
HOUSES OF GRAIN

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Dad stirs his oatmeal slowly on the stove. I stand by the silver toaster, watching it like a falcon would for a twitch in the grass. The thing is from my parent's wedding day in 1955. More torch than toaster, it tends to set off the fire alarm without warning. I won't eat burnt toast anymore.

What is left of the World Trade Center still smolders in piles thirteen hundred miles away. My husband and I saw the wreckage ourselves from his client's office window, just a week or two before I peed on the little stick. Heard the scraping of the piles and the backup warning beeper of the heavy machinery all night as we tried to sleep.

I'm not sure how I feel about growing a baby in my belly while the world catapults into the maze of God's pinball machine. Not sure how I am going to swallow the toast either, sick as I feel.

Dad clears his throat and turns from the stove. Tyker! The toast he says.

Dammit. Dammit again. The last piece took twice as long I say holding up the black bread.

I throw it on the counter and grab another slice out of the plastic bag.

Fer cripes sakes! Eat that Tyker. Don't waste bread like that he says.

I can't swallow burnt toast. Hormone-laced tears spill from my eyelids. I can barely swallow toast at all. Buy a decent goddamn toaster I say and then mumble something about carcinogens.

But I know what Dad sees when he looks at a bag of bread.

As a kid I'd ride through the fields on the bench seat next to Dad from farm to farm collecting dried up holsteins, fat hogs and skittish sheep in his long maroon trailer. That's how it was done on the threshing crew, he'd say when he was finished telling me again. Every August, after each head of wheat turned golden from dancing in the sun, Grandpa Bill would

drive the team of horses with the binding machine, the freshly cut stalks falling into messy rows. Dad, aged nine or ten to start, would come behind on a hay wagon with cousins and neighbors smelling of sweat and earth. They bundled up armfuls of wheat or oats, tied them into shocks with twine and stood them up on end in windrows.

There was an art to stacking the bundles you see. You made a tent kinda-like with three leaning in on each side, that was six, Dad said. Another man would put two on each end and sometimes with wheat they'd put one across the top, to preserve the color. Eight or nine, depending.

He added that this wasn't a task for sandy soil because if you had a dry spell—you wouldn't get squat.

The women, who stood over the wood fire stove in the kitchen, with wet foreheads and tired eyes fed them well and plenty.

That was only half of it. The shocks were left to dry in the sun and the wind for weeks until the farmer who owned the threshing machine could get to Grandpa Bill's farm. Weather depending, the crew would go out again on the hay wagon in their overalls and straw hats. They would dismantle their houses of grain and put the shocks back on the wagon. Garter snakes slithered underfoot while mice scampered from the shocks. The big threshing machine waited for them at the edge of the field. Dad and the others would toss the bundles from the wagon and the lead man would feed it into the machine careful to keep his fingers. At the other end you'd have a pile of grain and a pile of straw. Most of the grain fed the cattle during the long, sterile winter, some went to the market to feed the people.

There are too many people to feed now, to do it this way anymore, I said to Dad. I wished hard for the stomping team of horses and eating Grandma's peach pie with the neighbors under the shade tree near the kitchen. That was one way of looking at it to Dad's way of thinking. Or, maybe, there were so many more people because we didn't do it this way anymore, he said. Mmm hmmm, I said and nodded, but I didn't know what he meant.

But now, waiting on my new piece of toast, hand on belly, staring at the plastic bread bag stamped with at least a dozen preservatives, maybe I did.

Hand that to me Dad says, and I give him the cold burnt toast, not taking my eyes off the orange coils of the antique toaster. Butter knife in hand I hear him scrape black flecks into the sink. I glance as he spreads some butter. It does not sink in. He takes a bite. I hear a click and press the black lever. This time, nothing is wasted.