A Farm Is Life

Jo Brown*
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Abstract

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Then I looked out. I saw the dark sky and the stars and the matchstick outline of the corn crib across the lot. I heard the soft rustling of the ponies as they ate.

Rog sang softly—to himself—and to me—and maybe to some girl—a love song. I listened dreamily—it was good to be home. I closed my eyes and began to get my feeling—my thinking feeling—and I could hear but I could not hear the quiet chewing of the ponies and the love song Rog was singing and the flutter of the pigeons above the splash of the milk in the bucket. And I thought—this is it—this is what I want—I've gone to college to find it and it's here. It's in me and it's with me and it's for me. I want life—this is life. It's in everything—in the old cow and in the manure and the dirt and in the corncrib out here. This is life. A farm is life.

It is the beginning—the way I want to sing and the way I do sing when I go out the back door in the morning. And the feeling of something great when I see pigs born—that time old Sarah had so much trouble she almost lost them all, and Rog and I stayed with her all night. I can't forget the smoky lantern and the pain Sarah had and the hurting tears in my throat. And then it was over, and we'd saved five pigs, and it was life. It was the beginning of life.

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It is beauty. The look of our Palomino stallion, El Capitán—a great name and a great horse. The look of him as he gallops to the pasture and his mares—head thrown back and white mane flying—his sides muscular slabs of gold. And the look of winter snow that stretches on and on and on and hurts your eyes when you look at it and holds the precious tiny tracks of a field mouse. A farm holds the beauty of life.

And there is ugliness. The slimy mud and manure mixture of the barn lot when the ground comes un-frozen in the spring. The dirty gray rats in the oats bin that I'm scared of—who creep and gnaw and bloat themselves on our grain. That is ugly, but it is farm and it is life.

And it is love—animal love—the bellows of old Spot each spring when we wean her from her calf. And the way I felt when we had to shoot Benny, a twenty-year-old pony, blind in both eyes. But he was Benny, and he was mine, and I loved him.

And it's hate. The terrible way that El Capitán hates our fiery little Shetland pony, King, and the way King hates Cappy—that day last summer when King broke through the gate into Cappy's territory and the fight. The way they screamed and reared and clawed one another, and I standing terrified in the barn door while Rog tried to separate them with a whip. King finally jumped the fence to limp away. But Cappy had a raw torn place above his eye where the little pony had kicked him. He was never as beautiful again.

It is the bitternes and helplessness—and yet the laughter. Winter—eleven below—squatting by the frozen pump with Rog while he holds a torch at the frost-pin hole and me pouring hot water down through the spout with no success—tears of despair frozen on my face. Then going to the house to make another torch and get more water and warm our hands. And Mom wanting me to stay in—"No, and besides he needs me, don't you, Rog?" And the feeling of having really done something when the handle gives and I feel the water gushing up and it comes out rusty and dirty at first and the horses crowd around the tank. And then back at the house and being able to laugh at Rog's grimy, smoky face and the tingle as I plunge my hands into cold water to unfreeze them.

And it is sweetness. Wanting to hold and squeeze very tight black and white baby pigs with curly tails and a sugary, nutty smell. And when I go after the cows by myself—singing
Sketch

—and then I stop and look at the earth and the sky and put my legs beneath me and sit down and hold a handful of coarse clover. It’s then I want to squeeze the earth and the sky and the clover as closely as I did the pigs.

And always it is the end. The colt that was supposed to be born in October but wasn’t. And then a snowstorm the last of November. The mare didn’t come in to feed that night. Rog and I started into the pasture—saying nothing. And we found them. The new colt in a frozen heap on the ground and the mare—not moving—staying with it. We led her to the barn gently and gave her an extra portion of oats and curried her and bedded her down. We could do no more...

Then Rog was done. I heard him slap the cow’s side and I felt good, and I felt great as I jumped down from the window and opened the back gate. And I thought—this is why I love it—because it is everything—the bitterness and the ugliness and the laughter and the love. This is where I want to be— to live. Because a farm is living. A farm is life.