

Iowa Summer

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It should have been a pleasant drive from Indiana to Iowa that summer. Our '63 maroon Ford Galaxy, its glossy finish ending above twin full moons that functioned as headlights, had a most modern innovation: carpeting. I loved the way it muffled the road noise, how cozy it made the car seem in the rain, and the way I could scrunch my forever-bare toes into the soft pile of that tan carpet. To a ten-year-old, we were the classiest people in town. What the car lacked was air-conditioning. But at least we had our first brand-new car, with its new-car smell, and that wonderful carpeting under my toes.

Driving to Iowa back then was an exercise in patience on the part of my parents. My older sister Cyndi and I never got along, and this was magnified by long periods in the close confines of the back seat of a car. We bickered and bickered until my father's patience wore as thin as spring ice, at which point my father swung his right arm over the back seat, waved it back and forth, and yelled at us to "cut it out back there" or we were "never going on a vacation again." This was actually an annual event, for we took a trip every summer, and every summer my father had to tell us the same thing. It didn't get any better as we got older, either.

The farm, overlooking the flat, fertile farmland of north-central Iowa, watched us through the hot Iowa sun as we approached. Familiar replaced unfamiliar. Alongside the road sat the timeworn, rust-red corn crib, decaying bits of cob bristling out of its broken-down sides like a scarecrow's hair under its hat. We always asked my father how old the crib was, and each time he would say he didn't know and why did we have to ask him again? There it sat, a lone sentinel along the road, the gatekeeper to the Anderson farm. Every time I saw it, I felt a familiar constriction in my stomach.

As we rounded the corner, we could see my grandparents' lane on our left, with the farm buildings waiting for us at the end. There sat the big black mailbox on the right side of that narrow dirt path, a road better suited to horse and

wagon than our spiffy new Ford Galaxy. The weeds in the middle of the lane grew better than the flowers in Grandma's garden, and she fiercely believed in her mission to keep those weeds under submission, sending Uncle Maurice out there on schedule to keep them in line. She was not as adept at keeping Uncle Maurice in line. The drive provided a means of escape.

As we drove up the lane and onto the little knoll where the farm buildings were located, a fur-covered cannonball propelled itself at each of us as we got out. Sputnik actually belonged to my Uncle Richard, who named him after the Russian satellite, but the dog spent most of his time at my grandparents' farm because Uncle Richard was one of those "rich Iowa farmers," the kind of bachelor who liked to travel as far away as Russia and let someone else take over his farm while he saw life outside the narrow confines of a small town.

Sputnik was black and brown, very short and squat, with a fierce countenance that belied his friendly demeanor. He was so square and solid that, when he hurtled toward you, you felt like he was a guided missile on a mission to knock you down and lick you to death. His duty done, Sputnik would always abruptly return to his farm dog responsibilities with an air of great importance, immediately forgetting the new arrivals.

At the end of the lane, Grandma waited impatiently during this imposition on her valuable time, hands folded across her chest, her thin arms and legs poking out from behind her cotton house dress to which an apron seemed permanently attached. Her black hair, not daring to turn grey, was tucked into an almost invisible hair net in hopes that it would stay in place in spite of the almost frenzied degree of activity in which she was constantly engaged. She swooped down upon my sister, gave her a big hug, and told Cyndi how happy she was to see her. Then Grandma rushed past me to my father, scolding him because it had been so long since we had been there, and then turned around and practically flew back into the kitchen to her important business.

Meanwhile, Grandpa shuffled over to Cyndi, his crew-cut grey hair bristling out of the top of his head like so many unruly weeds in a garden patch. While hugging my sister he turned to my father and shook his hand, asking about the drive and remarking that this was "the hottest summer on record" (it was always "the hottest summer on record"). Then he shuffled back to his tractor, slowly climbed aboard, and drove back out

into the field.

Uncle Maurice moseyed over to tell us about his latest painting, describing in great detail the symbolism represented in it which was obviously so far above our heads. This uncle, a charter member of the counter-culture of the 1960s, was very caught up in the anti-establishment rhetoric of that era. All of his paintings were bizarre, loaded with some esoteric symbolism he concocted in his "visions." He was proud of the patience he displayed while enlightening those who weren't "with it," so he now took his time reciting every particular of the metamorphosis of his most recent work of art.

Uncle Maurice's long brown hair, which always looked like the Andersons had run out of shampoo a little too long ago, hung down to his shoulders underneath the beaded Indian browband wrapped around his forehead. Fringe decorated the front of his suede shirt. Faded blue jeans provided for summer ventilation with their patchwork of holes. Brown leather sandals on long, narrow feet served as startlingly unorthodox work boots. After delivering his monologue, Uncle Maurice sauntered off to finish his chores, calling to Cyndi over his shoulder to join him after dinner on the front porch to sing with him while he played his guitar. It was because of her uncle that Cyndi eventually learned how to play the guitar herself.

The two-story white frame farmhouse, its green trim outlining the peeling paint in a feeble attempt to provide order, faced the east, regarding the barn, corn crib, pump house, and pig pens with a melancholy stare. The farm buildings clustered closely, standing together against any incursion from outsiders. Scruffy white cats skulked about, taking full responsibility for ensuring zero population growth in the mouse and rat families on the farm. Chickens milled about, hoping to find stray kernels of grain to serve as *hors d'oeuvres* to their meager daily rations. Black and white Poland Chinas snorted and grunted as they lolled about in the mud and putrid odors of their foul, fetid pig pen.

The front door of the Anderson house was only used for "real" company. We used the side door, which had a good view of the scraggly raspberry bushes, their thorny stems just waiting for little girl fingers and arms. This door also had a compelling view of the nearby rancid, rickety outhouse. I always said I could smell the outhouse from the corn crib down the road, but my parents scoffed at me (especially my father,



whose family farm this was) and said that I had an "overactive imagination." "Overactive imagination" indeed. Who could forget the smell of the slimy slop that lay buried underneath the sliver-saturated seats of the outhouse, the feel of the dark, dank wood that lay under your feet while you sat, the circumference of the seat encircling your posterior like a bull's-eye?

I was terrified of that outhouse. It was pitch black inside, a tiny two-seater with no ventilation whatsoever, and in the stifling Iowa summer the smell could make you faint even before you opened the door. But what really frightened me was that some day a chicken would come up from underneath while I was sitting in there, and peck me on the behind. I knew this was inevitable—Frankie Hinkle told me so. He said that, when he and his brother were at his grandparents' farm in Minnesota, his brother Jim was sitting in their outhouse and a chicken came up and pecked *him*, so I know it was just a matter of time before I met my own chicken.

I tried to avoid the outhouse. If I knew we were going into town, to church, or to some other farm for a visit, I would try to wait for that chance. But, most often, I would resort to using the white granite-ware chamber pot in the big bedroom upstairs. I didn't know until years later that everyone in the dining room below could hear the clank of the lid and everything else I was doing because of the grate in the ceiling between the dining room and the bedroom above it. Mother said she didn't want to tell me that everyone knew, because I would never have gone back to the farm again. I'm surprised my sister let that opportunity pass her by.

Once inside the side door and into the kitchen, the cold linoleum of the green and white speckled floor chilled my bare feet. I stopped at the water bucket, lifted the ladle and drank the lukewarm water, letting the ladle fall back into the bucket with a loud clang. Grandma scolded me for being so careless, and I ran off into the other room.

The downstairs had only four rooms, the kitchen and bedroom in the back, and the dining room and living room in the front. All of the floors in the downstairs were covered with the same dull linoleum that covered the kitchen floor. When it wasn't cold and clammy, it was hot and sticky. I was apparently the only one who noticed this, for only I ever went barefoot on that farm.

The dining room was huge, with easy chairs and a wood

stove on one side, and a long table and two very large oak china cabinets on the other. Tall windows looked out over the farm, bringing a lot of light into the room, making it the one cheery place on the farm.

The living room was small and dark, with a massive walnut upright piano towering over one end of the room, and a musty couch and chairs nearby that were similarly uninviting. Two windows that could have brought some life to that room were in heavy damask draperies, hanging oppressively over the only means of fresh air. Cyndi spent the bulk of the time she was indoors with my grandparents in the dining room; I staid in the living room, or in one of the two bedrooms upstairs.

On the dresser in my grandparents' bedroom behind the living room was a music box which played "There's No Place Like Home." Over and over I stood in that dark little room, alternately listening to the arguments interspersed with laughter in the dining room and the melody from the music box. The porcelain of the music box was cool and grainy in my hands, and the cold linoleum froze my bare feet.

During the day Cyndi went out with Grandpa on the tractor or picked raspberries with Grandma. Then Grandpa, Uncle Maurice and my father took Cyndi fishing on the river, coming home with pails and pails of bullheads. Cyndi helped the men filet the fish and then assisted Grandma in the kitchen.

You could always hear Grandma cook. She clanged her pots and pans around, slapped dough on the counter, pulverized any meat with which she came into contact, her shrill voice rising above the cacophony of sound. You could depend on an argument going on in the dining room at the same time as the cooking and, not to be left out, Grandma would enthusiastically yell her contribution and then turn back to her work.

The high decibel level continued at dinner. Grandpa, Uncle Maurice and my father were always engaged in some heated discussion, plates slammed on the table, utensils clattered and crashed against the plates, and always my grandmother's voice penetrated the whole affair. The platters and platters heaped high with steaming bullheads, their millions of little bones hoping to make one last attempt to strike out at man, all seemed to rush at the only person who hated fish. It was as if all of the fish in the whole world had arrived, with their smelly slimy skin, their hated little bones, and their putrid flesh, intent on pushing me even further out of the Anderson family.

After dinner, Cyndi and Uncle Maurice went out to sing on the front porch. I slipped unnoticed out the side door, past the outhouse glaring at me in the twilight, and walked down the little lane toward the mailbox. I stood and watched the sunset, listening to the crickets, soaking in the last warmth of the sun on my arms, feeling the soft, warm dirt of the lane underneath my bare feet. Not until it was dark did I head back toward the house.

Nightime on a farm should be as serene as a sunset. Not so at the Anderson place. The clank-clank of the hog feeders was a continuous lullaby, daring me to shut it out just long enough to fall asleep. The hogs grunting and chickens cackling, together with the ongoing argument in the dining room below, did not pretend to lull me to sleep. Even the rooster was confused about the time. He would crow off and on all night. You had to work hard at sleep at the Andersons, as hard as you were expected to work at gaining entry to their club. Neither was possible.

