

The muse and the moos

Story by **Marci Diehl**

ONE OF THE LITTLE SPROUTS ON MY family tree has turned into a super-reader. Nate, 7, has been devouring books for months, and his favorite authors can't write books fast enough.

I love seeing these stories transporting him to other places. But when he read *Charlotte's Web*, I was reminded how an author led me to a very unlikely place—for real, and in my adulthood.

Once upon a time, I fell in love with the writing of E.B. White. One of my favorites of his, *One Man's Meat*, is a collection of essays he wrote while living on a saltwater farm on the coast of Maine. It's full of his experiences with all the real-life animals that eventually found their way into his children's books like *Charlotte's Web*. After reading White's essays, I had a vision of myself in barn boots, walking through a pretty pasture in the morning mist, then sitting down to write at my desk in the evening, cleaned up and full of the muse.

Now, I was born and raised in the city. The closest I had come to farm animals was admiring gussied-up bovines at the state fair. But White had gotten to me with passages like this one from "Getting Ready for a Cow":

"I have waited a long time for this cow, this fateful female who I have yet to meet. The cow seemed a long way off, but I held her firmly in my thoughts, as a soldier holds the vision of home and peace through a long campaign in a foreign land."

As a writer, I had no idea how to get from milking an interview for all it's worth to milking a cow for a morning meal. But then I saw a small article about relief milking. A relief milker is sort of like a temp, only on a dairy farm. Surely, a farmer could use my help.

Actually, no. Several turned me down. John Mueller of Willow Bend Farm in Manchester was the only farmer amused enough to take me on for training. Maybe he'd read E.B. White; Mueller, like White, attended Cornell University and once caught lobsters off the coast of Maine, just



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like White did.

Willow Bend is a much larger operation than White's little 40-acre farm. It has an employee handbook and a kind of profit-sharing plan. It's a state-of-the-art family farm, now with 4,600 cows between two partner farms. When I was there, there were a mere 600 cows. Still, for a city girl like me, that's a lot of cows.

I reported for training in my new barn boots. Mueller sized me up for some overalls. The manure White honored wryly in words was all too present in reality.

I got a tour of the operation. Mueller decided I'd better stay off the tractor: not my forte. And I learned the cold reality of a farm. Willow Bend had a top certification for its superior husbandry, and the cows are given the best possible care—but they're numbered, not named. "They're stock, not pets," Mueller explained, no doubt noticing my soft eyes as I looked their way.

For a week in the December snow, I attempted to milk the cows. My fellow

milkers, both farm girls, were fast and expert. Forty cows, forty udders at a time—spray, wipe, strip, hook up. I was game, just not fast. I took everything the cows dished out. Mueller liked my spirit. He gave me the task of bottle-feeding newborn calves. I loved their long-lashed, melting brown eyes and their soft pink muzzles. The girls taught me to vaccinate a cow against mastitis of the udders.

Writing went out the window. I felt victorious, triumphant and inspired. I was also exhausted, feverish, achy and congested. White was plagued by hay fever in his life. My plague was bronchitis.

So my experiment ended. "Come back anytime," Mueller said to me. "You're a natural with the calves."

Now I view cows in their pastures through the window of my car. But I'm re-reading *One Man's Meat*. With open book, I'm sitting with E.B. on his porch, contemplating. In his barn there is a cow, sheep, pigs, geese and rats. And one spider, spinning her web to capture the imagination of readers young and old. **C**