

M Tractor

by Steven Gowin

They say Billy Laukenbach wrung hens' necks off, tore them to shreds with his bare hands, and ate them raw, feathers and all.

They claimed his daddy, Clair Laukenbach, padlocked him in a root cellar most of the time... the only way to hold him because he wasn't right, was not natural.

My Dad used to rig up a cultivator or adjust a seed planter out there for Clair. He worked on farm implements and repaired tractors for Van Meter Motor, the McCormick Harvester dealer.

He'd known Mr. Laukenbach for years and said that Clair had restored a real nice Farmall M and kept it out there in the garage. He said the McCormick M was a hell of a tractor; he respected an M the way his Dad had respected a Belgian dray.

One July night, when I was 13, Clair stopped by the house. Could Dad see about a bailer flywheel gone off balance first thing tomorrow? Ten acres of clover needed bailing, but the troll'd told him tomorrow'd be thunderstorms.

Dad agreed, and Clair said good night. When he'd gone, I asked Dad what Clair'd meant by "Troll," and Dad said I should come along the next day; I'd see, and maybe they'd show me that M too.

We headed out early. Dad steered and held coffee with his left hand and worked the shifter with his right. Steel tools in the back clattered about; the air was tinny with ozone.

We'd just turned off Puckerbrush Road when he put his right hand on my shoulder and said if I saw a little old man out there, a fellow with a hunched up back, I shouldn't be afraid. That was Clair's boy, Billy.

I said I'd heard all about Billy from the kids, was he the troll? that he had a lucky hunch, that his yellowy teeth bucked out from his mouth and fell out all the time but grew right back, that his thing was nine inches long and hard most of the time.

Dad said, Jesus H. Christ, but nothing more. Five minutes later, we pulled into Clair's lane, and Laddie, Billy's car dumb collie,

began chasing after us, nipping at the tires, snarling and barking and coughing on the gravel dust we kicked up in a white fantail.

We parked on the brown grass by the machine shed, and Dad grabbed a couple tools from the back. Clair walked up from the barn to meet us and told us come over to the patio first. He wore no shirt under his striped overalls.

He said the day was already too muggy, damn it, like it'll get before a big one or maybe a twister; the Troll always knew. He called and called for Hazel, his wife to bring iced tea, but she didn't come and didn't come, and Clair finally got the tea himself.

We finished our drinks quickly, and walked down to the machine shed to look after the hay bailer. Dad cursed it as a damned New Holland, and wondered why Clair hadn't bought a McCormick; he wouldn't be about fixing it twice a month during haying.

Clair was reaching up under the bailer talking about how he'd run over something, probably more damned dead chickens, and Dad was tap tap tapping that flywheel with a ball-peen hammer. I looked up and saw Billy standing there, right beside Dad with his own tea in a big Roy Rogers glass.

I hadn't heard him come in. Dad had said don't be afraid, but I felt a little shock anyway. Billy was the same four feet tall I'd expected, had the same hunched back, but nobody'd mentioned freckles, big as mosquito sores.

His bright pink scalp showed through his thin red hair. He had light blue eyes set deep under his brow, the left squinting and bulging and almost closed even in the shade. His ears and cheeks, were sharp and boney, and he wobbled as he stood, off balance, frail.

Clair, looked at me looking at his son and said this was Billy and would I like to see the farm, see their M Tractor in the garage? Hadn't my Dad done a fine job rebuilding its motor and power take off and all? Billy'd show me around. Take him around, Troll.

Billy was off then, heading away from the machine shed. He moved in a kind of roll, yawing to his right, his skinny, veiny left arm stretched in front of him a bit like the Mummy on the "Gravesend Manor" weekend movie.

He hummed and whistled something that didn't make sense, but the dog liked it well enough. Laddie'd brush hard against Billy's leg, tipping him off balance, then shoot ahead barking and circling around to start it all again.

Billy's left foot was way bigger than his right and pushed against the leather of his boots making a shiney spot at the toe; his khaki trousers were immaculate, creased sharp; they bulged out from the crotch several inches down his right leg. He'd buttoned his blue checked shirt all the way up to his pointy chin.

When he spoke, he stopped and turned his whole body toward me. He couldn't move his head for the hump, I suppose, and he talked without looking at me in a spitty whispery voice. Said the lightning was coming, mother fuckin' lightning.

He said thunder bolt'll strike him two or three times a storm, but it don't bother, couldn't do much hadn't already been done by god his own self, that fuckin' bastard, ha! He said Clair wants that cock sucker clover bailed, but you can't stop the fuckin' sky.

He led me down the hill away from the machine shed, and we continued to the chicken coop. I could smell them before I saw them... Chicken sickened me ever since I got a good whiff of a raw one in the kitchen one day. I must have been five.

Billy halted now, stroked that pointy red acned chin and waved at the hutches. Them chickens. Chickens chicken chicken shit bastards. A little spit had slipped out the corner of his mouth. You kill em, and you eat the bastards, yah, he laughed.

He stood still a minute, then stumbled back up the path to the garage. Once there, he pulled open the door to reveal a gorgeous perfect farm tractor. An M is a deco beauty... all parallel line, pleasing curve, nothing but grace... all clear to even a 13 year old kid..

Billy limped over to the tractor and said he kept that son of a bitch clean, cleaned the bastard up, kept it nice, and with his finger tip he wiped a tiny bit of grime off the shifter boot. Then he rubbed that finger in Laddie's fur to clean it, and was off again, Laddie following, nuzzling him off balance again.

The sky had darkened, gone very dark, was nearly black in the Southwest, cracked through with blue lightning bolts from time to time, the bolts nearby and coming closer and closer. Billy said see see, it's comin', son of bitch comin' all right and he tipped his whole body backwards to face upwards.

Then he stretched both arms out to his sides palms up, and began a slow halting spin, a turn a stop, a turn a stop. Laddie raced around him in fast dog orbits barking and panting, and Billy barked back. Billy barked and swore, you son of a bitch come on you bastards.

Without finesse, big drops came hard and fast; the first ones kicked up a little dust on the ground. Dad was just leaving the machine shed and called to me from across the yard to come on get out of the rain, we're done here. We both ran for the car.

Laddie was panting hard, still racing in circles and Billy began crying that we'd need to go to the cellar, go get in the cellar, better go to the god damned cave. Come on, come on back get over here you son of a bitch, I'll show you a secret thing a big long secret thing.

The storm was on us, lightning striking close enough that we felt the tingle in the air and the barn's clapboards rattling. Clair was up out of the shed now too calling for Billy to come on in, goddamnit, Billy come on in, son.

Dad started the Chevy and waved goodbye to Clair. The storm and the excitement had him laughing in the car. He said we were out of the gale now, by god, rubber under us all the way round, safe from thunderbolts.

I looked back to watch Billy. He wouldn't go in from the lightning, and Laddie wouldn't go in without him, and he turned and turned in the storm again crying out for us to come back, come on back, we ate chicken didn't we? We ate chicken ha! Chicken, chicken, bastard chickens!

