

Haytime on the Prairie

Berit Bedord

Our family lives on the very last leg of the Greenfield Irrigation District. We raise our hay on what water makes it to us, and whatever rain chooses to fall. Granted, we have only ten acres; it's not much. Plus, our manual labor force consists of no one but my dad and me. Bryce's allergies, which are far worse than mine, don't allow him to help as much as he probably could.

Our best tractor is a tiny Ford 8N, red as a smoldering coal and kept in good condition. The small-square baler that we use has been around since the 1940s, but it pulls through every season like the tough old barn cat that neither nature nor people can kill off. Dad bales, and then it is my job to throw the bales into stacks, two wide and three tall. I am also the one who pitches any hay Dad misses into the next windrow.

Dad and I raise hay for our horses; that takes up three, sometimes four, of our small fields. The other two fields are usually rotated between hay-barley and native grasses that we bale and sell. All of these fields have their fair share of half-buried and rusted obstacles, small things like nails and glass bottles and big things like parts of metal barrels, that were left here by the people who lived on our land before us. But Dad is steady and precise, regardless of obstacles, and all I have to do is keep up.

After the hay has been cut, we let the torrid sun dry it out. We turn it, dry it some more, and get the baler cleaned and tuned while we let it cure. Then, when Dad pulls out his pith-helmet of a straw hat, stands in the field at a seventy-five degree angle to Scotland, shuffles his feet through the dirt and dry grass, and runs a handful of hay through his fingers, I know it's time to bale.

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I, though, think that smell and taste determine when we should bale. Every year, I notice that the taste in the dry air is about the same: dusty and sweet, like old brown sugar. The smell is usually the same, too: tired rain and dry summer, like the air in an antique box that holds the vague scent of the last place the lid was closed.

I run to the house for my thinnest and rattiest sweatshirt, replace my shorts with cargo pants, and pull my camo Bridger Steel hat down on my head. Then I dose up on all the allergy medications we have. I trot back to the first field, dust puffing up behind me from the gravel in the driveway. The field has yet to soften from its recent cutting, and the short alfalfa stems drill into the bottoms of my boots.

Dad fires up the tractor. The little red beast coughs, heaves, accepts its job, and begins its diesel-fueled little rumble. Off go the tractor, baler, and Dad. *Clunk-lurchy-cough*. Black smoke rolls across the field, and then a bale is pushed off the hot metal. Already, the ninety-two degree weather has made me strip off my grimy sweatshirt.

I wrap my leather-clad hands around the two strands of twine on the bale, bend my knees, lift and roll my shoulders, and heave the bale onto my thighs. With a few waddling steps, I start a stack. A bellow from the corner of the field lets me know that, even though my process took only a few seconds, I'm already lagging behind.

I grab a pitchfork and dart off. Dad can't reach the very edge of the field safely, so I scoop the excess hay and fling it into the closest windrow. Two forkfuls later, I go back to move another couple of bales into a nearby stack. Dad yells that the last bale wasn't tight enough, so I pull out my pocket knife. Hay explodes into the air, onto my skin, down my shirt, in my hair,

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eyes, and shoes. I hold still for as long as I can, hoping a breeze will spring to life and blow it off me. It doesn't, so I try not to breathe. It doesn't work, and I sneeze once, twice, three times.

Dad is hollering again. I sneeze one more time, cough, and scuttle off to see him. The hay burrows deeper into my skin and nostrils. Have I mentioned that hay and straw are the only things I'm allergic to in the whole world?

Round and round. I sneeze, stack, pitch. Field one is done, and we move on to field two. Pitch, sneeze, stack four bales, cough. The sun is bitterly harsh, blinding and white. My skin burns and itches. I HATE hay.

Dad yells again and I step toward him. We are in the corner of the field where water in the irrigation ditch flows steadily toward the neighbor's place. I try to make out Dad's words over the rumble of the baler and the faint sound of the water.

"Berit! BERIT, back up! There are two rattlers in that corner! Get outta there! Don't bother pitching. We'll get it later!"

I feel myself go pale as I backpedal as fast as I can. I hate, hate, hate snakes and always have. I hate the way they move, sound, and look. They are like the monsters that every little kid is told don't exist. I wish I could deny the fact that snakes are real. I don't go near the corner of the field again, and I watch a little more carefully where I put my feet.

Field two is done and we move on to field three, the last one this year, for this cutting at least. The sky darkens. Something besides the tractor and baler rumbles. I look east. Big, black, furious clouds stomp toward us. We have ten minutes, tops. This is the biggest field, heavy with hay. Dad kicks the tractor up a notch, and then another. The baler squeals and I cringe. If it gives out, we could lose some of the hay, and we need all of it. *Clunk, clunk, clunk.*

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Faster, faster. Round and round. Hail is promised. The sky goes black, then purplish, the color of blueberries. I sneeze over and over. Stack and sneeze, then pitch into the windrow. I'm wheezing despite the meds I took.

A raindrop hits my nose. As Dad swings by again, I hear him swear, and I know that he feels the drops start to hit. *Plink, plink, PLINK*. I urge myself to stack faster. Something hits the brim of my hat. Hail.

Dad makes the last circle of the pasture as hail gains force. Winds pick up; rain soaks me. Dad jumps off the tractor and throws bales into a stack. We're done. I grab the pitchfork; Dad hops back onto the tractor and urges it to the machine shed. There is nothing more we can do today.

I run for the house, up the steep hill, past the barn, beyond the chicken coop. Dad is running from the other direction, headed toward the house, too. Up onto the deck, I grab the handle of the door. I can hear Dad right behind me as we charge into the house. Once inside, my sneezing and coughing resumes. Though the rain eased the burning for a moment, my arms are covered in itchy, swollen scratches. My head throbs, and I can't breathe through my nose. Dad looks as though he's in about the same shape. Both of us stand for a moment in the dark kitchen, panting and wheezing. Though we both look and feel terrible, all that matters is that the hay has been baled and stacked. Even though the rain has lessened some, the hail and wind continue to shriek. But the hay is stacked, and until the next cutting, we've won. As I head for the bathroom to rinse the hay off my hands and face, I pass Dad. He reaches out and gives my shoulder a squeeze. In between a cough and a sneeze, Dad manages to say, "Good job, kiddo. Thanks for the help." I smile at the floor and keep walking.