

[Bookends]

# Brook Farm

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**W**hen I was 13, I attended an experimental school in the northwest suburbs of Chicago. There was a formal school building in a business park with an adjunct campus on an organic farm. We spent most of the time on the farm campus. We were supposed to learn how to work the land. It was reasoned that we would never be tempted by delinquency if given plows and hoes and sent into the fields. We were to live as on a commune, each proletariat claiming a piece of a collectively owned sense of pride. We were fully indoctrinated with the belief that we were Socialist children of the soil.

The farm grew every known vegetable, from fingerling potatoes to black corn. A chain-smoking man named Steve held the title of supervisor. It was unclear exactly what Steve did in his role as supervisor. He would sometimes appear in the middle of a garden or a cornfield with a menthol cigarette in his mouth, and announce to the workers that lunch was over or that lunch was beginning or that he didn't know where someone was. Steve never asked questions, for questions were admissions of ignorance. He simply stated a fact and then waited for an answer to be shouted at him. The only official act of business I remember him carrying out was abolition of the honor system in the Farm Store. This was something I resented, as it seemed vaguely counterintuitive to the communist ethic we had been trying to establish. It was a leap back into the capitalist dark ages for us Bolsheviks. Steve conducted most of his important

work in an old, skinny Tudor house on the border of the farm's property. No one was allowed inside.

Steve was Lee's superior. She reported directly to him about everything and delivered progress updates at the end of each week. Lee was the titular People's Rhetorician and Morale Booster. She worked closely with the laborers. As a result, our experimental class of five kids and our teacher, an elderly woman named Gerta Johns (to maintain equality, we were to call her simply Gerta), got to know Lee quite well. That was how I came to write the farm's weekly newsletter, *The Organic Times*, because Lee claimed to know me. She thought I was "cut out for the job" and gave me a copy of *The Elements of Style*, in which she inscribed these words:

To R. A. Frumpkin—

Some picturesque ointment for your writing  
. . . and all the best writing instruction  
you will ever need

—Lee, 2003

The "picturesque ointment" was a subtle mockery of my purple style, which had become unintelligible to all but the most tenacious of readers. My writing, so loaded with nonsensical similes and verbiage, seduced my audience with promises of a plot while, unbeknownst to them, I was really just creating my own version of *Naked Lunch*.



The arrangement was to work like this: I'd plant and water flowers in the greenhouse for four hours in the morning, and then, instead of participating in heavy labor (for which Gerta had determined me unfit), I'd report straight to the garage by the silos in the afternoon. Underneath the suspended skeleton of a Ford pickup, I was to sit at a desk and produce a newsletter for the organic farm that was at least two pages long. I had no idea who my readership was, and Lee didn't know either. Was I supposed to market the farm to a bunch of bored housewives? Glorify organic produce for the vacuum-seal set? Gloss over Steve's bigoted hiring policy and our conspicuous presence in the fields? Lee smoked Marlboros while I tried to come up with something to write about. She was in and out of my "office," playing like she was some board exec and I was a lowly typist. *You got the memo ready, Frumkin?* I rarely had the memo ready. I was lucky to eke out a few sentences a day.

I became less and less sure of myself working in the garage. Producing a weekly newsletter did not invigorate me the way Lee had predicted it would. I named and categorized everything in the room. I planned a revolution, imagining that we'd all rally together and oust Steve from his impregnable Tudor. Soon, I began to hallucinate that I was Chairman Mao. Through the window, I could see the farm in its entirety: the two greenhouses, one traditional with potted plants and the other a botanical garden of sorts; the corn and pea fields just under the electric wires; the abandoned silo and the juniper garden; loamy earth that stretched for acres, ending in a marsh of cattails. I wondered what use I was being put to in this microcosm. I listened to FM radio and seriously doubted my own worth.

Deep in the throes of crisis, I consulted Gerta. She was always in the traditional greenhouse and speaking with her had become difficult for me. She was showing numerous symptoms of Parkinson's disease; her hands shook when she tried to water plants or lift a spoon to her mouth. Frightened at the display of her own vulnerability, she'd try to hide whenever I sought her

out. She could often be found behind a leafy jungle plant or a row of potted cacti when I needed her advice most.

Feeling like I was speaking to the burning bush, I asked her how I was supposed to learn anything of real value while writing about fertilizer and honey. Gerta told me the best kind of learning was vocational, the sort that is derived directly from interest, experience, and intense self-examination. We are the pupils of our daily lives, she said. The Farm Store, the workers, and the fields are our teachers. Public schools don't offer raw experience. Curriculums, she said, just disguise the fact that students are forced to learn whatever is hurled at them. As she spoke, I was reminded of the fire-and-brimstone preachers of the Great Awakenings of the 18th and 19th centuries. To the skeptics in their congregations, they would ask the loaded question: "Surely you're not thinking of leaving the faith?"

Gerta raised an eyebrow and I shivered. I wasn't thinking of withdrawing from the experimental school to go to a public junior high; I wanted to be locked in a room with only a laptop and a shaft of sunlight, to produce a newsletter about a farm that, having thrown normalcy to the wind, vaguely "employed" five thirteen-year-olds. (Even the diehard Communist can't withstand that temptation of a Saturday matinee or a bagel with lox, neither of which you can pay for with proletarian pride).

So I continued with the others to sneak beneath the radar of the Illinois State Board of Education, to duck out on requirements that most children were studiously absorbing in East Berlin-style buildings. But to what end? We accomplished very little, maybe supplied a restaurant or two with fingerling potatoes. Like the actual Brook Farm, our enterprise eventually crumbled. Unlike Brook Farm, it was a cadre of irate parents, not intellectual disillusionment, that brought us to our knees. I was placed in public school the next year, where I discovered I could expound on heirloom tomatoes and rutabagas with remarkable ease. It's often said that revolutionaries do some of their best writing while in jail; by the time I was 14, I'd spent seven recesses writing *On Protracted Farming*. Here was my life's purpose realized. ◆