

The Things We Carried

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Editor's Note: Mallory wrote this piece in an English class during her senior year of high school in Princeton, New Jersey.

The things we carried were by necessity. We had our water bottles, hats to keep our ears from the encroaching cold, bits of grain to feed our sheep when they needed love. My good friend, Sophie Parker-Goos, who we all called Peeg by the second day in, always had a bandana tied in her short hair to keep it from floating into her vision. There were our work boots, covered in mud within only a few days, and the dozen pairs of wool socks waiting to be worn. There were tattered jeans that we could kneel in easily to milk Louise, or that could withstand Sal's hoof when we had to clean the undersides. There were alarm clocks positioned next to every bed, reminding us that the next day, we'd be up just as early to do it all over again. And really, we stopped minding that.

Certainly six months ago, unpacking, I tossed them upon my bottom shelf, naïve as to how quickly they'd become important. Two days later I pulled them out as we embarked upon our first real trip to the farm, picking basil and potatoes, getting the initial specks of dirt on their canvas palms. Within short succession of arriving though, you could find sticking up from every back pocket, a pair of rugged work gloves. Hardly significant in any way when you see them, creased from sweat, memories and challenges. Worn to fit our fingers perfectly after four months of use. Some had holes, some were patched, some stained, but all with indefinable character. All the while, seeing the wounds of work and the pleasures of participating. They'd watched us, even aided us, in a vital period of growing.

My worn out pair was almost like the wrinkled face of my grandfather, knowing the secrets to life, love and dismay. A myriad of pain and joys through the kaleidoscope of colors life offers. He's a wise man who has seen a lot, offering freckles of wisdom whenever faced with a challenge. Outwardly trite but there was something about him that was a little noteworthy, possibly idiosyncratic, just like my pair that I'd bought from Lowes with my mom just a few days before leaving home. But they travelled with me to watch the sunrise, learn about the world around me, and learn about myself.

They'd seen tears. They'd seen the shock when our cow, Ishmael, died, strangled by a chain in his pen. They'd seen a community faced with the horrors of sudden death, traumatized with the reality of life. They'd seen the earth we'd dug up to bury him, and our faces when we'd hidden them from the tragedies the world offered us on that cold Wednesday morning. They'd seen the hugs we'd given our farmers, our peers, and ourselves in quiet when we were struggling to grapple with the situation. We'd

buried our faces into them when times were hard, when we saw an open pasture and thought about Ishmael. They'd been intertwined in the fingers of others who had picked us back up, or maybe even whom we'd picked up. But in that moment, when we staggered on a skiff between faith and disappointment, those gloves had watched with a kind eye, holding in our feelings through tarnished fibers. And somehow, they felt our pain with us.

They'd seen the sweat of hard work, empowering us to try harder, to earn more. The days we trudged through the snow, not much past six, wondering how worth it these early mornings were, we had on the gloves. They saw hay bails being stacked, they brushed the ice off of a horse's coat and worked through our worn out souls. Even when we arrived at breakfast, eager to strip our hands free from them and stack our plates, we were reminded by yogurt and eggs from the farm that we had earned this breakfast. And we recalled how unique that feeling was.

I visited Peeg that January in New York, and saw that she had her pair tacked up on a bulletin board above her desk, which I was happy to see was also littered with photos celebrating our semester. I asked her about the gloves, whether she minded that they probably didn't smell too great, but she didn't mind at all. She said the smell was comforting, the way that lavender had been to me before I left, because we had a great big plant growing outside my house. So now, miles away from our home in the woods, the smell brought her back to the barn, times of work, times we played on the swing, or sat next to the pond talking about life, finally with some answers in our own.

And now, sitting on my trunk staring down at the pair, so prosaic, I can't even imagine throwing them in the back of a closet, with along with other insignificant tokens of the various phases of my childhood. The gloves were trophies now. Their red had become muddled with dirt and time, embedded with nostalgia. It didn't matter whether we harvested enough basil, or our toes were numb and we regretted not throwing on that last pair of socks, they watched with us. At the end of the day, hell, at the end of these past six months, they were a part of me. An emblem of the real world, which few of us dare to live in.