

Fresh Country Air

I had the best 11th birthday ever. Well, almost. My friends came to my grandparents' farm up the dirt road from our house. It was early June and steamy. Everything was blazing green, even the lichens crawling up the little red outhouse next to the ramshackle garage. Out in back of the wood shingled house the land was wild and overgrown, but it used to be a working hundred acre farm where my Gramps, a construction foreman, raised beef cattle with his best friend Mose to make extra money. It worked: Gramps and Meema had a second house in Florida where they spent their winters, and Gramps played golf everyday. He had at least twenty cases of Pabst Blue Ribbon beer on hand at all times and always sipped from an open can in a cooler cup, even when driving his station wagon. Gramps inherited the farm from his Uncle Will, a hermit whose house was in ruins in the woods across the road. Meema still worked as a secretary. She was also a cocktail waitress at the Country Club even though she didn't have to. She liked to work, always making us tons of food and frying up all the fish they caught out in the Gulf of Mexico the previous winter. Meema never drank Gramps' beer, but they fought all the time anyway. Gramps could be mean.

On the slate patio in front of the house was a card table covered with presents, fried fish, and a chocolate cake Meema made. All we ever ate was chicken unless we were at Meema and Gramps' house. There was a little old record player on the table too, my Mom's from back in the Sixties. I spied two flat squares wrapped in garish paper in between our water balloon fights and tree climbing. From the tree branches I could see the new pasture laid out by my dad Carl the previous month, with fresh fence posts and gleaming barbed wire he pounded in himself using a twenty pound maul and a hundred pound roll of wire. Each post had an end shaved to a point like a big heavy vampire stake. They were taller than me, too. Mom said Dad had to lie down after driving every post and tuck himself back in. I tried to count the two hundred posts spread out over two acres of land for the heifers we were getting the next day. The grass was really high and I couldn't see the bottom strands of the fence, much less that far down the hill. Dad was going to make extra money the same way Gramps did: we were going to raise beef cattle to sell. I had no idea what a heifer was, but we needed money. My Dad had a store downtown, where he grew up, but nobody in town had any money after the typewriter factory closed. Dad also just had surgery for a double hernia, so he couldn't come to my party because he was back home on the couch recuperating. Mom had flushed all his pain pills down the toilet. I didn't know what a hernia was, but Dad hadn't left the couch in four days, and he was a tough guy. He would grab my knee real hard and tell me to let him know when it hurt. My face would turn red

from the pain but I'd try not to tell him until I past the point I couldn't take anymore. I promised to bring him some cake.

After I fell out of the tree it was time for food and presents. My mom Candy, Meema, Gramps, my seven-year-old sister Kathy and my friends surrounded the table, gobbling up all the food in sight. I had three pieces of cake. When it came time for the presents Kathy got her box first even though it wasn't her birthday. Kathy and I fought like cats and dogs; Mom always said "Kathy's the starter and Max is the finisher." Mom always made sure Kathy never got left out because she would cry the rest of the day. It seemed like she cried all day everyday anyway. The box was big, covered with holes, and made chirping sounds: when she took off the top fifteen white fluffy baby chicks were inside. My friends were horrified except for Chris, whose dad raised rabbits and had a "killing stick." We all had allergies and were sniffing and slurping snot because the grass in the fields around the farm had just been cut for hay. My friends lived in town in raised ranch-style houses. We lived out in the country, and my grandparents were way out in the sticks, on the road to the dump. Their crazy cat Morris got dropped off there one rainy night a year ago. Gramps loved Morris. Morris was big like a dog, didn't have a tail, and hated kids. Morris had already attacked Kevin, one of my friends in attendance. I found him so he tolerated me, I guess. I suppose if I'd been dropped off out there I'd be mean and nasty too. I wondered if Kathy's chicks had been dropped off a truck or if Gramps and Meema got them at the Cheesefactory Auction Palace down the road a half hour past the dump. They were always selling livestock there, and that's where Dad bought the heifers. The Cheesefactory Auction Palace smelled really bad and people there spoke with funny accents.

When it was my turn to open presents I ripped open the first square. It was Queen's *Greatest Hits*, so the other record must have been *The Game*, which is what I asked for. I was thrilled! After tearing open *The Game* I immediately put it on the record player. In fourth grade my classmates would play records while waiting for the bus, and our favorites were AC/DC and Queen. We loved *Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap* and *High Voltage*; that singer guy's voice was so scratchy and weird but his accent made him sound smart. But Queen sounded pretty. We all loved the drums and bass and Freddie Mercury's voice. Plus he had a cool moustache and the whole band wore leather jackets. *Live Killers*; how cool was that? Our favorite song was *Don't Try Suicide*, the b-side of *Another One Bites the Dust*. *Don't Try Suicide* and *Big Balls* freaked out Mrs. Winchester, but she always let us play records anyway. I never had any records before today, but I knew to drop the needle on Side 2, Track 2. Ready Freddie counted it off.

A-one, two, three four-one!

Everybody was so happy, full of fish and cake and smiling away. My friends' eyes widened and we all started our freaky little dances to the syncopated rhythm of the handclaps, drums, bass and shimmery guitar.

*So you think it's the easy way out
You think you're gonna slash your wrists... this time
Baby when you do it all you do is get on my tits*

Chris writhed around on the ground like a caterpillar, Bret played air guitar, Andy did an interpretive dance. Kevin spilled his coke all over himself. Kathy was tossing the chicks in the air.

*You need help! Look at yourself you need help
You need life! So don't hang yourself it's OK, OK, OK, OK, you just
Can't be a prickteaser all of the time*

Meema started clearing the table and Mom looked really pale. Gramps was laughing between gulps of beer. That Freddie Mercury, what a man, he said. Gramps agreed with me! I nodded approvingly and cheered he's *the* man Gramps, he's *the* man! Gramps sprayed his beer he was laughing so hard, told me that's right, he's *the* man. I was so happy Gramps agreed with me, because he'd been mad at me since he tried to teach me to shoot his rifle and the hammer caught my cheek and the gun went off and I started crying I was so scared. You're like a little girl, he said, a fat little girl. That made me really mad and embarrassed because I'm a boy. I didn't like being chubby.

Just then Kevin spazzed out and smashed his mouth on the card table. The needle jumped and there was blood everywhere. Morris scampered out from under the table. Kathy shrieked with fear and cried as Chris and Bret looked on with horror at Kevin, who was missing teeth and emitting a silent scream. Mom carried him inside as Gramps muttered something about insurance. Andy's fancy dancing had carried him down the long driveway toward the oiled gravel road. There was no more cake. The sun went down on my 11th birthday party.

The alarm went off at 5 am. Carl groaned as he hit snooze on the alarm; this was the first night he'd slept in bed with Candy since the operation. Getting up was going to be a bitch, especially today.

"Candy?"

"Good morning, Carl."

"How was the party?"

"Great. Are you ready to pick up your packages?"

"The heifers?"

Candy was unamused. "Jesus Christ Carl, it's five o'clock."

"I was wondering if you could go down there for me?"

3 minutes later Carl shuffled painfully down the stairs to collect his prize: two virgin heifers ready for breeding. Carl would be the proud owner of livestock, eventually, a herd. The city boy went country; he'd be a gentleman farmer. This revolutionary equation would feed his kids and save him from himself and his failing store. It was a great day, the beginning of the next chapter in his life. He checked the trailer hitch and fell into the seat of his olive 1976 Ford Pinto, rolled it in neutral down the driveway, popped the clutch to start the engine, and drove off down the hill into the sunrise to claim his destiny. Every bump in the road reminded Carl he was alive.

I awoke to Kathy's shriek. She was bawling and the day hadn't even started yet. I staggered downstairs and out the front door barefoot and in my underwear toward the garage where we were keeping Kathy's chicks in a pen. Mom tried to console Kathy, who was really going bonkers. I went over to the pen and looked down through the chicken wire to see ten chicks standing up, one with a bloody tail. Five chicks were missing. When I looked closer, I could see flattened feathery disks under the feet of the chicks still standing. There were five of them. The chicks had been trampled under the feet of the other chickens. Kathy hit a high note.

"They've established a pecking order," Mom said.

"What do we do about the bloody one?" I asked.

"We'll come back out later and it'll be flat too," Mom said.

I picked the trembling chick up out of the pen. The other chicks glared and peeped at me as the wounded chick kicked and pecked at my hands. In pain, I dropped her into the mob below and they started attacking. As Kathy screamed I reached back down into the pen and retrieved the victim, placing it on my shoulder. I looked up at my mom.

"I'm naming her Pitiful," I said.

"We'll put it on the sunporch and see what happens," Mom said.

Pitiful immediately took a poo on my shoulder. Gross! We put her in a box on the sunporch and she watched us carefully all day through the window screen we placed on top. Kathy and I even played Queen for Pitiful to cheer her up. Mom said she would try homicide if we played that song one more time.

Dad came home early before dinner to pick us up so we could see the heifers. He drove Kathy and me up to the farm to introduce us. Mom didn't go, she said she needed to keep an eye on Pitiful. Mom and Dad didn't say much to each other before we left. The Pinto lurched and slid up and down the hills on the gravel road. I didn't understand why it wouldn't start with a key like other cars. Dad liked to "coast," to accelerate to the top of a big hill then put the car in neutral and see if gravity and inertia would propel the Pinto to the top of the next hill without using the gas pedal. Sometimes we could do three hills in a row, especially if there were cinderblocks in the back. But we didn't coast today because Dad was excited. Mom said the car was dangerous and could blow up at any time because the gas tank was too close to the back. The stones in the road sometimes made sparks at night, and when the tail lights went on, I often thought we were on fire.

We ground and spun up the greasy dirt road to find Gramps and his cooler cup out front chipping golf balls into the old garage. Once in awhile he'd hit the garage and the whole structure would shimmy and whine. Gramps waved but didn't look up as we slowly cruised down the loop driveway toward the pasture where our heifers lived. Meema was taking laundry off the clothesline; she was wearing her Country Club uniform. She blew kisses to us as we got out of the Pinto, which wheezed, groaned, and coughed to a stop. Steam poured out of the hood. Dad pointed toward the fence and said they're down there somewhere.

Kathy and I went up to the fence but couldn't see over the tall grass. We could definitely hear them moving through the stalks and blades. The best we got was the sight of tall stems jolted by the animals' movement

against the other grasses swaying in the breeze. The ground shook a little; they were big. I turned to see Dad and Gramps filling the radiator of the Pinto with water from a hose that led off into the tall grass. Gramps was holding up the hood with his nine iron. I didn't see a spigot, but the stony concrete ruins of an old barn were visible through the brush. I'd never really looked back there.

"There's a freshwater spring over behind the old barn," Gramps said.

"It's how we're watering the heifers," Dad added. The hose was old rubber covered in green algae, but the water coming from it was clear. I went to drink from it but Dad yanked it away and put it back in the tall grass. We still couldn't see the heifers. I wanted to see how much different they'd look compared to cows at the dairy farm behind our house. Would we have to milk them? Gramps shot Dad a look.

"No, Max, the heifers haven't had calves yet, so they're not cows, and don't produce milk," Dad said.

"You wouldn't want to drink the milk of polled Herefords anyway, Max," Gramps added.

"What does polled mean, Grampy?" Kathy asked.

"It means they don't have horns. They burn them off when they're calves," Gramps replied, a twinkle in his eye.

Kathy began to wail and Dad fell back into the Pinto. Gramps loaded us up, gave the Pinto a kicked shove down the driveway, and we were out of there without so much as a glimpse of the heifers. Gramps cranked a golf ball in our direction which almost hit the Pinto, bouncing down the dirt road in front of us and into the ditch. He was crazy. Why was he trying to blow us up? Dad said he was drunk. Mom made chicken for dinner again. I checked on Pitiful, still on the sunporch but sleeping comfortably. Kathy screamed herself to sleep, certain we were eating Pitiful or one of the dead chicks, and everybody went to bed early except Dad, who was more comfortable on the couch.

We could see the heifers a week later. They ate all the tall grass in their small pasture. The heifers stared at our van as we sputtered up the slope and down the driveway. They were a reddish brown color on their stocky bodies with white faces and heads. Their legs were short and stubby. We christened them Rosebud and Alberta. Rosebud because that's a cow

name; Alberta after an ice cream cake we bought for Meema's birthday was made with the wrong name on it so we got it for half price. Meema's name was Roberta. Both names always cracked Kathy and me up. Dad and I ducked under the barbed wire to take a closer look. I got stuck between the strands and tore my shirt. Dad said a bad word and stalked off toward the ruins of the old barn. Alberta licked a cube of salt bigger than my head. We weren't allowed to eat salt or candy. Mom forbade both, but pretzels, popcorn, chocolate chip cookies and milk were OK.

A big old porcelain bathtub was at the top of the pasture about fifty feet away from the north side of the fence on a slope. From my spot below the tub, I could see the old algae-covered hose running into it. Water flowed over the sides, making a muddy patch surrounding the tub. Rosebud, the bigger one, ambled over, looked down at me, and stopped in the mud. As Dad dragged out a bucket of grain, Rosebud leaned her head down and drank from the muddy water she stood in, not the clean water in the tub. I walked around to get a better view from the side. Rosebud's tail was up in the air and she peed into the mud she was drinking from. I looked at my Dad.

"Heifers aren't very smart, Max," he said. I looked down and saw I was standing in a glop of cow manure. My Keds were ruined. I stepped away, the poo slid, and my feet were airborne. Even though my nose was stuffed up from hayfever I could smell the crap I'd fallen into. Flies buzzed all around me. Greasy brown smeared all up and down my leg and Rosebud's pee was flowing right toward me. I jumped, rolled, spun and fell away from the oncoming stream. Dad was laughing but I could tell it hurt him to. I decided I didn't like heifers and hoped they would go away.

It was late July, 2:15pm on a Wednesday. Nobody in Carl's store except the goddamn kids. Carl stared at the phone: had it been disconnected or were people just not calling? Parking lot empty except for that piece of shit van. Thirty-two dollars in the till, all the merchandise out on on the floor waiting to be bought: toaster ovens, stereos, televisions, bicycles, some jewelry in cases. All that merchandise waiting to be paid for. Carl wanted to break something. The heifers had been up at Dick Carlisle's farm for a month to be bred by that monster in the back barn. Heifers were in heat only once a year, Carlisle told Carl. Jesus Christ, that bull was humongous. Laying down it was three times the size of Rosebud and Alberta. What stupid names. Can't call Carlisle again for a progress report, don't want to piss Dick off. What the hell am I going to do if they don't get bred? Horror possessed Carl's soul: for the past twelve hours he was wide

awake. If Max breaks that bike he's been hanging off for the past hour I'm gonna break him, Carl thought. He ought to learn how to ride the bike instead of swing off the handlebars. When Carl was eleven he had a paper route and was shooting hoops in the park all day in between chores and beating up his little brothers. Max is spoiled. *Queen*, Jesus CHRIST. The phone rang.

"Hello, Crown City Merchandise?"

"Carl! Get yer ass up here, they're finally goin' at it!"

"Dick?"

"Goddamn, kid, who ya think it is, the Virgin Mary? Tell ya what, that little one's no virgin no more, heh-HAH! It is a bee-YOO-tiful day! Veal so tender it can barely *walk*! Ya gotta get up here and see this!"

The phone slammed down. Finally some excitement, some progress. Carl scooped up Kathy, who immediately started screaming. Max spun the sign on the door from open to closed, the door was locked, and the Pinto started after Vito from the diner next door gave it a jump. At least the diner was empty too.

I was glad to leave the store. The store is so boring. I hate the store. Nothing to do, Dad's always grumpy, people are mean when they come in, if they come in. At least I can listen to my records on headphones. Mom and Dad wouldn't like *Bohemian Rhapsody*. It's scary and makes me feel weird inside. *He's just a poor boy from a poor family, spare him his life from this monstrosity*. They can never hear it or they'll take it away from me. Dad raced home, kept the Pinto running and handed Kathy through the window to Mom, who had just come back from playing golf with Meema. Dad looked at me and asked if I wanted to go help him with the heifers. I didn't want to go but was afraid to say so. Mom said it was either that or feed the chickens. I didn't want to feed the chickens. They had grown up and were all different colors now. Pitiful had her own pen next to the chicken coop behind the garage just to the left of our woodpile. One rooster was jet black and mean. We named him Aggressive and I was scared of him. He'd sneak up on me and attack me, scratch and peck my legs. I was just a poor boy. Aggressive hated me and made me bleed. Beelzebub's devil put aside for me. I needed a broom to keep him away because I couldn't run very fast which was why I was always picked last in gym class. I really didn't want to

feed the chickens. We backed out of the driveway real fast and tore up the hill toward Mr. Carlisle's farm. Dad had a weird grin on his face.

The heat licked in waves over the gravel road. Dark woods then blazing sunshine and back again. Lush green hills with pastures giving way to even greener hills covered with wild forest. We passed all these old barns, some red, some broken down and covered with green vines. Some barns had old ads on them for a clothing store downtown that just went out of business. The store sold clothes for seventy years, and the barns with the ads looked that old. Scrub brush reaching into the road and scraping the side of the Pinto. A herd of black and white cows crossing the road from pasture to barn, making us stop. It was milking time. Ramshackle houses with old cars in the back drowning in weeds. GTO. Skinny freckly kids running toward the road as we drive by. Stones crackling under the tires and dust clouds behind us. Mangy dogs snarling and barking and chasing us, keeping up with us. Later I would learn they were hell hounds on our trail. Grizzled gray leathery farmers on big green tractors spinning cut grass and throwing hay bales into wooden carts. Really old abandoned houses with asphalt tile siding and milkweeds for a front lawn. Haunted houses. Dead people inside. Lots of old pastures with rusty barbed wire and gray fenceposts. A wooden stand selling butter and sugar sweet corn on the cob for ten cents an ear, season just started. Tan Guernsey cows grazing on the hill. They give the best milk. Now we're on the big hill, the roller coaster, fifty, sixty, seventy miles an hour, everything rattling down the Pink's Road dust bowl. Barbed wire fence posts sailing by like in a Road Runner cartoon. Dad yelling "Mustang Man!" from those dumb Louis L'Amour books he was reading all summer. We had to be tough like Mustang Man, what would Mustang Man do? I was sick of hearing about Mustang Man, he was stupid. We rolled left and swerved right through the stop sign at the top of the hill just like Bo and Luke Duke would. But our Pinto wasn't nearly as cool as the General Lee.

Dad spun and lurched the van to a stop on Dick Carlisle's lawn. The big white farmhouse was to the left, to our right were three big red barns in an I-shaped formation. Mr. Carlisle stood on the lawn in his brown-speckled green overalls and faded red baseball cap, smoking a pipe with one rubber-booted foot leaning on a tree stump. It smelled like manure everywhere and there were tons of flies buzzing around. Chickens strutted all around. They were big and white, not little multi-colored Rhode Island Red runts like ours. Dad hopped out of the Pinto.

"Damn, Carl, where the hell you been?"

"How are you, Dick? What's happening back there?"

"What happened, more like. Maybe them sons a' bitches still goin' at it. I don't know."

I stayed in the Pinto. Maybe we'd leave soon. Dad turned to me.

"I'm going out to the barn for a minute, Max. Stay on the lawn, don't go into the barn. We'll be out in a few minutes."

I nodded, heard Mr. Carlisle ask if I was Dad's kid. They laugh as they walk away toward the barn. When they're out of sight I step out of the car. My eyes were watery from the heady mix of manure and fresh cut hay. Fresh country air. I saw two rusty nails next to each other on edge of the stump, which looked like it was used to cut wood, lots of axe marks in the top. I didn't see a woodpile like ours anywhere around, only a big propane tank next to the house. The barn nearest me had a white outhouse attached to it, sort of like at Gramps' farm but new. I stepped toward it.

The door was open and I looked inside. There were white buckets and lots of white feathers around, on the walls and floor, which was gravel. Hooks hanging from the ceiling, ten of them. A bucket filled with steamy reddish-gray water under a big sink with a green hose. There was a hatchet on the wall.

"Hey boy," a hand landed on my shoulder and I jumped, maybe squeaked a little. It was Mr. Carlisle, looking down at me with his squinty eyes, puffing smoke out of his pipe. My dad was nowhere around.

"You like chicken, boy?"

"Not really, we eat it every night." Mom and Dad always said honesty was the best policy.

"Damn, boy, ain't nothing wrong with chicken! At least yer eating every night, I mean, look at ya! You eat plenty! Go catch me one of them chickens, I wanna show ya somethin'."

I was terrified, but over the summer I had gotten fast enough to catch our chickens. After seeing *Rocky II* where Mickey made Rocky chase chickens in training so he could whup Apollo Creed Dad made that a chore for me to master. These chickens were big, but not fast like ours. I caught

one quick, and it flapped and kicked like crazy. Out of breath, I turned to Mr. Carlisle, who held the hatchet and stood over the stump laughing.

"Jesus, fat lil' fuck's fast! Now bring that sum bitch on over here." A claw dug into my hand and the chicken pecked at my face. I bobbed over to the stump, choosing to grab hold of the neck with my right hand rather than the wings, which now flapped all over.

"Neck goes 'tween those nails, boy." I did it and held down the wings with my left hand and the legs with my right. The chicken was squawking and wiggling. Mr. Carlisle's breath was down my neck and smelled stale, like tobacco and manure.

"Well goddamn, boy, how ya supposed to whack its head off if ya got both hands on the damn bird?"

I snapped my head to the right and my voice cracked. "I don't want to," I protested. I worried I'd cut my fingers off with all that flapping and screaming and stink.

Mr. Carlisle got mad like Gramps. "Well goddamn, boy, what's the matter with ya? Too good to kill yer dinner? Ya some kind of faggot or sumthin'?" I switched hands quick and snatched the hatchet from Carlisle's thick calloused grip.

The chicken's head popped right off, flying to my right about three feet, with sparks from the hatchet scraping against the rusty nails close behind. An energy ball of claws and feathers levitated from the stump before me and ran around the lawn, jerking about and flapping its wings, falling down, spinning, strutting, and repeating, blood spurting everywhere. I looked at the head in the grass and the eye looked up at me in horror as its beak opened and closed, gasping for air, like a fish out of water. My fingers were all there. The blade of the hatchet was half deep into the stump which was now split wood. I'd broken it: the nails would have to go on the other side now. My eyes were watery and burned from my allergies and the sweat pouring down my face.

"Goddamn kid, nice shot. When yer done blubbering grab that chicken and dunk it in the hot water bucket over there so you can pluck it. Stop cryin', ya little sissy." My Dad staggered out, walking backwards away from the barn. "Hey Carl, ain't never saw nothin' like that in town, have ya?" Mr. Carlisle smacked me upside the head as he moved toward Dad, who seemed

like he was a football field away. I made my move for the Pinto as the headless chicken bounced off its front wheel.

My Dad and Mr. Carlisle talked a bit. Dad looked like he was in shock, and he handed some cash over to Mr. Carlisle before getting in the car. Mr. Carlisle glared at me through the windshield and shook his head in disgust as Dad walked away from him, but smiled at Dad when he was in the Pinto facing him. I really didn't like Dick Carlisle and didn't want to be around him ever again. As we coasted home we stopped to get some sweet corn but Dad forgot he gave Mr. Carlisle all his money. When we got home I walked up to Aggressive and gave him a swift kick to see if he could fly.