

A LIVING IN THE COUNTRY
SHORT TALE

SWEEP
THE BARN



HARTLEY STEVENS

Sweep the Barn

A Living-In-The-Country Short

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By

Hartley Stevens

Between ages six and ten, my family lived on a farm in the Florida panhandle. Sometimes these days I forget details from yesterday, but the most vivid memories of my life remain and occurred during our time on that farm.

Daddy was the owner and manager of the farm. He thought it incumbent on him to use all the wonderful tasks and chores to develop within his children a strong work ethic and sense of responsibility.

My earliest job, mine to own and manage, was to sweep the enormous barn where we worked on field equipment. I don't know the actual dimensions of the place, but to a six-year old it seemed the size of a football field. In reality, it was probably only half that size.

The barn was always dirty, dusty. Farm hands would bring in a piece of broken equipment from the field and all kinds of banging, clanging, welding, grinding and other mess-making jobs would begin. All of the remnants of dirt and metal fell to the floor. The floor always needed sweeping.

It seems, ten-thousand times, I was instructed to sweep the barn. This was not my favorite task.

After a year or so, I was given an upgrade of sorts. I was still in charge of barn sweeping, but I was also now allowed to mow the yard and area surrounding it. I enjoyed mowing much more than sweeping and tried to cut grass even when there was no grass to cut, just so I didn't have time to sweep.

My dad saw through the thin veil of my distraction and helped me learn better time-management, much to my chagrin.

Over the next year, Daddy gave me tractor-driving lessons. We didn't actually do farm work, he would just have me drive him around the property on the tractor as he gave me instructions and feedback.

When I was eight, on a beautiful autumn afternoon, a glorious event occurred. Instead of the lone tractor drive, we hitched a plow to the rear of the tractor and my dad and I drove to a rear field of sixty acres or so. He had me practice plowing up and down several rows, making sure I understood how to handle the horsepower, hydraulics and various handles, knobs and dials. He was satisfied with the practice runs.

He said, "Tomorrow morning, I want you to bring the disc out here and plow as much of this field as possible." I was elated. *Finally*, some man-work.

Returning home that evening, I went to have words with Mama. "I'm doing man-work tomorrow, Mama. Can you wake me up before Daddy?"

I think she was always a little worried about how much work we did in relationship to how much play-time we were allowed. Still, she was always on my side and truly wanted to help.

The next morning, before the sun, she woke me and helped me get ready in quiet. She gave me a tinfoil-wrapped breakfast sandwich to go.

With my thermos in hand, I kissed her cheek and strode off into the fog-filled, dark morning. I stowed my water on board, checked the oil—as any good farmer would do—then mounted the beast and cranked the huge diesel engine. I let the motor warm some, then shoved the gear in place and headed for the back sixty. My testicles seemed to double in size while on my journey.

I rounded the corner of the dirt road, found my practice rounds from the day before and sunk the disc in the earth. I cranked the throttle and let the big-boy eat.

My dad always said, “Getting a whole bunch of work done in a day is mostly about being prepared and keeping the engine running. Men who don’t get much done like to take breaks, they like to get to work, then sit around talking—‘bout women, hunting, dogs and such crap.”

The main idea was get to work and stay, steady on. Steady on. Steady on. The words of wisdom from my youth.

The tractor didn’t have a cab, it was open-air. Cab-tractors were for sissies, he always said.

Anyway, I plowed that first row and on the way back, I could smell the musty, turned earth and see the first glimpse of sun on the horizon. I was filled with joy.

At ten o'clock I'd plowed nearly a third of the field. By noon, just shy of half. Mama came round the dirt drive corner and waved me down. She had lunch. She was prepared for a picnic and spread the cliché, checked cloth on the ground, then took out a man-kind of lunch box—not one with cartoon characters or other silliness. She handed me the lunchbox and another thermos filled with home-ice and cold water.

I was very proud of the lunchbox and my Mama delivering it. Still, I had no time for all of this luxury. "Mama, if you want to get serious work done, you got to keep the motor running." I ate while standing, giving her advice and instruction. "Sorry-excuses for men take breaks. I appreciate you bringing me my lunch, but I got to eat on the go. I got to keep the engine running."

My God, where did she get the patience to put up with all of us?

I kissed her cheek and took my bologna and cheese to go. Back on the beast, I sunk the plow and let the engine howl.

By four p.m., the field was plowed, perfectly. The work day didn't end for some hours to come. I'd finished early, because I was prepared and kept the motor humming. I drove the tractor back to the homestead, one very, very proud little man.

I expertly parked the tractor and plow, let it cool, then gathered my thermos and walked wearily, dusty, weathered and full of dormant pride back to the barn. I plugged in the fan. No other workers were there yet. I grabbed two five-gallon buckets. I set one close to the fan and another a distance away. I sat on one bucket, and rested my weary feet on the other. Then, I basked in the wind and glow of a job well done. What a man I was.

Less than an hour later, Daddy, the boss magnet, arrived and surveyed the scene of me lounging against the fan's wind.

He walked up and poked a toe at the bucket my feet were resting on. I smiled and booted the bucket in his direction. He sat. We both enjoyed the breeze for a moment.

Then he leaned back. His face was not what I expected. He said, "What'cha doing, buddy?"

I gathered all that pride and fixed him with a man gaze. "Plowed the whole field. Got it done early, I was prepared and let the motor hum."

His face twitched, unreadable. He nodded and shook his head at the same time. "I drove through that way when I was coming home. You did a good job and I'm very proud."

Simultaneous heart swelling and testicle growth ensued.

He continued, "But, what I'm asking is, what're you doing *now*?"

This wasn't what I was expecting. A sudden, wrong turn of events. In a pitch higher voice I stammered, "I plowed the field, parked the rig, I'm... just sitting here with the fan, waiting for you."

He nodded, "I see..."

The fan seemed much louder in the ensuing silence. Finally he said, “So you’re just sitting here, lounging, waiting for me to come back and tell you what to do next?”

That didn’t sound right, but it was accurate. “Yes sir.”

He looked around the barn. The dirty, dusty grime-filled floor of the barn. “A farmer’s work is never done. If you plow the field, then you come back and fill the diesel tanks for tomorrow. You grease the plow, check the oil again and you get ready for the next day. Did you do all that?”

My pride fell to the ground mixing with all the dirt and grime. “No sir.”

“And buddy, if you finish all of that, then you get back to basics, what you know. You sweep the barn.” He patted my knee, “Now, let’s get to it.”

Thank goodness the thought bubble above my head wasn’t evident. SWEEP THE BARN – SWEEP THE % @#*\$&’ing BARN. I knew some worse words. Barn-sweeping was for my little brother, sweeping was *his* job now. I’d moved on to man work.

Daddy was a good listener, especially to body language. So I held my face. I hustled off to do the seemingly lower tasks I’d been advised of.

An hour or so later, the Dad, came back around just as I was finishing the dirty task of greasing the plow. He said, “Let’s take a ride.”

Most of the time during my growing-up-years, this was the first sign of a long sermon or admonishment. But not today. I drove his truck while he road shotgun. He pointed and directed me to another field on our six-hundred acre spread. On the way, there was no talking—this was

a good thing. With the windows down, our arms resting on window edges, we just rambled along letting all the clean country air into the cab, watching the sun get sleepy.

At the far end of our property, he called me to a stop. We left the cab and he waved a survey of a much larger field, nearly a hundred acres. “Tomorrow, I want you to come here and plow this field. Watch the swamp to the east and plow the rows north and south. You understand?”

The pride welled within me. He’d seen a job well done and this was a promotion, an advancement of sorts. Bigger field—for a better apprentice. “Yes sir.”

We made a loop of the farm and returned home. I sought out my favorite compatriot, Mama.

“Mama, I got a bigger job to do tomorrow. I need the same kind of help. Can you get me up again, before Daddy and bring me lunch?”

She smooched my dirty face and rubbed my short hair. “Of course, darling. Boots off, clothes in the washing machine, then a long shower. I’ll get busy with tomorrow’s agenda.”

“Yes ma’am.”

The next day began the same, way before the sun. The only difference being I was already up and at it when she came to my room, which I shared with Rex, my younger brother.

On the stoop, she handed me a breakfast sandwich wrapped in foil and the thermos with a handle.

After the mandatory oil inspection, I headed to the back one hundred acres. When I reached the new field, I sunk the plow and let it eat the earth.

By the time Mama came with lunch, I was already more than two-thirds done.

By four o'clock, I'd plowed more than I did the day before. The whole, bigger field, in the same or less time. Finished, I raised the plow and punched the throttle.

Back at the barn I refueled the tractor, checked the oil, greased the plow. And... I swept, the ever-loving long-assed expanse of concrete called the barn.

What a whip snap worker I was in the man-game—and only two days in. It was five o'clock. Still, the other workers and the boss weren't back.

I found my two buckets, plugged in the fan, sat and reclined. Man work done—check. Sissy, little-boy work done—check.

Within the hour, my dad returned and it was *déjà vu* all over again. He turned my bucket stool and sat, letting the wind blow against his sweat-drenched denim.

Long, tall, wide silence followed—filled with my pride.

“What'cha doing, buddy?”

I leaned forward, elbows on knees, feint smile creeping. “Plowed the field. Refueled the tractor, checked the oil—again, of course, and greased the disc. Then I swept the whole barn.” I leaned back, smugly satisfied.

He was an excellent manager. “I’m very proud. You must have been prepared and worked long and hard. You’re an excellent tractor-driver.”

I nodded. I wanted to stand and run in circles waving Roman-candles while shouting my own name.

That now familiar, ominous silence enveloped us.

“But, buddy, what I’m asking again, right now. What – are – you – doing?”

Uh-oh. Uh-oh, shit on a stick. I’m afraid my exasperation showed. Real, real, high pitched whiney voice. “I plowed the field, the big one. I refueled and greased and checked oil. Daddy... I *swept* the barn.”

“And now?”

He demanded eye-contact at all times. But just now, my head dipped and I mumbled, “I finished, I finished all of it. I was waiting for you... to come back, and...”

He shook his head. Adjusted his glasses. “You just don’t get it. Do you?”

The tremble started, my drawers were soaking with sweat, even with the fan. Stupid fan. *Stupid... stupid... fan.* “Sir...”

“A farmers’ work is never done. You plow the field. You care for the equipment. You sweep the barn. But, if you can’t find any other meaningful, productive thing to do, then you turn that broom around and you sweep the barn again. And after you finish, if you can’t find the next job of importance to do, you turn that broom around *again* and you sweep. You wear that

broom out, you rake it down to tiny bristles. But, buddy, you don't ever stop. You just keep on sweeping. Do you understand?"

By now there were tears. He hated tears.

"Yes sir."

Thirty-five years later, I've told that story a hundred times. I've managed thousands of people in several different businesses and industries.

My advice to you. When in doubt, just keep sweeping the damn barn.

The End

Before You Go...

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