



## how i failed at farming (again)

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**J**ust before the great Illinois corn-and-soybean harvest begins, it is customary to tell farm-injury stories. These graphic tales of startling disfigurement are told in the poker-faced manner of the heartland Midwesterner, who handles everything life can throw at him — from winning the Illinois State Lottery to a farm foreclosure — in the same way: a nod of the head, a pick of a stubborn callus, possibly a spit of tobacco, and a tight grimace that says, “Oh, well, what can you do?” Grim encounters between man and jagged mechanical parts are usually recounted while the storyteller is engaged in the very activity that led a neighbor to lose a knuckle, or a testicle, or half his face.

“Caught his shirt sleeve in the grain auger,” the farmer might say, while loading grain into an auger himself. “Ripped off all his clothes and broke about every bone in his body before it spit him out. Lay there quietly for hours before anyone came by. Vultures started circling. Rats, too. The only person within shouting distance was the boss’s wife, which is why he kept quiet. He was embarrassed, you know, about being naked in the vicinity of a proper lady.”

An auger is a large, screwlike mechanism that conveys grain from ground level to the top of one of those tall silver bins that break the flatness of the prairie landscape. Augers are noisy, dangerous, and unforgiving. It’s no wonder many a shipment of Midwest grain includes a missing digit.

Farm-injury stories are useful if for no other reason than that they scare the rest of us away from farming. They may explain, in part, why fewer than 3 percent of the workforce farms and the rest of us eat merrily away without knowing exactly where our food originates. (We know that milk comes from cows and beef comes from cattle, but what’s a steer? And why would one “poll” an Angus?)

If you have a strong stomach and can listen long enough without fainting or retching, you’ll find that farm-injury stories have an important underlying message: pay attention. Furthermore, when you think things are going well, pay *extra* attention. By the Midwestern farmer’s philosophy, bad is bad, and good will probably turn bad if you don’t watch out. Average is ideal.

My brother-in-law summed it up one afternoon while

changing one of the massive dual tires on his John Deere combine: “John Jordan had one of these tires fall on top of him. Suffocated him to death. Slowly. He was having a good day . . . too good.”

**a**fter twenty-seven years of living out west, I have moved to rural Illinois so my wife can be near her family. When we first arrived, I began bragging about my previous

stewlike meals and bake round loaves of brown bread. I would have ample time to write poetry and learn to play the dulcimer. In the afternoons, we would take long naps in handmade Guatemalan hammocks. Three-day weekends would be the norm. (That’s as far as I got in my predairy fantasy. Actually, imagining the naps, stews, and homemade bread was usually good enough.)

The reality, of course, was something else altogether.



farm experience, at a dairy in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, where I was once employed as an “assistant dairy herdsman.” Impressive as the title sounds, all it meant was that I toiled like an indentured servant seven days a week, twelve hours a day, without coffee breaks. During daylight hours, I milked sixty messy cows — twice — and helped with the unrelenting field work. Nighttime was reserved for locating strays in nearby forests, where they loved to play hide-and-seek, and chasing them back to their pasture. Any remaining time was usually spent on my back studying the insides of my eyelids. For compensation, I was given a drafty farmhouse to sleep in, the princely sum of six hundred dollars a month, and an unlimited supply of high-fat milk and red meat.

This was twenty years ago, during my failed back-to-the-land period. My experience was hardly the pastoral ideal I’d had in mind. I’d pictured more of a Wendell Berry essay: farming with draft horses; growing weed- and insect-free patches of organic carrots and tomatoes; working in harmony with like-minded people who never had trouble reaching a consensus. There would be black Labrador retrievers named Molly, with red kerchiefs around their necks, frolicking in poppy-covered meadows. Someone else would cook large,

Squatting beside a manure-covered cow and squeezing her teats as she tries to kick you in the head is about as glamorous as it sounds. Getting slapped in the face with the same cow’s urine-soaked tail is also high on my list of experiences never to repeat. Dairy cows are extremely stubborn, but also bony in the hips, so hitting them is a bad idea, and the reason why so many dairy farmers break their hands. But the most valuable lesson I learned was: never stand directly behind a cow when she coughs. Their bowels are looser than creamed corn.

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