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Off the Court, Onto the Farm

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OFF THE COURT, ONTO THE FARM

By

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Bachelor of Arts Central College, 2010

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Science

in Environmental Studies

The University of Montana

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OFF THE COURT, ONTO THE FARM

Chairperson: Josh Slotnick

Abstract:

This work contains two separate but connected stories about developing a relationship with something larger than myself. Reaching the end of my basketball career forced me to examine my relationship with the great game of basketball and my role in it. After ending my hoops career, I spent a summer working and living on a small, organic farm. The lessons I learned from the game helped me to develop a meaningful relationship with the farm and to find a reciprocal role with the land I lived and worked on.

Acknowledgments:

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OFF THE COURT, ONTO THE FARM

Chapter One

Leaving my hoop dreams behind to work a summer on an organic farm, I expected to grow crops and possibly even a new identity. My relationship with hoops wouldn't die however; its lessons would help teach me how to develop a relationship with the land. In seeing how I would always belong to the spirit of the game, I would come to understand how to live as part of the land. But I had no way to conceive how the new identity I'd grow from the land would free me from a cultural worldview I'd unconsciously held and present me with a different understanding of my role in the world. I didn't even have the language for that yet. All I had were the directions to Tomten Farm in Colorado's San Juan Mountains:

On the descent down Colorado Highway 145, take a left on County Road #5. Continue for about a mile. Take a right when the road forks. At the fork in the road, I could not see where the road led. The road disappeared from view as it descended down a steep embankment. All I could see was a roaring creek raging with mid-May mountain snowmelt and an aspen grove full of naked, white-barked trees. Up at this elevation, the aspen still had a few weeks before they would send out new buds for the season. I rolled down the road towards the creek and aspen grove. I was not sure exactly where I was going, but I knew that I had turned onto the right path.

I crossed the creek on a small, single lane bridge and climbed to the top of Hastings Mesa. Under an enormous blue sky, I discovered a wooden 2x4 converted into a homemade

sign. The sign, illustrated in red letters, burred “Tomten Farm.” I pulled into the driveway. Closing the truck door behind me, I took a moment to absorb the Mesa’s panoramic views. A 14,000 foot mountain sprawled across the horizon in front of me. Even with sunglasses covering my eyes, the reflection of the strong Colorado sunshine bouncing off of the snowcapped mountain burned holes in my retinas. I looked to my left, towards the east horizon. Another mountain, not as wide but seemingly just as tall, towered above the scrub oak bushes, aspen groves and grass pastures of Hastings Mesa. On the western horizon, the distant La Sal Mountain Range rose out of southern Utah’s expansive red desert. A frigid wind blew in from the north.

A butterfly, flapping its yellow and black wings, flew in front of my face and brought my attention to the farm I stood on. Chickens, unalarmed by my arrival, paraded in front of a heaping compost pile rising up from the ground near their coop. A few paces past the chicken coop, a south-facing greenhouse soaked in the unadulterated mountain sunshine. I greeted the chickens with a nod and stepped foot on a dirt path that extended from the greenhouse. The path led to a tan colored, wooden house. The house connected to its own small greenhouse protruding southward. A grill and a colorful chair made from old red, yellow and blue skis basked in the sunshine on a front porch. I walked past the house, following the dirt path. The path wound behind a small garden plot past a shed with solar panels and a small windmill whirling gently in the light breeze. A fenced in half-acre sized garden rested at the end of the path. I peered at the dark soil inside the fence. I didn’t open the gate to go in; I couldn’t risk staining my last fresh pair of basketball kicks.

I watched another butterfly struggle against the slight breeze. Its large white wings fluttered in the crystal clear air. The flight of the butterfly brought my eyes from the garden towards the scrub oak bushes, still naked shrubs and green grasses surrounding the shed and its solar panels. My worries about the freshness of my shoes subsiding, I noticed the music of birds filling the air with a gentle song. Looking for the birds, I instead discovered a closet sized wooden structure behind the solar panels.

My curiosity rose with each step towards the structure and turned into a moment of trepidation. I unlatched the door to take a peek without stepping inside. A white toilet glistened between a pile of sawdust and a roll of half-used toilet paper. Instead of water in the toilet, there was a deep, dark hole. I came here to the farm craving adventure; and, shitting in a composting toilet didn't bother me, but the thought of composting human feces did. Prompting my adventurous courage, I took a deep breath in through my nostrils. Surprisingly, no nasty smells permeated upwards from the hole. My nose only picked up on the scent of sawdust mixed with the sweet smell of the Rocky Mountain spring air. I took the fresh air as an auspicious omen and tried to remind myself of the beauty, not the stench, of the circle of life.

Behind me, the sound of approaching footsteps crunching on dirt put an end to any more revelations. I only hoped I had time to disguise the fact that I had just been peering down into a toilet. I made a complete 360 degree turn, and as if I were making a behind the back dribble, I softly closed the toilet lid, keeping my hands and the toilet seat hidden behind my back. Underneath the backdrop of the skying Hayden Peak, a slender, blue-eyed brunette woman in her mid-twenties calmly marched towards me. She wore a kind smile, dirt-stained

hands and a faded green sweatshirt speckled with dried dirt. Her tall, black boots left behind a trail of dark, sticky mud or maybe even manure.

“Welcome to Tomten!” she exclaimed, “I can see it didn’t take you long to put the composting toilet to work.”

“I did just drive seven hours from my folks’ place in Colorado Springs, had to have my priorities in order on arrival,” I said, figuring it a better response than having my first impression be admitting to examining a waterless toilet out of an anxious curiosity.

I extended my hand and introduced myself. She refused my out-stretched hand, and instead wrapped her arms around me for a welcoming hug.

“You must be Julie, the farm manager?” I asked as I snuck a peek onto my vintage 1987 Denver Nuggets Alex English jersey, hoping none of the dirt from Julie’s hands or sweatshirt got onto my jersey. The dark blue, rainbow highlighted Denver skyline uniform of the Nuggets all-time leading scorer was my one piece of cherished clothing. Nervous about having a good first impression on the farm, I wore my go-to outfit to dress to impress. Unfortunately, my clean basketball jersey only symbolized my culture shock on the farm. I felt like the chaco-sandal wearing, white hippie kid aimlessly wandering the sideline of a basketball court at a city park who doesn’t know the protocol of the court. I knew how to confidently call out ‘I got next’ to get myself into a pick-up game, but I had no idea how to make a good first impression on a small, organic farm.

After introducing herself, Julie said, “We’re glad to have you as a part of the farm this summer! Let me show you around.” She spoke enthusiastically but so quietly that I had to focus to hear her over the birds’ singing. “And in case you were wondering, we only use the composting toilet for fertilizer in the beds that grow flowers, not food crops.”

I followed Julie through the gate into the garden. Nothing other than a few not yet blooming dandelions and thorny thistle plants grew from each bed and path. Julie paced over to the nearest bed and squatted down. She reached into the soil compassionately as if it were a dog begging to have its belly scratched. Julie’s smile widened so much as she watched the dirt crumble through her fingers back onto the Earth that I couldn’t concern myself with the dark soil blemishing my shoes.

“Here in this bed we will plant several kinds of greens. Asian greens like bok choy and some kale, chard, arugula, a couple kinds of spinach and quite a few varieties of lettuces.”

“Oh ok. Nice,” I replied, pretending to actually have heard of bok choy, kale, chard and arugula. Maybe gluten-free rich kids who ate their lunches at bistros had seen these greens in their salads; but, like most kids of my generation, lettuce on a hamburger, spinach in Popeye’s mouth and marijuana loaded in a bong were the only greens I could confidently identify.

Still smiling, Julie leisurely led me over to the next bed. “Here,” Julie said, “we’ll grow radishes and a few varieties of beets.”

“And here,” she took me to another bed, “will be our lone bed for grains. Being at 9000 feet obviously limits what we can grow. But that’s ok.” Her eyes glistened as she admired another handful of soil combing through her fingers.

“The first important lesson to learn on the farm is its limits. The land gives us all we need as long as we give back to the land. You’ll learn how to give back to the land what it needs so that it will continue to provide us delicious and healthy food. If we return enough to the land to keep it healthy, the land will keep us healthy.”

Julie proceeded to show me the rest of the garden. At each bed she caringly stroked the rich soil through her hands and fingers. She also continued listing off what we would sow in each bed. Again, the names of the plants she rattled off sounded more like far off galaxies than food destined to end up as lunch: rutabagas, kohlrabi and nasturtiums.

A middle-aged woman with short white hair and a friendly disposition approached us from the tan house. She wore a green shirt that shouted in red letters “SouthWestern Institute for Relocalizing Economies.” I recognized the woman as Kris Holstrom, the proprietor of the farm. The previous summer I had volunteered as a compost crew member at the Telluride Bluegrass Festival in exchange for a festival pass. Kris had supervised my crew at Telluride’s Town Park and had convinced me to convince Julie to hire me on as an intern the following summer.

“Wow Kris, this place is absolutely stunning!” I said to her after she also refused my hand, instead going in unabashedly for a hug as if we were long lost friends.

“We feel very lucky to live here; it is beautiful and just wait until the garden is in full swing. Our growing season is still a couple weeks away. Anyways, I’ll let Julie finish showing you the farm. My husband John will be back soon, he had to work late at the library. We’ll get dinner cooking. You and Julie should come eat with us in a few,” said Kris.

I watched my steps carefully as Julie and I proceeded through the small garden plot in front of the house. This plot apparently held perennial herbs. Since none of the herbs yet resembled any of their blooming, summer selves, I did not feel too ashamed about not recognizing any of them.

We made our way down to the driveway on the path that led to the greenhouse. Excited to actually recognize a plant, I blurted: “Raspberry bushes!”

My outstretched fingers coiled around a sharp thorn on a raspberry bush. Memories of indulging on wild raspberries while on hikes in the mountains floated across my mind.

“That’s right! Soon apple mint and spearmint will pop up here too” responded Julie, seeming encouraged by my first burst of enthusiasm.

The smell of black licorice danced in my nostrils as we entered the greenhouse. Memories of browsing through candy stores drifted through my head.

“Here, try some of this fennel,” said Julie. She handed me a green, scrawny stem.

“Wow, this tastes better than candy,” I exclaimed, astonished that I didn’t have to take off a wrapper to eat something so sweet.

My fingers plucked off another piece of fennel as Julie began to show me the greenhouse. The floor of the greenhouse contained three meandering beds filled with mustard greens. Julie also pointed out the chard, kale and more perennial herbs, but most had already been thoroughly picked over. They had filled salads, lasagnas and other dishes throughout the winter. Julie munched on a kale leaf. I picked off a leaf, secretly studying the plant so I could recognize it on my own. I nibbled, and the strong pungent taste contorted the muscles on my face.

“Kale isn’t sweet like fennel, and it tastes a lot better cooked,” said Julie. She picked up on the painfully obvious fact that my first time eating kale was on the kale growing farm she expected me to work.

Too embarrassed now to hold eye contact with Julie, I examined the two large water tanks in the northern corners of the greenhouse. Painted on the blue tank closest to us was an image of the Colorado flag, a red C enveloping a yellow sun. I took the painting as a sign that perhaps I could fit in at the farm. I had the exact same Colorado flag ‘C’ tattooed on the inside of my left bicep, imposed over a mountain that eerily resembled that first mountain I saw over the horizon on my arrival at the farm. Before I could think of a comment to redeem myself after my first kale tasting, a wild-haired, grizzly-bearded, snow-boot-wearing mountain man opened the greenhouse door. A hand rolled cigarette rested between his ear and head. He made eye contact with me and grinned.

“Arza, it’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m John Holstrom. You guys can come on up for dinner, we’re ready to eat. We made a chard and squash lasagna with some of Julie’s famous goat cheese from last summer.”

Julie and I followed him to the house. I shook John’s hand as I entered the kitchen. No one offered to say grace before the meal; instead, everyone seemed to express gratitude by presenting the meal as a multifaceted story in which everyone played a part. Slicing up the lasagna, Kris began recounting how the meal’s ingredients came to be on our plates. The basketball orange winter squash came from her sister’s farm, Battle Rock Farm. Kris mentioned how her and John’s two teenage children, Kirk and Kelsey (who were out that night with friends), had made the hour and a half drive to the desert in Cortez in late September to help Kris’ sister harvest the squashes before the first hard frost had arrived the previous autumn.

“This morning Kelsey picked the rainbow chard from the greenhouse on her way out to town for school. Mint from outside the greenhouse and lavender from one of the herb gardens adds a sweet flavor to the cheese. Last summer Julie started flavoring the cheese this way,” explained Kris.

Everyone agreed the only better tasting cheese was the one that Julie had infused with honey from a neighbor’s bees and sorrel from the herb garden closest to the house. Julie informed me that the milk to make the cheese came from a hilariously mischievous goat named Robyn. Unfortunately, Robyn wouldn’t be coming to the farm this summer. Robyn had died a few months ago giving birth; but two of her older daughters, Eva and Chipeta, would be two of

the goats whom Julie would teach me to milk this summer. The goats still had a couple more weeks down in their warmer, lower elevation winter home outside the town of Montrose.

Returning my focus to my plate, I stuffed my mouth with lasagna. I chewed on winter squash, chard and goat cheese for the first time in my life. The vibrancy of the flavors surprised me: the taste of the squash reminded me of a good pumpkin pie and I loved the rich smoothness of the mint flavored cheese. As I chomped on the lasagna, I noticed a framed picture hanging on the living room wall: a green hay field next to rows of bright red peppers lay alongside a river flowing inside of a burnt-orange desert canyon. A caption sandwiched between two dancing, flute-playing kokopellis read “Battle Rock Farm.” The meal I ate had been presented as a story. I couldn’t see the story embodied in the food on my plate, but I could see a bit of the story in the framed photo of Battle Rock Farm and the view of Tomten Farm through the living room window: An open pasture with brown, knee high, dead grass sprouted over the spring’s new growth of ankle high green grasses.

I tried to picture Eva and Chipeta playing rambunctiously in between bites of grasses. And I tried to feel excited about the thought of learning how to milk a goat. But filling buckets of milk from goat teats didn’t sound as fun as scoring buckets back at Central College’s basketball court. And I wanted to return to Central after the summer with unruly, rowdy stories from a hippie farm in the mountains. I felt sure stories about food wouldn’t make the cut. My reputation as a funny storyteller might turn more sour than old goat’s milk. The lasagna tasted good, but I preferred dribbling an orange basketball over hearing stories of an orange squash.

And then I remembered that Game 5 of the Nuggets-Lakers playoff series should have just ended. I needed to know who won, but no one at the farm even knew this could be the first time my beloved Nuggets could reach the NBA Finals, let alone know who won Game 5. Could I really spend an entire summer with people who cared more about chard than who won the NBA Finals?

“So what’s your first impression of our little farm?” asked John, blissfully unaware that a shred of cheesy chard dangled from his beard under his lower lip.

“It’s beautiful!” I said.

And I added, “Julie mentioned to me how recognizing the limits of the farm will be the first lesson I need to learn. Normally, I’m preached at about how to learn how to grow beyond limits,” I said. “But I think I might be able understand. Decision making separates a good point guard from a great one, one who plays within himself and knows his and his teammates’ limits.”

Now I was the one speaking a vernacular no one else understood. These people belonged to the farm. I belonged to the game of basketball. Even though this would be my first summer not dedicated to the game, it would always be a part of me and me a part of it.

Jon chuckled at my observation, his tongue blissfully lapping up the chard from his beard into his mouth.

Kris, also laughing, replied, “No surprise there. Sometimes the best thing to learn is to figure out the things you need to unlearn. This farm is as much about offering a different perspective on living as it is about growing food.”

I gulped down a mouthful of water, slowly, hoping to understand what Kris meant before I set the glass down. But I still couldn't confidently differentiate chard from kale. I'd need to scrape together a basic farm education before I could learn to unlearn. Eventually though, that's how it would happen; I just didn't know it yet.

Anyways, I had to ponder about my upcoming living situation. As Julie and I washed the dishes, she, Kris and John explained to me my housing options for the summer. "We have a yurt for the interns. There's a bed lofted above the little library in there that you can claim for the summer," Kris offered.

"In another couple weeks, Taya, our other intern this summer will arrive. The yurt's kitchen will be where Taya, you and I prepare all our meals and will be our common living space," said Julie. "The bed in there is first come, first serve but Taya did mention how she coveted the chance to live in a yurt."

John then offered his two pennies, "We have two tipis. Julie lives in one of them, but we could set up the other for you before Taya gets here. I mean the yurt is nice, but you can really make the tipi yours!"

Living in a tipi sounded exactly like the type of adventure I had hoped for this summer. I jumped at the opportunity like it was a jump ball. "I'll crash in the yurt until we have a chance to erect the tipi," I said, knowing that Miguel and my buddies back at Central College would never believe me when I told them about my summer home in the Colorado Rockies.

After we put all of the cleaned dishes away and said our final goodnights to the Holstrom's, I followed Julie in the evening's purple twilight past the garden to the white yurt about 100 yards further up the footpath.

"I'll be down here at 6:30ish tomorrow to make breakfast. The Mountain Film Festival opens tomorrow in Telluride. Kris gave us passes to go to the symposium that starts the festival. We'll be there for most of the day. See you tomorrow!" Julie said as I opened the yurt door. Then she turned to face the hill behind the yurt and slid between the scrub oak bushes hanging over a path that took her up to her tipi.

Inside the yurt I moved a pillow from an old couch sandwiched between the kitchen and some shelves full of books to the futon mattress resting on the platform above me. Then I strolled back through the farm to grab my sleeping bag and a change of clothes from my truck. I took off my last remaining pair of shimmering basketball shoes. Sitting on the tailgate, I cleaned the fresh smudges of dirt on them and stuck them in their box in the far corner of the truck bed. I walked back to the yurt sporting an old, busted pair of shoes. My basketball shoes weren't any more comfortable, but they were much more comforting. At the time the Jordan's I walked in placed me in the world, not the land I stepped on.

Chapter 2

“Don’t matter where I’m at, the inner hooper inside me always knows how to get to the gym,” Miguel assured me. We both had been to Pella, Iowa, and Central College once before, but that was during our official visits the previous spring. Unlike Miguel, I didn’t remember how to get to the gym on the opposite side of campus from our dorm room in Scholte Hall’s top floor. The rest of the freshman on move in day wandered campus to find their classrooms and hung pictures in their dorm rooms. Do what you can that first day to make yourself feel comfortable on campus. That’s what all of the brochures and pamphlets littered about told us. So that’s exactly what Miguel and I planned to do; only for us, that meant acclimating our jumpshots to Central’s gym. First though, we had to agree on who got which bed. I had figured the winner of a game of one on one should earn the right to sleep in the cooler air of the bottom bunk. But maybe my 5’11” (short for a college shooting guard) roommate who instantly revealed himself to be a hilarious, and I must admit a striking ladies man, wouldn’t mind the suffocating heat of the top bunk.

“You’re from Texas, this Iowa heat must feel like a lukewarm shower to you!” I joked while still attempting to make a persuasive point.

“And you’re a white boy from Colorado! You always had that mountain air to breathe. Not me, I’m from the ‘inner city,’” Miguel said using both his hands and brown eyes to place the euphemism for American ghetto in quotation marks. “Breathing that air gave me asthma. I need the bottom bunk so I can breathe bro!” said Miguel, trying to push his eyes out of their sockets while he pretended to choke himself.

I laughed, doubting that the bottom bunk would make any difference. But I wasn't subjected to breathing 'inner city' air growing up; so to not trivialize Miguel's asthma, I grabbed my sheets and spread them across the top bunk.

"I'm white and I did have fresh mountain air growing up, but don't think that I can't score inside the three point line!" I said to my roommate.

"We're about to find out son. I got my hoopin' kicks already inside my backpack. You can slip your shoes in there too," offered Miguel as we walked out of our dorm room.

"I don't mind carrying my shoes, thanks though," I said, gripping the heels with the index and middle fingers of my left hand.

"You're smart, show the girls you're on the team," Miguel said with a grin while he took his shoes out of his backpack. He then presented them on his palms as if they were trophies.

"That's how you're going to carry your shoes?" I chuckled. "I just like to use my two peace fingers to grasp the heels," I said.

"Peace fingers?" Miguel asked while laughing like someone who just got the punch line to a joke. "I figured you a hippie with that long ass hair, now I know for sure!"

While insisting to me that he knew how to get to the gym, Miguel, and I suppose I did too, stopped every attractive girl we encountered to announce our arrival on campus by asking for directions to the gym. One upperclasswoman, not conned by our opening remark replied in passing, "How do two guys on the team, even if their freshman, not know where the gym is?" The rest babbled directions to the gym and occasionally to their own dorm rooms, clearly

mesmerized by my roommate's dark, tattooed and muscular physique. You win some, you lose some, I suppose.

Inside the empty gym, we made sure to save the first Iowa numbers in our phones. But the new numbers in our phones couldn't make up for our bodies, minds and souls feeling displaced in a land of cornfields. Only the comfort of placing our basketball shoe covered feet on the hardwood and setting our eyes on a basketball hoop could do that. Far away from our families and homes that had molded our identities and personalities, we warmed up in preparation for testing each other's games. We warmed up without any more teenage, testosterone filled pretense or bravado. We played to place ourselves in the only way we could in a town none of our friends had ever heard of.

We battled each other. All made baskets, including from beyond the three point line, worth one point. First to eleven won. Had to win by two. A couple minutes into the game and we had felt more beads of sweat dripping off of our shirts and foreheads than we had seen the ball go through the hoop. Miguel's left elbow crushed my ribs on a spin move. I reciprocated by keeping from him scoring by smashing his wrist, not the ball, against the backboard, causing him to miss the layup. No fouls called. No spoken words needed to articulate how much I hated it when he scored on me, how Miguel hated it when he didn't score on me. No words were necessary to express that it wasn't hate we felt as much as a passion of playing hard. We loved playing our role in an orchestra of squeaking shoes. The squeaking song of our shoes cutting on the hardwood created the rhythm that shaped the beating of our hearts. With every pull-up jumper I hoisted and with every step-back shot Miguel took, our souls cemented themselves

comfortably back within our minds and bodies. We may have felt out of place in Iowa, but in this sacred space our identities stood strong. The game itself didn't belong to us, but we knew we belonged to it.

Miguel had ten buckets. I had the ball, nine baskets and a shooting rhythm. I knew I wouldn't miss my next shot. He felt the same premonition and crowded my space, determined to not let me score with a jump shot. He anticipated my shot fake and beat me to the spot I wanted to get to for a one dribble pull up, my bread and butter shot. But I had foreseen him anticipating me playing to my strength. As he stepped into the spot I dribbled towards, I lowered my shoulder into him and spun away for a one-foot, Dirk Nowitzki style, right foot fade away jumpshot.

Miguel and I came from very different places, peered into and perceived the world through very different lenses. Yet our bodies experienced the world through the same art form of one-foot fade aways, splashing nets and quick crossovers. And we both defined the world around us as an extension of the basketball court. Joe Biden we didn't understand to be the vice president, he was Scottie Pippen to Obama's Jordan. My one-foot fade away felt pure, I envisioned the ball swish through the net as it left my right hand. But Miguel too saw me seeing the ball go in the hoop, and got just enough of a finger on the ball to make it fall short on the front rim.

Climbing the stairs to the coaches' offices in the upper level of the building, I tried exhaling the sting of my loss. What bothered me more than the loss though was that I had played my best game and had executed all of my best moves. And I knew that Miguel hadn't.

“Those are the priorities I love to see!” Coach said. “First thing our guards of the future do on campus is work on their games. I saw a bit of the action down there, who ended up winning?” he asked.

“Miguel beat me on the court today,” I admitted, intuitively knowing this statement foreshadowed the next couple of years.

“We’re excited to have you guys put on Central uniforms. This could prove to be the best recruiting class we’ve had since I’ve been here,” Coach beamed and his assistant, who had done most of the actual recruiting, nodded in agreement.

Miguel and I left with freshly printed and personalized preseason workout plans designed as skill road maps for our Central basketball lives. On the way back to our room in Scholte Hall, I detoured through campus to the environmental studies building and met my academic advisor, ready to accept any advice. Instead, she probed me with questions for which I wasn’t yet ready to respond.

“What do you want out of college?... How can you utilize the environmental studies program to prepare you for your life after Central?” she asked me. “What skills, what knowledge do you want to obtain to prepare you for creating a more sustainable and just world?”

In the basketball offices, I would have had a genuine, lucid vision to offer. But I couldn’t give my academic advisor any real answers in her office.

Back in the dorm room, I sorted through environmental studies program pamphlets and course descriptions. I already knew my workout plan by heart and imagined exactly where those skills would take me in my basketball career. But I was unsure of which academic courses I wanted to take. Even less sure of where my budding environmentalism could lead me. As unsettled as I felt to not have any earnest answers for my advisor's questions, for what purpose my life could hold outside of the basketball court, I felt enthused to reach the point in my life to genuinely begin contemplating these mysteries.

"What goals do you have?" Miguel asked me.

"I want to learn how to prepare myself for creating a more sustainable and just world."

Miguel laughed, kindly mocking me with a peace sign. "Man," he said, "I don't know about saving the world. But I do want to be Conference Player of the Year, an All-American and I plan on leading Central to the Big Dance."

"I can already tell you're not going to be a typical division III player," I said motioning the back shoulder fade-away jump shot he made to beat me earlier.

"Nor are you!" he said pointing to a poster I had hung on the wall next to my top bunk.

It said, "The Earth does not belong to us, we belong to the Earth."

I may have known then that Miguel would prove to be an uncommon division III talent. But not for another couple years, not until I cared for and ate from the land I lived on would I learn the meaning of that poster.

Chapter 3

I could see my breath in the morning air as I slid out of my sleeping bag. As fast as I could, I put on my sweat pants, red Central College basketball t-shirt, sweatshirt and wind breaker jacket. Bundled up, I stepped outside of the yurt. The sun had just begun to pop up over Hayden Peak, the sun's bottom half still hidden behind the mountain's eastern slope. Wearing a jacket and dirt-stained, tan cargo pants, Julie was walking towards the yurt on the trail from her tipi snuggled in the scrub oak bushes at the edge of the farm. Behind her a few scattered sun rays reached Mount Wilson on the southwestern horizon. The early morning sun washed the snow-capped mountain in a light pink color. Julie and I exchanged morning pleasantries as we quietly watched the rest of the sun rise in the sky above Hayden Peak.

"Hungry for breakfast?" asked Julie.

"Yes I am! What *are* we going to have for breakfast?" I responded.

Seriously though, I wondered what we'd eat for breakfast. Before I went to bed last night, I had scoured the yurt's kitchen and pantry. I assumed it had been a while since Julie had been to the grocery store after assessing the yurt's food situation. Bags of things I'd never purchased at a supermarket before such as flour, dry oats and dry beans filled the pantry. The fridge contained a few bags of greens and goat cheese, and the freezer had some elk meat and frozen green chilies. But there wasn't anything to eat for breakfast. No frozen waffles or boxes of pancake mix, there weren't even any eggs in the fridge. If Julie was going to want me to cook breakfast, we would start the day off hungry.

“I’ll cook some pancakes if you don’t mind scrambling some eggs with the kale we have in the fridge,” said Julie.

“I would scramble some eggs, but I’m pretty sure that we don’t have any, and also... well, never mind,” I said. I wanted to let her know that we didn’t have any pancake mix either, but I didn’t want to be the bearer of so much bad news early in the morning.

Smiling gently while trying to hold back laughter, Julie responded, “The eggs aren’t in the fridge. But if you go down to the chicken coop, I’m sure you’ll find a few eggs that the chicken ladies left for us this morning. Farm fresh eggs are on the menu this morning.”

I giggled, self-conscious of my own naivety. I responded, “Oh, I guess I didn’t think of that.” Farm fresh eggs sounded appetizing, but I still wondered how she planned on making pancakes without any pancake mix.

I made my way down past the garden and past the little herb garden to the chicken coop. The sun’s strength grew as it rose in the sky. The light pink color radiating off of Mount Wilson faded away as the bright white of the snow began to reflect the direct sunshine now shining upon it.

Approaching the chicken coop door, I could hear the hens clucking and chit-chattering, anxious to leave the coop and to see the light of day. I opened the door to let the chickens out. I introduced myself and said good morning to each hen before I stooped down low to enter their shelter. Sure enough, the eight hens had left behind five eggs. Three brown eggs, a blue one, and one white egg speckled with chicken poop laid there waiting for me. I scooped them all up

into my hands, balancing the poopy one on top of the others so I didn't have to make contact with it. I'll let Julie figure out what to do with that one I thought as I carefully walked back to the yurt.

Stepping through the yurt's open doorway, I proclaimed to Julie: "Four good looking eggs and one poopy one!"

"Ok great, so five good looking eggs! I'll take a poopy egg from a hen I know over an egg artificially painted white from the supermarket any day!" exclaimed Julie as she took the blue egg and the poopy one from my hands. She wiped off the poop on her pants and added the two eggs to the pancake batter she had magically prepared.

Well, I thought, this gentle woman may not mind a few drops of still steamy doo-doo butter on the shells of her eggs, but she can perform miracles and make pancake batter without any boxes of pancake mix. I wanted to eat, so I decided not to worry about the poop staining Julie's already stained pants.

Julie and I each shared our life stories with each other as we ate the eggs and kale I scrambled. This summer would be Julie's third at the farm, her second as farm manager. Four summers ago she came out to southwestern Colorado for Telluride's bluegrass festival and came back the next summer to work on the farm. Now twenty-six years old, she grew up in New York's Hudson Valley. As an environmental studies major, she became interested in organic farming while in college. Someday, she said, she would return to the Hudson Valley and hopefully start her own organic farm.

I told her that I too majored in environmental studies as well as in Spanish. I had just finished my sophomore year at Central College in Pella, Iowa. Two years prior, I had left the big blue skies of Colorado's Front Range for Central to play basketball. After two years of cheering on my teammates from the bench and manning the point guard position for the scout team, I finally was in position to get playing time as the first guard off the bench. But during my two years at Central, I had lost my attachment to my basketball career. Leaving the team freed me from a summer of workouts in the Central gym, and I could return to my beloved Colorado for the summer and to learn a little about farming here at Tomten. But mostly, I was searching for a way to fill the void in my identity after hanging up my hooping sneakers for good. Basketball had always provided me with a tangible purpose in my life. I hoped reconnecting to the Rockies could resolve that loss of purpose, that my unexplored environmentalism could reveal a new life journey and maybe give me the chance to have my life belong to something other than hoops.

Julie proceeded to cook the pancakes on the stove after we finished eating the eggs and kale. The eggs tasted great and kale definitely tasted better cooked, but I felt like a lot of the kale remained in my mouth, stuck between the crevices of my teeth. I wanted to ask Julie how best to chew kale so that it doesn't stick in one's teeth. I wanted to ask her how she whipped out pancake batter without any pre-made pancake mix, but I still felt humbled about not thinking of going to the chicken coop for eggs. Instead of asking any questions, I listened to her describe the film festival symposium that we were about to attend.

The Telluride Mountain Film Festival, held every memorial weekend, is a documentary film festival meant “to inspire and instill change in the world.” Each year the festival follows a certain theme. The festival always begins with a symposium that explores the year’s particular theme. Coincidentally, this year’s festival focused on food. Kris had secured symposium passes for Julie and me. Having quickly learned how clueless I was about not just farming, but food as well, I felt fortunate for the opportunity for a crash course on agriculture and food systems. At the least, I hoped to learn enough to avoid any further embarrassment next time I had to find food on the farm. Maybe it would even show me if I really belonged at a farm.

One of the first speakers at the Mountain Film Symposium was Jerry Glover from The Land Institute. The organization bills itself as “a non-profit research, education, and policy organization dedicated to sustainable agriculture...” Glover began his presentation by citing the most recent United Nation’s (UN) assessment of the state of the planet. The UN’s Millennium Ecosystem Assessment determined agriculture is the largest threat to biodiversity and ecosystem functions of any single human activity. I shifted my weight from my right butt cheek to my left, uncomfortable with the notion that the work I was about to dive into this summer is the single activity most responsible for the degradation of life on this planet. I thought of all the life and beauty I had already witnessed at Tomten Farm. I thought of all of the miles I had driven in Iowa without seeing anything other than corn or soybeans. Certainly, I hoped my work this summer wouldn’t devastate the life and beauty up on Hastings Mesa. I wondered if this was a sign that I had made a bad decision by going to work at a farm. I wanted to save the environment not to learn how to destroy it.

Following Glover was the 'renegade lunch lady' chef Ann Cooper. Cooper has devoted her life's work "to transform how we feed our children in school each day, from highly processed to highly nourishing food- one school lunch at a time." She mentioned how the Centers for Disease Control has stated that due to our children's highly processed, low nutrient diets they have for the first time in our nation's history, a lower life expectancy than their parents. Already, \$200 billion a year in this country is spent on diet related illnesses. Unfortunately, that number will only skyrocket. One out of every three white children and half of minority school age children develop type II diabetes before they turn eighteen years old. Close to forty percent of children need insulin to keep them alive! Even to me, the correlation between unhealthy agricultural lands and unhealthy children seemed obvious. I could see how plugging our children into a food and agricultural system destroying the life and ecosystem functions of our planet produces sick children. This summer would be my first not working with kids at basketball camps. As an athlete, I had always enjoyed being a role model and appreciated having a positive impact on kids. Basketball had given me so much; teaching kids was how I gave back to the game. Maybe I should be a nutritionist, not a farm worker... I could make the connection between what happens at farms and kids' health, but I didn't yet realize there was a different food and agricultural system our kids could plug into.

Joshua Viertel of the Slow Food movement, announced that every time we eat, we implicitly involve ourselves in agriculture and directly engage ourselves in the story behind that food. Viertel continued to say that eating is a manifestation of the eater's ethics. Slow Food prides itself on the values that food should be good, clean and fair, both to the people who eat it and to the people who grow and pick the food. Pleasure and responsibility are linked, Viertel

argued. This idea yet seemed an abstract one for me. Then I remembered the squash and kale lasagna I ate last night and the poopy egg from this morning. Alright, I thought, I at least have a basic idea of what Viertel's preaching. I actually could begin to understand how my food has a story. But for me to be a part of that food's story, to eat conscientiously, still lay beyond the grasp of my experience.

The last speaker of the day was local rancher Dave James. In cowboy hat and boots, James explained how he and his family run their ranch based on four ecosystem blocks that he claimed provide the foundation for the planet's ecology and human civilization. The four ecosystem blocks are: 1. Solar collectors (plants receiving the energy of the sun and making it available for the rest of the ecosystem); 2. The cycling of nutrients and of energy within that ecosystem; 3. The collection of and the cycling of water/precipitation; and lastly, 4. Community dynamics. James explained how every plant, animal (wild or domestic) and person on the ranch are all *members* of the ranch's community. Each plant, animal and person plays an imperative role in one or more ecosystem block. The economy of the ranch was the ecology of the landscape itself; there was no separating the two. I thought back to the previous speakers. The stories and ethics embodied in the food produced by his family's ranch were a far cry away from the ones Glover mentioned, the ones destroying diversity, destroying life. Certainly, the ranch's economy was not a part of the same story that manifested itself in the sickliness of our nation's children. By working in and with the land, by living as a contributing member to it, he was fixing the environmental problems I hoped to solve.

Julie and I both agreed that a couple of beers around a fire at the farm would be much needed after such a dense day at the symposium. We stopped at the country mercantile on the way home to grab a six pack before ascending to the top of Hastings Mesa. After getting settled back at the farm, I tucked in the chickens. Julie started a fire. Walking back from the chicken coop, I bumped into John as he blindly rolled a cigarette, never taking his eyes off the maroon-violet alpenglow warming Hayden Peak. After some quick small talk about our days, John walked with me up to the fire with his guitar and began singing.

“I don’t want a pickle, just wanna ride my motorsickle. And I don’t want a tickle, I’d rather ride my motorsickle. And I don’t wanna die, just want to ride my motorcyyycle!”

Seeing the moon begin to emerge over Hayden Peak, John paused to enjoy a sip of beer. Then he returned his glare back to the moon and let out a howl that for a whimsical moment brought my imagination to earlier times when wolves roamed these snowcapped mountains and red mesas. Unsure if it was appropriate to laugh, my now grinning face glanced over at Julie. She smiled and nodded as if to say, yep this is normal and you haven’t seen anything yet. I looked up at the moon, fought the spontaneous urge to howl and instead let out a little laugh. I glimpsed over at John to make sure he didn’t mind my chuckle. My reaction only encouraged the moon’s liberation of his spirit animal. He rubbed his facial hair as if it were a wolf’s mane rather than a man’s beard. Behind John, the remaining red light of the sunset emanated off of the La Sal Mountains rising above the red desert floor in Utah.

Captivated by the inflamed desert sunset, I wailed out loud, “Wow. Look at the red coming off the mountains in Utah!”

“That land is stunning,” replied John. “I’d love to spend more time over there again, but those guys in Utah with thorny twigs shoved up their asses who call themselves the authorities are too quick to lock up an ‘uncivilized’ man such as myself. If you’re lucky though, your bad ass girlfriend just might get your ass out of trouble.”

“Is that right John? Are you speaking from personal experience?” asked Julie, struggling to make her soft voice heard over my laughter.

“Well Julie, you know how about thirty years ago I was on an energy exploration team. Back then you lived every night as if it was Friday night, and each morning felt like the Monday morning after a weekend at a Grateful Dead festival. Anyways, our team was out on an operation near Hebrew City, Utah. The team and I enjoyed a few bottles of whiskey at a club – and it was called a club because bars at the time were outlawed in that part of Utah because, well, you know, Mormons.”

“Yes we know John, just get to the story please,” said Julie laughing out loud.

“So I leave the so called club to go visit a lady friend at a hotel a few blocks away. I didn’t make it a minute before Johnny law came swerving out of nowhere to pick me up for public intoxication. The police station there held two little cells. They locked me up in one. In the other was a huge, bulky man who looked like he’d been living out in the mountains for a long time, not wanting to have any part of our so called civilization. I’d only been in my cell fifteen minutes or so before I was about to pass out, but just before I did, a tall, graceful, beautiful blonde woman walked into the station like she owned the damn place.”

John paused to sip on his beer and to howl again at the moon.

“This lady told the officer at the station that the guy in the cell next to me was her boyfriend and that she needed to talk him about some ‘urgent domestic matters.’ Amazingly, the cop actually obliged. She began to make her way over to the cell, and before I knew what was going on, she whipped out a gun from her coat faster than Billy the Kid could himself. She pointed the gun directly at the cop’s forehead and made it clear she’d shoot him square in the head if he didn’t let out her boyfriend. They got out of there without even a wave goodbye. I never heard anything about them, hell they probably never got caught.”

John cleared his throat, strummed the guitar and got back to singing.

“I don’t want a pickle, just wanna ride my motorsickle. And I don’t want a tickle, I’d rather ride my motorsickle. And I don’t wanna die, just want to ride my motorcyyycle!”

Lying down in my sleeping bag, I tried to recover the last warmth of the fire’s heat sizzling on my skin. But my body heat hadn’t yet warmed my sleeping bag, and I felt too cold to fall asleep. My mind galloped through the day’s events. The cold wasn’t the only thing preventing me from becoming comfortable enough to sleep.

Reflecting on the fact that agriculture acts as the most pervasive threat to the life and the ecosystems on our planet hurt something deep down inside of me. I’m named after my great grandfather, Arza Hammond, who was a farmer on the high plains of western Kansas. The name Arza means Earth. I had always loved my unique name and relished the idea that such a name gave me a destiny or some sort of a divine given responsibility to protect my namesake. I

constantly had been the kid who demanded that others in my family and classrooms recycle. Yet as a high school quarterback and point guard, I had also felt it my duty to eat as much as I could to add more muscle and weight to my body. I never cared nor had ever even considered where those calories came from or how they came to be. The revelation that my everyday eating caused damage to what I felt fated to protect forced me to reconsider how living my daily life as Arza played into my name's providence, my calling that I had always felt but had mostly put off realizing.

I walked along a point in my life where I was searching for ways to veer off of a life path strictly devoted to fulfilling my athletic ambitions. The new path I'd set foot on began with this disheartening revelation. After learning and after admitting that I had unwillingly, even if unknowingly, contributed to the single activity most responsible for the destruction of the life and beauty of Earth, I felt eager to explore the notion of engaging myself in a different story. But basketball and its culture had given me the lessons I lived by. I regarded the game as sacred; it had placed meaning in my life. I wasn't sure how farming could. Yet I knew Hastings Mesa would be the most beautiful 'court' I'd ever set my feet on.

Not only had I been shamed by my revelation, but the rancher Dave James showed my idea of environmentalism to have been muddied with counterproductive preconceptions. The obligation the name Arza bequeathed on me I had thought was to save 'nature' by preserving the last pristine places by keeping our civilization and its economic activities separated from our daily lives. Yet, James didn't protect the beauty and life on his ranch by roping it off to people or economic activities, and certainly not to the single one most responsible for destroying those

things. Instead, his way of not living from it, but rather, on it, as part of it, is what guarded and protected that place's beauty and life. He belonged to his place like how I belonged to the great game of basketball.

Chapter 4

I had to be the only player who looked forward to practices more than games. It wasn't that I loved the grueling drills and scrimmages in Central's chilly gym more than playing in an actual game. But because I hadn't registered any playing time since we throttled a Bible College team before winter break, practices became special space. For the first time in my life, I watched entire games from the bench. But I managed to contribute. As scout team point guard, I played an imperative role in practice.

But I thought I had a chance to end our regular season with some real burn. Luther University, our final regular season opponent, had only won a few games all year and I knew Coach hoped to rest our starters for the conference tournament. The final standings at the top of the conference were already set before the last Saturday of Iowa Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (IAC) games. Central had secured the tournament's 5 seed, regardless of our final game's outcome. Miguel had just been named IAC newcomer of the year, and our 6' 11" center, who would go on to be one of only a handful of division III players to play professionally, had garnered a spot on the all-conference team. The standings at the conference's bottom had not yet been determined however. Luther had no shot at making the six team conference tournament but could avoid last place with a victory in this final regular season game.

On the three hour drive to Luther in Iowa's northeast corner, I reviewed my Luther scouting report until I knew it like the sewing of a good basketball. On the locker room's whiteboard before the game, I diagramed from memory the progressions of Luther's offensive plays and sets. During warmups my shots only touched net as they splashed through the hoop. I

felt prepared, ready and optimistic. Unfortunately, the only thing outmatching my eagerness was Luther's determination to escape last place.

Luther's shooting guard drained consecutive three pointers to start the game. Like gasoline on a campfire, Luther's sparse but animated blue-clad student section flamed into a frenzy. Coach growled. I didn't blame him. Our defensive game plan revolved around denying their shooting guard the ball as if he were Kyle Korver, the NBA's most feared three point shooter (and a proud Pella native). If he did catch it, we were to close out on him hard, forcing him to dribble inside to the interior of our defense anchored by our star center. But both of his shots came without a Central defender in sight. The lackadaisical defensive effort seeped into our offense. Our first two possessions ended in unforced turnovers. Coach threw his clipboard on the floor and called timeout.

Luther's shooting guard nailed his fifth three just before the halftime buzzer, extending their lead to an embarrassing twenty-six points. In an explicative and curse-filled halftime speech, Coach warned the starters that if they didn't start the second half with the intensity of rabid dogs, they would sit the rest of the game.

In the first possession of the second half, Luther ran an offensive set I had directed at least a hundred times on the scout team in the practices leading up to the game. All week we had that play drilled into our heads like a bad Justin Beiber song. Like brushing your teeth before going to bed, we should've been able to guard their play out of habit. Then Luther scored a layup on the play's first and primary option. Coach emptied our bench. He yelled at the new five on the floor, daring any of them to not show the same focus and hustle as Luther. I

wasn't in the game yet, but I leaned forward from my spot on the bench, ready to take on that dare the way a little kid relishes the opportunity to espouse a double-dog dare.

But my seat remained warm the entire game. Earlier the sweat saturating my red long sleeve warmup helped keep my body attached to the sweet shooting rhythm I had generated during warmups. But then my sweat's dampness transformed into a melancholy-like chill on my skin. Like any ballplayer, I had been embarrassed on the basketball court before. I had been posterized trying to take a charge in front of the basket, been ripped while making a crossover at half court. But I had never felt so isolated, so separated from the court and the game. My warmup's bright red color singled me out to everyone in the gym and the only thing in the gym that could match its color was my roasting face. I would've felt better had I been cast naked in front of the crowd. I wanted to burn that damn warmup. First though I had to walk through the post-game handshake line, the only one on either team still covered in a long sleeve meant to be a transitory uniform to warm the body for the game. But it only branded my body as not belonging to the game.

Our practices that next week felt strange not because they were physically easier walk-throughs designed to keep everyone fresh for the conference tournament, but because we couldn't wash the humiliation of such a horrid, such an unmindful effort off of our skin. I felt separated from that effort and from the team. Without the opportunity to play hard at practice, my spirit even began to feel separated from the game itself.

In the conference tournament's first round, the University of Dubuque, a team we twice had beat solidly in the regular season, blew us out in a game that we never had a chance to win.

You win some, you lose some. But if you don't put forth the effort to win them all, then you're just lost, I suppose.

The coaching staff granted us three weeks off after the season's end before we were to begin our off-season strength and conditioning program. I used that time to process my lingering embarrassment and disconnect in the best ways that I knew how. I absorbed encouragement and counsel from my dad, Earl Arza Hammond, the best basketball, football and life coach I ever had. I engrossed myself in the love and homemade cookies shipped to Iowa from my mom. And I soaked in the consoling, healing medicine of the oncoming spring sunshine. In its warm, fresh air, I shot hundreds of free throws outside at a town park, each soothing stroke breaking down the estrangement I felt from the game, from my own game, from myself.

And I walked through Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge, one of the very few places in Iowa in which one can follow trails through native vegetation. A sea of tall switch grasses, blue stem bunches, not yet blooming yellow coneflowers and ten inch high purple prairie crocus flowers grew towards the sky from gently rolling hills. On the western horizon, I could see dark cumulous clouds the size of mountains pouring rain and lightning from a storm still a day away from the Refuge and Pella. Looking out over the tallgrass prairie, I imagined the spectacular sight of vast herds of bison and elk moving through the prairie like the storm in the distance.

My free throws at the Pella town park had helped me reconnect to my inner hooper, my tried and true basketball identity. Though no longer divorced from the spirit of the game, I felt detached from the Iowa landscape outside of the (small for Western standards) Refuge.

Growing up in the countryside at the foot of the mountains north of Colorado Springs, I had depended on Colorado's public lands as much as the basketball court to not only recreate, but also for space to retreat into in which I could *re*-create my thoughts and emotions. Like looking at a star studded night sky, the wide open spaces and endless horizons of the West made me feel comfortably small in the universe. Only by using the landscape to engage my imagination, not by recalling any facts or knowledge, could I even begin to comprehend the vastness of time, of the universe and of my life's impact on it.

After living half a year in Pella, Iowa, I came to realize how privileged I had been to grow up with such easy access to these 'protected' places. These places and the experiences I had there had formed my worldview just as much as my basketball experience had. The endless rows of nothing other than corn and soybeans of the Iowa landscape hadn't sparked my imagination and inspiration. And like the suburbanized Californians and Texans who flocked to Colorado's Front Range to live in cookie-cutter housing developments that resembled the exact same ones they had previously lived in, I felt that most Iowan's way of seeing the world followed the same rigid rows and straight lines of their monoculture landscape. The conformity imposed on the land by gargantuan machines and a corporate controlled global economy seemed to restrict their collective imaginations. No spices or green chilies in any of the meals, nothing other than the top 40 blared from the stereos in the dorms. Video games were my classmates' main form of recreation. Television and computer screens broadcasted their consciousness and awareness of the world.

Iowans boasted about being 'corn-fed.' But the only corn they did eat came from farmer's and townspeople's personal gardens, not from the rigidly rowed fields of corn. That corn fed automobiles' gas tanks and feedlot cattle whose bodies were meant to eat grasses not low-grade corn. I enjoyed the few ears of sweet corn the Central cafeteria rarely offered, but I craved tamales and green chili smothered burritos. Katy Perry sang a few fun tracks but I yearned for politically and socially charged reggae and hip-hop. I especially ached for bluegrass from groups named after mountains, rivers and streams: Yonder Mountain String Band, Head for the Hills, Spring Creek Bluegrass Band. I craved for a culture inspired by an ever-present sun, from mountains forced upwards from the Earth's powerful forces and from human creativity as vast as the Western sky.

I could escape to the wildlife refuge, an isolated island of biodiversity in an ocean of uniformity, to liberate my mind and soul. I connected to that place and what it meant to live alone in an island. In the Refuge lay the only place in Iowa where I didn't feel the red, long sleeve warmup stick to my skin. I began to recognize that I connected best to a place in which I felt I belonged. In the center of North America's agricultural heartland, I didn't yet realize I was still a year and a half away from learning how to consummate my most profound engagement with the world, with the place in which I lived.

SOT Ch. 5

Soothing melodies from the birds in the scrub oak bushes and aspen trees flowed thick through the calm morning air. My ears welcomed their song as an early morning present. Meanwhile, I strolled to the coop to water and let out the hens. The ice crystals on the ground sparkled under the morning's first light as the sun emerged above Hayden Peak. I let out the hens. They dashed out the door like kindergartners escaping to recess, and I smiled, sharing their joy for the new day. Collecting two brown eggs and two blue ones, I remembered the manners I had forgotten my first week on the farm and thanked them for their breakfast gift. The bird's songs, the chickens' excitement, and the new buds on the scrub oaks and aspen seemed to announce the start of summer on Hastings Mesa.

The yurt's door rested wide open. John Denver's "I Guess He'd Rather Be in Colorado" oozed out into the airwaves, describing the previous two years of my life. Inside Julie prepared hot tea from dried mint leaves as she sang along, "He'd rather spend his time out where the sky looks like a pearl after rain, I guess he'd rather be Coloradooo!"

With summer on my mind, I thought of summer mornings in my past. If my dad controlled the stereo in the garage-turned weight room back home in Colorado Springs, he and my younger brother Eli might also be listening to John Denver, hearing him sing "Rocky Mountain High" as they pushed heavy weights off their chests. If Eli chose the music, Tupac and Nas would be providing the musical motivation. A pop radio station would soon be coming on in Central's weight room. Regrettably, I was the only one on the Central team and the only member of my family (other than my momma of course, but including my fifty-year-old dad)

who couldn't dunk a basketball. I didn't want to have my status and athleticism diminished by returning as a soft and super skinny earth muffin. So before helping Julie with breakfast in the yurt, I ripped off a few sets of push-ups and used a branch of an Aspen tree to complete a couple sets of pull-ups. But the pump in my muscles only lasted half as long as the aching in my heart for the comradery I left behind in the weight room. The yurt and my tipi had a better view than any weight room and the freshly laid eggs provided better protein than any protein shake, but they couldn't fill the basketball-sized hole in my soul.

"Took you a while to get the eggs. How were the chicken ladies doing?" Julie asked as I handed her the eggs.

"They were all thrilled for the new day, to go out and claw and scavenge in the dirt again."

I could imagine Miguel and Eli laughing, picturing me carrying poop covered eggs across a farm instead of hoisting 45lbs barbell weights onto a bar. But they also couldn't imagine the joy of watching hens rush out the coop like little kids racing out of school on the first day of summer. They didn't know how much better eggs from happy, healthy hens tasted compared to the eggs they ate from the supermarket. The sun washing over the mountains with a pink and orange color each morning as it rose above Hayden Peak was a kind of beauty that could never shower over them in a fluorescent-lit weight room. And only if I enjoyed these things here I told myself could I share this beauty with them when I would tell them about it.

"Come to think of it," I said to Julie, "The chickens excitement for the day rubbed off on me." I didn't tell her earlier this morning I doubted if the farm was where I really wanted to be,

but I also didn't lie when I added, "I feel like joining the chickens in their joy of being here at the farm today."

Julie smiled, knowing exactly what I meant. "It doesn't take long to learn that the vibes of this place are just as nourishing as the food." Indeed. Those vibes gave me just the jolt of energy I needed to work the farm that day without wishing I were somewhere else.

And by then I had gotten into the rhythm of our work days. At dawn either Julie or I would let out the hens and water the greenhouse starts and beds. Meanwhile, the other one of us would make breakfast and tea in the yurt. After breakfast we worked the garden beds. Julie would leave the garden early to cook lunch. She quickly had learned that I wasn't yet capable of scrounging for greens and herbs from the greenhouse to make a lunch with the beans and flour stored in the yurt. I knew this worried her, so I made sure to prove that I could work hard and follow directions.

Which is what I did. But I mostly labored as if it were a sort of cross-training workout acting as a substitute for the workouts I would have otherwise been doing at Central's gym or my family's garage. Every ten weeds I pulled counted as one real deadlift repetition, each hauled wheelbarrow full of compost and manure counted as an entire set of curls. My work helped produce more fertile soil and robust crops. In the plants' growth I saw my work produce results and I thought of it as a means to keep my body fit without a gym. My sweat in the gym produced results too. But unlike at the farm, I knew my body's sacrifice in the gym not only strengthened my muscles, it strengthened a deep connection and care. I hadn't developed a relationship with the soil like I had with the game of basketball.

And the food, how I did love the home cooked meals. But I still viewed each meal strictly as post-workout calories that my muscles needed to replenish themselves. I devoured the breads Julie made from scratch and the beans she soaked overnight to make dishes with the greenhouse greens and herbs. Never were there any leftovers; I ate as much as she could cook. I felt relieved to know that I wouldn't lose any of my hard earned weight. In fact, it would be fair to say that during my first couple of weeks on the farm I saw my primary job as eating. Yet I rarely thought to savor my food as the tastes of the farm. I could savor the beauty of the mountain views. I couldn't yet see any of the beauty within the soil I worked. The only tangible thing I saw from my work on the farm lay in the bulk of my muscles. I hadn't yet awakened to how the soil I worked and the food I ate from it offered the meaning of my new life journey.

The meaning basketball held in my life had never rested on the court itself. In pouring my soul and love into the game, I had connected to something transcendental within it. And only by seeing the splashing nets, the trash talk, and the players on the court as forming a wonderful whole had I found the game's sanctity. I labored in the soil of Hastings Mesa. But I only looked up to the mountains to find any potential meaning. I hadn't found it yet. My effort perspired into the land but not any of my love.

We were still two weeks away from transplanting kale, chard and lettuce starts from the greenhouse into the garden's beds. The soil may have been too cold for our baby greens and the prospect of another hard frost as high as a Coloradan at a 4/20 rally, but the soil lay ripe for dandelions, lambs quarters and Russian thistles to sprout and grow like achy-kneed kids hitting their growth spurts. If I hadn't weeded the entire garden with Julie not even a full week earlier,

I would've thought dandelions, lambs quarters and thistles were the crops we raised on the farm. I pulled weeds and piled them into a mound big enough that had some of the weeds not had thorns, I would have leaped onto them for fun as if they were a pile of raked leaves.

I drew my second line in the dirt path next to the garden bed. The last thistle I yanked out finished my tenth deadlift repetition and represented my second completed set. The thistles still needing pulled should be worth another two full sets. But it was the hottest day of the year so far. I was in charge of watering that day and planned on watering the starts again after dinner as usual. The thought of the baby plants suffocating in the mid-day heat never crossed my mind. But Julie knew they needed additional attention that day and feared the greenhouse heat might dry them out if they didn't get a mid-day watering. Since it was my job to water them, I followed her to the greenhouse, careful to leave my marks in the dirt so I could resume my workout later.

Julie was right about the extra devotion. Half the starts drooped down wilted, begging for water. Sunrays, their heat intensified from the greenhouse plexiglass, had already desiccated the soil, turning it into crust. We rolled out the hoses and began to shower the starts. Julie, normally quieter than an English-speaking gringo kid stuck in an upper level Spanish class, let more words flow from her mouth than the water coming out her hose.

"Growing food has shown me how I don't just work the soil and the plants, but how I work on myself," she said.

I nodded in agreement, thinking of my two lines in the dirt. I knew how my labor was also working my body into good condition. But she spoke about exercising her spirit, not just her body.

“Working the farm showed me how to care, to care for the plants, the animals and the land. With my work I make a commitment to care and to take care of this place.”

We continued watering. And a few of the wilted plants, freed from their drooping, extended towards the sky once again. I wondered if it was the water or if they felt encouraged from Julie’s words. Perhaps it was both.

“I’ve worked this soil enough to discover my care is not the only thing tending to it. When I commit to caring for it, not just working it, I become aware of this presence. And in this place I know there resides a sustaining spirit.”

We returned outside to the garden. I found my two lines but didn’t see any sustained divine presence. Maybe it was because the garden beds weren’t big enough to house such a thing. The five-foot-wide beds stretched out about twenty feet, but they did appear almost endless every time I looked up to see all of the weeds growing in them. The garden beds started to seem even larger, as big as whole worlds in fact, as I witnessed all the activity within them that I hadn’t noticed before.

Uncovered earthworms swam through the copper and chocolate brown of their soil world, their poop trails leaving behind plant accessible nutrients. Pillbug millipedes, the same color as the dirt on my hands, rolled into balls each time my hands entered their domain. Julie

and I collected them in a bucket as a delicious gift for the hens. We collected dandelion greens and lambs quarter greens to create a salad treat of our own. I didn't yet feel any caring presence in the soil, but I appreciated the company of all the little critters working the soil as tirelessly as I did. And later, I took the time to enjoy the surprisingly delectable taste of a weed salad.

But before I enjoyed the salad, I pulled out more thorny thistles than I could count. Sometimes I had a perfect pull, extracting an entire thistle root system. Standing up, I held the end of the roots above my head, but more often than not, the roots stretched longer than my six foot body. By paying attention, I learned that one cannot rip out roots without pulling out soil, worms and other critters. I saw how these things didn't only make their homes in the soil, they *were* the soil. They constituted the makeup of the soil as much as the dirt did. The soil didn't separate them from each other, it only acted to join them as one whole. I didn't reduce the game of basketball to jumpshots, rebounds and workouts in a gym, and now I wouldn't see the farm only as an isolated part the Mesa's landscape anymore.

Chapter 6

The summer before our sophomore years, Miguel and I lived in Central's gym. We lifted weights with the rest of the team in the early mornings before going to our work-study jobs on campus. I added ten pounds to my frame, Miguel put on twelve. Everyone returned to the gym at five to play pickup games before eating dinner together at Central's cafeteria. But Miguel and I would get to the gym by three to perform drills, utilizing the gym's empty space to add new facets to our games.

Miguel pretended to be James Harden or his hometown San Antonio Spurs' Manu Ginobili as he practiced their Euro-step move, making it a part of his own offensive repertoire. Then he'd guard me while I toiled on adding Chris Paul's running floater to my own game. After hitting a shot, imagining it to be a game winner sending Central to the big dance, we'd take turns giving interviews to the imaginary news reporter, telling her how we grew up dreaming of sending our squad to the NCAA Tournament.

Still learning to accept our bodies' and our games' limitations, we spoke believing that we were top NBA prospects. In my interview, I gushed about how I felt elated to follow in the footsteps of Colorado legends Chauncey Billups (Mr. Big Shot was the only four time Mr. Colorado Basketball) and Pat Garrity (his #53 the only retired jersey in my high school's gym). For Miguel though, these interviews felt only as imaginary as any limitations to his basketball career. Being Conference Player of the Year and an All-American seemed well within his reach after winning IIAC Newcomer of the Year. And after witnessing Central's center from the previous year earn a contract in Germany, beating out guys from the ACC and Big East for the

remaining American roster spot, his basketball career didn't appear to be limited to playing for free. Our center was almost seven feet tall, Miguel almost six feet. But neither of us worried about the limitation at the time.

As Miguel scored with ease in pickup games, euro-stepping his way past every defender, his new strength and array of moves seemed endless. I saw my game remain restricted to pull-up jumpers and threes as I couldn't depend on my new floater to fall consistently. Every guard on the Central team could hit threes and jumpers, and I couldn't euro-step my way to the hoop. Whereas Miguel saw our center's success in Europe as a sign that he could play after college, I saw it as a sign to think about my life after basketball. And because he was the only player we'd lost from the previous year, I knew I'd rarely have the creative space to perform any new moves in practice as the scout team point guard anyway.

I spent the last two weeks of June back in Colorado, preoccupied with my situation. I didn't skip any workouts though. I lifted weights with my dad and Eli, who was preparing to leave to Nebraska on a football scholarship. Reliving my high school quarterback days by throwing balls to my wide receiver brother, I reflected not only on my finished football career but on the approaching end to my basketball career as well.

Every deep ball I threw to Eli brought back memories of touchdowns we had shared. We cherished one in particular. Our high school owned the second ranked football team in Colorado Springs at the time, our opponent ranked number one and home to a Parade All-American. The first play of the game Eli lined up in the slot, covered by the All American. A run up the middle, off the right guard was the play call, but at the line of scrimmage, I audibled to a

pass play, calling for all the receivers to run vertical go routes. A high risk, high reward play but I knew Eli was too fast for anyone to cover one on one. I received the snap, took my three step drop, threw the ball and hit Eli in full stride. With his 4.4 forty yard dash speed, it was no surprise when he outran everyone, All American included, to the end zone for a 76-yard touchdown. I threw two more similar touchdowns to Eli on our way to victory.

The next day the Colorado Springs Gazette ran an article featuring goofy, brotherly quotes from the often unintelligible Eli. The reporter had asked Eli if he knew I'd throw him the ball on that first play. Eli told the reporter he knew I would because in the huddle I had given him "the look."

"Can you describe 'the look'?" the reporter had asked Eli, knowing he'd stumbled upon journalistic gold.

"No," Eli bluntly replied. "That's brotherly stuff," he mumbled, unaware that he had just provided the reporter with one of the funnier quotes ever written in a Gazette sports article.

Coach Ramunno proudly hung the article on the wall outside of the varsity locker room. For years, I had resented the article. Not because of all the 'brotherly look' jokes I had heard at school, but for even more selfish reasons. I couldn't come to grips with the fact that the kid Eli had scored on went on to the NFL whereas I went on to hoop at a tiny division III school in Iowa while Eli and his NFL quality athleticism went on to play division II football in Kearney, Nebraska.

But reminiscing back home on that game and article with Eli gave me a new perspective. I always had dreamed athletics would lead me to some sort of promised land. But if that's all I had played for, I never would have gone to a school in Pella, Iowa, whose mascot was the Dutch. Playing offered a way to love what I was doing at that moment, to feel passion no matter where I was or who I was with. I loved the "brotherly stuff" inherent in the journey more than any final destination.

So after returning to Pella from my trip to Colorado and the Telluride Bluegrass Festival, I decided to keep going to the gym with Miguel every time three o'clock rolled around. I embraced being Dutch. I didn't work out with the purpose of proving to myself that I was better than my destination as a D3 player. With that chip off my shoulder, I didn't worry if my running floaters didn't fall through the net every time; I just enjoyed shooting them and who I practiced shooting them over. And when I watched football on Sundays, I rooted for Lamarr Houston, Colorado Springs' own Parade All American. I also came back with Julie's email and daydreams of a new journey.

Chapter 7

After I committed to be a summer intern at Tomten, Miguel had felt determined to prepare me for the farm. He ripped off the posters of LeBron and Derrick Rose from our dorm's walls and replaced them with his own personal, subliminal artwork. He didn't even personally know any hippie girls, nor had he ever even seen an organic farm before. But in his imagination he knew the exact appearance of girls I'd need to be attracted to if my tipi were to ever have as much buzzing from the bees and singing from the birds as his dorm room would have over the summer.

"You're going to wish your farm girlfriend was Dutch like her," he'd say every time we passed an attractive girl on Central's campus. "Unless you start learning to like hairy armpits and legs now!"

His illustrations and worries of me having a celibate summer were cute, but of course I didn't take his illustrations seriously; my attraction towards athletic, basketball-playing women was as unmoving as a legally set hard screen. That would never change. Yet he hung pictures of dreadlocked girls wearing peace sign necklaces and rainbow colored overalls not quite long enough to hide bushy armpits and hairy legs.

When Taya arrived at the farm, she looked like she walked straight off the page of one of Miguel's drawings. Arriving in her Prius, she wore yellow, orange and lime green overalls and had long dreadlocks cloaked in rasta-colored beads. The hair dangling from her armpits looked mature enough to safely transplant to the outdoor garden. Unlike me, she instantly recognized every plant growing in the beds of the farm.

“Red Russian Kale! My favorite,” she said in her first venture into the greenhouse. “Oh and Lacinato Kale, it tastes so great when it’s been braised with lemon juice.”

Taya was as comfortable in the garden and in the yurt’s kitchen as John Stockton was in short shorts. Before she even unpacked her car, she made Julie and I a chard, pinto bean, green chili scramble lunch complete with two joints for an appetizer. Julie, breaking the stereotype of the girls in Miguel’s illustrations, didn’t consume Colorado’s most famous herb. So I got to enjoy an entire appetizer to myself as Taya told stories of the little she could remember from rockin’ bluegrass and jam band festivals. The mountains surrounding us were the only things large enough to compare to Taya’s personality.

But I didn’t know anything about enormous personalities until later that afternoon. After I gave the starts in the greenhouse a vigilant mid-afternoon watering, Eva, Chipeta and Nesta arrived at the farm. It took me a few weeks before I could understand much of their incessant chatter even though they talked more constantly than a professor who assigns his own book for class discussion. And their endless appetites helped show how they enjoyed disobeying orders more than kids sneaking out of the lunch cafeteria to go eat from the candy vending machines in the hall.

In anticipation of the goats’ arrival, we had the portable electric fence set up on the lushest, greenest grasses of the farm’s pasture. Julie and I, gripping the goats’ collars, led them into the fenced in area. Taya stood next to the small, solar-powered generator, waiting for Julie and me to exit before turning it on. With all three goats seemingly secure and content inside, Julie and I walked out of the enclosure. Taya stared at Hayden’s Peak, entranced by the snow

on the summit. Dismayed to see Julie and I leave, Nesta busted through the circled fence, knocking part of it to the ground before Taya had remembered to turn it on. The goat headed to the closest scrub oak bush faster than the “Manimal” Kenneth Faried goes to the basket on a fast break. Nesta chewed off four leaves and gave me a look as I chased after her as if to say “Ha, you thought I was going to eat grass when there’s scrub oak for dessert!” She baa’d and baa’d to Eva and Chipeta, letting them know what she thought of the delicious dessert.

Chipeta followed Nesta, leaping over the fence Nesta had knocked down. She skipped towards the scrumptious scrub oak in joyful anticipation. Eva baa’d in excitement as she trailed Chipeta, but Julie quickly picked the fence up off the ground and held it in Eva’s way. Eva, undeterred, tried to hurdle over the fence and Julie’s arms as if she were Jesse Owens. She didn’t land the jump, landing directly on Julie instead, knocking them both to the ground and entangling both of them in the fence. Meanwhile, Taya, somehow still noticing nothing other than Hayden Peak, finally remembered to turn the electric fence on.

Eva screamed, and I bet Julie did too, kicking and flailing in pain from the shock. Julie shrieked “Off, off!” as she writhed on the ground with Eva kicking away on top of her. They thrashed in the fence like a fly stuck in a spider’s web. Taya somehow forgot the shock was now on and got a jolt of her own as she tried to pull Eva off of Julie.

“Not off of me! I mean turn the fence off!” Julie struggled to screech.

Taya let go of Eva and stepped towards the generator. But Eva, ninja in disguise, gave her a sideways karate kick. Taya stumbled and the electric fence wrapped around her ankle. Taya, with her one untangled leg, hobbled around in pain and screamed “Fuck Monsanto, Holy

Fuck Monsanto.” Eva laid sideways, kicking and squealing goat language cuss words. Julie, the fence now wrapping around her body like sheets on a mummy, clenched her teeth, miraculously pulled an arm out of her mummy wrap and hopelessly stretched for the out-of-reach generator.

Up at the scrub oak, I let go of Nesta’s and Chipeta’s collars and raced to the generator. I turned it off and unwrapped Julie as Taya unwrapped her own ankle. Once Julie was unbound, I began to unleash Eva, but she was impatient and jealous of her goat friends eating all of the dessert. She gave a jujitsu kick right to my balls, the only ones more precious than basketballs. The kick freed her, and she fled to the scrub oak bush. Once at the scrub oak, she, Nesta and Chipeta ate away at the bush as if on a lazy Sunday-afternoon picnic. Julie, Taya and I all reposed on the ground, clutching our ailing parts. Nesta, as if she already hadn’t proven enough to be the group instigator, pompously mozied over to us, then peered down at us and offered a proud and loud “Baaa!” Then she galloped back to the others. They nearly ate every leaf on the scrub oak bush before we humans regained our fortitude and got them put back away in the electric enclosure.

The next morning Taya took on the job of breakfast cook while Julie and I shared the morning chores. We fed, watered and gave the hens kitchen scraps for a morning treat. They gave us six eggs. The starts in the greenhouse, now several weeks old and having matured enough that even I could begin to recognize and distinguish whether they were kale, chard, mustard greens or romaine lettuce, appeared as happy and healthy as ever as I watered them.

Julie sang them one of the cheerful songs she sings to the toddlers at the daycare she works at during the winters. She inspected every plant, delighted to see them growing strong.

And now we had another morning chore to complete before we could eat breakfast. I was eager to learn how to milk a goat and to make cheese. I also felt excited about getting to better know the goats and their personalities, although the possibility of experiencing any more painful goat mischievousness made me nervous.

In their pen adjacent to the north side of the greenhouse, Julie and I set up the goat milking station. We mixed oats, corn and sunflower seeds for the goats to enjoy as we milked them. The milking order had to follow the goats' own social hierarchy; otherwise the alpha would make our lives, as well as the other goats' difficult. Nesta had already proved to be the ringleader. Chipeta and Eva allowed her to jump onto the milking stand first, confirming her alpha status. Julie, her morning tea still too hot to drink, placed her mug next to her seat on the stand.

Nesta was impatient, so Julie quickly washed her udders and teats and milked her just as quickly, filling up the gallon bucket almost halfway with her milk. Julie made it look easy. She wrapped her thumb and forefinger around the base of the teat tightly enough to trap the milk inside the teat. Then Julie squeezed with her middle finger, then her ring finger, and then her pinky, in one smooth, successive motion. Afterwards, she relaxed her grip on the base of the teat to allow milk to refill the teat. Within a few minutes, Nesta's teats remained wilted and shrunk, all her milk now in the bucket. We prodded her off of the stand and Chipeta jumped up

on it before I could even grab her treat of grains from a bucket hanging on the greenhouse wall outside of the goat pen.

Chipeta, although eager to follow Nesta's shenanigans, was the calmest of the three goats. Julie washed her with a cloth and demonstrated the milking motion again to me on her left udder. I tried to milk her right teat. Chipeta baa'd, she wasn't as sure of my milking motion as she was of Julie's. And Julie, nervous that Chipeta would kick over the milk because I was taking so long, finished milking her right udder for me. Julie, showing off her skills and accuracy, squirted a couple shots sideways perfectly into her tea and took a refreshing drink.

Eva, the youngest goat and full of nervous energy, eagerly and awkwardly jumped onto the stand. Eva cried for her grains and wouldn't stop kicking. I got her securely in the milking stand, Julie brought out a new bucket and gave Eva her grains. Again, I tried to milk her left teat while Julie milked her right side. But Eva continued to kick, even as she licked up her grains. Julie swatted her on the side and firmly but softly told her to chill. Eva did. Julie emptied her right teat, and I sprayed a few meager shots of milk from her left side.

"I'll let you finish," Julie told me as she gave her an extra handful of grains and scratched the back of her ears to keep her from kicking.

I tried but my hands and fingers couldn't perform the milking motion as smoothly as they could release a jump shot. Eva only became even more nervous even after receiving a larger portion of grains. And despite having the smallest teats, she was on the milking stand the longest. She didn't like that. Eva exchanged glances between me and the other goats, wanting to join the other two in the space of their pen. But now realizing that I could squeeze her teat

tighter than I had been without hurting her, I was pumping out the milk faster than I ever had (but still not near as fast as Julie). I almost had emptied her of milk when Eva just couldn't stand being separated from the other goats any longer. I had gotten faster but not fast enough. She kicked over the bucket and her hind legs jumped around on the milk stand like a little kid on a trampoline. Then she pooped.

“Don't worry about the milk we lost,” Julie told me. “Shit happens, which by the way is another present the goats give us.”

Picking up on how the goats operate, I grabbed Nesta's and Chipeta's collars and led them out of their pen to the portable, fenced enclosure in the pasture. Eva, not wanting to be left alone, followed us out on her own. I waited to admire Hayden Peak until after I had turned the fence on. I told the goat ladies to have a nice day with the best baa I could muster. With a mouthful of grass, they looked at me with their sideways, rectangular pupils and baa'd back.

Back in the goat pen, Julie had shoveled their manure into a wheelbarrow. She rolled it over to a new compost pile we had just started near the greenhouse and chicken coop and dumped the doo doo on the pile. I grabbed the two milk buckets, one full, one empty thanks to Eva. Or maybe thanks to my amateur milking skills, but it was easier to blame Eva. I carried the milk to the yurt where Taya had pancakes, scrambled eggs and a salad of dandelion and lambs quarter greens waiting for us.

After eating Julie showed us how to make chevre cheese out of the gallon and a half of goat milk we'd collected. First, she strained the milk through a filter. Globes of black and white goat hair, dandruff and other random debris forced her to add an extra filter. I remembered

how effortlessly and unassumingly she had squirted unstrained milk straight from the teat to her hot tea. Julie may not have resembled Miguel's farm girl illustrations in appearance or temperament, but she had a collected, brazen farm-made stoutness that I was beginning to appreciate.

Then she heated the milk to seventy degrees on the yurt's kitchen stove and added the chevre culture.

"We'll let it sit and let the rennet coagulate the curd. By dinner the curds will have clumped and we can drain the liquid whey. We'll add some salt and herbs and have goat cheese!"

Hastings Mesa's high elevation limited us in what we could grow. Yet the days on Hastings Mesa were growing longer and warmer. We still hadn't sowed any of the garden beds, but within a few days we planned to sow six beds with spinach seeds. Spinach, loving cooler weather and chilly nights, was a crop we could raise better than any of the farms down in the hotter, lower elevation valley climates.

But unlike the garden beds we'd prepped and weeded for transplanting the greenhouse starts in, the spinach beds lacked the fertile, nutrient-rich organic matter. However, we had a heaping compost pile and six hands to transform the beds.

We sifted black compost through a table-sized, homemade sieve. One person pushed on her ends' handlebars while the other person pulled. Once the orange wheelbarrow was full, I rolled it up to the garden. With a pitchfork Julie loosened the soil in the beds. I poured the fine,

dark compost onto the beds from the wheelbarrow. Using the pitchfork, I burrowed and incorporated the compost into the bed's soil. Julie took the wheelbarrow down to the compost pile to gather and sieve through more of the goodness with Taya. Meanwhile I continued to work the compost into the beds.

Sometimes Julie and I traded jobs. Sifting the compost with Taya, I often had to press down on large dark clumps to force them through the homemade sieve into the orange wheelbarrow. My hands became darker than afternoon thunderstorm clouds. And I realized pellet poop collections formed the sticky clumps in the compost: The goats' other gift to the farm. Because of their recent arrival, I had up to then considered Nesta, Chipeta and Eva visitors to the farm.

"We got a wheelbarrow full of goat gifts," I told Julie after dumping the composted manure onto a bed she was about to double-dig.

"Yep, that compost is full of last summer's goat manure. They earn their keep on the farm too," she replied. "They give back what they take."

The goats weren't visitors I realized, they were a part of the farm just like I was. They too ate from the soil every day and contributed to it. Earlier I recognized how the pill bug millipedes, earthworms and thistle roots contributed to the soil, a part of a whole. The goats may have had more distinguishable personalities, but they were a member of the whole as well.

I rubbed the compost sticking to my hands into the beds. Of course, the amount coming off my hands was negligible, but when the composted goat manure fell off my hands onto the soil where we'd grow spinach, I saw another personality in the soil, one I knew more intimately than any of the goats'. From my labor I saw myself in the soil. And that day in early June, I learned the first thing I needed to unlearn: I'm a part of the soil, a member of Earth's processes that literally feed me.

Before that summer every meal I ate either came off a shelf or out of a bag or wrapper. I had unconsciously learned that food was a consumer product. The dollars it cost it me were the only things connecting me to my food. I had thought and acted as if the market, not the Earth, gave me my nourishment. The fluorescent lit supermarket aisles and logo branded products had been the red long sleeve warmup I never took off at the Luther game, separating me from the spirit of the game and from the sustained spirit in the soil. And it had given me a cultural worldview: One that created an illusion, an illusion that I wasn't connected to the soil.

In my economics classes at Central, I learned that soil is an *economic* resource. My environmental studies classes taught me soil is a *natural* resource, more worthy of respect perhaps than a strictly economic one, but a resource separate from civilization and from my own body and spirit nonetheless. My entire daily life experience had taught me how separated I was from the soil, from what we call 'nature.'

Had the Jordans in my closet and the jerseys I purchased at the mall held my understanding of the game, I never would have revered the wisdom inherent in the game. The

game never would have contributed to the formation of my soul. Like the star studded Western night sky, the spirit of the game was larger than I could ever be. But I knew I was a part of it.

My visits to the mountains in Colorado and the wildlife refuge in Iowa had always been my way of ripping off the red long sleeve warmup and connecting to the land. Yet I put the warmup back on when I returned to living my daily life. A few weeks on the farm and without a visit to 'nature,' I found the union of my body and spirit to the land, the one I'd been seeking. From my vigilant care of the greenhouse starts and constant weeding in the garden beds, I had made a connection to the soil. Even as I ate from it with dirt stained hands, I had viewed it as if it were separate from me. But now I didn't only identify with the soil, I saw myself in it.

Chapter 8

A gentle, mid-February storm blanketed the ground with snow as we drove away from Pella on the team bus for our last regular season road game. We sat tied for fourth place in conference with Coe College, our opponent in Cedar Rapids that Saturday. Despite the game's importance in the conference standings, we hadn't prepared the usual comprehensive game plan. Death, as perhaps only death can do, had shuffled our priorities and perspective earlier that week. A funeral in Fort Dodge, Iowa replaced practice as thoughts and prayers replaced any preoccupations on securing the conference tournament's four seed.

Zak Clark, our second team All-Conference senior point guard, lost his dad to cancer, a few days earlier and just ten days before our final regular season home game. Senior Night. Central honors every senior with a bouquet of flowers for each senior and his parents. Zak's dad had suffered through an extra chemotherapy session earlier that year, hoping it would extend his life an extra few weeks. So he could hug Zak on Central's half-court decal on Senior Night.

Zak had stayed in Fort Dodge with his family after the funeral on Thursday. We didn't anticipate him meeting us in Cedar Rapids for the game that Saturday. So even though the only stats I had registered since conference play began were DNPs-CD (Did Not Play-Coach's Decision), I would be needed if foul trouble plagued Miguel or any other of our guards.

We dressed in the locker room before warm-ups, not having heard from Zak. Coach came up to me: "No deer in the headlights look if you get in. We might need a couple minutes out of you. And not unproductive minutes."

Not exactly feeling encouraged, I looked over Coach's notes on the whiteboard. Miguel walked over to me and gave me our secret, roomie handshake. Our right palms met, fingers clasping the other's thumb as we leaned our right shoulders into one another. We pulled our right arms back, but instead of ending the handshake with the traditional finger snap, we rolled back our right shoulders, then leaned them forward again as we wiped the metaphorical dirt off of each other's right shoulder. Only that time, Miguel wiped the weight of Coach's headlights off my shoulder.

I felt reassured as we left the locker room for warmups. We jogged out onto the court. Meanwhile Zak, to our surprise, entered the gym and walked straight into the locker room. He avoided eye contact and didn't say a word to anyone. He didn't hurry to put his uniform and warmups on, I presume to give him the opportunity to share the locker room alone with his dad. He missed the first half of warmups. But once the game started it seemed as if warmups and his dad would be the only things Zak would miss on the basketball court that day.

Inspired by Zak's heroic and stoic appearance and his barrage of deep three pointers to open the game, we raced ahead to an early ten point lead. But by halftime the Hollywood heroics had worn off. Coe took its own ten point lead into intermission. Then in the initial minutes after halftime they extended their lead to a seemingly insurmountable twenty point lead.

But Miguel hit back to back threes and scored inside on a euro-step move. Now down twelve with just under five minutes to go, the momentum we had created made us feel like the game was following a movie script once again. All great basketball movies end with a great

comeback right? As if on cue, Zak nailed two more NBA range threes on our next two possessions. Coe though responded with a bucket after using the entire shot clock.

Down eight, less than two minutes remaining, and Zak hit another long three. Again, Coe responded, making a contested mid-range jumper at the end of the shot clock. Zak, undeterred, received the inbounds pass, took four dribbles up the court and pulled up a full three feet behind the three point ark. Splash!

Now we were only down four with fifty seconds to go. Zak then stole Coe's inbounds pass and hit a cutting Miguel for a layup, knifing their lead in half with forty four seconds left. Coe then let all thirty five seconds tick off the shot clock before missing a shot. Miguel secured the rebound, took two dribbles to half-court and called timeout. Six seconds to go.

On his white clipboard, Coach designed a play. Everyone in the Central huddle felt the pull of destiny as much as any particular play would win us this game. Zak was to catch the inbounds pass, throw it to Miguel at the top of the key and cut through the key to the right corner, pulling the defender face guarding him out of the play. Miguel was supposed to take his man, one on one, and either tie the game with a driving layup or hit Zak in the corner for the win if Zak's defender helped on Miguel's penetration.

But when Zak caught the inbounds pass, he waved off Miguel and dribbled the ball himself to the top of the key. He tried to shake his defender with a crossover. His defender though stuck on him like white on wonder bread. Zak took a hard dribble and an equally hard step towards the basket. The Coe defender sank lower in his stance and beat him to the spot. Zak then dribbled behind his back as he stepped behind the three point line and let rip a sweet

looking shot over the outstretched arms of the Coe defender. The buzzer echoed throughout the gym as Zak's shot reached the apex of its high and long arc. I stood up with the rest of Central's bench, arms raised, ready to rush the floor. The ball landed softly on the back rim and sunk halfway in the basket as it rolled forward on the rim. It continued to roll completely around the rim, still halfway down the basket, until it rolled to the back iron once again. The ball stopped rolling, ready to fall. But it hit the back iron and popped out.

Coe's bench leaped to their feet and ran onto the floor. Central's bench stood still, deflated and heavy-hearted. But not about the game's final score. Zak collapsed onto the hardwood. We picked him up off the floor and got in line for postgame handshakes. Zak however skipped the handshake line and lumbered, head down, over to his mother behind the Central bench. They embraced. They hugged. They wept and they wept on each other's shoulders. No one could wipe away the weight of tears off of those shoulders. The conference standings could reduce the game to a loss, but the power of something so meaningful could never be lost on us.

Back in our dorm room later that night, Miguel and I reflected on the harrowing game.

"It seemed like destiny for Zak's shot to go in," Miguel said.

"I know. I thought the exact same thing. But summoning the courage to take that shot, maybe that was his true destiny," I offered.

“Zak sure did have some balls to wave me off. But I don’t blame him. For once, I understand your hippie talk. The victory lies in Zak having the courage to call off the play and to take his own shot. That game was his and only his to win,” said Miguel.

SOT Ch. 9

The first day of July was the first day I had done the morning chores by myself since Taya had arrived at the farm. Julie had gone backpacking for a couple days in the Lizard Head Wilderness, about thirty five miles from the farm, on the far side of Mount Wilson. Taya was cooking crepes stuffed with goat cheese for breakfast back in the yurt. I brought down kitchen scraps for the chickens. They were pumping out more eggs now, averaging six a day between them. Cayenne pepper plants in the greenhouse beds had thin, green branches full of white flowers and a few small green peppers popped out of a few flowers. Long, black trays full of lettuce, bok choy, chard and kale overflowed with green and purple leaves. Basil starts grew strong in their trays and appeared just as ready for transplanting to the garden as the greens. I watered the starter trays, dipping my fingers into their soil, knowing they had gotten enough water when the soil began to transition from damp to almost soggy. I didn't sing to the plants in the greenhouse when I watered like Julie did. I admired the plants and their growth, but I felt sure they missed Julie's soothing songs.

Seeing how robustly the starter plants grew in their trays, I felt proud. Proud of the potting soil I had made with Julie from scratch using the farm's compost, dirt and vermiculite. Proud of how fruitfully I had sowed the trays. The small plants busting out of my soil in the trays seemed like my creation. The greenhouse was like a well-oiled machine. I was the operator, the soil and the plants my designs. With the plants under my care, I felt like a commanding source of life.

Next, I milked Nesta, Chipeta and Eva. Double fistling their teats, I milked them before they even finished gobbling up their morning treats of grains. I nonchalantly led them to the

knee high grasses in their pasture. Afterwards, I returned to their pen adjacent to the greenhouse, making my contribution to next year's garden beds by scooping up their manure and unloading it on the dark compost pile.

Julie, nervous to leave the farm to me and Taya, had left an easy to follow to-do list. Weed the garden of course, and transplant our second succession of bok choy, chard and kale. Taya and I weeded in the morning through the early afternoon under a strong Colorado sun, beating down on us and everything else on the Mesa. For lunch Taya made extravagant fried egg sandwiches that spilled over with bright green chard leaves. Glossy red and yellow veins extended from the Chard stems like streams flowing from the Continental Divide out to the red desert plains. As she prepared lunch, I watered the greenhouse starts. My shirt was as soaked with sweat as the soil in the trays was soaked with their afternoon watering. The greens were especially vulnerable to the July heat, but I couldn't sense any susceptibility. I was in control, master of life and death.

Taya and I didn't finish weeding the garden until dinner. As the sun set over the red desert in Utah, Taya watered the spinach, kale, mustard greens, potatoes, radishes, turnips and potatoes growing in the garden. I tucked in the hens, led the goats back into their pen and moved the portable fence to a fresh spot in the pasture. Together we watered the greenhouse starts.

The next day our primary job was to transplant our second succession of greens from the starter trays to the garden. So we placed them into the cold frames on the back side of the greenhouse. Starts spend their first night out of the greenhouse in the cold frames (miniature greenhouses that don't hold as much heat, but are warmer than the chilly, high-elevation night

time temperatures outside) to let them transition to the outdoor climate. Inside the greenhouse Taya grabbed the basil starts. I hesitated, looking at her with trepidation. Julie had only told us to transplant the bok choy, chard and kale.

“There’s room in the cold frames for more starts,” she said.

“Julie said we’ll wait to transplant the basil until the cayenne plants have red peppers. There are a few immature green peppers dangling from them, but no red ones yet,” I said.

“Ya, but it’s July! Did you not feel how hot it was today?” She asked.

“True,” I said. “And look at how stout my soil has made them. We’ll keep an extra eye on them, we got everything under control.”

In the following morning’s chill, the basil reached outward towards the sun inside the cold frames just as robustly as the greens. My work, my care seemed just as commanding as the sun rising above Hayden Peak. We waited until the evening’s chill enveloped the Mesa to transplant them. Using remay, large blanket-like, frost protecting cloth, we covered all of the day’s transplants. Masters of life.

On my walk from the tipi to the chicken coop the next morning, I stopped to enjoy the view of the fresh snow on Mount Wilson and Hayden Peak. After milking the goats and taking them out to pasture, I checked on the plants in the greenhouse beds. I snipped off a green cayenne pepper and ate it. It tasted somewhat sweet but not spicy. Definitely not ready to throw in with our morning’s scrambled eggs.

Before the sun got high enough in the sky to make me take off my Central basketball sweatshirt, we uncovered the remay from the recently transplanted bok choy, chard and kale beds.

“See,” Taya said, “The transplants did just fine last night.”

Then we uncovered the two basil beds. Disaster. The basil looked like plastic that had baked in an oven overnight. No life in a single leaf.

“We really thought we had everything under control,” Taya remarked with a smirk.

“I thought we had this farm running like a machine, pumping out food products. Nothing was supposed to be defenseless with me as the operator. We covered the beds with remay, the machine was tucked away safely in the shed for the night.”

“We were wrong I guess. Nature doesn’t run like a machine,” conjectured Taya.

Basil does not tolerate frosts. Hastings Mesa at 9000 feet elevation only has a seven week period of the year with no danger of frost. With no more basil starts sowed in the greenhouse, Taya and I had ruined the only chance the farm had to raise basil. Before I could tell Julie what happened, I needed to vent about my failure and to receive counsel in a context I could understand. My mistake was on the farm, but I didn’t need a farmer to explain my blunder. I needed a basketball coach. I called my dad.

“I made a big mistake Dad, all the crops have been growing so well. I had thought everything on the farm was under my control. We had a cold night last night, and even though it was only a light frost here on the Mesa, it killed every one of our basil plants,” I told him.

“I take it that basil is more susceptible to frost than your other crops. You grew up at 7000 feet, a light frost this time of year shouldn’t have surprised you,” he said.

“I know. Julie had told me not to transplant them from the greenhouse until we had ripe cayenne peppers growing in the greenhouse. But it’s been so hot recently, and plus it *is* July.”

“When I’m coaching Arza, I know I only have a few timeouts each game. The time on the clock rarely determines when I call a timeout. The flow of the game, momentum swings and the players’ emotions show me when I need to call time. Things I can’t see from numbers on a clock or in a coach’s manual. The clock only shows one dimension of the present moment. Coach’s manuals can only express general principles and concepts. My particular team and how my team plays in a particular game, only I can know.”

“I know, I know, it’s just that I felt sure I had everything under control,” I said.

“No one can be the master of life and death, thinking you control everything is only an illusion that allows reality to blindside you,” Dad said. “I can never allow myself to think I’m the director of the game. Even as a coach, I don’t try to have absolute control of my players, let alone the game itself. I just play my part. The coach puts players in position to make plays, to give them the opportunity to find success by fulfilling their roles. Each player’s contribution can’t be measured by numbers in a box score but by how well they set up their teammates to successfully play their roles.”

“I know Dad. I learned all these lessons from basketball a long time ago. I wouldn’t make them on the basketball court. I didn’t even watch the NBA Finals this summer. I feel disconnected from the game, do you think that’s why I forgot the wisdom it has shown to me?”

“Your playing days are over Arza, but you’re relationship with the game isn’t. The game has given you teachings and a wisdom on not just how to play, but how to behave and how to live to benefit others and the whole. Despite all the trophies and stats, your relationship to the game was never a material or superficial one, it’s always been much deeper. I know you already

know all this, when I've seen you work with the kids in your basketball camps you clearly know how to give back to the spirit of the game."

"That's why I was able to walk away from my spot on Central's team. I knew I'd always have my relationship with hoops, I felt I'd already arrived to having a new role in the game. But basketball always gave me a context to see how my life had a meaning, a role to fill. I think I may have lost that," I said.

I could always translate an understanding of the game from the basketball court to the rest of my life. The farm had taught me about food, but I didn't know how translate any of its lessons to how I lived my life.

"As a player, the game had already given you all it could. You see you have a new role, but you no longer see your meaning in the whole. Your new role is to contribute to the game's spirit by giving back," Dad said.

Dad ended the conversation with one last thought, "Sounds like you need to develop a relationship with the spirit of the place you live on and work through."

Julie came back to the farm later that evening. She already knew about the light frost that had blanketed the Mesa the night before. Her good friend Weston who ran a small, organic farm at an even higher elevation on a mesa west of Hastings Mesa had lost everything in his gardens. I was afraid to see how dismayed she would be with Taya and me.

"He must be upset?" I asked her after she told his story.

"Of course he's upset! But he's not completely distraught. He's farmed there a long time. He knows shit happens. He also knows that without shit life doesn't happen either. We're

not only vulnerable to our decisions but also to the forces of the Mesa, to the ones that made the Mesa itself," she said.

And when Julie saw the basil she was agitated with Taya and me, but not upset about the farm. In her selective irritation, she scolded us. But she still stroked the soil of the basil beds as compassionately as she had on my first day on the farm. Now though I saw my work, myself, my lack of care and hubris in the soil. I also saw lessons in the soil, something deeper than just the food it produced. And I knew as part of the soil I belonged to this particular place, not only to the soil in the ground. From this place and its expressions of life, I had a context, a basketball court, to contemplate when I should act and how I should act, how as a member of the land I had duties and responsibilities to it. I had a connection to it, not just a material one, and within that connection lay the wisdom I could follow to live a meaningful life.

Chapter 10

As the five seed in the IIAC tournament, we again faced a team from Dubuque, IA. This time Loras College and their All-American center, who many D1 teams would have loved to have had in their frontcourt, defeated us in the conference tournament's first round. But that was not why we lost. We double teamed him every time he got a touch in the post, yet flaws in our defensive execution--not in our gameplan--allowed him to easily pass out of the double team to open teammates for easy buckets.

In postseason play each possession and every movement in the game carries the utmost significance. In such tight, ultra-intense games, emotions run high and defenses fueled by that raw emotion dig deep, staking their ground. Execution becomes more difficult than during the regular season; and, execution in these tough circumstances comes from habits built over the season, not from any particular action during the game. Central could sporadically make spectacular individual plays and could look excellent at times. For our team, brilliance was an occasional act. But Loras played excellently out of habit, each play executed out of a well-built routine. And in those fleeting postseason games when everything is on the line, the execution of each play and of every counter knee-jerk reaction is built on habits, ones that either expose or redeem.

With my sophomore season over and spring beginning to arrive, I withdrew from the Dutch architecture buildings and street squares of Pella and Central's campus to the Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge once again. I hiked a paved path through the restored tallgrass prairie, the most endangered ecosystem in the world. Signs along the way pointed out the difficulty of

restoring a rich and diverse ecosystem from ground that had been cleared and mono-cropped. No large, intact sections of tallgrass prairie survived the Dutch (including my maternal great-grandparents who emigrated from Holland to Northwest Iowa), American and other immigrant settlement of the last century and a half. Scientists, the signs claimed, have no way of knowing the full array of plants and critters that once inhabited the ecosystem. I'm not sure if anyone consulted the peoples whom Iowa is named after. Indigenous languages themselves probably would offer plenty of knowledge about the plants and animals of the land's recent past. But to the scientifically informed signs and their authors, only our culture's way of knowing mattered. The seeds for the Refuge's restoration project came from the tallgrass prairie's final holdouts: roadside ditches and interstate medians. My culture's habits of degradation seemed to prove more powerful on the land than any one specific act of regeneration.

Although the plains of central Iowa roll through gently sloped elongated hills, the paved, interpretive trail stuck to a small, flat section of the Refuge. A few paces after the trail's second to last sign, a deer trail slithered off the path through some bushes up a small, long hill. Unable to constrain my curiosity, I squeezed through the bushes and climbed the gently sloped hill. Happy to be off the pavement, I followed the trail down into a wide gully, green with the grasses' new spring growth. A softly flowing creek meandered through the gully and I sat alongside it.

The soft burbling of the creek reminded me of my last hike back home in the Colorado mountains. I had hiked a busy, well-marked trail that eventually ended at an old, high-elevation gold mine below the summit of a 13,000' mountain. I never reached the rusted, still-toxic gold

mine however. Before the trail began switch-backing up the mountain, I had noticed a gametrail that led around the mountain's westward bend. Faintly, I could see the gold mine at the top of the switchbacks, but I couldn't imagine what lay on the other side of the gametrail's bend. I followed it. Of course, only another bend awaited me. I'm the kind of hiker who always stays out later than planned because when I see a bend on the trail, I can't turn around until I see what's on the other side.

So I walked to the next bend to discover that the gametrail bended yet again, this time uphill through a thick grove of chokecherry bushes. After the trail flattened out on the other side of the chokecherries, a group of white mountain goats blocked the trail, grazing the grasses growing along the trail's sides. Imagining the next bend would offer a view of the Continental Divide, I contemplated sidestepping the goats to continue. Instead, I sat on a boulder and watched the goats dine on the steep, rocky mountainside. I had already eaten my trail lunch, and I figured watching the goats move along the rocks provided enough adventure for one day. Biting off my curiosity as the goats bit off grass tops, I had took one last yearning glance at the trail's next bend and then had turned around to go back home.

A slight but frigid spring breeze swept through the brush covered gully in the Refuge. I slid my hands into my pant pockets and the crumpling of paper reminded me of the empty March Madness bracket I hadn't yet filled. The Big Dance, the NCAA basketball tournament, began the following weekend. I played DIII basketball, but like every other fan in America, the D1 bracket would be the only one I would religiously follow the next three weeks. I looked the

bracket over, settled on a champion, took a risk on a couple of small school Cinderellas and filled the bracket with the rest of my best guesses.

I had filled out a bracket every March for as long as I could remember. But that time at the Refuge felt different. My last two seasons at Central I'd been relegated to a spectator and a cheerleader. Always before, I filled out my bracket in eager anticipation of playing in it. The expectation of playing in it, even accepting that it could only be at the DIII level, proved I had a role in the game as a player. But I couldn't help feeling how completing that bracket symbolized the transformation of my role within the game I loved. I scribbled on my bracket passionately, still connected to the game, but only as a detached fan. Not as an eventual participant.

The week before conference play began last season, Coach scheduled a meeting with me in his office.

"Now that conference games are about to start, barring any injuries, you won't get any more playing time. Your job will be to give the guys encouragement and energy from the bench. Be the first to greet them with high-fives when they come to the bench for a timeout, start a defense chant every time we need a stop. In essence, you need to be a cheerleader," Coach had told me.

As a gawky-eyed freshman, when Coach and I had had that talk, I was excited to have any role on the team. I could make my presence felt on the practice floor. I looked forward to raining threes and crossing up every kid ahead of me on the depth chart. Riding the pine was just a necessary step on the ladder towards meaningful playing time later in my college career. And it shouldn't have been any different my sophomore year. In fact, with Zak and another

senior guard graduating, next year I would climb up that ladder. I was set to be the first guard off the bench my junior and senior seasons.

But my passion for the game hadn't been fulfilled by watching games for a second straight year. Reflecting back on the year, I saw the change really had started the summer before my sophomore year. Miguel had practiced and worked out that summer with the purpose of becoming Conference Player of the Year and an All-American who would lead Central to the Big Dance. Every other summer I had had the same kind of purpose. But unlike Miguel, I knew my basketball career wouldn't extend past college. I started to play and practice with the sole intention of enjoying and sharing our passion for the game. Miguel's success seemed to give the possibility that he could play professionally overseas after his career at Central. His basketball end rested out of sight. I found my success in the beauty of the basketball journey and all the brotherly gifts and lessons it had given me.

As our sophomore years wore on, Miguel established himself as one the conference's best guards. I belonged to the game primarily as an observer and as a fan. My love for hoops never wavered, but my passion could no longer be fulfilled by optimistically sitting on the bench. The basketball court and the rhythms, lessons and vernacular held inside its sidelines continued to provide me the most lucid context to understand my life and its place in the world around me. I loved going to the gym to play with Miguel and my other teammates to talk trash, to laugh at their trash talk, to compare everyone's moves to our favorite NBA players and to reminisce about the latest buzzer beater LeBron or Chris Paul had hit. My drive no longer came from the desire to reach a certain goal; a fairy-tale culmination of my career no longer provided

me a purpose. Nor did it fuel my passion for the game anymore. Instead, I recollected on the journey itself and enjoyed my connection to the game. Throughout my sophomore year, the beauty and joy of the game itself motivated me to practice hard and to cheer hard. In letting go of my ego-driven goals, and choosing instead to draw my inspiration from a more profound inclination, I began to feel that I had reached my career's culmination. I didn't have to be in the box score to still be a part of the game. I always knew I'd reached that point, but until that year I never imagined it would arrive when I still had two years of eligibility remaining. I didn't see my basketball end anymore; I saw myself living it.

And that end wasn't on a glorious mountaintop. From it a new trail emerged on the mountainside. It led to a bend. No longer was I preoccupied by the gold mine at the primary path's end, but I didn't know if I had the courage to step off the well-marked trail.

My environmental studies classes had begun to fuel another passion. The environmentalism growing inside of me couldn't grow with summers spent inside a gym. But I feared that I had never actually been on the hoops path I had imagined my whole life. Always I knew that Arza's basketball story, though its highlights flowed from high school, was the story of a college player. I could leave the journey only if I knew it was the journey of a bona fide college baller; I needed confirmation to know that I was. But one thing scared me even more. My budding passion for all things green excited me, but without hoops I feared I wouldn't know who I was. Taking a shot at something else in life terrified me not because I would relinquish my basketball career--I always knew that would have to happen eventually-- but because I would lose the guiding force of my life.

The next day Julie emailed me, offering a summer internship at Tomten Farm. I hadn't yet told Miguel or anyone else at Central that I was considering leaving for the summer, leaving the hoops squad. All of the other environmental studies majors in my graduating class already had secured summer internships. I knew the mountains of Colorado would offer a more memorable summer than one in the gym at Pella, Iowa. And I knew my best chance for finding a new guiding life path lay in my beloved Rockies. I needed the endless sky and mountain horizons to spark my imagination and to provide something other than hoops that my soul could identify with.

I showed Miguel the email, told him I thought I had to take it. "But I don't know if I can abandon the basketball court for a hippie farm. I'll be the first guard off the bench, what I've always wanted seems perfectly laid out in front of me like a play drawn out on a clipboard. Can I really leave that? I don't want to abandon you and the rest of the guys, I don't want you to think I'm quitting on you guys," I told him.

"Remember our conversation after the Coe game in Cedar Rapids?" Miguel asked.

"Remember how we realized the victory lay not in the scoreboard, but in Zak's courage to take the shot? Remember how I wasn't mad at Zak for waving off the play Coach drew up for me? I knew that day the shot was one Zak had to shoot," Miguel continued. I nodded.

"You just need to summon the courage to wave off the play you see drawn on the clipboard. You can't shoot scared, and this is a shot only you can take." Miguel leaned forward, offered his right hand and gave me our secret roomie handshake.

Yet I still searched for the courage to take my own shot when I had my postseason meeting with Coach in his office.

“I don’t need to tell you that we’re graduating three senior guards. As the first guard off the bench, you’ll have an important role on the team next year,” he told me.

“And we’re excited, not nervous about that,” he said. “With your shooting and the strength you’ve added in the weight room, we think by year’s end you could be a solid upgrade for our bench. We keep stats on everything, not just in games but in practice as you know. Your winning percentage in drills and scrimmages in practice was better than anyone else other than Miguel this last year. Because of what you showed in practice, we even debated making you a part of the rotation this last year. But the proven experience of the guys ahead of you was just too much to ignore. However, you have proven to be a solid player. Next year you’ll have the chance to show that to everyone else.”

Coach’s words squashed one of the fears holding me back from taking my own shot. I had been a college hooper, indeed that was the journey I’d been on all along. I left the game, but it didn’t leave me. I knew the death of my career wasn’t my life’s end to basketball. It had contributed so much to who I was, I would forever be indebted to it and in my regular life I knew I could still give back to it, not as a player but still as a member of the game itself.

As an art form, basketball had showed me the joys and sorrows, the creation and destruction of beauty inherent in my humanity. I needed a new journey to see how my humanity fit in to the rest of the Earth. How Arza not only relates to humanity but to the place I was named after. I emailed Julie, hoping a summer on a farm in the Rockies held the entrance

to my new journey. I was not sure exactly where I was going, but I knew that I had turned onto the right path.

Chapter 11

Few farms raise spinach in late July. Spinach doesn't like constant heat. When exposed to heat day after day, spinach plants panic, sensing their end is near. They bolt, putting all of their energy into producing seeds. The leaves stop growing, and they no longer have a pleasant taste. A farmer can't harvest or sell spinach that has begun to bolt. However, our farm at 9000 feet elevation had the perfect climate in July to grow spinach. High temperatures rarely reached above eighty degrees and the cool nights encouraged the spinach to grow lush, dark green leaves.

As the only farm at the farmer's market that could grow spinach during mid-summer, we sold as much spinach as we could grow and harvest. And our spinach had a well-deserved reputation as the best you could buy anywhere, not just at the farmer's market. We could almost charge as much for a bag of spinach as the dispensaries in town charged for a bag of an 1/8th of an ounce of medical-grade marijuana. Spinach was our cash crop. It paid for our beer and nights out (albeit we had to take turns going out-- someone had to tuck in the hens, goats and plants!). We traded it with other merchants at the farmer's market for bison meat, roasted green chili peppers and homemade tamales.

By late July our spinach beds were already growing our second succession of spinach. But our second succession of plants didn't grow as robustly as our first. The plants had brown spots that looked as if a smoker had gone through the beds and put out his cigarette butts on all of the spinach leaves. Some leaves' ends turned into a disgusting lime green, the pale green seeping onto the remaining dark green of the leaves next to the stem. The spinach's ineptitude

even had Julie perplexed. Spinach had grown more easily than any other crop her past two summers at the farm and it had this year until now. We consulted Kris after she got home from working at her non-profit organization in town.

“Our garden is so small that back when John and I ran the farm, we used to only grow spinach every other year and always in different beds. Since we let farm managers and interns run the farm, they have been growing spinach here every summer, usually alternating the beds but still, all of those beds have grown a lot of spinach the last decade or so,” Kris told us.

“That’s no surprise,” Taya said. “The market tells us to grow as much spinach as we can.”

“Unfortunately people rely on the market of the economy our culture has created as the truest reflection of the world, and they believe it’s the best guiding force that should dictate their behavior. Consumerism is their value system. Judging from the bumper stickers on your car, you don’t come off as one of these people Taya,” Kris noted.

I remembered what my dad had told me earlier about connecting to the spirit of the land like how I had connected to the spirit of the game of hoops, and what Julie had told me about the sustaining presence she feels in the soil every time she cares for it. I remembered how Taya and I had ruined the basil crop by planting it according to a calendar, ignoring the little green cayenne peppers dangling off of the pepper plants. I remembered a game in high school where I started off hot from the three point line. The rest of the game I only shot threes and missed most of them after my hot start. We had a big lead after the first quarter but lost the game.

“You let the three point line distract you from what the defense was giving you,” Coach had told me. “The line shows you where to shoot to score an extra point, but the defense always shows you where to go with the ball, where the highest percentage shots are. Threes are worth more on the scoreboard, but the scoreboard shouldn’t show you where to take your shots.”

“The land, not the market, is our best guide to how we should act and treat it,” I said, feeling like a wise coach.

Kris smiled. “I see you’ve reflected on learning what you need to unlearn.”

Then Kris brought Julie, Taya and I into her home. A dresser in the living room had drawers full of seeds. She reached into a drawer labeled cover crops with a piece of masking tape. The rest of the afternoon Julie, Taya and I sowed a cover crop of alfalfa into the spinach beds. We may owe our living to the land but it doesn’t necessarily owe us anything. Everything it offers is a gift. In working the land as if it were a machine, I thought with careful measurements I could give it inputs to keep it running. Taya and I though had learned that the farm doesn’t run like a machine, nor are we machine operators who run everything under our control. Machines only need fuel and inputs to pump out products.

But something that’s alive, something that not only produces things but also beauty and joy needs not only well-measured inputs. It requires something more profound. It needs love. We are not the only ones caring for the soil. The sustained spirit Julie mentioned doesn’t run solely run on the nutrients from the compost we give back to it. The game of basketball doesn’t continue to flourish because of all the games, practices, brackets and tournaments people

generate. It flourishes because all of the joy, love and passion players, coaches and fans pour into it. The stats and analytics may offer a perspective on understanding the game. But the more profound things are what hold the game's wisdom. And the game only offers its wisdom to those who play, coach and cheer with passion and love. From that passion and love for the game, hoopers sacrifice their own stats and accomplishments for their teammates, for their team, for the whole. The elation from a win fades, the sorrow from a loss, even if it never goes away, dwindles. The spirit and the meaning within the game only strengthens.

We planted alfalfa in the spinach beds. The nitrogen that the legume alfalfa fixes into the soil was what the soil needed to be able to grow spinach next year. Our sacrifice, our giving the land a chance to regenerate instead of forcing it to grow more cash crops, was the love it needed to strengthen the beauty and wisdom it gifted us. From its wisdom, we saw how to live on the land we worked through and stepped on. The market gave us a perspective on how to act, but a superficial one from our own creation. Not one based on the wisdom within the land.

After we had sowed the alfalfa, I collected a handful of soil. I picked out the earthworms, pill bugs, stones, weed roots and compost clumps. I thought of Miguel and Eli, how recognizing and sharing the beauty of the game showed us how in belonging to the game we were entangled in a web of beauty and love. Our play and bond embodied the lessons we'd learned from it. In those brotherly moments, our bond to the game was special because our bond to the game and to each other was sacred. We felt the spirit of the game in the effort and in the sacrifices we made together. In the soil resting in my hand I felt this spirit in the land I belonged to.

Julie steamed tamales we'd traded for at the market for lunch. While they cooked, I checked on the goats. I gave them more water. They talked, baa'ing and baa'ing to me. I scratched them behind their ears. Their eyes sunk into their sockets with pleasure from each scratch; I knew just the spot and rhythm they loved. They gave us milk, but the quirkiness of their personalities gave us more laughter and delight than could ever fill a milk bucket.

Tamales are my favorite food. I had never had cabrito tamales before though. But I was sure I'd enjoy them just as much as any other kind of tamale. However, I spoke Spanish and I knew the farm we'd got the tamales from raised goats. Cabrito means 'little goat.' I loved our goats, could I really eat what one their brothers? But by then I had eaten enough from our own farm to learn how the act of eating had transformed me to a more appreciative eater. Working the farm and eating from it had developed my understanding for the memberships of life that fed me and are fed by me. As others nurture me, so can I use their nourishment to help nurture others. And in this nourishment I connect to the sustaining spirit in the soil that makes me and my food. I didn't just consume the cabrito tamales, rather I ate in celebration of life lived and gived.

Life lived and gived. In eating I accepted other's sacrifice and partook of the sustaining spirit that nurtured it and could now nurture me. The theological definition of economy is 'the presence of God's activity in creating and governing the world.' Hoops was sacred to me because I felt that presence every time I laced up my sneakers. The basketball court offered me a place where this connection could guide my life on and off the court. In working the land and

eating from it, I didn't need a basketball court anymore to guide me. Every sacrifice I made, every bite I took brought me back into the presence of the sacred.