Farm Boys
Fellows, Will

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Bill Troxell

Born in 1950, Bill grew up with one sister on a beef and grain farm operated by his extended family in Clinton County, Indiana. He lives in Indianapolis, but is still involved in raising registered livestock. In this brief narrative, Bill reflects on how the gender roles of his childhood have influenced his identity as a gay man.

ANYTIME I NEEDED to get away to think my own thoughts, I’d go walking through the woods. Often the cows would be in the woods somewhere, and part of my wandering was to connect with them. When I’d eventually find them, over a ridge or down in a hollow, I’d sit down and be with them. I was a part of the herd as far as they were concerned—they were used to me. Off in the woods, lost in my own little world, I felt like I belonged. A lot of my problems were solved sitting on a tree stump in the woods with the cows.

I never wanted to be a tractor jockey, but I could never get enough of working around the livestock as a boy. My dad didn’t spend a lot of time with the livestock, but I learned a lot from my grandfather and my uncles. In the springtime, when everybody else was busy doing fieldwork, I was much more at home with the cows—counting them and keeping records on who was bred to who and when they were going to calve. In the summertime I was showing cattle and going to rodeos, where I was belt-buckle-high to a lot of cowboys. That was a great attraction.

At the International Livestock Exposition in Chicago one summer, when I was twelve or thirteen, I was introduced to a couple of steer wrestlers. I couldn’t take my eyes off of them. In a moment of pent-up excitement before they competed, one of them grabbed me from behind, lifted me off the ground, and rubbed his big knuckles into my crew-cut head. Watching him compete and slam his steer into the tanbark, I got excited thinking about how playfully rough he had been with me earlier.

I’ve never been close to my father, but my grandfather on my father’s side was like a father to me. He was a tall man, strong and rather quiet. He usually didn’t have a lot to say, but when he did, everybody would stop to listen because it was very significant. I had a lot of respect for him and felt a great bond between the two of us. He, like some of my uncles, was
the strong yet gentle and unassuming kind of man that is now the kind of guy I’m sexually attracted to: tall, clean-cut, sleeves-rolled-up, suntanned.

My father’s side of the family tended to be less demonstrative of their feelings, but my grandfather would do something my father never did—sit down and talk to me. My grandfather always had time for me, and it felt good to touch him and to have him touch me—grab my shoulder, pat me on the head, kiss me goodnight. One time he leaned down to give me a kiss and I could feel his beard stubble on my face. I’d never been that close to a man before, and I thought, wow, that really feels good! Sleeping in my grandfather’s room one night, I was awakened when he came in to go to bed. With intense curiosity, I watched him get undressed. After that, whenever I stayed at my grandparents’, I would pretend to be asleep so I could watch my grandfather get ready for bed.

I’ve absorbed the influences of many good people in my life and made them a part of me. I’ve been influenced not only by strong, clean-washed men with rolled-up sleeves, but also by women with flour on their hands and aprons around their waists, standing behind the screen door and waving at me when I got off the school bus. I identify strongly as a man and I am not effeminate in any way, but I feel like I’m comfortably in balance with both aspects of my family in me—my masculinity, and those parts of me that feel more nurturing and caring.