

You Look Like a Farmer

Life Experiences

By Evelyn Wool

The idea hit me like a lightning bolt. That next-phase-in-life plan, the "What do we do when the birdies fly the nest?" scheme. It was meant to be a "What do you imagine yourself doing ten years from now?" plan. It was a plan I felt sure my husband would scoff at and call a ridiculous, pie-in-the-sky, unrealistic daydream. I never for a second thought he would go along with it.

July 4, 2010 Fairfield County, Connecticut

A man of average height and build leans against a shovel. Sweat trickles down his temple. A droplet quivers at the end of his nose before gravity pulls it to the ground. A once-white t-shirt, now mottled with muddy sweat-stains of varying sizes on his belly, underarms, and back, exposes dunes of chest hair plastered beneath.

The pants? Well, if you could call them that. Gaping holes in baggy, generic blue jeans show off caked-on dirt at the knees. A thread-bare crotch barely camouflages the contents of the tightie-whities peeking through.

"We need to get to the market," I remind him. "There's nothing for dinner tonight."

"What time is it?" the man replies. Always a question for an answer.

"It's 5:30." *The market closes at 6:00 pm on Sundays*, I add silently.

"Okay, let's go," he says, sauntering toward the driveway.

"Wait, you can't go like that," I say in vain. Trying to stop my husband once he is in motion is like trying to turn the Titanic.

"What's the difference?" he says, shrugging.

Eyes downcast, I follow the man through the produce section, ignoring the stares. There has got to be some sort of law against shopping while sweaty, never mind muddy. We hadn't even stopped to wash our hands.

Robert nabs iceberg lettuce, a tomato, a green pepper, and a bag of yellow onions.

"We'll make a salad and grill sausage and peppers," he states, lumbering on to the meat department.

"Do we need anything else?"

Desperate to end this trip as quickly as possible, I don't bother mentioning the other items missing from the refrigerator at home—milk, cheese, and eggs—as I mentally calculate how many cups of coffee remain in the last can of grinds.

"Nope," I say.

Then, spotting our neighbor out the corner of my eye, I add, "Let's get going."

We head for the self-checkout, ducking the long way around the aisle. Nearly there, almost home free, a few more feet ...

"Hey, Robert," a husky voice breaks our stride.

Dammit, how did he get there so fast?

"Hey, Mike, how's it going?" Robert replies, unphased by the intrusion.

"Good. What are you two up to?" he says, raising an eyebrow.

"Just doing a little landscaping. The time got away from us."

"Attention shoppers, the store will be closing in fifteen minutes. Please take your items to the checkout now."

I take the cue and slip to an open register, not bothering to excuse myself. I feed a few bills into the machine, grab the bag, and head straight for the exit, not looking back at the men. I pull the car up to the curb and telepathically will Robert out of the store.

Ten minutes later, the car door finally opens.

"What took you so long? You don't usually chit-chat."

Then I notice the blocks of ice cream. I should have known.

After our modest meal, Robert heads for the back door.

"Where are you going now?" I ask.

"I want to finish digging that hole while I still have a little daylight. You coming?"

Every bone in my body is already aching. The last thing I want to do right now is more work.

"Just keep me company," he says, reading my mind.

Mesmerized by the rhythmic thrust, stomp, hoist, toss of the shovel, a scene unfolds in my mind as the last bit of daylight wanes. I see a broken fence post tangled in a ball of wires on a lonely stretch of pasture. A rooster crows in the distance as the first hint of light breaks the eastern horizon. A man with sweat stains seeping through his grayish undershirt and gaping holes in his pant legs, spears the ground repeatedly with a pole-digger, plucking and releasing small mounds of soil from the ground, creating a neat, round hole for a new post.

A cow looks up from the grass and gives the man a hearty, "Moo," hello.

The nearest house is a mile away. No witnesses around to take note of the man's appearance. No minutes-before-closing trip to the market will be needed, for adjacent to the pasture is a large garden bursting with vegetables. Swiss chard, spinach, collard, and mustard greens; scallions, radishes, beets, turnips, and carrots; and iceberg, red leaf, and Romain lettuces soak up the early morning dew. Vines of melons and pumpkins race to the corners of the plot, obscuring their fruits beneath lattice-patterned leaves.

"You look like a farmer," I say dreamily, wishing I had grabbed a watermelon at the market.

"Hey, great idea," Robert replies. "Let's look into getting a cow."

March 1, 2022 Johnston County, North Carolina

It's thirty-two degrees out, this brisk, sunny morning. I am washing afterbirth goo off Maxi's udder in preparation for milking. Milk is already leaking from both teats.

Twenty-four hours ago, I had found this doe licking a wet, wobbly reddish-brown kid with long white ears and a white belt. Two others lay nestled in the hay at her feet: a black kid with random white patches and a rich chocolate-brown kid polka-dotted with small white spots. Maxi had "freshened" on her own. The term is used to describe a goat that has come into milk after kidding, which is the process of a goat giving birth. This is Maxi's third freshening and would likely be her heaviest lactation now that she was fully grown. Maxi had an ample supply of milk in her swollen udder; it appeared she could feed a whole herd.

Yesterday, all three kids had suckled life-assuring colostrum from Maxi, but this morning they appeared hungry and were sucking on my fingers. Maxi's udder had filled to epic proportions overnight, making it difficult for the newborns to latch on to her teats. So, I had done what was necessary. I had coaxed Maxi away from her kids, marched her into the milk shed, and locked her head in the stanchion of the milk stand.

I now sit mesmerized by the pulsating inflation tubes and rub Maxi's neck for encouragement. Maxi cranes her head around to give me the stink eye.

"Don't worry," I tell her. " This milk will go right back to your babies to make them strong. And your udder will be softer the next time they try to nurse. You'll be much more comfortable soon."

Maxi meanders back to the barn while I pour her sticky, yellow milk into bottles. A few minutes later, I smile as three eager mouths greedily drink their fill. I linger to watch the

satisfied kids bounce and nudge each other. I snap a few photos and revel in a successful morning.

Back at the house, I take a brief break to eat breakfast and jot down the day's to-dos. The morning chores are done. The goats, horses, sheep, and three-week-old piglets have been fed. The milk machine's hoses and inflations have been cleaned and disinfected, the milk shed tidied and swept. Charlie, one of our two Australian Cattle dogs, has had his morning thyroid medication. Let's see, what else? I know there is something big that needs to get done today. What is it?

What was it that Robert muttered on his way out the door this morning? He has left for a few days to visit several of the Outback Steakhouse restaurants he oversees in Myrtle Beach. That means I'll have to make the feed run today. But no, that's not it. There's something else tickling the back of my brain.

I gaze out the window. The sky is clear. The birds are chirping, geese honking. A Muscovy drake saunters past Penny, our other farm dog, who watches from her perch on the lounge chair. In the distance, a donkey is hee-haw-ing. Across the pond, the cows have gathered around the troughs. Is it that late already?

What was it that I was supposed to do? Oh well, I guess I'd better get on with it—there's so much to do, and time's a-wastin'. Wait, now I remember, the taxman cometh. I was inputting the farm's expenses from February 2021 when I left off a few days ago. But no, that's still not it. There is something else I'm forgetting.

Just then, a notification pops up on my phone. Oh, shoot. Today is the day I had planned to publish my latest children's book, *Eve's Big Day on the Farm*. I type a quick postponement message, then pull out my box of receipts.

Robert returns three nights later and finds me asleep on the couch, face planted in the pillow, drool trickling down the side of my face. Bits of hay are stuck in my sweater, and a glob of manure is glued to the bottom of the boots I haven't bothered to remove.

He nudges me and says, "Now, *you* look like a farmer."