

The 1175

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I am sitting in the College Center at Augustana College after a full day of classes. I am complaining about the large amount of reading I have to complete, even though I enjoy the material. While sitting and discussing various college topics—women, classes, and women—I see my younger brother making his way to the booth where I am sitting.

He seems angry, which doesn't surprise me. Anyone who knows my brother will agree that he is always either in a sour mood or upset about something which usually amounts to nothing. But when he reaches me, he does not crack a joke, which is something unusual. Normally, he'll make one if only to show that his anger is just a front. Instead, he looks directly at me and tells me that we have to go to Iowa City because our father has had complications resulting from his surgery.

At this moment, there is no oxygen for me to breathe. I cannot respond. I feel the tension around me. I feel like this has to be a joke. My father has never been sick; the thought of him in critical condition is like a round square, or a small planet: the terms are just contradictory. But the next thing I know, I am on my way to Iowa City, driving my brother's Dodge pickup truck while he sits in the passenger seat. We are trying to make sense of what is happening. After a while, the truck becomes silent, and I am left to my thoughts. It is then that I remember the 1175.

The 1175 is a tractor that has been on my family's farm since my mom and dad got married. Technically, it is a 1978 Case Agri-King. It is painted white, a misleading feature to many people who associate Case farm equipment with the color red. This is a common error, but anyone who knows tractors knows that Cases are not red; Case IH (the organization created when Case merged with the International Harvester company in 1985) makes the red tractors.

But even with such a venerable history, the 1175 is hardly a tractor that other farmers envy my family. It is old, and its gears are difficult to shift. And surely it is not as convenient as a modern tractor, on which every control is one button-push away. But these things do not mean that it is a bad tractor. In many ways, this tractor represents the values of our farm: small but unique, plain but diligent. For many farmers, the 1175 represents ideal farming days gone by—as our farm does, especially against the backdrop of the contemporary industrialized petro-plantation.

As I envision the shiny white metal of the 1175's hood, I notice an old combine working in a bean field along Interstate 80. Not even halfway to Iowa City yet, I can think only of my home, and that I want with such desperation for it not to change. Thinking about how I was raised and the place where I grew up reminds me of my parents, but I don't want to think of my dad's complication. When I reach the hospital, I want to be strong for my mom.

My mind wanders until I begin to think about a few classes at Augustana. We're discussing things like What is nature? and Where does my food come from? and all of this brings me back to the farm. When I think of nature and of food, I think of the golden-green hayfields we have on our land. I think of the hay, freshly cut after a hot summer's day. During mid-summer, it is so hot that we have to leave the door and windows of the 1175 open, so that we do not suffocate or suffer from heat stroke while driving along a field's trimmed edges.

I dissect the favorite tractor in my mind, trying to envision every last detail. The tractor is all white with a cab. It has a red engine and underbelly. The rims on the wheels are also red. On the white hood is a black stripe with the white numbers 1175 and letters that spell out "Agri-

King.” I realize that I miss driving this tractor, I miss the life that comes with our work. But as these thoughts are keeping my mind from thoughts of my ailing father, I cannot complain too much.

For most of my childhood, the 1175 was the pride of our farm. It was our biggest tractor and the one with which we did all of our heavy field work. It had a set of dual tires that would slide on next to the rear ones; we used these for the disking, the cultivating, and the plowing. I remember how shiny and gray the insides of the duals were. I could sit inside them and feel like I had fallen into a Pepsi can. I remember seeing from the cab of the tractor the top rubber part of the dual tires rotating around and around while I rode in the fields with my dad on cold fall nights when my mom went to choir practice. My brother and I would sit behind my dad’s seat on a tool box that was right next to the swing-out window at the back of the cab. From my spot, which was usually on the left side, right above the black parking brake lever and literally right on top of the black plastic toolbox, I could see the entire tractor. I could look out over Dad’s head and see the controls, steering wheel, and gauges. I could see the left front tire rolling across the shredded corn stocks illuminated by the headlights. I could look out the back and see the implements tearing the ground so it looked like an ocean wave was rolling across the ground where the teeth lifted it. I could look to my right and see my little brother smiling ear to ear while asking my father pointless questions about what he was doing. And through it all, my dad would smile, seeming to cherish this time with two of his boys.

I begin wonder if I miss the tractor or instead what it symbolizes to me. I remember when I was boy and my dad was young and healthy. He was the toughest man I knew, and no one would have thought to tell him him. If we misbehaved, we knew that we would have to go look for our own switches off of the apple tree in our backyard. (Always look for one without the little knots.)

I begin to miss my invincible dad. When were his hard, angular features replaced with this sick and tired visage? How could he grow old on his family? Doesn’t he know that his is the strength that holds our family all together? Without him, we could not have the farm. Without him, I would lose every sense of home that I have. We would have to cash rent the land. We would sell our machinery. All of it. I cannot even imagine the empty feeling that would come with selling the 1175. But for the time being, we still have my dad, and the tractor, which will sit in our farm yard during this working season and not see any cold fall driving.

My dad was not the only one who ran the 1175 back when I was growing up. I remember my grandpa also doing his fair share of farm work. My grandpa was an amazing man. He worked on the farm, well after becoming an octogenarian. I always envisioned my children seeing my dad getting into the 1175 and thinking the same thing about him. Was it the tractor that made these two men so strong? Or was it these men who had made the tractor so powerful? Perhaps the reason I love the 1175 so much is that it is the one piece of my history I can look at and feel a strong sense of home. I can see my grandfather and dad getting into the 1175 to do work on the land I call home. I want their work to be my work, for my children to be raised in hayfields and by people with character and strength enough to tame those fields.

I am so caught up in thinking about home that I almost miss a sign saying that the university hospital is at the next exit. I’m nervous because I do not know exactly what is wrong with my dad, other than that he is suffering from critical complications resulting from an operation that removed a cancerous prostate. As we drive closer to the hospital, my emotions seem to run on separate tracks. On one hand, it is a beautiful fall day, and the University of

Iowa's campus is stunning at this time of year. On the other hand, I am going to see my father, sick and broken, and I don't know what to expect.

I find a place to park and see a red truck like the one my dad used to drive. I think of the 1175 again. I think of what it must look like at this very moment. Idle and covered with dust in our machine shed, but summer lingers with the last of this year's hay on the cutter. Time has changed our farm, as it has, and will, the make-up of my family. My grandfather is no longer living, and the family farm is no longer as immaculate as it was when both he and my dad worked its soil. It has many weeds growing in places that they never would have allowed. The farm is still clean and working, but it's one that looks as if it has been forgotten for several weeks. That's because it has been. Since his surgery, my dad has not been able to do all the work in addition to his full-time job as a banker. My brother and I have been going home to do what we can, but our pace is no match for what my father's was.

I begin to feel ashamed that I have almost abandoned him and the farm. Here I am at school, working to be a teacher so that I can let the farm go—the farm that means time with my father that could be shorter than I imagined. And as I begin to compare the places, college and the farm, I know that Augustana is not my home. My home is in rural Warren County, Illinois, on a 275-acre farm hidden off of Rural Route 1. My home is where each field has its own name; this is how we know where we are. I imagine the house, the green shed, the 1175 sitting inside when it should be lively with action, hooked to an auger cart for harvest, and then, later, ripping up the ground in brown waves in a sea of soil. Instead, it sits idle with few prospects for the near future.

I am in the hospital elevator with my brother. We make our way to the third floor, where my mom sits in the waiting room while my dad is in surgery recovery. We leave the elevator, and I feel the hair on my arms stand up with nerves. I have no practice dealing with a sick parent and worry that I will freak out or show weakness. My parents have been healthy my entire life, and I don't know how I will deal with this sort of trauma. This is a new kind of fear, even worse than when I found out my dad had early-stage prostate cancer, the same cancer that took my grandpa out of the 1175 forever.

We walk into the area where my mom is supposed to be waiting. We cannot find anyone and start to wonder where she might be and if there is something wrong. Finally, we see her talking to a doctor in a hallway. I am hesitant to go to her because I do not want to hear any bad news. I do not want to know why my father had to have an emergency surgery. I just want to go back to the truck and go home. I would give anything for a cold fall evening, to ride on the toolbox in the cab of the 1175. Instead I have a hospital hallway, stuck in what feels like a dream.

My mom spots us and smiles. She introduces us to the doctor, a specialist in his field, supposed to be best of the best. He tells us what he has just told my mom, that my dad had an infection—a bad one—but the doctors found it in time, so they were able to clean it up. He says that they do not know where the infection came from, that it is odd that it happened so long after the initial prostate surgery, and that my dad will be in recovery at the hospital for a while. The image of the idle 1175 comes to me again.

I have not lived a fall in which Dad has not been out in the field harvesting. It is both his and my favorite time of year. I remember going out and riding the combine with my dad, riding in the grain truck to the elevator with my grandpa, and moving the 1175 with the auger on it to empty the combine. These memories are just like the 1175. I realize that it is not the 1175 or

these other farming activities that make me miss home. It is the chance to live and work with my father, doing for free what so many others would not do for a great deal of money.

Time passes, and we are still in the waiting room at the hospital to see my father. I am sitting with my mom and brother. Going through my mind are only two thoughts: the health and rehab of my dad, and that old white tractor sitting in a shed on our farm in rural Warren County. These two are connected more than I once thought; their futures depend on one another. The future I am hoping for is one in which my children are sitting on a fence, watching my dad get out of the 1175 after a full day's work during fall harvest. They won't understand that theirs is a childhood and a way of living denied so many others. But knowing that they they should grow up around work worth doing by people who love them, and in places that they will come to love, is enough for me to know that our farm and its dingy, magnificent tractor will have many good years ahead of them.