

Finger Lost Finger Found

by Steven Gowin

Little Roy Farrell'd taken a bite of his fourth grade teacher's ear as she bent close to help him sound out the word "grace." Doc Felter had sewn most of teacher's ear back on, but by seventh grade Roy still couldn't read and never understood that he'd injured a teacher.

Roy'd broken a collarbone at age 12, suffered a serious dog bite and several second degree burns at age 14. At 16, he'd bitten through his tongue in a car accident. But none of that had ever caused him even a moment of pain. Something about that part of his system, the experiencing of and understanding of injury, had never functioned.

The Farrells lived one town away in an unpainted clapboard house that smelled of old plaster and stale beer on summer nights. The boys, Roy and older brother, Merle, were registered in the South Dallas County School District but rarely attended.

Apart from problems with school, they'd also quit their church, "The Roman Catholic Church of Rome, Italy," as my mother called it.

Suffering

When their severed relationship to the church became clear, their priest, Father Kenneally had telephoned Mrs. Farrell.

"Roy and Merle have ignored confession for over a year, spit out the host at their last communion, and skipped mass for weeks and weeks." I sympathized with the Farrell's intentions, which were to raise hell, and their religious convictions, which were none. I had left my church, the Evangelical United Brethren, against my own mother's wishes.

After the priest's call, Mrs. Farrell had fretted and wept and prayed to the Lord Jesus Christ for guidance. She was a mousy and washed out woman with sad, dull burnt hair, waxy skin, and worry... worry in her eyes, in her strained voice, in her carriage. You could almost smell that worry, and it shamed and disgusted you to know it in her.

Although she'd birthed her sons, when they'd finished with her breast, she'd done as much for them as she could. They'd had no birthday parties or outings with the Boy Scouts; they'd never seen a fair or theme park. She'd never even taught them personal hygiene. Since they'd been toddlers, they'd worn stringy red hair, long and dirty.

Now their complexions bloomed with tiny red and yellow acne rosettes too. Their jeans shined with cigarette tar, automobile oil, and their own Farrell grease. They grinned slack smiles through ragged yellow teeth, and they smelled of tobacco, and urine. I have only rarely seen Farrells eat anything but potato chips, and they never touched water. They smoked cigarettes and hemp and drank what alcohol they could lay hands on.

Mrs. Farrell certainly loved the children, but she was frail in mind and spirit, and her motherly constitution was weak. Rather than threatening her sons or applying some other discipline, she put her trust in the Father, the Savior, the Blessed Virgin, and the Holy Catholic Church and tried to get to mass every day.

The Farrells owned six big Fords, all in a state of glorious rusty decay and kept in the Farrell junk yard front yard Ford wreck museum. The Farrells' church, St. Anthony of Padua, lay five miles away in the county seat, but the boys always took whichever Ford they'd cobbled into running condition themselves and refused to drive Mother Farrell to mass.

Consequently, every weekday, half an hour before services, Mrs. Farrell telephoned one Catholic neighbor or another, "Can you run me to St. Anthony's? Father's expecting me. Jesus save us, the boys are wicked and run off the rails. I'm sick for their souls."

The Law

Mother Farrell was right. The boys had been staying out all night, breaking into and vandalizing riverside cabins, driving wild on gravel roads, shoplifting, and peddling drugs, mostly marijuana.

They'd ingest any pill offered them whether for man or for beast. They gambled of course, and no young lady in the county, not even

their cousin, a loose girl, Betty Fitzgerald, would step into their sight. And Dallas County law enforcement certainly knew the brothers.

As self-appointed guardians of Dallas County youth, Sheriff John Wright and his son in law, Deputy Kim Duhle, delighted in harassing the county boys, stopping us for car equipment infractions and arresting us for beer drinking.

Wright wore a bow tie with his starched, pressed uniforms. A fastidious man in his late fifties, he smelled of steam pressed cotton. Impeccable and unnaturally clean, he smiled broadly and kept perfectly manicured nails. Soon after the Farrells quit St. Anthony's, Wright and Kim identified the brothers as juvenile delinquents and swore they must realize justice, repentance, and rehabilitation.

Then through various traffic stops and trunk searches Wright spread the word to the young men of the county; he planned to catch the Farrells at something, and that the rest of us should "steer clear" of them.

The Understanding

The boys thrived on fear; they worshiped the primal and valued it above anything else. I've seen them pee on a kid, simply to see the kid cower or start a fight.

Most boys steered clear of the Farrells, but you could deal with them if you could establish an understanding, a respect. And I did respect them for their fearlessness.

Then too, my father had taught me to withhold judgment and forgive quickly. I don't often succeed at following those principles, but I try. Certainly such qualities do not register as fear. The Farrells recognized this in some pre cognitive way, I think; it was our understanding.

My Mama, however, had no tolerance for Farrells, Catholics, or my father. She'd kicked Dad out years ago when she could no longer tolerate him and the likes of those he tolerated.

"Your father knew some of that Farrell clan. And Davises too. Probably from that Ethel's Tap," she'd told me. "You know, the

mother's off with priests most of the time, and the old man's been up to the penitentiary down in Fort Madison."

"Don't you run with that bunch. They are a outfit; they don't look after their toilet; and why do they call the young one Finger?" I did not answer, so mother continued. "Farrells is papists. Did you know that? Now let me tell you about papists. There are monks in Wisconsin keepin' a huge stock of weapons in a grotto at their monkery."

This was an old rumor in the Upper Midwest. Mother'd heard it from the E U Bs who claimed that a monestary sect on the Mississippi were hoarding a stock AK 47s, shotguns, Thompson guns, hand grenades, Claymore mines, mortars, bazookas, and so on.

Mortally frightened of the Roman Catholic Church, the question of what monks would do with such armaments never crossed the E U B mind. "Whatever them Catholics is planning don't matter," Mama swore, "They're under the Pope in Rome, and our Lord Savior knows it's no good."

Farmer John Schmitz

I never told Mama how Roy got his nickname, but the Dallas County boys christened him "Finger," after he'd lost his right middle digit working for Johnny Schmitz.

Farmer Johnny Schmitz moved slowly and labored over thought except when considering money. In those, moments, however, his eyes brightened, and his attention snapped to. He wore blond hair so short, you'd take him for bald, and was thick and strong with piggy light blue eyes.

John Schmitz farmed his own land, his father's land, and whatever land he could lease from unfortunates such as Max and Ruby Davis. The Davises were, like Schmitz, members of St. Anthony's Parish. Davises had few talents, but Max could find grocery sacks full of morel mushrooms in the season, and Ruby managed to keep a goat or two for the milk. The brother and sister lived together southeast of town and, it was said, knew each other there, in unholy and unclean ways.

On Saturday nights, Max liked to ride the goats to town with him for company. He'd leave them in his old car while he drank to inebriation at Ethel's Tap. Sheriff John Wright, and Deputy Kim, had stopped Max several times on his way back to the farm and finally threatened to call Monsignor if they caught him again. The Sheriff, also one of Kenneally and Monsignor's flock, hoped to keep Max straight enough to get to Sunday Mass.

After the threat to involve the Roman Church, however, Max did not refrain from but rather did alter his Saturday routine. When Ethel closed for the evening, Max simply stumbled back to his Studebaker and slept there with the goats who kept him from freezing many a February night.

Such were the folks from whom Johnny Schmitz, with Monsignor's blessing, leased acreage and profited.

Haying

July clover and alfalfa fields in Iowa steam with dew in the mornings. But by 2 PM, hot gray dust from airborne hay particles fills the air. Breathing that air turns snot green in 10 minutes.

The heavy machinery, the moving hay racks, the surfaces slick with clover powder make baling hay dangerous work. Yet Johnny Schmitz paid fifty cents per hour less than the going rate for the work.

None of the Dallas County boys would bale hay for Johnny, but the Farmer was our neighbor and my father's pal, and Dad asked me to work for him even when all the other boys refused... all but the Farrells of course.

You'd wonder why the boys would put up hay for the Farmer. Well, of course, no one but Schmitz would hire Farrells... and they did need a little money for alcohol and Autolite Genuine Parts. But there was more.

Although not a friend of Mother Farrell, Johnny Schmitz had his own understanding with Kenneally and the Monsignor. During her crisis over the boys' souls, Pere Kenneally, had suggested that John hire the boys for hay baling, hoping their employment would get the

matriarch off his back. "Monsignor would see it," he assured Johnny, "as favorable."

Their holiness ministered grace and tolerance, on the one hand and fury on the other. They offered a liberal interpretation of who, no matter how wayward, might receive the sacraments, yes, but they could also damn certain parishioners to languish in an outer purgatorial ring.

Kenneally and Monsignor made themselves plain in this and so begged, and cajoled and threatened families such as the Davises, and other needy but landed Catholics in the county.

Farmer Schmitz, a surprisingly generous contributor to the parish given his penchant for thrift, did understand his interests in relation to St. Anthony's, the diocese, and Monsignor, and so he telephoned Ma Farrell immediately on Pere Kenneally's suggestion.

Corn Belt Beer

Kenneally and Monsignor's recommendation, however, had noting to do with the boys' agreeing to hay for Farmer John Schmitz.

That had required a special arrangement. The deal that put Farrells on John's hay rack had stipulated that at 3 PM, on hay baling days, Johnny bring them a half case of cold beer.

Farrells don't care what they drink, as long as it's very cold, so Johnny bought and iced down the rock bottom cheapest brew he could find, a medium weight and tasteless, but relatively strong lager... Grain Belt Beer. The Farrells christened it "Corn Belt," in honor of the great state of Iowa.

And so the haying went. According to Johnny's calculations, after 3 PM, six hay loads, baled and lofted, were necessary for the boys to finish his beer. However, if the baling did not end by 3 PM plus six loads, the boys would break into their own stash, a twelve pack of iced Hamm's tall boys in a coffin shaped cooler that Merle kept on the backseat of his Galaxy 500.

This would mean a diminishing return for Farmer John... poorly stacked hayracks, grounded bales, and broken bales. So, in the morning, Johnny Schmitz had to judge the haying day very carefully. If a field held too much hay, the work could necessitate a second

day... a second day of cost. Or it might require he start in the morning, give the crew lunch, and keep everyone past six risking what that meant in damage.

And, of course, John must figure the New Holland haying machine into the equation as well.

The New Holland

Too tight to buy a hay baler of his own, Johnny Schmitz let his hay baling to Sy Davis, Max and Ruby's first cousin or possibly brother.

Sy rented out himself and his decrepit New Holland hay baler cheaper than anybody in South Dallas County. Sy was, himself, a mediocre farmer. A yearly bender during the growing season greatly deterred him from agricultural success.

For his alcoholic moment in the sun, Sy drank nothing but Everclear grain alcohol which transformed the shy, sun baked, overall clad, unshaven clod to a rural dandy in glossy, tasseled wing tips, Sansa Belt ban-roll slacks of fine polyester, and a light nylon sport shirt over a clean white wife beater.

During his binge, Sy Brylcreemed back his thin ducktails and doused himself with Aqua Velva. Actually well read, the normally laconic farmer became loquacious with drink, and quoted Homer and Melville. The bender, usually in August, lasted about two weeks. To finance the binge, Sy kept every penny of his profit in a Maxwell House coffee tin wired to his tractor's shifter column.

Sy's 1954 New Holland 1600 model H wire hay baler made heavy, green wire bound bales wet enough to combust spontaneously and burn a barn, and green enough to ferment a little in the loft and drive cows mad for the want of them. On the job, the fourteen-year-old New Holland, quit often, freezing up hard from the power take off to the bale chute.

Although an enormous vexation for John Schmitz, the farmer's baling crews adored the New Holland for its caprice. Any day with Sy and the New Holland meant you could count on at least an hour of paid down time. At that inevitable moment, you sheltered under the hay rack and laughed as Farmer Schmitz pounded the New

Holland with a ball peen hammer, flung the Maxwell House can to the ground, and threatened to withhold Sy's commission.

Sooner or later though, the farmer mechanics patched the New Holland together again long enough for it to grunt out a few more heavy, wire bound bales of hay.

Fay's Lunch

Johnny preferred to start his crews at 11 AM so they'd have had their lunch before coming to work. Then, if necessary, and he felt he could risk it with the Farrells, he'd keep crews late without dinner.

On the day of Roy's accident, the field had yielded a bumper crop of hay, and John reckoned he could finish by 6 or 7, but only if we began by 9. That day, we worked 9 to 1, and headed in for lunch with Johnny's wife, Fay.

Fay's hay crew menu never varied: lumpy mashed potatoes with greasy gravy, mushy green beans, strawberry Kool-Aid, and a fried chicken whose neck she'd wrung that morning... the taste of death still fresh and sickening in it.

There was the milk too. The Schmitz kept a pair of Jerseys and drank thick fresh cow's milk, unpasteurized and poorly separated from the cream. The kitchen, smelling of raw chicken and warm milk, drew big horseflies with shimmering hairy green backs that flew straight in from that hot outhouse Johnny kept because he was too cheap to buy plumbing.

The Farrells and I ate little of Fay's lunches although Sy Davis enjoyed them greatly.

A Fatty

In civilized places, in the middle of blazing summer days, laborers take time for reflection, respite from work, shelter from the day, and digestion of the noon meal. That is not the case in Iowa, however.

By 2 PM, we were back at work bumping across John's hayfield, south of town. Roy and I pulled heavy bales from the New Holland's rear chute and dragged them to Merle at the back of the rickety hay wagon.

Merle stacked the bales there, tying them together on the rack in crisscross tiers, swearing the whole while, and with a thumb to one

nostril blowing hard through the other to spray green hay snot on Roy's or my back if he could. The sun beat violently on us. We worked hard and fast; our glove tips filled with hay dust.

Then, just after 4 PM, the New Holland shuttered, and clanked, and seized. The delay that meant working past 6 PM, should have meant trouble for Johnny Schmitz too. But when John counted the beer in his cooler, he calculated the crew could run until 8 PM and finish today... a happy fact for the thrifty farmer.

John's beer was available, however because Merle and Roy hadn't drunk their ration yet. Instead, they'd twisted up a fatty to smoke during the New Holland breakdown and attained the required buzz without their full quotient of the farmer's Grain Belt.

The reefer compromised John's calculus and threw off the ratio of work available to alcohol consumed. Stoned to the gills, but thirsty now, the boys wanted their Corn Belt, and they wanted more hay to bale.

Hay Hooks

The Farrells often worked stoned and half drunk. If that had been our only problem, we might have finished by putting up enough green hay to burn down two or three barns.

However that day, we faced another issue. Those heavy, green, wire bound bales required steel hay hooks to handle. But Sy'd forgotten to bring enough hooks for everyone, so Roy was handling the bales in only cheap cotton gloves to protect his hands.

About 7:30 PM, the New Holland grunted out a green eighty pounder that glistened with damp in the evening light. Roy hauled it onto the wagon, lifted it and walked toward the back of the hayrack. He'd just bucked it up on his knee to pass to Merle when he slid on slick hay dust and lost his footing. "Whoa," he'd cried, and while Roy flew off the wagon's South side, the heavy bale with his right middle finger went north.

As soon as we realized what had happened, Merle and I yelled for Sy to stop his rig. But Sy deferred to Johnny, who was waving him forward, motioning for Sy to continue. The farmer wanted to finish the windrow and pick up Roy on the way back.

Merle, red now and breathing hard, ran forward, jumped off the hay rack and lunged for Johnny pausing only long enough to pull a ball peen hammer from the New Holland tool box. John yelled for Sy to "shut her down, God damn it," Meanwhile I jumped down too and grabbed Merle from behind. Ball peen lifted high and ready to crack a skull, Merle held up just as he reached Farmer John.

All was quiet for a moment. A light breeze kicked up a little dust low to the ground. Swallows and martins darted overhead after mosquitoes and locusts in the twilight. Red-winged Blackbirds returned to their nests. In the gloom of the wooded slough below the hay field, an early firefly appeared, and when I'd cleared my nose, the clover smelled sweet.

Finger Found

Farmer Johnny used a blue bandana to mop sweat and hay dust off his face, and swore loudly, "Jesus H. Christ. Whore Mary, the Virgin of God. Damn it all to hell." He stamped around the field a minute, then he leaned into the New Holland facing away from Roy while Merle and Sy leaned on the baler facing Roy and me.

"Wow, dig this shit," Roy said softly as he sat bleeding on the big green bale that had taken his finger. Calmly, he watched blood spurt at quick intervals from his finger stump. Glove and finger were gone, however. Sy eventually noticed Roy, pulled his dirty wife beater off from under his overalls, walked over to the boy, and stanching Roy's blood with it.

I poked around on the ground looking for Roy's finger. When at last I found the digit and got it from Roy's glove, the tip had gone all white under that green hay dust. Funny thing was, the fingernail was perfectly clean. I think when the wire popped it off; the force of it all just blew all the grime from under the nail.

Finally Sy and Johnny got Roy to the front seat of Merle's Galaxy 500. Merle took the finger from me and put it in the baby coffin icebox with the cold Hamm's. While there, he took out a couple of the tall boys. "Me n Roy'll go find Doc Felter, but be back in the morning," he told the farmer.

He got into their Ford and handed Roy one of the beers. "The son of a bitch John Wright don't need to know a god damned thing about this," Merle told John, and to Sy, "Don't forget them hay hooks tomorrow, damn it Sy. We'll need 'em."

"Be here at eleven, and get your lunch before ya come," Johnny told the boys, and as Merle started the car, the farmer yelled, "And that bastard, Monsignor or any of em, don't need to know about this neither, okay?"

Merle and Roy slammed their doors shut and rumbled away from the hay field and onto the gravel towards town. The Galaxy 500 kicked up a high rooster tail of dust we could see long after the Ford itself was out of sight.

Finger Lost

On the way to town, Roy and Merle drove around to kill time and finish their alcohol. When it was gone, they'd stopped for more and never did find Doctor Felter or medical attention.

Next day, they were back at 11 AM, as promised. Roy wore a big dirty bandage on his right hand, but it protected only four fingers and a stub. He worked that whole day, and drank his six cans of Grain Belt by 6 PM when we finished.

A couple of the kids tried "Stub," on Roy; but the nickname never stuck. "Finger" did... Finger Farrell. Merle kept Roy's digit in a jelly jar of kerosene in the Galaxy 500's glove box until a year later when the boys needed fuel to set fire to Deputy Sheriff Kim's Crown Victoria prowler. Merle said later it had been a "god damned shame to burn a Ford, but it had had to be done."

Within a few days, every kid in South Dallas County could name the arsonists, and most regarded the destruction an heroic act. Soon, from the St. Anthony's pulpit, Father Kenneally, under Monsignor's orders, swore excommunication for any Catholic boy withholding knowledge of the crime.

The E U Bs, for their part, claimed not only eternal damnation for any complicity, but that the evil was certainly a Catholic misdeed, probably involving Prairie du Chien monks.

All agreed that jail time should be the felons' reward. But no one talked, and the Brothers Farrell were never caught, never convicted, and never punished.

In the activity around the arson, however, Finger's finger had been lost forever.

End

