

3 COUNTRY LIVING

Eventually, my stepfather, along with hundreds of others, was laid off from his job as a tool and die machinist. He eventually found a job in upstate New York, in a small rural town about thirty minutes outside of Rochester. His mother had purchased a home in the next town over so we packed up and moved upstate. I remember my grandmother being sad about us moving farther away. She never said it directly to me but I could tell by the way she talked to me that it was bothering her so of course, it bothered me also. Antonio and the entire neighborhood came out to wave goodbye to us as we drove off and headed to our new home.

Country living was a serious change of pace; our house was located directly across the street from a cow pasture in which the farmer kept all his heifers. Heifers, for those that are about as "farm oriented" as I was, are female cows that have yet to give birth to any young of their own. Our rented home was a huge old farm house that was built in the 1800's and had a large red barn which was separated from the house by about 50 feet of unpaved driveway and parking space. The house sat on at least 20 acres and our closest neighbors were more than a mile away in either direction.

The house had 4 large bedrooms on the second floor, my room was huge, so big that when I would play with my toys on the dark wooden floor I could hear an echo bounce off of the bare walls. The doors creaked whenever they were opened or closed and the house was so drafty that if the wind blew hard enough outside, the thin, see through curtains that hung from most of our windows would move as if they were a flag hung high on a flag pole.

By the time of our move, my sister was three or four years old and my mother had given birth to my brother, who was named Calvin after my stepfather. We left Elmira in the middle of my fourth-grade year and I transferred into my new school, where I knew no one and where I was the only person of color in my class. I always had an easy time making friends. Most of my peers liked me immediately and I always ended up being the leader amongst them, not because I was the smartest or loudest of the group and certainly not because I was outgoing but because I was easy to get along with and I always managed to make everyone around me smile. I was actually a very shy kid, I have never enjoyed meeting new people in large groups and I've always shied away from situations in which I was the center of attention, but inside my own groups where I was comfortable and knew my peers, I would open up and allow them to be close to me and myself to be close to them.

Within a few weeks at my new school I had made a bunch of new friends and became especially close with a few of the boys that rode my school bus to and from school each day. The Smith boys and I became instant friends, they were the sons of the family that owned the house we lived in as well as the cow

pasture across the street, and they had a large dairy farm where their own huge, old farm house was located. Their bus stop was the one right before mine when we were heading home and the one right after mine when we were headed to school in the mornings.

Occasionally when my mother had doctor's appointments with my little brother, I would get off the bus at their house and stay with them for a few hours during the week. These visits introduced me to life on a farm. As soon as we got off the bus, we would drop off our books in the house then head to the barn that housed the cows and they would prepare the electric milking machines while their father and a few farm hands would begin to round up the cows.

As each cow entered the barn, they would move quickly to a large trough filled with grain and begin to feed, at which point the boys and I would lock the cow's heads into a gate so that they could be milked. The machines used to milk the cows were stainless steel pots with hoses connected to tubes attached to the main pot. Each hose had a stainless steel suction cup that was placed on the cows' udders by hand, this was our job, and then the machine would suck the milk from the cows' udder using a pulsating suction action. Each steel container was attached to clear hoses that would run the milk to huge storage containers in another area of the barn where the milk was then pasteurized and afterwards transferred to another storage container to be cooled and loaded onto large tanker trucks for delivery.

When the cows were all milked, they would hit a button that would release the bars that held the cow's heads and the cows would be herded out through the back of the barn back to the pasture. As soon as the cows made their way out of the barn, their chores were done and we would usually have an hour or so to explore the farm before it was time to head into the house to do homework and eat dinner. We would climb to the top of one of the barns and make forts out of hay, play hide-and-go-seek in the cornfields across the street and venture into the huge silos where the grain was stored and bounce balls off of the walls and make weird noises then laugh at the echo. I loved playing on that farm but I could never get over the smells of the dirt and grime. A few hundred cows create an unforgettable smell, especially inside of a confined space. And I would always have all kinds of hay and grain and dirt in my hair whenever we would play, which I hated, but I loved exploring the farm and all the adventures we would get into.

Every morning the Smith boys would be up by 4am to do their morning chores before they headed off to school. I learned that farming was extremely hard work and I also learned how much I enjoyed consuming something that I had helped nurture or harvest. The milk that came from those cows tasted better than any other milk I've ever experienced and the vegetables from their small garden, which we all helped plant and pull weeds from, appealed to me and I actually enjoyed eating them. Their parents were always busy doing work on the farm, cleaning, cooking, repairing the house or farm equipment. I can't recall

ever seeing their father sit down, except to eat. Between the smell and dirt of the farm and the amount of work I witnessed the Smith family put into their farm, I knew that farming was definitely not the life for me.

My friends from the next bus stop after mine, the Denis's, had a pig farm and cultivated huge amounts of land to grow corn. I would usually play with them on the weekends, helping them feed their pigs and then spend hours and hours exploring their hundreds of acres of land. I discovered that pigs will eat anything. When the boys told me this I didn't believe them so we would experiment by throwing all kinds of things into their pens to see if they would eat it. We threw rotten potatoes, chicken bones, dead birds and frogs into the pen and watched the pigs scramble and push each other out of the way as they rushed over and ate it all. They had pigs that were almost as tall as I was, and had to weigh at least 600 pounds and they had piglets that we would pick up so we could hear them squeal and call for their mothers.

After we fed the pigs we would head over to a pond adjacent to the cornfield, so we could catch frogs, skip rocks and occasionally go fishing. We would round up a bunch of frogs then subject them to all kinds of torture to see what would happen. We would throw them in the air as high as we could to see who could make their frog's guts splatter the farthest. We would throw them as hard as we could onto a barbed wire fence, seeing who could get the frog to stick on the fence. We tied M-80 firecrackers on the frog's backs and lite them then ran like hell before the frog exploded, sending frog legs and guts all over the place. We had the most fun using the frogs for target practice with their pellet gun. We tied them to a fence post and we all took turns shooting pellets at them, measuring our success by the amount of damage each shot would inflict.

One time we decided to play hide-and-go-seek in the corn fields. I took off running, determined that no one would find me, not considering that I had no idea where I was headed or how to get back. When I realized that I had probably run too far, I turned around and tried to head back in the direction that I had come from but after walking for what seemed like an hour, I started to yell hoping that someone would be able to find me. No one answered back and panic set in.

Eventually I found a small hill and was able to barely see over the cornstalks and figure out a way to get out of the field. I was at least 5 football fields away from the road, but it was not a road that I recognized. I made it to the road and realized that I was on the complete other side of the farm. It took me 2 hours to walk back to my house and I made it home just before dark, frustrated and angry at my friends for leaving me out there, so angry that to this very day, I suck my teeth and shake my head in disgust every time I drive by a cornfield!

For a prepubescent boy, country living was a lot of fun, there was always an animal to torment or some new property to explore and I could go fishing anytime I wanted. By this time, Patrick and his family had moved to Rochester, New York which was only about 45 minutes away, so he would often come

spend the weekends with us out in the sticks. We found a pond that was about a half-mile walk from the house so we would take some snacks, grab our fishing poles and a tackle box, throw the poles over our shoulders and walk down the gravel stone road to the pond. In order to get to the pond, we had to climb through an electric fence which was never a problem as we were both skinny and pretty agile.

One day, after making it through the fence, Patrick announced that he had to urinate so he put his fishing gear down and unzipped his pants to relieve himself. I did the same except I said, "hey, let's pee on the electric fence!" Patrick said, "naw man, I'm not doing that, you can do it but I'm not." I gave him a look of disgust and said, "man you're a chicken! You're afraid of a dumb fence? Well I'm going to do it," and I aimed myself directly at the fence and began to pee.

Patrick was watching in anticipation and I just gave him a disgusted look, as if to say "see, told you nothing would happen," when I felt a slight tingle. I said, "oh man, I just felt a . . ." and before I could finish my sentence a jolt of electricity shot up through my urine, through my penis and hit me in my stomach like a body punch from Mike Tyson, lifting me completely off my feet and knocking me flat on my back. I lay there, piss all over my pant leg, moaning and saying, "my dick, my dick, I think I broke my dick!" Patrick looked at me in shock and then busted out laughing hysterically, to the point where he fell on the ground as he pointed at me and reminded me, "I told you, I told you not to piss on an electric fence!" I eventually got up and shook my dick until I was convinced that it wasn't broken, zipped up my pants, gave Patrick the middle finger then started to laugh myself. To this day, Patrick will still bring that up and we both laugh until he cries.

By the time that first summer rolled around, a bunch of my friends were beginning to prepare for football practice. I had always played sports, my mother got me involved in baseball and bowling when I was four or five and I played every year, usually making the little league all-star team for baseball. My mother felt that sports were good for me and she would work hard to make sure I was kept busy and actively involved in some sort of sports year round. Seeing most of my friends preparing to play football, my mother asked if I wanted to play as well. My only real interest in playing football was the uniform, when she told me that I would get to wear pads and a helmet I was in!

My first days at football practice were very different than anything I'd ever experienced. The coaches were always yelling at us to get up or get down or run faster or push harder and everyone seemed to know exactly what to do, except for me. I was totally lost. It took me a few weeks to figure things out and by the time I did, we were fully suited up and ready for our first day of full contact in pads. We were doing the "monkey drill" where two players lay on their backs, tops of their helmets touching, one with a football and the other on defense. Laying parallel to the players are a row of tackling dummies and when the coach blows the whistle, the player with the ball has to try to get up and run by the

defensive player before he tackles him.

They matched me against the biggest, strongest kid on the team, a big country white boy named Billy. Billy lived around the corner from my stepfather's mother's house in Newark and he was my closest friend in her neighborhood. Billy was soft spoken and reserved but on the football field, he was a monster! This was his third or fourth year playing and he was the star of the team, playing running back on offense and middle linebacker on defense. As we prepared to get down on the ground for the drill, I smiled and looked at Billy waiting for him to smile back but he just looked right through me with a look like he was going to try to kill me.

The whistle blew and before I could even fully stand up, Billy drove his shoulder into my stomach, wrapped his arms around the back of my thighs and knee, lifted me at least a foot off the ground and then, using all of his weight, slammed me onto my back. I let out a low grunt as the ball came flying out of my hands and everyone standing around us let out a collective "ooooohhhh." I lay there staring up for what seemed like an hour before I tried to get up and when I did, I took a deep breath and I realized that I couldn't exhale. Panicking, I took a huge gulp of air and tried again but nothing would come out, the air was stuck in my lungs. I rolled over onto my side and I could feel the tears starting to flow down my cheeks.

One of the coaches came over and took my helmet off and said, "relax Bost, you just had the wind knocked out of you. Relax and you will be able to breath soon." I thought I was going to die! When I finally caught my breath, it was time for wind sprints. Billy came over and asked if I was ok then ran the sprints with me. The whole time I was thinking that I wanted to rip his head off and I was already daydreaming about laying his big country ass out. I gained a whole other level of respect for Billy; that's the funny thing about young boys, the more physically dominant we are, the more we tend to respect each other. Actually, this respect for physical dominance seems to be a trait that stays with boys even as they grow into men, and is exhibited in man's fascination with sports and war, and an overall respect for another grown man, simply because they are able to physically best someone else.

I didn't start to come into my own on the football field until the season was almost over. Eventually I gained enough understanding about the game and what was supposed to take place, that I was able to slowly build some confidence, and with that came more playing time. My aggression seemed to grow in amounts that mirrored my confidence and soon I was laying into dudes and knocking the wind out of them, just like Billy had done to me. On the football field, aggression is feared, admired and rewarded and I had finally found a place where my anger could be unleashed without ever having to express a single word about why I was angry. I was finally able to break away from that shy kid that didn't know the difference between a running back or a corner back, and become a leader on my team, strictly through the application of aggression and athletic ability, and my teammates and coaches encouraged me to do so.

Our entire team was white; white coaches, white players, white cheerleaders, white parents, white fans at all the games. My stepfather, when he did attend the games, was the only person of color in the stands. I remember one of my teammates asking another teammate who the Nigger in the stands was there to watch. My other teammate, knowing that he was a part of my family, just-nodded his head towards me and they both looked at me slightly embarrassed and wondering if I heard them. I did, but I said nothing, I just pretended like I didn't hear a thing while my mind started racing, once again thinking about that word and how it applied to me.

I cringed in the rare occurrences that my stepfather would attend a game, not because of his race or the fact that I might hear the word “Nigger” a few more times, but because of the amount of abuse I'd witnessed him inflict on my mother and all the whippings he handed down to me. I never trusted him, I always watched him out of the corner of my eye and his presence alone was enough to make me anxious. My aunt Val, his sister, attended many of my games and I was always happy and proud that she was there, never feeling the anxiety that was a consistent reminder of my stepfather.

On February 6, 1981, my mother gave birth to my brother, Calvin. Calvin was born healthy but after a few months he was diagnosed with Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, or SIDS. SIDS causes babies to stop breathing, often resulting in death or severe brain damage if the infant is not revived in time. While getting ready for school one day, my mother started screaming in a panic, “call the ambulance, he's not breathing, he's not breathing.”

When I went into the kitchen, my mother was holding Calvin and his face was turning a dark purple color. She started to perform CPR on him and in between breaths, she instructed me to call the ambulance, and told me what to tell them, then had me wait outside and guide them into the house when they arrived. By the time they got there, my mother had successfully resuscitated my brother and he was again breathing but we still rushed him to the hospital in the ambulance and stayed there until they transferred him to a hospital in Rochester, which was more equipped to address his issues.

When he finally returned home, he was given a heart monitor which would beep loudly if his breathing was interrupted. Even with the heart monitor, I would often go to his crib and place my hand on his chest or just watch his chest moving, listening and watching intently to make sure he was breathing. Later in life I would find myself watching my own children as they slept, looking to make sure their chests were moving and constantly placing my hand on their back to make sure I could feel them breath. My brother had at least two more episodes from which my mother had to revive him, one time we were alerted by the monitor and the other time my mother was holding him in her arms when it happened.

When he got a little older, his monitor would often go off, everyone would rush to his crib and he would be standing there, holding the wires he had just pulled out and smiling! He knew that if he pulled the wires out, the monitor would sound and everyone would come running and he approached it as if it were a game, laughing and giggling every time!

Eventually, my brother's health issues coupled with my stepfather finding a new job, led us to move to Rochester, a small city in western Upstate New York, located directly between Buffalo and Syracuse. My brother was seeing a specialist at Strong Memorial Hospital, one of the best hospitals in the area at that time, and it was around this time that the doctors found a large tumor on one of his kidneys. We soon found out that the tumor was cancerous and at the age of three, Calvin underwent major surgery to remove his kidney and then began chemotherapy treatments to help battle the cancer.