Farm Baptism

Something hard-wired inside me already knew I better not cry in the company of grown men. My first time helping to unload a tractor trailer of hundred pound sacks of horse feed in scratch-ass burlap. All other farm work suspended, everyone pulled in to make a human conveyer from truck to feed room where Wesley was last-man-stacking. Big Nelson, Shelby, Captain Cooper Carter, Pee Wee, Angel, Bill, Ned, with Tank hefting each bag down off the truck. Clockwork left/right body swings feeding the next man, and me, the new kid, thirteen-years-old, hired for grass cutting, placed in the middle, with expectation to equally share what was coming down the line.

I learned the hard way, beyond just the burlap sand-papering all exposed skin: if you bobble, if you can't handle the weight getting medicine-ball-times-ten slamming into your chest, then expect no mercy from men. The bags will continue getting tossed your way, while everyone waiting creates new names for you, as the ones still active in the line smirk and silently jeer as they keep 'em coming, bag after bag burying you long after you're down. They only stop when the throwers become too consumed with laughter at your buried predicament and your pitiful idea of what cussing amounts to.

Kind of like the anvil. Everybody saying they'd love for you to graduate up from push mowers and the numbing buzz of weed eaters along the miles of fence line, become a real horseman. But they got rules. If you can't pick up that black iron anvil sitting on the round-cut of hardwood out in front of the barn, then no, you can't test yourself against a thousand pounds of fiery beast ready to kick-stomp-bite your insides out of you. Two hundred and fifty-pound anvil—that's your man test.

You want to become a horseman, be part of a barn crew. Inside are the smells of rich sweet feed, cured hay, the dusty liveliness of horses, oiled leather from halters and lead shanks, and ever-present bluster of men. The steady sounds of hooves scuffing, the tines of steel pitchforks ringing, a banging of buckets, and man-laughter. You catch whiffs and glimpses when you take breaks to enter the barn’s tack room where saddles and medicines are kept, poking your head under the faucet in the sink for the rescue of water. Letting it run over your head, face and neck, trying to calm the steady broil from cutting grass in the heat of the day.

Okay, you get to come in from the summer swelter and clean stalls once in a while if they’re short-handed. Shovel manure. Anybody can do that. Everybody has to do that, even Pee Wee who is a rider, farm jockey, exercise "boy," who jumps high into the saddle and watches a quarter mile fly by in a little over twenty seconds. Big Nelson goes head to head with rank-minded glorious stallions every day, but he still has to shovel. Shelby, who is both old and old-school, works in the layup barn, root-doctoring the sick and injured in shadow ways unknown to the visiting veterinarian. He cleans stalls, telling stories of horses and the healing powers of Goldenseal on horses’ summer sores. The Captain is only six years older than you, but he's been entrusted with the mares and foals, he mucks stalls fast, and if you get tapped to help him you better not turn your back or he will jump you and thump you just for the fun of it, all the time throwing light punches and crowing like a cock on top of a pile of manure. Which is what you
smell like after such a thumping. Which is what you are. The grass, at least, has no agenda other than steady growing.

Sometimes when you find yourself out by the training track and you're trimming the grass down around each and every fence post to keep the farm looking sharp to passersby, you pause while they're working out the horses being groomed and aimed at big purse races in Kentucky and Maryland and New York. You hold your breath at the majesty flying past you, the power and heart. Angel tells you that there comes a time when the young horses no longer need the crop--the short leather whip brandished by riders. He says the horses in training go from being asked and urged to wanting to throw themselves around that track, legs blazing with wild focused purpose, daring one another to run faster. They live for it.

You tried the anvil at day's end one Friday, before taking off for the weekend. Everyone gathered. You felt the cords in your neck flaring like fish gills out of water, you asked the muscles in your biceps and forearms to obey, but you could not inch that piece of iron into the air, and the men sniggered and sniggered, awarded you new names, took off in dented trucks and on loud motorcycles with their payday checks, everyone intent on raising hell. Your mother picked you up in her Buick Roadmaster Estate Wagon.

The men allowed you in for unloading hay. A tractor trailer load of Timothy and alfalfa shipping in from Pennsylvania. What you learned this time: bales are easy to toss from the top of a truck across and into the barn loft. But as layer after layer is removed, and as you grow more tired, you must toss the hay bales higher and higher. And if you miss the loft, if an errant bale falls to the floor of the barn, then you become christened with new names. Ugly names. Names you don't want to own or live under. But you do, each day, as you roll your mower past the horsemen around the barns, heading to the outskirts of the farm.

You watch as the stallions are brought into a pen to breed with a few non-thoroughbred mares, summer too late in the season to offer them high-class registered horses. The idea: keep the stallions interested in their business, remind them what they are all about, passing their fiery lineage on to the next generation. People with plug-horses get a fine foal, the studs get that moment of roaring release for whatever might be pent-up and angry and indomitable. Bill and Ned make coarse jokes while witnessing the act. You remain quiet, fighting to keep your eyes from going too wide.

Midsummer comes, and the Boss is unhappy with you. Says you're a damn fine grass cutter, but he needs more help with the horses on weekends. The men work twelve-and-a-half days on, then get a day-and-a-half off. Half the crew gets that day-and-a-half off every other weekend. The horses don't care about man-needs--water, stall-cleaning, hay and feed, plus time to stretch legs in a grassy paddock must happen daily. That's all there is to it. If it was Christmas Day they wouldn't care, their needs are their needs, and men are entrusted to take care of those basic things. Boss wants you there on weekends to help get the job done. It would be your first step into becoming a horseman.

Your parents are devoutly worried about you. Aged thirteen, and you have not yet accepted The Lord as your savior. They’re not about to let you work weekends until you’ve gotten straight with God. They haul you to the First Baptist Church of Ashland every Sunday, hoping you will be converted, redeemed. But that light simply hasn't shown on you, that calling hasn't tugged away at your insides and made you whole just yet. Saturday nights your parents push
conversation over fried chicken, tomatoes, and sweet corn on the cob, prepping you for the big
decision you must make in front of the congregation in your suit and tie.

Nobody appears to be close-around one day when the work ends, and you’re once again waiting for your mom to pick you up. Horses snort softly, contentedly in the barns, the now-familiar aromas of cut grass, horses, bushhogged fields and manure, plus the rackety buzz of cicadas all fill you with confidence. Orange day lilies bloom around the barn front, decorative aesthetic circling around the anvil. No one is watching, no one around to call you names. You put your arms beneath the mismatched points of the anvil, you assume that bent-knee stance you’ve finally learned from hoisting feed bags and hay, and you lift. The anvil rises an inch. You drop it back in place, sit down with your back against it waiting for your mom.

A day later the Boss pulls up alongside the road you’re mowing and tells you to forget the mower, get in the truck, he needs you, get the hell in. You obey. He has given you this job, and he has serious expectations that you need to fulfill. He calls you bad names. You forgive him inside yourself, because somewhere in the future you want a name like "Big" or "Captain" in front of what they all call you. You know: he pays you money for living your days in the open air, pays wages to you in this fight against the heat and the weight. And you realize you’ve never been more willing in your entire scratch-ass life.

He yells for you to follow him when the truck throws gravel while sliding to a halt, door banging open as if there’s an emergency somewhere close by. He has a serious hitch in his giddy-up, but he’s a fast-walker just the same. Old injuries he could give a hoot about. The two of you go through a gate, into a pasture that tapers down to the Newfound River, a trickle that maybe shouldn’t be called a river though such things get misnamed all the time. Still, there’s a strong current, and there are fine pools that silver fish like to dart through. You’re puzzled: the men are all gathered there, each and every one of them knee-deep in the flow, holding hands.

They begin to drown you. Correction: they commence baptizing you. The Boss grabs you by the hair and wrenches you backward into the water. Even under water you somehow grasp his words: Oh Lord, we are gathered here today to redeem the soul of this candy-assed sinner. He who was a boy must now enter into the kingdom of heaven and work, the province of sweat and manure, blood and muscle. Boss Man is holding me under a little too long. He was blind, but now he sees, he was weak, but now he’s ready to kick some serious ass. Bubbles begin fighting for sunlight. We are all witnesses--we who hitched back in barn shadow, we who stood on the hillside in the far-pasture, we who leaned on the railing in the barn loft--we who knew in the instant that your anvil of faith had been lifted. Please Lord, bless this sinner so that he might work on Saturdays and Sundays, attending the Church of God-Given Hard Work. Let him emerge a new man. A man who can labor on weekends, learn about horses. In Your name we pray, amen.

Praise The Lord I was lifted up, allowed to catch a deep and righteous breath of air. Tears all around, laughter, smiling, brotherhood. Praise Him, for enlightening my parents when I got home all soaked and happy, recounting just the pertinent parts of the story for their appraisal. Their hallelujah arms raised high, and they waved me off to the blessed path of horse and farm and men. Praise Him--for I was saved.