

Thanks giving

Johnnyboy would never forget that day. A combine harvester was great. Up there, demolishing everything below was a real high for a kid who had spent his life in awe of the world overhead.

His father didn't speak much. Except when he cursed. When he lost his temper words rolled with fluency off a tongue that was rarely stretched. All it took was a calf to go astray, a bird to shit in the wrong direction, back a car into the forklift. A thrill of shrill explicative's would cut the air, uselessly falling flat shortly afterwards as their power waned and reality took hold. Johnnyboy was wary of his father, followed him doggedly, head down, a couple of paces carefully placed behind. Jack didn't say much but it was important to keep on the right track, trace the footsteps cautiously. His father had an awful temper when things worked out wrong.

The harvest meant sandwiches. Lots of them neatly cut, packed, stored in metal tins. Biscuit tins that were Christmas presents from shops you had supplied all year. An old fashioned loyalty card. Biscuits gone, they were stored up for the sandwiches in spring. Corned beef, which also only appeared once a year, was spread generously, an odour of rich meat beaten into the silky linen of neatly sliced white bread. All folded into tin foil. The kids helped put it all together, hands squashing bread piles until they squeezed into shiny layers. Their mother supervised, sweating and seeming to enjoy the thrill of anxious variety: it wasn't like milking the cows dry every morning and evening. And the bottles of beer were bought. Once a year beer was allowed in the house for the harvest. His mother would keep a couple for herself.

The harvesters were special. Usually yellow, occasionally green. They couldn't be overtaken. They rolled on at their own pace. They fought their way down the narrow roads until they got onto their playing field where they always won: they only ever drew when the weather failed and the rain came in too early but

even then it was too late to stop. They bit into the ripe earth and make it offer up its grains.

From the height of the harvesters platform, shuddering, shaking, rattling like a hamster in an enormous cage without seatbelts, you could see most of the country: or that is what it seemed like at the time. Back then the fields, the whole world, was neatly encapsulated into what could be glimpsed from a combine harvester's dust stained cabin. It gave you a view on a wider, more expansive world than you could see when milking the cows or even from the rickety swaying of an old bicycle taking you to the nearest village and the hint of a kiss from a girl who smelled of cheap lavender to hide her family pigsty and her own morning ablutions.

Johnnyboy spend the year dreaming of that ride. When you get older rides take on a new meaning, but back then that was the only titillation Johnnyboy had. Standing up there dominating the wheat as it bent beneath the wheels, was trashed to a core, beaten into trailers that thundered off to try and earn some money, you were king of the landscape. The prices were never right. Or the moisture. Or the weather itself. That was life on a farm: hope against hail, endless despair even when the sun shone and the corn fell beneath the blades in even streaks of the machine up and across the plain. Gold grains shirking, dust throttling the back of your throat, a longing for that beer that was packed once a year for the harvesting crew. Jack would take one for himself. Johnnyboy would watch his father drink it and wonder when he would be old enough to do the same.

Most of the time Johnnyboy stood idly beside the beer, hoping for that ride: he spent most of his teenage years doing the same.

Johnnyboy only rode the combine harvester once, but the memory lingered like the scent of a long dead flower hovering somewhere in the depths of sensual memory, tickling your fancy, reminding you of something you keep forgetting. Dust, the whiff of body odor from Frank the driver, corn husks down your socks, sun glimpsing through the enormous window that had become your

world as the engine sweated, pumping iron. The cattle in the next field staring, wondering whether or not to move off to the corner, but like the child up front, too trapped by the image to let fright kill the adrenalin rush. The machine shuddered beneath his feet. Frank never said anything. His father beckoned. It was time to get down. The harvester never stopped. They jumped off the bottom rung and hit the ground running. Jack didn't say a word. Johnnyboy followed his father breathlessly.

The need returned every summer, with the consistency of an allergy.

He had never told his father how much he wanted that ride. Year after year the longing to repeat stuck in stomach like a ball of pasta waiting to explode. How he longed to be up there in the cockpit, running along side and grasping the steps: there was no time to stop. You kept rolling. The exhilaration of the trip, straw in your socks, tickling, irritating, dust in your ears, throat so dry Johnnyboy himself was tempted to try a beer. The roar of the engine, the chuckle as it beat through the stalks, the howl as grain was poured out the funnel into the tractor and trailers rolling alongside in unison, until one sped off down the fields, then the knuckle twisting road, to be weighed, sold and another effortlessly slid into line and took its place. Johnnyboy envied those young lads who were just old enough to have a driving license, or maybe they didn't, but tall enough to reach a clutch and a smile big enough as they rattled along narrow country lanes at high speed, high speed for a tractor.

Johnnyboy never became one of them. He went to university and wrote about them instead and started to call his dad Jack. Daddy was too trivial. They'd never really been all that intimate. First names sounded correct.

Spring came around every year but Johnnyboy could never ask Jack straight out for permission to ride the harvester once more: grain stored, sold, it was too late again. Parents were like that. Demanding and silent. You knew what

they wanted, knew you would never fulfill those needs, and at the same time you struggled to express what you wanted, hiding behind a sulking sly stare that hinted at everything but clarity.

Not having rode that harvester again, or more importantly not having asked to, stayed with Johnnyboy all his life, stunted his growth almost. Every time he had a big opportunity he backed down. He could have gone into politics but couldn't face the stump. He could have fucked that red haired in the lift but the noise of a distant harvester crowded his instincts. She looked away embarrassed. Johnnyboy scuffed his shoes.

Johnnyboy could have asked his father to let him ride in the cabin again. But Johnnyboy never mentioned it to Jack, wheat chaff caught in his neck, scraped the back of his throat raw; the roar of tractors in a hurry swirled before his eyes, blotting out the options. Surely his father would have said yes. Maybe all Johnnyboy had to do was ask. Standing there staring at Jack's coffin Johnnyboy would never now know. Their conversation was as silent and bleak as ever.

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