble it—unbolting the warming

ovens, detaching the water jackets, and generally breaking it down into the smallest components possible. It was still a prodigious project; I have seen the original catalog materials for the 3755D, and it weighs 442 pounds—that's a lotta microwaves.

A neighbor came to help with the lifting, and once the stove was reassembled upstairs, its squat bulk anchored the entire first floor. Mom cleaned it up and rubbed it down with blacking, and although the shiny bits were dimmed and pitted, they did take a polish, and the blue *Monarch* logo still scrolled beautifully across the white porcelain enameling of the oven door. She rarely baked in the stove, but we often came in from wood-gathering expeditions to the scent of smoked ham and vegetables in a cast iron pan that had percolated on the stovetop all day long, and as we ate, our caps and mittens dried in the warming ovens flanking the central stovepipe and its butterfly damper, which reminded me loosely of the Batman logo. On cold school mornings, we tussled to see how many of us could plant our hindquarters on the warm oven door.

In winter the day began with the sounds of Dad building the fire. From our beds upstairs we'd hear the hinge-squeak of the firebox door and the clank of the lids and center plate as he lifted and set them aside. Next came the rolling rumble of the grates as he shook them free of ash. The grates were rotated by means of a detachable cast iron handle fitted over a stub of square shaft protruding from just above the draft door, and were concave on one side and convex on the other; each time Dad twisted the shaft, a nickel-plated indicator countersunk on the front of the stove slid back and forth, alternately reading WOOD or COAL. When the grates were clear and returned to the WOOD position, he detached the handle and stowed it in one of the warming ovens. Even this action had its own distinct sound: the tinny scrape of the handle sliding back in place and the *clunk* of the warming oven door stakes dropping into their pockets. If the ash pan was in need of emptying, we'd hear the gritty rasp of it being pulled from the square steel pouch where it nested beneath the grates. Then the front door would open and close and the house would go quiet while Dad walked to the garden and flung the ashes across the snow, where they left a skid mark like a miniature thundercloud run aground.

Then he was back inside, and even now I can summon the image of him downstairs alone, the day's work in mind, the simple ceremony unfolding. The crumple of the newspaper as he packs it in above the grates. The careful placing of the kindling, and then a few larger sticks of wood to catch and grow the first flames. The lids nesting flush with the stovetop when he replaces them, fitting their receptacles with jigsaw-puzzle precision. The scratch of the match against the sooty interior of the firebox door, Dad ducking his head to light the tinder, the prayerful stance of it, him on one knee and blowing gently at the flame in the predawn darkness, and us his family still abed. Mom and Dad still use the *Monarch*. It sits right where it has since the day it came back upstairs, just feet from the dining room table. Even today, when we kids gather as adults, someone (or sometimes two of us, if personal dimensions allow) winds up perched on the woodstove door. We sit there even when the weather is warm and there is no fire. Something more than warmth draws us to the stove, something having to do with memory and the center of gravity.

When it comes to parenting tools, it's tough to beat a woodstove. Pick up your room, we say, because...because...*never mind what Daddy's room looks like! Daddy is not the subject here! Daddy is a full-on poster boy of undiagnosed behavioral disorders!* Be nice to everyone, we say, because...because...*Yes, even that lady who "waved" at Daddy in the Wal-Mart parking lot...and the snotty little ingrate who stole your beach bucket...Why? Because...because...well, because passive-aggressive is the only way to roll, sweetheart.* In other words, how does one convey cause and effect to a six-year-old?

By having her haul firewood, that's how. You wanna lie around toasting your tootsies, darling daughter? ~~Then get out there and lug some cellulose.~~

In a sense, my siblings and I lucked out. Dad logged every winter, which meant the sawmill came most summers, leaving behind a giant pile of slab wood, which didn't need to be split—just sectioned up and stacked. We called these slabwood chunks *schnibblings*—a word we learned from a neighbor up the road. I'm not really sure how you spell *schnibblings*. Most of the time we shortened it to *schnibs*. Even now as I type this, I fear *schnibblings* will turn out to have been some outrageous ethnic epithet. So, forgive me. I Googled it and Babel Fish'd it and came up with nada.

The downside of our method was that most of the trees Dad harvested were white pine, which has a burn rate roughly equivalent to Kleenex, so it took a mountain of slabs to keep the house warm. When it was time to “make wood,” as the common phrase had it, Dad rounded up the troops and took us to whichever corner of the farm the sawmill had been set up in last. Sometimes we all climbed in the back of the pickup; sometimes we rode on a hay wagon to which Dad had attached side racks. A certain glumness prevailed when we were in the hay wagon because it was much larger than the pickup, and we were anticipating a marathon. While Dad was gassing up his saw, we kids began stacking slabs in a pair of sawbucks that cradled the wood in a bundle. With one side barky and one side rough-sawn, one end fat and one end knife-skinny (or thin in the middle so they snapped in two mid-lift), the slabs were splintery, unbalanced, and a hassle to handle. Yanking them from the every-which-way pile was like playing full-contact jackstraws. At Christmas, when we went to the city and stood on the carpet of Grandpa's split-level ranch and watched him fill the fireplace with uniform cylinders of papery-smooth white birch, I remember feeling what can only be described as firewood envy.

Back and forth we went between the sawbucks, alternately filling and emptying them as Dad ran the saw nonstop. We slung the chunks into the wagon or truck bed, stopping now and then to peer hopefully over the side racks. It seemed ages before Dad killed the saw, helped throw the last batch aboard and headed for the house. But the work had barely begun—the wood had yet to be unloaded and stacked in the basement. In later years Dad built a wood chute, but we used to just pull open a window and fling the wood through the opening. When we finished, the sill was battered and busted, and the window had to be held in place with a bent nail. Finally, we stacked the wood, often by increments after school. By the time the first snow fell, the basement was a warren of wooded corridors leading to the root cellar, chest freezer, and sump pump.

The penultimate step in the slab wood journey was the wood box—a large antique crate positioned directly adjacent to the solid Monarch. Once the wood had been stacked in the basement it came back upstairs one armload at a time over winter. By the time you made it upstairs, your biceps were aching and it was a relief to hear the noisy tumble of firewood spilling into the crate. It took a lot of trips to fill the wood box, but the following morning when we raced each other for the stove door, we had in some measure earned the warmth on our hindquarters.

Now that we have moved to the farm, poor Amy has come to understand this dynamic all too clearly. One of her daily wintertime tasks includes making the long trudge to the old granary across the yard where the dry wood is stored. Watching her load up her purple plastic sled and drag it slowly back to the house, I smile, remembering all the times Dad pried me from behind a Louis L'Amour cowboy book to do the same. More often than not, she goes willingly, if not gladly. If she sulks or fusses, I launch into an eye-glazing sermon, reminding her of how many times I have found her curled up in front of the stove with Dora the Explorer, and do you *know* where that warmth comes from, and let me tell you when *I* was little we had to go all the way out on the *back forty* to get *wagonloads* of wood, and, well, on and on it goes until Anneliese gives me the look normally delivered from the front pew by the wives of long-winded preachers, at which point I stalk off in a cloud of my own oration.

Meanwhile, Anneliese explains to Amy that she is not just doing *her* chores, she is *helping the family*. Anneliese presents these lessons in terms any six-year-old can grasp, and sees no need to revise upward when—as is regularly required—she adjusts my own focus.

I recently stepped into the upstairs hallway just as Amy emerged from the bathroom cinched underarms to knees in a towel. As I watched, she dropped her head forward, wrapped her dangling wet hair in a second towel, twisted it turban-tight, and then—in a single unbroken motion—rose upright and flipped the tail of the towel back over one shoulder before scampering to her room. I stood stock still, having just witnessed the future rocketing beyond my grasp. Of course I saw her mother in the movement, but I also detected a more universal womanliness, a posture of assurance. Were the moment to be rendered in neon, you would have this bright buzzing sign flashing *See Ya Later, Old Man*.

Amy is my *given* daughter. The term is not mine. A poet friend blessed me with it when I was trying to work my way around the word *stepdaughter*—a term I find serviceable by way of explaining the situation but utterly short of the mark when it comes to expressing the heart. Amy's father Dan lives in Colorado, and I am grateful to say that we get on well. As a matter of fact, we have just returned from a visit with him, his wife Marie, and their two toddling sons. Amy relishes the chance to play big sister, and quite rightly calls the boys her brothers without qualification or prefix. As for the adults, we are nearly four years into a relationship that is in some respects highly unusual, but ultimately exactly as it should be. We are sometimes complimented on how we have managed to skin the mire, but not a one of us takes the situation for granted, and if the subject is raised, each will point to the critical contribution of the other three. In these situations only one person is required to bring the whole deal down, so: *Yay, team*. I am reminded of a party trick I learned as a child in which you set four water glasses butt-up in a square pattern and then weave the blades of four butter knives in such a way that the handle of each knife rests on an upended glass and the blades form a self-supporting grid in the middle. Once the blades interlock they will support a fifth glass filled with water. Remove any one of the knives and the whole works collapses, dumping the water. Amy is the water in the glass. Amy's father says we are “an anomaly relying on grace and friendship.” Unfortunately, he is eloquent and able to express himself without resorting to party tricks as allegory. Additionally, he stands six-foot-seven, has all his hair, and can make raspberry coulis from scratch.

If there was any lingering alpha male tinder smoldering between Dan and me, I trust it was snuffed on the third night of this most recent visit. Thinking I heard a call from Amy's bedroom, I ran upstairs to check on her and found that she had taken ill. Based on her sad puppy eyes and chalky countenance, I determined she was shortly due to hurl. Grabbing a towel from the doorknob, I scooped her up just as the first blast blew. I caught most of it in the towel and hustled to the bathroom, where I wrapped a steadying arm around her and used my free hand to keep her hair from her face while the poor kid heaved in the toilet.

During the first false lull, she raised a plaintive cry: “What is *HAP-pen-ing?*”

And I realized: this was her first-ever upchuck session. Of course she'd spit up as an infant, but she carried no memory of it. This was the first real deal.

“You're throwing up, baby,” I said, projecting calm reassurance. “It's because you're sick. It's not fun. But it's OK. You'll feel better.” She barfed again.

During the next lull, through tears she said, “This is a *really bad day!*”

When the vomiting stopped for good, I stood at the sink, running a cool rag over Amy's face. By now Dan had come to help. When I looked up into the mirror I saw him reflected behind me, dipping

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