

A LIVING IN THE COUNTRY
SHORT TALE

PLAYING
WITH FIRE



HARTLEY STEVENS

Playing With Fire!

A Living-In-The-Country Short

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By

Hartley Stevens

Playing With Fire!

My favorite day of the year, from the time I was in first grade until I left for college, was the first day of school. Not Christmas, not my birthday, but the first day of school. Why? I'll tell you. All summer long, every day including Saturdays, we worked. We got started before the sun and came home when it was dark. We didn't have sleep-overs or play dates. I bid my friends farewell the last day of school and wouldn't see them again until that proverbial day when the new English teacher would inevitably ask us to write a paper detailing what we did the past summer.

I could have changed the date and handed in the same paper every year.

You see, I grew up on a family farm. I learned to drive a tractor, tend livestock and do all other grown-up jobs, while still in grade school.

My Daddy was the boss, the ruler, the he-coon tip top king of the farm, our family and my life.

Awww, you poor child.

Not at all. I treasured every moment. My dad built a baby-seat on his tractor and I got to see and learn from him every day. Still, I loved that first day of school — friends, sports, girls, getting up an hour later and home at night hours earlier.

Mid-way through the summer following my freshman year, while driving the tractor and planting a summer corn crop, I hit a rock and busted something big, important and expensive. My dad sat underneath the planter hammering, banging and muscling the bent metal. From time to time, he'd yell for a new tool, bolt or implement. I'd dash off with max speed to retrieve the master's bidding.

I wasn't just interested in pleasing him. I was in a competition against every other farm-worker past and present, every person, every human. I wanted to be the best — at everything, even when nobody else knew we were competing. When my dad took me to get a haircut, I would concentrate on being still, at anticipating the barber's every subtle move of my head. I wanted the barber to say to my dad, "He's the best boy at getting a haircut I've ever seen. A master of sitting still in the chair."

My brother, Rex, was the opposite. Four years younger, wiry and tough as a flint rock, he didn't give a damn what anyone else thought, suggested or cared for. He was incredibly good-natured, but listened to the devil on his shoulder far more than the angel. He was and still is the toughest human I've ever known. So when trouble came, which was often and mostly in the form of whippings, he'd just take it. Problem was that nearly one hundred percent of the time his mischievous behavior would get *both* of us a spanking.

Rex would get a look a gleam in his eye when he saw the barrier, boundary or absolute line of transgression. He'd say, "Let's do it brother. Let's just do it."

To which I'd reply, "No, you know we'll get in trouble. I don't want another whipping."

To which he'd reply, "It'll be worth it. C'mon you big sissy. Let's do it."

To which, unfortunately, most often I'd reply, "Okay, but just a little bit."

Then, we'd do *it*, whatever *it* was, get in trouble and get a whipping. Then, I'd pound him for getting me in trouble — getting us in *more* trouble for fighting and earning *another* spanking. After, my dad would make us hug and profess our love for each other. This happened approximately ten thousand times in my youth.

So, on that particular day, my dad sat in the dirt under the planter banging and shouting orders. I'd run, retrieve and sweat nervous rivers. Rex, on the other hand, had climbed on the front of the tractor and was using his imagination. He slammed the flapper on top of the exhaust pipe while making loud, diesel-engine noises at his full volume. "Whoooo... change gears, Whaaaaa... chink chink, Roaaaaa." In the dying heat of the afternoon, this went on for nearly two hours.

Then, the rain of central Florida summers burst onto the scene. There was no drip-drop-drip. It all began with fury and remained. Thunder boomed and lightening cracked. The only perceptible change was my dad was now sitting and writhing around in mud. He still banged and yelled, I still ran and retrieved and Rex made his noises standing on the front snout of the dead tractor.

My dad wore glasses and now they looked like goggles. His denim shirt and jeans were mud-heavy and the sides of his face were caked in grease. I stood shivering in a white t-shirt and

jeans with the same gritty war-paint. Finally he'd had it. He needed a part or tool which we didn't have in the tool box.

"That's *it!* Get in the truck!"

The truck was a normal, for the time, single cab, bench seat farm vehicle which he'd been driving for ten years.

My dad was the meanest human I'd ever known, but he didn't cuss. He yelled and had a vein-popping face when he was aggravated, which was often, but he didn't cuss. However, when his voice got soft after that anger fit, and when he said, "Get in the truck", it sounded to my ears like he was saying, "Let's all take a long drive through hell's inferno". The scariest conversations of my life happened in the cab of that truck, punctuated with long bouts of silence, which were worse to my thumping heart.

My dad sloughed through the mud, threw tools in the toolbox and got in the truck slamming the door so hard I thought the window should break.

I begged and pleaded, but finally had to climb the front of the tractor and chase Rex back to the truck. He was giggling and taunting the whole time.

Inside the cab, my dad had cleaned his glasses and tossed remnants of paper towel on the floor. Rex and I retrieved them and wiped our faces. My dad rammed the truck in gear and fishtailed through the growing mud out to the paved road. It was to be a forty-minute drive home through the strengthening storm.

Ambivalent, oblivious and mischievous, Rex settled into the middle of the bench seat humming a song from his head.

I hugged the outer edge of the bench, one butt cheek clinched between the seat and door. Getting as far away from the volcano behind the steering wheel as possible.

As was normal, Rex pinched and poked and punched at my side and arm closest to him. I shot him a look. I whispered loud, “Cut it, can’t you see — can’t you see Daddy is mad?”

My dad drove, matching the violence of the storm, with his white knuckles on the wheel and scorn on his face. The ancient wipers made a futile arc back and forth.

Rex gave me the eyes. I actually remember thinking, “*Oh shit.*”

He reached out and began sliding the horizontal switches to and fro for the heater and air conditioner which had never worked. He hummed and shifted the switches as if he were changing gears. Sometimes he screeched or hummed too loud.

I scowled at him with bent brow and begged with body language for him to consider the ogre on the other side of the cab. At best, he was indifferent.

I leaned harder against my own door and tried to forget I had a brother.

After the intrigue of the useless controls lost his attention, he found the shiny, plump knob of the cigarette lighter. In my whole life I’d never seen anyone touch the lighter or the air controls or the knobs and buttons on the radio.

Rex punched the lighter inwards then began twisting the radio dials and pushing the black plastic buttons. There was no sound, but he hummed and emitted a word or two from country songs he knew.

Then... the lighter popped out with a faint click.

Rex grabbed the knob and pulled it free. He looked into the glowing red coils on the end of the lighter. His eyes widened, his smile grew. He held the lighter up to his lips and blew slowly into the heat. He liked the feeling. He traced the outside of his face, an inch away from skin contact, warming himself from ear to ear. He liked it a lot. The heat subsided. He replaced the lighter and punched the button again.

From the corner of my vision, I could see him lean towards me and give the eyes again. The mischievous reptilian smile was bending wider. Again I thought, “*Oh shit... shit, shit, shit.*”

I grabbed at Rex’s elbow and whispered again, louder still — I needed my dad to know I was on his side. That the circus monkey between us was not related to me. “Cut it out, you dim bulb. Daddy’s hot.”

Rex snatched his elbow away and said in his own loud whisper, “Sissy.”

Hand to Heaven exasperation on my part.

He took the lighter from the socket and did his blow and face-warming routine again. Stretching it out, exaggerating it for affect on me. I pressed myself against the window and door. My face was wet with the condensation of the glass.

Still, I kept him in my periphery view, I had to — you never knew what Rex would do. The warm face-bath drained the heat from the lighter, but I didn’t know that. After one last blow on the coils, he stuck the lighter to my naked arm.

It wasn’t hot, but I didn’t know that. I shrieked and recoiled all the same. Remember, this is all happening in the claustrophobic, five-foot wide space of a truck cab with an epic storm raging outside.

I slapped at his hand and the lighter fell on the floor. I grabbed his elbow hard and snatched him close and whisper-yelled, “You crazy, freaking doophus punk...”

The reptile smile got wider. He pulled his body away in defiance. “Sissy... Sissy little titty-baby girl.”

He grabbed the lighter from the floor and jammed it back into the socket. A repeat performance ensued. The knob popped, he pulled it and warmed his face and neck. He blew and let the warmth reflect back on his face. He did it several times, his eyes glinting, the smile bending. I hugged the door harder yet. I gave him a loud message with my eyes, shook my head and mouthed, ‘*Nooo*’.

Finally, he moved with deliberate slowness and acted as if he was going to stick the lighter to my arm again — then without warning, he turned quickly and stuck the lighter to my dad’s arm.

Dad jerked his arm away and almost lost control. He swerved into the ditch on our side of the road, then the speeding truck did a one-eighty across both lanes and came to a skidding halt facing the opposite direction, the wheels dropping in the ditch on the far side of the road. We were all shaken like so many nuts in a can.

The bomb dropped, the atom split, I’m sure a mushroom cloud bloomed above us.

Daddy yelled unintelligible words and swatted across the cab of the truck smacking both Rex and I repeatedly. Rex absorbed a lot of hairy forearm and elbow while I got most of the hand shrapnel. He grabbed me by the arm and Rex by the neck, hauled us from the cab and flung us in the bed. “Just wait till we get home,” he yelled.

He stalked back, jumped in the truck, slammed the door and spun around, heading for home at demon speed.

The storm raged.

I melted up against the toolbox hoping to avoid the needle-like pellets of rain. I began mentally packing a bag and thinking about hopping on a train — no way I wanted the home-front Armageddon to come.

I looked across at Rex and there was the smile, the corners of his mouth nearly uncontained. We began a horizontal kick fight which lasted thirty miles, all the way home.

The End

Before You Go...

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