The DIRTY LIFE
On Farming, Food, and Love

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The white dogs seemed less homicidal and cringed and circled around our legs. We could hear a television blaring football from the open upstairs window, but nobody answered our knock. We continued along the long drive, lined on both sides with buildings on the verge of collapse. Just off the driveway, a school bus stuffed with old plastic bread crates was sinking into the dirt.

We wheeled our bikes into the granary. The floor was two inches deep in old grain, and when we opened the door the light cut through the dust and sent a battalion of rats scuttling for their exits. We left the bikes and walked east, back toward the lake. We were on a slight rise and could see that the farm was a mosaic of open fields and stands of nursery trees—spruce, pin oak, linden, and red maple—planted in straight rows. The land was flat, and some of it tended toward swamp. We pitched our tent among a bunch of arborvitae. The white dogs had followed us, begging for attention.

By the time the tent was pegged down it was nearly dark. We retrieved our bikes and retraced the last part of our ride, back into the village of Essex. I was bone tired, and still jet-lagged from a recent trip to Asia, and the only thing I wanted more than sleep was food. For some reason we'd failed to bring provisions, and my blood sugar was dropping below the level required to keep me sane. I wanted food like a wolf wants food. I wanted food so bad I was angry about it. I sat on a bench outside the town hall while Mark went to explore our options. When he returned he sat down and put his arm warily around me before delivering the bad news: the only place to eat was the Inn, and they wouldn't take us, despite
the empty tables I could see through the window, because we didn't have a reservation. There were no stores, and the next town was a five-mile ride away, mostly uphill. It was fully dark by then, and I didn't think I could make it back to the farm, let alone the next town, without something to eat. I seethed, hating every quaint corner of a place so small and stupid you could actually starve to death in it. I hated the farm at that point, too. It was a dump, and it was swampy, and in the summer you'd probably be eaten alive by mosquitoes. I considered whether or not I'd be arrested if I were to sleep on the bench and decided I wanted to be arrested, because they'd be required to give me a ride to the jail in a car, and feed me. It'd probably be something perfectly acceptable, like peanut butter sandwiches. The only traffic light in town blinked endlessly to an empty street.

We were fixed in that tableau of misery by the glare of a pair of headlights pulling into the parking space in front of our bench. A man with silver hair got out, carrying a covered casserole dish. He smiled widely at us, noted our bicycles, asked us where we were from and where we were going. Mark told him we'd come up from Poughkeepsie and were camping at the Essex Farm. "Well," he asked, "are you hungry?" Even in my desperation, I could feel the "No, thanks," on the tip of my tongue, the city habit of distrust toward any show of unsolicited kindness. But Mark had already accepted on our behalf, and the man led us across the street to the basement of a big stone church and opened the door onto the sounds of clattering silverware and chatter and laughter rising up from a sea of gray hair.

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It looked like we were crashing some kind of geriatric mixer, but I didn’t care, because I had caught sight of the long tables against the wall, crammed with food. I could see plates of sliced ham, baked beans, mashed potatoes, and bright-colored Jell-O salads studded with fruit and topped with blobs of pastel Cool Whip. The man who’d brought us asked for everyone’s attention, and fifty lined faces turned toward us. He introduced us as traveling long-distance bicyclists who wouldn’t mind some dinner, and the room erupted in applause. The next thing I knew, someone had me by the elbow, guiding me through the crowd toward the tables laden with calories, placing a plate in my hands, pouring me a glass of iced tea. I wondered briefly if I was stuck in a dream, if this was some kind of cruel mirage, but soon I was seated and eating. It was the kind of food that grandmothers make, the kind invented to fill the stomach of a ditchdigger or a farmhand. I ate biscuits and gravy, green beans with slivered almonds, a drumstick of fried chicken. There was an urn of hot coffee, too, and an entire table dedicated to desserts.

When my peripheral vision returned and I could speak again, I learned that we’d stumbled into the centennial celebration of Essex’s Methodist church. There weren’t many young families in Essex, it turned out, and they were Episcopal. Everyone in that basement knew one another intimately, and most were in some way related. Many of the people I met that night would become important in our lives. The man who found us on the bench was Wayne Bailey. A few years later his wife, Donna, would knit a pink sweater with white piping for our infant girl, with a little cap to match. The small and wrinkled woman we