

Farmer's Son

By N.E. Lasater

BOBBY

SPRING

1971

1.

From underneath the planter where he lay flat on his back, Bobby Rowan McAllister heard the roar of the Chevy's engine as soon as his father's truck cleared the top of the hill. Even from that distance, the pick-up's old motor gunned so loud the twitching finches on the power line above him stopped chattering. Even Will, the gray-haired hired man who knelt next to Bobby, handing him tools, shut up the moment he heard it and cocked his head like the birds to follow the sound.

The old red truck spun off clods of dirt and yellow dust as it charged toward the tiny brick farmhouse and the gravel yard on the uphill side of it where the teenager and the hired hand were working. Sweating and crammed in tight under a metal seed tube, Bobby could hear but he couldn't see beyond the mechanism that hung almost to the ground next to his cramping left shoulder.

Will was already standing by the time Bobby threw down his wrench and scuttled out crablike from the twelve inches of space he had between the metal parts and the rubber wheel. There were five tires in all, alternating with the six row units attached to the planter's long metal arm. Bobby had spent the morning inching himself between them, working on the steel mechanisms, and he was hungry.

He had barely straightened up when the Chevy careened, braking hard around the corner, and jerked his father to a cloudy stop nose-in less than a foot

from the side of the shoebox house. Bobby squared his shoulders and planted his feet apart as his father had taught him, then gripped both his freckled hands behind his back. He took in his breath.

“Jesus Christ!” Garrett McAllister shouted as he climbed down from the pick-up and slammed the door, clunking metal against metal. “What the hell are you doing up here?”

“You said it was too wet.”

“The hell I did!”

“This morning, you –”

“I told you to come out and see what was going on!” Garrett strode toward him across the gravel, rolling his shoulders. Bobby saw the harm in his eyes.

“You told me to fix the seed tubes, Dad, and that’s –”

“Don’t you ever use your head?” Garrett kept coming but pumped his arm out, pointing to his right but not looking as he stepped onto the high spring grass that Will hadn’t mown yet. “You’re eighteen goddamn years old. Don’t you see it?”

Bobby followed the finger to his left, then swung his whole body, searching.

“Over there!” Garrett stopped in front of Bobby. “Jesus!” A spray of spittle wet Bobby’s face.

Bobby scanned the hill on the other side of the machine shed. “I’m sorry, Dad. I don’t see –” He twisted around the other way to find Will, but the hired man had slunk back into the shadow of the open barn. Bobby caught a glimpse of thin bars of sunlight streaking the sags of his face.

“Don’t look at him, Bobby! He’s just as ignorant as you are. Bertram’s

running. Can't you see it?"

A few dark birds circled low beyond the machine shed that blocked Bobby's view. Stretching even taller than his six feet, he squinted above it to see the small specks reeling and turning in the sky. "I swear, he wasn't running when I came in. And I went all over the county like you said, to see what everybody else was doing before I - "

Garrett's finger jabbed him in the chest. Bobby looked down at it. "Do I have to be here all the time? Bertram's the dumbest farmer in this state. He doesn't even get his beans in until after the Fourth of July. But there he is, while you two just sit here with your thumbs up your asses."

"But Dad - "

"You've already cost us half a day! I want you down there on the other side of that ditch. You hear me?"

"Yes, Dad."

Garrett leaned in so close tuna salad filled Bobby's nose. "What did you say?"

The boy blinked. "I said yes."

Garrett stepped the hard toes of his hard boots over top of Bobby's own. He stared up at Bobby towering above him. "What did you say?"

The air around them stopped moving. The trees and even the grass stopped waving. There was nothing but sun and the heat in his father's eyes.

"Yessir."

Garrett pressed down on Bobby's toes.

He said it like his father had taught him. "Sir. Yes. Sir."

Garrett raised his eyebrows. His feet didn't move.

"You're the boss. I'll do whatever you say."

Garrett grinned wide, blasting his small sharp teeth. "You're damn right you will."

His father spun around and headed for his truck again, his narrow shoulders rolling. "I'll be back in an hour. One hour. You hear me? Will!" he shouted. "You're a coward. You know that?"

Garrett opened the driver's door and turned. "And Bobby, don't you dare plant too shallow. That seed cost me a fortune. It's dry. You take it all the way down to proper depth."

A moment later, the truck backed up eating yellow dust again, then turned and charged up the gravel road. Bobby didn't move until the spinning swirl behind it had disappeared long after the bright red had crested the hill. The finches twitched once the sound was gone, as Will re-emerged blinking into the bright, hot sunlight.

Will still held the tools he had been handing Bobby. "Your father's full of crap," he said. "It's not gonna be dry enough to plant for at least another day."

Bobby waited, but Will said nothing more. "So what do you want to do?"

"I told you. I'd leave it another day."

"But - "

"Your dad's a fool, Bobby. He doesn't know the first thing about farming."

"But you heard what Dad said."

Will shrugged. "Then I guess you've got a choice."

“Me? Why me?”

“Because he’s talking to you, that’s why. He’s not talking to me anymore.”

Will paused to manage the sound of his voice. “I’m sorry, but it has to be you now. So you can either tell him no, or you can do what he wants. Only he didn’t tell you what that was, did he?”

“What do you mean?”

“What the hell is “proper depth”? An inch makes all the difference in whether you kill the seed or not. You plant it two inches down if the ground’s dry, and not just on the top here. It has to be dry all the way down to that little seed or it’ll drown in all that moisture and never come up. If it’s wet underground, like I know it is, you’ve got to plant shallow so the seed’ll survive. No deeper than an inch.”

Bobby looked at the ground by his feet.

“That’s not going to tell you anything. It looks dry on top. And you can’t dig down either. It might be dry in one place but wet as hell a few feet over. The only way to know is from experience, from looking at the whole field. And how much of that has your father got?”

“But he said –”

“Bobby, I’m telling you. If we do what he says and plant deep, you’re gonna have a cocked-up planter gummed with mud you’re gonna have to fix. Again. But it’s up to you. Either way, we still have to get this last tube fixed.” Will threw down the tools as he crouched and turned, putting himself on his back with his knees bent and the soles of his boots flat. He began to wriggle under the low-hanging machinery, inching to get back under the same row unit where Bobby had been

working.

“But what if he’s right?” Bobby said to Will’s jiggling paunch.

Will snorted.

Bobby brought his right hand to his mouth to bite his ragged thumbnail as his eyes found the dark birds again, circling low above the unseen Bertram. There were more of them now.

Will’s hand searched on the patchy grass for the pliers and found them.

“I’m gonna go see,” Bobby said. “Maybe it is dry. Maybe it’s drier there than it is here. Maybe Dad’s right.”

Will didn’t answer.

Bobby headed to his dirty Rambler, which he had parked early that morning next to the picnic table by the back door of the house. A few steps away, along the same narrow plateau that paused the steep slope to the bottom land, aqua blue bath towels swayed on two clotheslines strung between a pair of rusted Y-poles that faced each other across the green. One small hand towel had slid loose and fallen. Bobby picked it up and gently smoothed it over his left arm before putting it on the line again in its assigned spot next to its brothers.

The gravel road bordered the western edge of his father’s property. On the other side of it and up a hill, the neighboring farmer was planting corn, sitting high and proud on his shiny new red tractor. Bertram’s planter was new too, a clean eight-row he was pulling like a giant rake behind him, cutting the ground as it made eight furrows where seed tubes shot the corn in, then buried each kernel under a carefully measured layer of dirt.

“Damn,” Bobby said to himself as his stomach rumbled.

The black birds circled, screeching and diving for worms. From the car, Bobby watched Bertram get to the end of the long field, then turn the tractor and planter in a wide half-circle to head back in Bobby’s direction. He even waved at the boy when he spotted him. Bobby had no choice but to smile and wave back.

Bobby took the gravel road downhill, passing Will again on his back in the farmyard. At the bottom, Bobby crossed a cement bridge that spanned a deep drainage ditch cutting a wide gorge in the broad, fertile valley that stretched ten miles north to a smudged gray line of distant hills. Garrett’s land stopped at the dark trees half a mile away.

Bobby climbed out and started walking. As he entered his father’s fields, he breathed deep, filling his lungs with the moist rich smell. It relaxed him, easing the stiffness he had already begun to feel in his shoulders. He rubbed the base of his neck, which felt better already now that he was in the fields alone.

He raised his legs high above the rows of dead, long, veined leaves and corn stubble that snapped under his boots. Chopped off a foot from the ground by the slicing combine during the last harvest, the old brown corn stalks stuck straight up like the broken teeth of a comb. When he was a child, Bobby had walked the marching rows, crushing them, jumping on each little pole with both laughing feet.

When he got to the middle of the field, Bobby kicked the ground, digging in the toe of his boot. Dry topsoil flew up to powder the air. He followed the wind current and watched the weight of the dirt.

Bobby squatted and laid one thin forearm on his knee, then picked up a clod

with his bare hand and crumbled it. He tilted his head and looked west to where the fronts came. The sky there was clear and sparkling blue.

He put both his palms down and rubbed the ground. He dropped to both knees as he touched the dry chunks and stroked the new weeds that blasted happily through the stubble. Bobby closed his eyes as he laid his hands on the willing earth and tried to divine without seeing it the state of the underground beneath his fingers.

“Dad was right!” Bobby yelled to Will as he jumped out of his car back at the farm three minutes later. “Bertram’s running and the ground down at the bottom’s dry. If we don’t get out there, he’s gonna kill us.”

2.

Will shook his head as he wiped the tools clean. “It only looks dry. I don’t care what you saw.”

“But the dirt’s powdery. It’s not chunky.”

“I don’t want to be fixing these seed tubes again. If they get snapped off, we won’t be able to find replacements. You know how old this thing is.”

Bobby flicked his wrist to check the Timex he wore under his left forearm. “He’s gonna be here in fifty minutes. He’s always on time.”

Will snorted again. “That’s the one thing he does do. He –”

“Will! I don’t have a choice.”

Will looked at him.

“I’m sorry,” Bobby said. “I don’t mean to be disrespectful.”

Will held up one hand. "It's okay. What a man to have for a father."

Bobby turned away. "Mom says it's me. I'm too willful. I'll get the tractor."

Bobby went over to the open barn and climbed on their one old Farmall and drove it out and swung it around so his back was to the planter's front. Will straddled the hitch of the old planter, rolling his right hand for Bobby to back up at a crawl. From five feet up on the tractor's hard seat above the big rear tires, Bobby had to make sure the two holes in the planter's u-shaped clevis stacked precisely around the single one in the tractor's drawbar. If they didn't, Will couldn't drop in the pin.

Bobby twisted his back so he could see better. He broke out in a wide smile when he got it done in one motion, without stopping. Will held both thumbs up. "I think that's a record," Will shouted above the noise of the motor. "Less than a minute."

Bobby hopped down and bounced as he walked back into the barn. Will drove his own truck, a dirty white one, to the sliding rear door where Bobby was already waiting by the tall, squared-off towers of fifty-pound bags that were piled in alternating rows to the roof on wooden pallets.

Bobby hauled six bags of seed corn over the tailgate while Will idled, then walked through the barn again and back outside, climbing once more on the tractor, which was now towing more than fifteen feet of perpendicular metal frame. The planter connected to the tractor with just the one hitch to create a "T" with the tractor in front dragging the wide planter behind it. As he rumbled onto the road, getting ready to make the right down the long hill from the gravel farmyard, Bobby had to watch carefully so he didn't sideswipe the mailbox or the electric pole.

On the other side of the narrow cement bridge, which he had to cross with both outside planter wheels dangling, he made a wide turn and brought the rig thundering onto the same shorn field where he had been, then snaked it left so it all pointed north. The tractor had its back to the farmhouse mid-way up the hill behind him. Will pulled up next to him in his dirty white pick-up.

“So here’s what you do,” Will said after they had clamored up on the planter’s long metal arm to pour seed corn into the six plastic bins that topped the six hanging row units. “Don’t set it too deep. Only go down an inch or you’ll pull up that mud once you get going and cock up the planter.” Will coughed as he clutched the huge, heavy bag and brought his forearm up to rub across his forehead. Corn dust had floated up onto his eyebrows and eyelashes.

Bobby copied the older man, scraping his own thin arm across his nose. “But Will, look at that tan color.” The compacted soil on the ground four feet below them, under the planter’s long metal arm, shone smooth and flat like the top of a hamburger bun in the hot sunlight. “And it’s not supposed to rain all week.”

“Listen to me. I’ve been doing this a long time. One inch. The seed won’t starve. It’ll draw up the moisture.”

“But if we do it your way --”

“My way?” Will was staring.

“He’ll rage, Will. You know how he is. And we’ll have to buy new seed. We can’t afford it. Listen, if we’re gonna screw up, I mean really screw up, why not do it his way?” Bobby was talking fast, hugging the bag of seed corn against his chest. “At least he can’t get mad.”

Will's face softened. "You really do believe your father."

Bobby scanned the sky, finding the dark birds again at Bertram's. He looked down again at the dry earth beneath the planter's small wheels.

"I need to do what he wants." He took a deep breath. "Assuming he's right, how deep do I go?"

Will nodded, finally. "On dry ground, you set it to two inches."

"Then that's what I have to do."

"Go slow. I'll be here. I'll honk if you need to stop, so listen for me. You'll be driving it. You won't be able to see when the mud starts coming because it'll be happening to the planter, behind you."

Bobby hopped off and walked to the first row unit at one far end to manually set two inches as the depth on the first pair of gauge wheels. As the boy sped down the line setting the other five the same way, Will filled the rest of the bins then stepped off the planter holding his paunch and drove his white pick-up out of the way. He opened his door and leaned out, planting his left boot on the ground as he pressed his backside against the cushion.

Bobby got up on the tractor and sat, then started it and pulled a lever that sent the right marker out seven and a half feet from the planter's end. The metal disk hit the dirt like the top of a tin can and banged as it sent up a puff of dust. He squared his back as he set his sight on a distant county road sign to keep his rows straight, and put it into gear and started forward. The tractor roared, chewing the ground as it lumbered.

Everything was okay at first, but then Bobby hit a little rise in the field and

chugged down the other side into a low spot that started mud slinging off the rubber tires and onto the metal frame, then onto the six dangling row units. Another ten yards and the muck had oozed up to cover the sharp rim blades of the units' opening wheels as they cut deeper into the wet soil and lifted it glistening, curling and folding it like butter under a knife. Soft mud churned out of the ground and rose in heavy waves that stuck to everything, clumping and dripping off every part. The planter was crippled and choking.

Will saw it happening. He pounded the truck's horn, but Bobby couldn't hear it. The boy was listening to the tractor's engine, which had just dropped in sound as it started to lug, straining to pull the growing mountain. Bobby had never heard that sound before, so it took him another instant.

Will had already jumped in the truck. He was flooring it, laying on the horn as he came bouncing over the old furrows.

Bobby stomped the clutch, then heard the engine whine as it revved out of gear. He stood up to grip the wheel and he locked his elbows and his legs to counter the brute force of his foot, which he'd shoved down like a piston. Bobby grabbed the gearshift that was between his legs and jammed it into reverse, pulling back on the hydraulic lever at the same time to raise the planter.

But it took more seconds to do than he gave it, and the planter was still partway in the muck when he let out the clutch too fast and started backing up. On the tractor Bobby twisted his neck and his whole body around to watch where he was going. The engine roared as it shoved, pressing back against the wet earth.

He heard two sharp pops, loud enough to be heard above the thundering

motor. Bobby heard them even though he hadn't heard the blaring of Will's horn.

Bobby jumped on the clutch and the two brakes, slamming both brake pedals with his right foot. Will yelled as he ran up. "Bobby, it's sprung! The bolts popped when you backed up on it!"

The whole third row unit had bent, pleating out from the frame with buckled metal. Only one pair of bolts attached it now to the long arm of the planter, when there were supposed to be two, one each on either side of the heavy mechanism. Without the second pair, the entire assembly had twisted. Folded sideways, it looked like a dangling baby tooth that needed to be pulled.

Oh shit." Will had one dusty hand to his face. "It's gonna have to be replaced and it's gonna be days before we find another one. You know how old this thing is? Jesus, Bobby. Your dad's gonna be pissed."