

## Farming

**T**HERE I WAS, A 10-YEAR-OLD and her heifer calf, Christy Homestead Janet, at the cattle sale in Waukesha, Wis. We had clipped and cleaned our animals, and now, one by one, they were led around the sawdust ring. The auctioneer trilled his high-pitched chant that seemed to mean something to the bidders as Janet posed just as I had taught her to.

My dad had selected her from the other calves on our farm as having good potential. She was brought to a special pen near our house where I looked after her all summer, feeding her, brushing her, shoveling manure and replacing the straw bedding, and—very important—teaching her to walk quietly around the ring as I led her.

The whole experience was a bit bewildering for me. I was trying very hard to do everything that was expected of me but had no idea why, or where, it was all leading. So that first year in 4-H I don't remember being so attached to my calf, or sad that she was being sold, especially when my dad and grandfather were so pleased at the \$812 price she brought. Another farmer would raise Janet to be a milk cow, presuming she would have many calves of her own to improve the next generation of Holsteins on his farm.

In later summers I came to understand more about how the farm worked, both the wonderful and wholesome parts and the sad and difficult parts. My brothers and I had other calves to take care of each summer, and as time went on we became more and more attached to them. They were our pets. We enjoyed seeing their personalities develop and would tell stories about their quirks and the funny things they did. We would go and visit "our calves," later grown up into mature cows, mixed in with the others in the herd. We were sure they remembered us when they rubbed up against us and even let us ride on their backs. Imagine the sadness, hurt and even anger we felt when our dad would casually announce at supper that one of our pets had been sent to the butcher.

So when I think of those idyllic days on the farm—the beautiful white Victorian farmhouse with bridal-wreath bushes arching at its base, the fields stretching in every direction, the vegetable gardens, the clotheslines with sheets flapping in the wind, the workhorses with their gigantic heads and powerful necks, the woods we



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could explore at will, the sheep, chickens, pigs, and cows that were part of our everyday lives—my storybook memories are tempered with the reality of the hard, even cruel, business decisions of farming. As perfect as my childhood might have seemed, and as happy and innocent as I appear in the photograph with Janet, as my life developed I would also deal with those darker realities.

How does one reconcile these conflicts? How do we come to understand the "why, or where, it was all leading" that puzzled us as children?

I have come to realize that there are no perfect childhoods; life is a process of making use of the good parts, and learning from, then putting aside, the hurtful ones. As the innocence fades, patterns emerge.

Finding landscape architecture as a profession was a way for me to use the generative, creative parts of farming to protect and work with the earth to create spaces for living.

Finding a small, vibrant South Laguna neighborhood on the southern coast of California, a community with a respect for history and an ample heritage of beach cottages from the 1930s, helped me find a replacement for my much-loved Wisconsin farm community. My bungalow in that neighborhood is a constant reminder of my childhood farmhouse; the wooden floors and windows, the cozy rooms now filled with grandma's furniture, put me right at home. A bridal-wreath bush in the backyard calls out, "Remember me?"

I don't eat or raise farm animals now, but we have a nice herd of three cats who enjoy the lifestyle I would have liked to have given those calves of yesteryear. And now our neighborhood has created a community vegetable garden. Although the wonder of where it is all leading still lingers, I am a farmer again.

## Ann Christoph

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