

Amidst Horses

By Pat Deeble

At work not long ago, I sat in a three-hour meeting in which the usual know-it-alls and those with un-holstered egos expounded on a system I had helped build. In one moment I was pissed that they were misstating so much and in the next realized that they were getting bogged down in details that only served to let the rest of us know just how much the speaker knew. I was pissed, too, that the only way to be heard was to rudely interrupt the one who was talking and talk louder until they quieted. That new voice, then in control of the conversation, would careen out of verbal control until someone else interrupted them in the same manner. It was conversational mayhem and I hadn't the desire or stamina to be heard. In the last hour, I simply pulled back into myself and thought of things far and gone from large mainframes, their systems and the egos that manage them.

While I nodded and appeared to be paying close attention to those in attendance, I was really drifting back in time and place to my world 50 years past...a lifetime ago. I was conjuring up a moment in my youth that was lonely, desperate, romantic and mine.

I was probably sixteen at the time with all the usual maladies that a sixteen-year-old is afflicted with. I was troubled by much, frustrated by much and little listened to by nearly everyone. What sixteen-year-old isn't?

It was summer, and the Hoosier days were humid, hot and long. Getting up at sunrise and working till well after the sun went down, seeing no one but my family for days on end was my life back then. Coming in from the field in the evening, I would drive our old Ford pickup into

the gathering gloom to feed hogs while others milked cows. As I drove up the lane, I could see in the rearview mirror, light from the barn billowing yellow and soft into the thick night. Even through the dirty windshield the stars shone wondrously, making the patterns they make. The Dippers, the letter “W” on its side, Orion lurking on our southern horizon all those Hoosier twinkles. The very same stars which Archimedes pondered and wrote of a millennium or two ago. The same stars that have sparked belief in a multitude of deities and legends. Stars that have inspired so much poetry and so much romance beneath them. Those stars.

Finally, hogs fed, cows milked and barn doors closed we head for the house. It was full dark and time for supper and a shower, perhaps a TV show then off to bed for we were tired and there was the ‘morrow.

But I was sixteen. I was young and not always ready to sleep even when my body was tired. My head was too full of what might yet be. I was in love in those days, you see. At least I thought so. I was writing letters and cards to a girl who cared little for me. She wrote back just often enough or I saw her through rare, chance meetings just often enough to keep my heart writhing on the hook of her.

So, one night, when the usual excuses didn’t work anymore and I knew sleep was hours away, I left my bed. I put on old running shoes, shorts, t-shirt and crept past my parent’s bedroom. At the porch door, I held the screen door spring in one hand to stop any twinging or twanging and quietly escaped into my good night.

It was full dark of course. The moon a thin crescent was waning to the new. A slight breeze rustled corn leaves into an easy hum making the night seem patient...friendly. The only other sounds came from a couple of late-night diners of the swine variety who were having one

last go at the hog feeder.

One advantage of living on a farm is that there are plenty of places to walk in the night without worrying anyone. Even though I had no purpose in mind, I began walking down our lane towards our woods. Here, I must tell you that the girl I was so taken with in those days lived in the house across the mile square. The fact that she was physically so near and yet so emotionally far was an irony I realized and lived with every day.

I walked the length of our east-west lane, climbing the rickety, white, wooden gate at its end. I crossed another field of our corn with what little light there was coming and going as clouds drifted over and then away from the thin, slivered moon. For my trouble, I received numerous leaf cuts on forearms and thighs from the corn leaves as I walked between the rows. Corn pollen dusted my brow, hair and arms making me look as old as I am now. But I didn't mind, by then I knew I was walking towards her...in her house...in her bedroom.

The last field to cross belonged to a neighbor who had let it go to pasture that summer. The ground was firm and grassy. Lightning bugs bugged about making friendly pin-prick yellow light, giving luminous hello to no one in particular. Moving quietly another cloud came between me and the moon, but I kept on walking for what was there to fear? I remember looking down at my white shoes, watching them glow and move in the dim light. But then a sound of a breath inhaled caught my ear and I stopped short, hair on my arms raising, my heart suddenly accelerating as I realized I was not alone.

I looked around and in the ever so slim light and was relieved to make out that I was standing amidst four horses. I had walked into the middle of them as if I could see perfectly. They were sleeping. Knees locked and standing still, heads lowered, breathing slow big horse

breaths in and out. One horse murmured as horses sometimes do, perhaps in the midst of some equine dream of greener pastures.

I stood between them for a time, stunned at where I now found myself and yet profoundly amused. I remember how even their breaths came, how much their flanks inflated as they slowly drew in before letting out. For reasons I cannot explain, I just stood among those sleeping beasts taking in our night. And in those moments, I became aware of so much other life. I felt as though I was really listening to life for the first time. It was as though I could hear all the insects in the world whirring, singing and moving around me. I heard a hoot owl in our woods calling and another answer more distant. A red fox trotted down the gravel road, briefly entering the pool of light cast from the pole-light in my would-be girlfriend's yard, its footfall precise, dainty, yet full of life purpose. In a moment, I realized the world was fecund with life unseen, life that was living on...life as unaware of me as I was unaware of it.

I don't know that I've ever felt more alive, more full of affection for the living. I don't know that I've ever felt other life, realized more lives than I did in those moments. I was in the middle of a living, breathing world and my heart was expanding, drawing in all that wondrous life around me.

I was overwhelmed by it all. It was as if I were drinking from the fire hose of life. I couldn't swallow it all, know it all...all that yearning to simply live and go on living, to simply breath that next breath. To top it off, I had this deep and delicious ache for a girl who I knew would never be mine, a flesh and blood, breathing girl not 200 yards away from where I stood. I could almost picture her sleeping there...soft to the touch, sweet to the smell, for I had, on occasion, drawn the scent of her in while standing near. I knew which room and window were

her's. And yet, even with all that yearning for her I was struck dumb by the night, by all that life, by all that breathing in and breathing out beneath stars so very bright and so very far away. In those moments I loved those horses, those owls, the fox and the next breath we would all take together as much as I loved her. In those moments I was one with them all, sharing in the orgasm of life being lived.

At some point I stirred, full of the life I had drunk in while standing amidst horses. I could not help myself. I could no longer deny this ache to be close to her. Quietly, I left the horses and climbed the last fence between us. I moved across the road into her family's yard and for once their dog did not bark or stir. I don't know if I was that quiet or the dog simply that tired. I stood, looking up at her window for who knows how long, willing her to open it and ask me inside while all those stars, all those wonderful stars, crowded 'round the roof of her house.

She slept on, of course. Breathing in, breathing out as rhythmically and sensuously as the horses, or so I imagined. I had no psychic abilities to implant desires in her or any other woman. No invitation was forthcoming to join her in her room ... her bed.

So, at some point, I simply gave up looking up. I walked back home giving a wide berth to the sleeping horses, feeling yet some kindred affection for those dreaming beasts and our chance meeting. Then, finally, home again, I shucked off my clothes and crawled in bed, letting the cicada sing me to sleep.

The following summer, or perhaps the summer after, the world did turn and this girl and I did hook up for a time. I confessed my night-time walks to her house. She giggled at my confession yet made a point of telling me she slept with her window open. So, on some other

summer's night, I again walked to her house in secret darkness, looking for horses in the night and, seeing none, crossed the gravel road to her yard and somehow climbed up on the roof outside her second story window. She drew me inside her room, like a big horse breath drawn in. Drew me inside her room, her bed and herself and made me happy for a time. And yet, all these years later, it is the horses and the night I remember most vividly. It is the ache of life for life I have not forgotten in 50 years. It was that delicious ache for life in the middle of that lifeless, smothering meeting that made me breathe in deep and let out slow and in doing so...remember.