

My mom bought me a toolkit and a train set, which, in the early 70's, were pretty weird toys for a girl. It was a pre-plastic era, and all of the toys had the metal heft of the real article. They were miniature, yes, but didn't have the garish colors or distorted proportions of today's Fisher Price. I can still feel the boxcar wheels click onto the steel tracks and the serrated dial adjust the jaws of the wrench. "I wanted her to know she could be anything she wanted," my mother likes to tell people. But when she asked me one day, in our avocado kitchen, what I thought that might be, I revealed a narrow concept of the word *anything*. "I want to be a farmer's wife," I told her.

When my mom tells this story at dinner parties, it always kills.

If I happen to be there, I protest, "But wait, you don't understand—" I am drowned out by the laughter. And I taper off. I don't really want to be the person to dim the white afterglow of a well-delivered joke. Plus, it would be impossible to explain the *But* feeling in my chest with same chancing as my mother tells that story.

If I did explain it, though, the first thing I would say is that, at five years old, I believed that farmer's wife was a job. I developed this impression from my picture books and probably just from the air I breathed in 1974. Boys were farmers. Girls were farmers' wives. Just like boys were pilots and girls were stewardesses. Boys were firemen and policemen. Girls were, well, missing from those parts of the books.

Based on the choices I saw, farmer's wife seemed like a pretty good gig. I was especially drawn to the pastoral responsibilities for animals. I wouldn't do quite as much heavy lifting as the farmer or endure as much windburn. True, I wouldn't get to drive the tractor, but I'd have a big awesome house. And mightn't I use tools? Mightn't the train deliver grain and livestock? I had train engineering experience and my own toolkit for God's sake. Wasn't I far more qualified than those tutu-wearing rubes down at the ballet studio?

Unlike teachers and secretaries, I'd have plenty of solitude. There'd be no need to dazzle anyone, as was required of country music stars and actresses.

As the only child of divorced parents, I didn't know it, but I had picked a future like my present — it involved spending a lot of time alone with our cat and dog.

Animals had always seemed safer than people. They showed their cards. I would never come home one day to find the dog directing movers to take his bed, dishes, and squeaky chicken out to a blue Atlas truck on the driveway, destined for a bachelor pad he'd share with his old Navy buddy.

Likewise, if the cat were crying and chopping up cucumbers, she wouldn't say, "Nothing's wrong. I cut my thumb."

And if the dog reappeared one morning, asleep on the couch with a tablecloth for a blanket, he wouldn't stammer something about having been too tired to drive home.

Animals farted and threw up without shame. And they only sat close, nuzzling a tattered copy of Richard Scary, because they felt like it. Unlike people, they wanted to convey their agendas. They vocalized and poked and did charades to aid comprehension. It was relaxing. They helped me to perceive the solitude that came with divorce as solace rather than loneliness. And if I hadn't been equipped with tools and with notions about industrial transportation, would I have been prepared to travel there? Hadn't I understood the suggestion of those toys — that I was capable of changing my route, my landscape, my structure, my foundations? I was simply a frontierswoman in difficult terrain.

When I was in high school, my single mother, in the market for a new car, considered a Honda Accord. “What do you need a hatchback for?” I asked.

She shrugged. She wore pigtails and a flannel shirt. “So I can haul stuff.”

A pedigreed smartass, I said, “What are you going to haul? Soup for One?”

It turned out that she *did* need to haul stuff. She often transported her windsurfer, her bicycle, her large art supplies, her home improvement projects.

At my reunion, everyone I met asked about her. “I ate hummus for the first time at your house,” they’d say. Or “Your mom explained Buddhism to me.” Or “Does your mom still play soccer?” What they meant was that she wasn’t anything like their moms. My mother worked as the chair of her department at the middle school, and she tutored in the summers so we could go on vacations. She changed her own oil and bought a dulcimer and sampled recipes from the Moosewood cookbook.

That woman, and I don’t say this lightly, might have made a fine farmer’s wife.