

Eeden, Eureka, 1969

A Story by Joe Cottonwood

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I spent the summer of 1969 on a place called Eeden Farm near Eureka, Missouri. There were four of us - two couples, each newly married. We shared a two-bedroom farmhouse at the end of a dirt road.

The neighboring farmers hated us though they'd never met us. They thought we were a hippie commune and were only slightly mollified to learn that we were newlyweds.

Washington University of St. Louis was planning to use the farm as a teaching site. In preparation, we were to spend the summer vacation converting a back porch into a bathroom and transforming a chicken coop into a meditation room. It was a job; it was a honeymoon; it was Eeden.

The house had no plumbing. Outside there was a one-seater privy and a pump where we washed ourselves with cold water. In the heat we'd sleep on top of the sheets under the open window. One morning a heifer nosed her head right through the screen above our bare bodies: chewing, drooling, staring.

Richard was my work partner. Together we dry-walled the chicken coop and then framed the bathroom. Richard had worked on construction crews in Texas during previous summers. This was my first time as a carpenter - that is, first as a paid one. When I dropped nails and groped in the mud to find them, Richard laughed and said, "You're a professional, now. You don't have to pick up nails."

"So that's how you can tell if a guy's a pro?"

"It's the only way."

Richard was wiry with big black eyeglasses, a sprite. He was from Houston and played in a rock band. He'd bought the shell of a 1933 Mercedes convertible with tattered leather seats. If you squinted, if you had a generous imagination, you might see some grand old carriage that should be pulled by a team of fine horses. The engine was a pile of rust.

After towing it to Eeden, he left it in the driveway in front of the barn. Dot, his wife, sat in the decrepit seat with a makeshift parasol and said, "Richard, dahling, fetch me a mint julep." Dot was pretty without a trace of glamour. She had long light hair, pouty lips, big brown eyes. She and Richard spent one whole night in the open Mercedes, giggling and talking and snuggling.

In the morning Dot told us that they'd seen a meteor shower. "You'd think they'd make a crackling sound," she said. "Then they just *vanish*." She pouted for a moment, deep in thought. "You're staring up at all those stars feeling the utter indifference of an infinite universe and then - wow - somehow a meteorite makes you feel connected to it all. Why is that?" Dot was a city girl. Life had already thrown her some tough pitches, but she still had the air of a wide-eyed innocent.

We all went to Eureka for supplies. When we returned, the Mercedes was missing. There was a note on the gate, left by the farmer who was leasing the land which included the use of the barn. *Had to load hay*, the note said. *Pushed car. Too bad*. The driveway and barn were at the top of a hill. When the farmer had released the brake, the Mercedes had lumbered down across the pasture - we followed the tracks - and plowed nose first into a stand of young willows which had stopped the carriage just before plunging over the bank into the muddy Meramec.

"Welcome to Eeden," I said.

"Complete with snakes," Richard said.

"Where'd you learn to fix cars?" I asked.

Richard shrugged. "When your clutch goes out and you're 300 miles from Houston, you learn to fix clutches."

I nodded. We shared that feeling: We could do anything, learn anything, accomplish anything if we really had to. Or wanted to.

One thing I had to learn was how to solder copper pipe. Richard

wanted no part of it, so I was in the crawl space under the house with a blowtorch when Richard, who had been hanging drywall, called down to me: "Hey! There's a guy walking on the moon!" I brushed myself off and we all gathered around the rabbit-ears TV to watch grainy images of Neil Armstrong bouncing around on the surface of the moon - or on a sound stage in Los Angeles. It seemed equally likely at the time.

One day somebody's beagle showed up at our door, paws bloody and sore, famished, covered in ticks. After a few days a farmer drove up in a dusty Chevy Impala. The beagle sprang up and ran to the man. This might have been a chance to break the ice. Unfortunately this was also the day two of our professors had come out to experience Eeden - to drop acid and strip off all their clothes. Naked, smiling, they walked up to the farmer extending their hands. The farmer, taken aback, actually shook their hands. Then he lifted the beagle, shoved the dog into the trunk of the car, and slammed the lid. Dot called out, "We removed forty-seven ticks." Without a word, the farmer drove away, beagle in trunk, two hairy-ass professors waving and grinning after him.

Dot and Silkie painted the walls while sharing stories. Dot was modest, never unclothed in our sight, mostly cheerful with a wild temper. You learned not to cross her. Dot collected owl pellets from the barn, broke them apart and studied the tiny bones and clumps of fur. "Poor mouse," she'd say. "Was this the meaning of your little life? To be owl food?" She was majoring in anthropology. She loved fossils and old clay pots. She was one of those people who couldn't talk to somebody without touching them, fingers to the back of the hand. Sometimes from a chair she'd extend a leg and touch you with her toes. She was intimate with everybody but sexual only with Richard.

It's hard to imagine now, but abortion was outlawed back then. Dot told us that in her freshman year before she'd met Richard she'd

made an appointment with a man in the back room of a bakery downtown, that she'd smelled yeast, she'd already paid him and yet she walked out, flew home, confronted family, and got a secret, illegal operation performed in a hospital by her own father, who was a gynecologist.

Dot adopted six kittens from the barn, gave them milk and let them into the house. She didn't know that milk would give them diarrhea.

Perry was our boss. A clean-cut and earnest young man, he lived nearby and supervised the farm. One day he brought the university bigwigs to check out our progress on the bathroom. It happened to be the day Dot had given the kittens milk and left them in the house while we all went to St. Louis on errands. When we returned, there was a note taped to the door: NO CATS ALLOWED IN HOUSE. EVER. The odor of cat shit took days to scrub out.

We were nearly evicted, we learned later, but were saved by the fact that Perry personally liked us. Nobody else out there did. Even his pregnant wife was cool to us. Perry had a brand new camper truck, his pride and joy. His wife didn't seem too thrilled with it. I suspected we represented the same spirit to Perry as the camper: that sense of freedom, the unfettered life, the open road.

A cow died, and the leasing farmer never bothered to bury it. "It's a message," Dot said. "What that guy thinks about us." Perry was furious. He said the pasture was overgrazed.

We witnessed the seven stages of cow decay while lazily, dreamily the summer progressed, the bathroom neared completion, the walls shone with fresh paint. Richard had to keep reminding me to slow down: "It's your honeymoon, fella. And mine." It went against my nature to work any way but hard.

We played guitars and hiked to the other barn, the "haunted barn"

at the far end of the farm. Friends visited, obsessed with searching for wild hemp which wasn't worth smoking even when you found it down by the river. You could lie in the hayloft and watch clouds. You could crank the music as loud as you wished. We had evening primrose, swooping swallows, breathtaking sunsets. After thunderstorms the air hung heavy with the sensuous smell of earth. We lived in a bubble of summer and never even heard of Woodstock until it was over and some guy told us he was there. "Where?" we said. It was like the moon landing, another universe. Another bubble.

In late August, Richard and Dot drove down to Texas. Dot fell asleep at the wheel and crashed into a bridge abutment. She died instantly.

That was it. The end of our Eeden. No sin, no blame. Just the random track of a meteorite.

Perry hired a contractor to finish the bathroom. Silkie and I returned to St. Louis. She had one more semester of classes to complete. I took a job operating a computer in a mental hospital. You didn't perspire in a computer room; you didn't slap bugs. No cows drooled; no river flowed; no blowtorch singed the hair on the back of your fingers. On campus students were rioting, buildings were burning. We stayed away. Together in our apartment we clung to each other every night and every morning, touching, loving while there was still time.

I remember how sometimes at night we'd sit on a rail of the old wooden fence, the one that the cows walked right through. Sometimes the crickets and locusts and frogs seemed to roar. You could see the outline of bats when they flew across the moon. One night Dot collected fireflies in a jar. She held the glass next to Richard and kissed him, sweet and sweaty in the greenish light. "They're just looking for firefly love," she said. "That's why they flash." Then she set them free.