

VERLYN KLINKENBORG



JANUARY

Every evening just at dusk I carry two hay bales into the middle pasture. One goes into the high feed bunk, the other into the feeder just below it. Each bale is bound by two strings of sisal baling twine. I cut the strings near their knots, which were tied by a mechanical baler sometime late last summer in a Massachusetts hay field. The bale springs apart, and the hay falls into flakes. I coil the strings into a neat loop and put them in my pocket. There's at least one coil of twine in every jacket I own and another in the hip pocket of every pair of jeans. On this place, baling twine is the thread of life.

Not that it gets used for much. It ties down tarps and ties up tomato vines and rose canes. It piles up day by day in an empty grain sack or a cardboard box in the barn. The horses are easier to catch with a double length of twine-string as my

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farming cousins called it, then with a proper halter, and the horses are also gentle enough to be led that way. I know ranch hands in Wyoming who never ride out without a loop of the stuff—usually the orange plastic kind—knotted to a saddle-string or a D-ring. It's hard to describe the emergency that a length of baling twine would fix, but you'd know it if you ever rode into one.

And yet this is the common stuff that gives rural life its substance, a token of what divides this way of living from any other, a reminder of what comes next, what comes every day. Coiling those sisal strands is one of the rewards of doing chores, as is standing among the horses while they crowd together and begin pulling hay from the feeders. The brown horses are mole-dark in their winter coats now, and the dapple-gray mare called Adeline looks ghostly white. Their long hair makes their ears seem especially small, and that makes them all look attentive, though they spend most of the day dozing broadside to the sun's low rays.

If you live with horses, you soon get used to the feel of a line lying across your palm and fingers—a rein, a lead rope, a lariat. It becomes second nature, what hands are for. You begin to feel for the life, the responsiveness in any piece of rope you handle, even a coil of baling twine, because when you work with horses, that line, no matter how stout or supple, is what connects you to them. It transmits the dexterity of your fingers, the guilelessness of your intentions. It becomes a subtle tool. It allows horse and human to moor each other.

Recently the neighbors' horses got out through a broken gate in the middle of the night. They trotted up the yellow line on

the highway for a couple of miles, backtracked down a gravel road, and disappeared into the woods. We searched until three a.m., driving the back roads, walking the dirt margins, looking for hoofprints or fresh manure. The night was foggy and there had been no snow. In the end, the horses found us. They walked out of the trees and onto the road we had traced them to. They were wraiths until we haltered them. Then they turned into their old solid selves, a pony, a small mule, and three aging, swaybacked horses, all footsore. And who's to say what we turned into, standing there in the mist, clinging with relief to the lead ropes in our hands? The moon barely glimmered upon us, a knot of creatures on the edge of the winter woods, exhaling together, happy to be connected again.