

IF YOU
Leave THIS
Farm

IF YOU
Leave THIS
Farm

THE DREAM IS DESTROYED

Amanda Farmer

 ARCHWAY
PUBLISHING

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Preface

g u t t e r
This is my true story of being raised in the Mennonite faith by a patriarchal father. I did not realize as a child that there was anything different about our family from other Mennonites, and I embraced the beliefs and expectations that had been integrated into my life. My journey has its beginnings in Pennsylvania, where I was born, but it really doesn't begin until we move to Minnesota to farm together. This is the story of our move to Minnesota, the conflicts that developed there, and my struggle to leave the farm. It is also a story about the challenges and triumphs of farming.

Leaving the farm, though, resulted in consequences I did not foresee and would never have predicted in a Christian family. The sequel to this book will continue the story of the disintegration of the family as a result of unresolved expectations resulting from my and my brother's leaving the farm. This is one story of what can happen when one child stays on the farm, and the others leave to begin a different life.

The names in this book have been changed to protect the dignity and privacy of those involved. The area for the setting in Minnesota has also been changed or made ambiguous for

the same reason. This book and its sequel are not, under any circumstances, meant to be used as a reprisal or an opportunity to be vindictive. Rather, they exist to share a story with others, a story that, I hope, can provide insight and understanding into the difficulties that can arise in families who attempt to mingle their personal lives and their futures together. My hope is that my story will prevent other families from going down this path—to hurt and bitterness and estrangement.

Chapter 1

THE EARLY YEARS

*I*t is April 1973, and it is dark outside as I slide my feet out of bed at four o'clock in the morning and dress hurriedly in the brightly lit bathroom. Daddy is already out at the barn and expecting his children to show up to help with milking, feeding the growing cattle, and giving milk replacer to the younger calves. I awaken Joseph, my brother who is fourteen and just a year younger than I, by banging on the bathroom wall that adjoins his bedroom. I hear a stirring, so I make my way downstairs and prepare for my mad dash through the dark to the barn to avoid the monsters that might be waiting for me. Paul, at seventeen and two years older than I, is allowed to continue sleeping and will appear later.

Our farm of one hundred twenty-five acres is located in the rolling hills of southern Pennsylvania. A narrow blacktop road twists through the farmstead, its path wandering within twenty feet of the buildings. The white clapboard house sits several hundred feet down the road from the typical red-bank barn. The upper part of the barn houses tons of hay and straw placed there through hours of toiling together during the hot summer

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months. The lower part is the milking area, which contains twenty-eight stanchions for holding the cows securely in place while they are milked. We are modern farmers in that the milk goes directly from the milking machine into a glass pipeline above the stanchions. The milk shoots through the glass tube to the holding jar in the milk house, is pumped through a filter, and then is dumped directly into the bulk milk tank. We milk around one hundred twenty-five cows twice each day. When the cows are not being milked, they are housed in a large free-stall barn. They are fed silage twice a day using a squirming auger that crawls down the middle of the feed bunk. The silage cascades down a chute from the two towering concrete silos that grace the landscape.

With the milking chores done, I make a repeat dash back to the house at around six forty-five. Mama works nights as a nurse at the hospital and will not arrive home until after eight thirty, leaving no one to greet me at the door. The house seems cold and forbidding in these dark, silent early hours of morning. My first action is to throw on several lights. Nobody seems to be lurking in any of the rooms, so I make an effort to slow down my frantic breathing. The bus is due at seven fifteen. I must hurry to wash up and change clothes.

Paul and Joseph are soon back in the house as well, and Paul makes a kettle of instant oatmeal for our breakfast. Oatmeal almost makes me gag, but there is no time to find something else to eat. I take a small portion and slather it with brown sugar, hoping to slide it past my palate as quickly as possible. There is always shoofly pie, made by Mama each week for breakfast desert, and that is what I go for as sustenance for the day. Joseph and I check frequently out the western house window for the flashing red lights of the school bus at the neighbor's as we gulp our food. Lunch boxes and coats lie by the door. I just finish

showing my second arm into a coat sleeve as the bus screeches to a halt outside our door. My stomach is curled in knots from this frantic rush each morning. But now it is time for my nap. We are the second ones on the school bus. I settle into a seat with Joseph for our thirty-five minute ride to Friendship High School, located in rural south-central Pennsylvania. This long ride gives me the perfect opportunity to make up a few of those missed winks of sleep. It has been impressed on us that work is more important than sleep. And it is certainly much more important than school. Therefore, this year—my tenth—will be my last year in school. Paul was removed from school on a work permit three years earlier and Joseph and I will leave next year to stay home and help on the farm too. I am being allowed to stay in school a year longer than the boys because I am smart—or maybe because I am a girl. I am not really sure which. Mama has a bachelor's degree in nursing, but Daddy does not believe that education is important. After all, he only has an eighth-grade education, and he did "just fine." And apparently, Mama doesn't think it necessary or prudent to oppose his wishes.

In some ways, I hate school. The lack of sleep and the stress of not having time to properly do the schoolwork weigh on me. But school does provide a means for me to explore a world that is quite different from my home life. There are the usual classes offered at any public high school: English, German, typing, geometry, social studies, gym class, and study hall. I learn easily and don't need to put a lot of brain power into mastering the material. This ability saves me scholastically, since I am always exhausted from the early-morning hours spent in the barn. My eyelids flutter as each successive teacher drones on; my head nods and finally sinks onto my desk. If there were a category in the *Guinness Book of World Records* for number of classes slept through, I would receive it. Surprisingly, I receive little reprimand from my teachers,

probably because I ace most of their tests and make straight As except in gym class.

Oh yes, gym class is my bane. But how can I make an A in gym when I am the only one wearing a dress while trying to climb a rope or perform cartwheels? We are Mennonites, so every day, I wear a skirt and blouse as my basic attire. A single braid of uncut hair snakes down my back beyond my waist. It is capped by a small mesh “covering” on my head.

Mennonites are distinguishable from other Christian denominations primarily by several beliefs that are distinct. They were, historically, called Anabaptists because of their rejection of infant baptism and the practice of believer’s baptism. The Mennonite Christian is to be separate from the world in all practices. This translates into a strict belief in the separation of church and state and the practice of non-resistance. No church member may serve in the military, participate in a lawsuit, vote, or hold public office. Dressing differently from the world is also stressed. For women, this means they are not to “use makeup, cut their hair, and wear slacks, shorts, or fashionable head dress, short sleeves, low necklines, dresses not reaching well below the knees, or clothes that expose the form of the body in an immodest way. The hair is to be covered with a veil of sufficient size to adequately cover the head.” (Excerpted from the Statement of Christian Doctrine and Rules and Discipline, Lancaster Conference of the Mennonite Church, July 17, 1968.)

In spite of feeling like a misfit at school, I do have a small, select group of “worldly” friends. Cory, Laura, and I hang out together in study hall, and they are my confidants. However, I am not allowed to visit their homes or go places with them because they might influence me toward those worldly ways. But a sense of personal pride does come with the stellar grades I am able to make in my classes, and it gains me a certain respect with my

peers. My accomplishment, though, is barely given a nod at home when I present my report card for signing.

After school, Joseph and I have a thirty-minute wait while our bus makes its first run before returning to pick us up for our ride home. I pull out the homework assigned for today and work on it while waiting. I finish it on the bus ride home, as I know there will not be time for homework once we arrive home. It is about four o'clock in the afternoon when the bus drops Joseph and me off at our house. We are expected to change clothes and go to the barn immediately to do chores again.

Afternoon is Mama's sleeping time, so she is curled up in bed. I tiptoe into the bedroom and nudge Mama to ask if I can have a cookie—or whatever else my eyes spy in the kitchen that looks good for a snack. She always just mumbles, “yes” and goes back to sleep. As we eat our snack, Joseph and I turn on the radio to a Christian station out of southeastern Pennsylvania. It is time for *Ranger Bill*. I love *Ranger Bill*. It is filled with adventure, something that I long for. We listen with absorption while we keep an eye on the road, hoping to hear the final minutes of resolution before Daddy appears, wondering why we are not out to the barn yet.

Today, though, we make it through the end of the radio program without Daddy appearing, and I jump on my bicycle for a quick ride to the barn. It is my speedy, dependable means of transportation around the farm. The sun is warm, and daffodils are just starting to emerge by the well house. The smell of freshly moved dirt is in the air. Daddy and Paul are out in the field working ground and getting ready to plant corn.

That means I will have to milk alone tonight while Joseph feeds the young stock. Milking goes so much more slowly when there is no one to help. I am relieved when Daddy comes into the barn around eight o'clock and helps to wrap up the chores.

Daddy is a man who commands respect. He expects his

children to obey him, and nonsense is not tolerated. Daddy could best be described as frugal and hardworking. His five-foot, nine-inch stature is trim and lined with bulging muscles. For as long as I can remember, Daddy has been totally bald. Only a strip of black hair caresses his ears and circles around the back of his head—a head that is too small for even the smallest “one size fits all” seed-corn cap. But having a small head has not in any way diminished his keen business sense.

Soon Paul, Joseph, and I are racing each other to the house on our bicycles for supper. Mama has supper on the stove and is napping while she waits for us. She will feed us and clean up before heading off to work again for another night shift. Mama is physically short and plump. Her dark-brown hair is pulled back under the traditional Mennonite veiling. Her round, smiling face greets us each day while her hands perform the never-ending tasks of cooking and cleaning and washing, as well as working away from home. I never hear Mama complain about her daily routine.

I grab a book to read while supper is being put on the table. Reading is my escape to adventures I probably will never see, but there is nothing to stop me from dreaming. I work in a few paragraphs before it is time to gather at the table. Daddy begins by reading a passage aloud from the Bible. Then he prays before we dig into a hearty meal of farmer's fare: potatoes, meat, a vegetable, and always a dessert.

“Children,” Daddy says tonight, “Next Monday evening, we are going to go to Nirvana to see some slides of farms that are for sale in the Midwest. They are being shown by a real estate agent from there. I need you to get the milking started right away when you get home from school.”

Daddy has been talking for some time now about buying land “out West” and moving out of the crowded Pennsylvania area. Currently, Daddy is renting land in small blocks of five to

ten acres, as far away as twenty miles from the home farm. He and Paul are farming around five hundred acres altogether. We all spend a lot of time on the road, traveling back and forth to the various fields and hauling the baled hay home during the long summer days. Daddy and Paul think it would be so much easier to just have a piece of land all in one block to farm. I am not so sure about this idea, but Daddy promises that if we do this, we won't milk as many cows. We will only have maybe fifty cows. That sounds like a wonderful idea to me and I am open to an adventure. By now it is nine thirty, and I fall into bed, exhausted with dreams of faraway places and fewer cows to milk.



The spring of 1973 has flowed into summer, slipped through fall, and another winter is knocking on our doorstep. I watch for the postman with eagerness and rush out of the house as soon as I see him pull away from the mailbox. Yesterday, Paul, Joseph, and I did not get a letter; but today, it is waiting. I rip it open and read:

Dear Children,

November 12, 1973, 9:15 a.m.

Greetings in Jesus's Precious Name,

We got to Garvin at 12:00 noon. Ate dinner with them then went to church ninety miles away. There were about five different families attending. One came over from ... Wisconsin, 120 miles away. Peter Wiehler. They are moving into this area. Eight children, oldest twenty-one. Benjamin Penner has five children. Two are married and aren't out here. They have an eighteen-year-old boy. A fifteen-year-old girl, Ellen Sue, and two blind

boys ... I think they are eleven and twelve years old ... We slept at this home. We used our electric blanket again. They live in a rented house. The one on their farm needs a lot of work to be done.

We just saw a 1200 acre farm. Four-bedroom house. The family has nine children, so the place looks dirty and a mess. I hope we don't have to get rid of all the trash around. Only one bathroom. Outbuildings aren't bad. It's a grain, beef, and hog farm. \$650 an acre. We want to go back to this farm tomorrow to talk to the owner. Roads all around it. Joseph and Amanda could drive and drive without fear of hitting anything or turning over ...

With love, Daddy and Mama

I fold the letter and begin making dinner for my brothers. Daddy and Mama have been gone since November 9. This is their second trip out West this year; this time targeting Minnesota with the objective of buying a farm there. We have been left at home again to milk and care for the house and farm while they are gone. I feel grown-up and respected to be entrusted with so much responsibility by our parents. From my perspective as a young teenager, I see our family as a tight-knit, generally happy family. Our life revolves mostly around working together. And working hard and willingly is the ticket to Daddy's approval. Though we have little playtime, no vacations, and little contact with the outside world, it has never occurred to me that this is not a normal state of affairs. In fact, in the autobiography that I wrote for an English assignment in my last year in the public school, I concluded with "there is no generation gap in our family."

We had waved good-bye to Mama and Daddy for their first fact-finding farm search on August 17. We were left alone for the

first time in our lives to do the milking and farm work and to keep the home fires burning. Their trip involved making a large loop through the Midwest, looking at farms in every state from Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Wisconsin to Minnesota and back through Iowa, Oklahoma, and Tennessee. In each state, they made note of the crops and the various farms on the market. It had been an awesome year for crops in Minnesota. They reported that Minnesota had the best crops of anywhere that they traveled. So Daddy and Mama came home on August 26 having made the decision to make Minnesota our new farming home.

The intent of this return trip in November is to find the perfect farm to buy. Our Pennsylvania farm has been on the market since September 29, and Daddy is hoping for a fast and profitable sale. He is asking \$270,000 for the one hundred twenty-five acres. That would make a good down payment on whatever farm they purchase. I can tell by the letter in my hand that Daddy and Mama see this land that she writes about as becoming ours. And sure enough, when they return on November 16, they report that they have bought the 1,280-acre farm in Minnesota. I am excited by the progress. This seems like a great adventure to me, and with anticipation, I look forward to beginning this new journey.