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Farm Sale: A True Story *For Bill*

The machinery is lined up—tractors, plows, disks, harrows, baler, cultivators, planters, hay racks, gravity boxes, loader, augers, grinder--from the east door of the Morton Building machine shed and circling the barnyard in a funeral procession, all the way to the edge of the long driveway. There the John Deere combine is parked: the head of the procession. The hearse. If the combine's gone, this farm is dead.

Closest to the shed door are the hayracks. The racks are for sale and so is all the stuff piled on them: log chains, fence stretchers, posthole drivers, disk plates, wheels, tires, wrenches, a welder, soldering irons, sprockets, front end tractor weights. The collected stuff from the tool shed, the garage, and the machine shed covers three hayracks.

I count ninety-eight pickups, up and down the driveway, wedged together, in the house yard, the orchard, the barnyard, strung along the edge of last year's cornfield stubble. Everybody has parked with care because it's February, thawing, and muddy. There is one mini-van, and mine is one of three cars on the place. Everybody else drove pickups. Mom would turn over in her grave if she could see all the tire tracks across her well-kept front lawn.

These men in striped overalls and Carhartt coveralls are mostly friends, come to pay their last respects. It is, after all, the funeral for a farm. The last of our funerals for awhile, we hope. First Dad, then Mom, then this rented crop land was sold out from under us, so the farming operation has to go, too. A farm funeral is the end of a family's way of life, the end of a story, and every man in work boots standing in the barnyard breathes, "There but for the grace of God go I." These men are my brother Bill's friends, come to be a support for him, hands in their pockets, come to buy something at a fair price. If Bill has to sell out, they may as well contribute to what he can take away from this, and they can get something they need in the bargain.

The auctioneer's voice gallops along, taking bids for each item on the hayrack. A very few of these men are vultures, strangers from far parts of the county or even further, drawn by farm sale ads and disguised in Carhartts. The vultures circle, bidding to pay the least and take away the most, picking over the bones of our family's, my brother's loss.

I've written this down, to the last detail. Twenty-one years ago, I wrote a story that opened with this scene, the galloping voice of the auctioneer removing each item from a family's lives, removing them from their family farm. But in my dream world, the day was frozen winter gray, and the girl walking the barnyard was only fifteen, and her pony was sold on auction, so her love in life, her passion, was gone to bidders. Now, this sale is not selling my passion; just my brother's. This black Iowa soil runs deep in my veins and is in the marrow of my bones, but I haven't lived here for thirty years. I've never been away for more than a few months at a time; but though this land is part of my soul, it's

not in my bank account, my daily routine, my sunrise and sunset, chore time, planting, and harvest, like it is in my brother's. It's his passion that we're selling here. I'm burying my childhood, my roots, but he's burying his life.

In the story that I wrote, the brother and sister had a living mother, had lost their father to a heart attack just as suddenly as mine dropped ten years after I'd written it, almost ten years to the day that I'd written the farm sale scene. It terrified me when I realized I'd prewritten history. Now, another eleven years later, the sale I wrote twenty-one years ago has sprung to life. Again, I'm terrified.

It's tenuous business at best, farming in the twenty-first century, and small farming is already a thing of the past. But it's been the dream of each of the men who stand here bidding; since each one was big enough to sit in his own daddy's lap, on the seat of a John Deere 60 or an International Harvester H, to push a toy tractor around the sandbox by age two. This has always been my brother's dream. By age six, he had mapped out an entire farm under the spreading branches of our backyard elm tree before Dutch Elm Disease. He erected fences, and worked the soil with the proper toys to match the season. Disking, plowing, harrowing, planting, and dropping seeds behind his toy planter that couldn't really drop full-size corn kernels or soybeans into the ground. His tiny plants sprouted and grew, and he cultivated, baled, picked corn, and combined. What implements weren't available in toy size at the dealer, he made from tin and laths. He had a homemade crib and machine shed to house his equipment.

I see that little boy who wore out the knees on every pair of his own striped overalls, all grown up now, gray in his hair, as he walks now among his friends, greeting them, answering questions. Some of these men I haven't seen for thirty years, and they come up to say hi to me. My bus driver from grade school is here, my second and third cousins, neighbors, members of Fjeldberg Lutheran Church. They admire Bill's care of his tractors, the meticulous maintenance his combine received, and his honesty when asked if things run perfectly. The baler does, and it brings top dollar. The John Deere 3020 brings over \$5000, which surprises everyone, and so does a White that Bill says needs bearings. The John Deere combine, the massive be-all-end-all of the farm, the purpose and the heart of things, brings only \$3100, \$4500 if you count the extra for the corn head and grain head. A new one costs six digits. The combine is the last thing sold, last of the funeral procession, the lowering of the body into the ground, the lowest note of the day. Then it's over, and we want to leave before the men finish loading duals, hooking up planters, driving away the tractors. Watching it all go down the driveway is the dirt thrown, "ashes to ashes, dust to dust" sprinkled over the casket. I've blinked back tears all day, but my brother seems to hold it together. I'm not sure how. He's my hero all over again, as he has been since I was three years old and wished I could drive a tractor like he did at six.

The auctioneer comes up to us and says, "Well, guess it's all over but the shoutin'." Indeed. It's all over, a closed, closed chapter in our lives, and we're just one little chapter in the book of our country's heartland. So we load ourselves up and we head down the driveway.

After all, we're a Norwegian Lutheran farm family, and there won't be any shoutin'.