A Season on a Farm

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Early 1989 and June, 2014
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Contents

1 The view from 1989 — 1
2 The view from 2014 — 22
3 About this document — 31

1 The view from 1989

The farm where I worked in the summer of 1988 was near Berkeley Springs, in eastern West Virginia, across the Potomac River from Hancock, Maryland, at the River's northernmost bend. It was an organic vegetable farm called Sleepy Creek, and it belonged to Norman and Donna Hunter, who were about forty and had nine-year-old identical-twin daughters. The twins were told just that summer that a sister, older by some years, had died as an infant.* Donna once told my comrade Hal that she and Norman had married too young. She told my comrade Elise that she and Norman stayed married only for the sake of the girls. Norman and Donna had grown up, not in the country, but in small cities in Pennsylvania. Norman had dropped out of college, but Donna was qualified to teach in West Virginia public schools. She had, however, given up teaching and was working instead on the farm, sometimes like one of Norman's employees, sometimes as a boss herself, although then her orders would often conflict with Norman's.

I visited the farm one day in the middle of May and met the three people who were already working there. Elise and Gerry had been out of college for a few years and had come to the farm seeking relief from office-work. They had lived together in Washington and were sharing a shack on the farm. The third worker was from Rosedale, West Virginia, a place he mentioned as if everybody knew where it was.† He told me his name was Ward, "you know, as in maternity ward or mental ward." When I sat with him in the yard, he heard one of the twins nearby complain that she was "stuck." He responded by singing the jingle from a Band-Aids commercial: "I am stuck on Band-Aids, 'cause Band-Aids stuck on me." He told me he

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*Footnotes in this section were added in 2014 or later. See §3, page 31. Norman's or Donna's parents had sent Donna and Norman on a trip to Lourdes, hoping for miracle cure for their first child; but it did not work.

†If you needed geographical help, he would tell you that Rosedale was near Sutton and Gassaway. According to *Wikipedia,* each of the latter two is a town of fewer than a thousand residents, while Rosedale is an unincorporated community whose population dropped after the natural gas boom ended in the 1970s. The places are in Braxton County, which is named for a signer of the Declaration of Independence.

had a warped sense of humor.

Gerry invited me to stay and have dinner, it being his turn to cook. Over dinner, I talked with him and Elise about art in Washington; but I did not know what I could talk to Ward about. I might have asked him about his life, which, I learned later, had been spent in several places besides Rosedale. He had lived on a tobacco farm, spent some time in college, been in military service, and driven a taxi in Miami, and yet he was younger than I.*

Later in the summer, Gerry reminded me of an incident that had happened on the day of my visit. The four of us had just met, and I said, in response to a question from Elise, that I was thinking about studying mathematics in graduate school. Ward said that he studied math on his own, so I asked him what in particular he worked at. Gerry told me that my look of disappointment was pronounced when Ward said "college algebra." I had hoped my look was not so obvious. I did not like to appear disdainful of any mathematical interest, no matter how rudimentary. But math was for Ward a way to pass the time, like playing solitaire. He spent hours that summer making a certain table of numbers that he calculated by tedious long-hand multiplication.†

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*I was 23.

†I think there is no avoiding the conclusion that, if I was indeed disdainful of Ward, it was for not being very bright. Any *amateur*—lover—of mathematics is still doing it to pass the time. As I recall, Ward was calculating Gödel numbers. This was a pointless activity. The usefulness of Gödel numbers is entirely theoretical. Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem can be understood as follows. Every number-theoretic formula $\varphi(x)$ has a Gödel number, which can be symbolized by $\ulcorner\varphi(x)\urcorner$. There is a formula $\theta(x, y)$ such that, for all formulas $\varphi(x)$, for all numbers n, the sentence $\theta(\ulcorner\varphi(x)\urcorner, n)$ is true if and only if the sentence $\varphi(n)$ has a formal proof (in some predetermined axiomatic system).

When I arrived for my first visit to the farm, Norman was out mowing hay. When he was through, and I introduced myself to him, he shook my hand, but he did not smile or look me in the eye.* I decided to work on the farm because I liked Gerry and Elise.

When I arrived to work at the end of May, Norman said, "I thought you weren't coming until tomorrow." I was the fifth worker: a fourth had already been there for a few days. Karen had just finished two years of college and was going to spend her junior year in Germany. Two days later, my new roommate arrived. Hal and I shared the *corn crib,* a standard farm structure converted to a bunkhouse. Pieces of cardboard boxes were stapled up to cover the chinks in the walls. Hal arrived with head nearly shaven and a set of weights and barbells, also some publications of the Adult Great Books Program. I learned later that he had been the singer for a DC punk band called Body Count.†

The workers' kitchen was on the back porch of Norman's house, and it contained the one sink for our use. For our other needs, we had an outhouse over near the barn. The porch was long and narrow, its outer walls mostly window. Our shower was outside, in full view, the head hanging on one of the mullions of the porch. The shower did have hot water. Karen had been surprised to learn its location when she arrived to

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Let $\psi(x)$ be the negation $\neg\theta(x, x)$. Then the sentence $\psi(\ulcorner\psi(x)\urcorner)$ is true, but has no formal proof. This is the point. Writing down the actual number $\ulcorner\psi(x)\urcorner$ would be impractical. Apparently Ward did not understand this, or did not care.

*These days I am suspicious of men who shake my hand without looking at me. Apparently this suspicion goes back some years!

†I find one song of theirs on Youtube, but I am not sure that I recognize Hal in the accompanying still photos.

work: when she had visited, and Norman gestured towards the shower, she thought he meant it was in a shed that happened to be in the same general direction.

Since we ate our meals on the porch, we heard what went on within the house. Norman and Donna occasionally yelled at one another or at the girls. Norman would belch for the world to hear. When fall came, and the girls had to go to school, getting them ready in the morning was particularly stressful for the family, and having to overhear the family became increasingly tiresome. I wonder how much they heard of *us,* for often what we talked about was them.

Early in the summer, deer were eating our crops at night, so I was assigned the task of chaining up the dog in the garden to scare them away. However, on some nights, Ward went to sleep in the garden instead. He took a rifle that Norman had borrowed, and he would tell Hal that there would be deer-steaks for breakfast. Ward and Hal were the only meat-eaters among us six. Ward never bagged a deer, and he must have been feeling embarrassed, since he used to talk of his hunting prowess. He said he needed his *own* rifle, and one Saturday at the beginning of July, he hitch-hiked to Rosedale to fetch it.

He never came back. Now, I had been annoyed by some of Ward's habits, and I had rarely had anything to say to Ward, but I felt glad to have come to the farm and known this person, the likes of whom I could have met nowhere else. He and I had got along amicably enough. Therefore I was surprised to learn how much animosity the rest of my comrades felt towards him. After his departure, he became the chief topic of conversation, mainly as an object of ridicule.*

*Some weeks later, Ward was in Hancock, and Hal and I took him the things he had left at the farm. Something that I had learned from

Hal soon moved out of the corn crib into Ward's old room. He first asked whether I wanted to move there, but I preferred just to have the drafty crib to myself. Ward's room was in the *apartment,* a collection of rooms, elevated by telephone-poles, above the concrete slab where we washed and packed vegetables. In time, the apartment would house the new workers' kitchen. Being insulated, but not well ventilated, it was not a good place to be during the heat of summer. However, Karen had another room up there.

Hal said that he would never forget Ward. Nonetheless, he told Norman that we were glad Ward was gone.

Norman said, "Well, I'm not. He kept you city-slickers in line, and he was the only one of you who knew that farming is a life-style, not just a job."

Norman was alluding to such things as Ward's willingness to do some work on Sunday, nominally a day off. Ward would work on a Sunday because he did not know what else to do with himself (besides the arithmetic for his table of numbers). As Karen observed, farming was very much just a job for Ward, who had come all the way from Rosedale simply because no employment was to be found there.

Norman used to have many criticisms of us city-slickers, though he had once been one himself. He ridiculed our habit of reading newspapers and magazines, saying, "If people cared more about their neighbors than about what's happening in Biafra,* the world would be better off."

Exactly what it consisted of, this caring about one's neighbors, Norman did not say; nor do I think he showed it by

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Ward about communication is on page 27.

*The war and famine in Biafra, which had seceded from Nigeria, had happened in the late 1960s, when Norman would have been in his early 20s.

example. Maybe in his case it was just the act of being an *organic* farmer, not using synthetic chemicals. Norman and Donna did not feel at home among their neighbors. Several times I heard Norman rant about neighbors who hung their laundry in the front yard, where all passers-by could see it. Having taught at the local junior high school, Donna knew the sorts of people that attended it, and she knew she did not want her own daughters to go to school among them. Norman felt likewise.

Norman wondered why we workers ate dried beans when there were fresh green beans growing in the garden. He spoke as if it were our duty to use farm-produce whenever we possibly could, and indeed I tried to take this duty to heart. I was amused to learn later that Norman never ate winter squash, which was our biggest crop.

According to Norman, vegetarianism was for city people who were ignorant of the importance of animals to the farm economy. He was referring to the usefulness of their manure. Norman raised rabbits to slaughter and sell,* chickens to slaughter and eat himself, and hens to lay eggs. What we cleaned from the animal pens would indeed go to the compost pile.†

Norman was fearful of saying something nice, though occasionally he tried to say it. When we workers did something poorly in his eyes, which was often, we heard about it; but if we had worked well, we might perhaps get a barely audible, brief mumble of approval.

Once Norman and I were sitting on the porch, and I was eating some pancakes that I had made. By way of making

*He sold them to Restaurant Nora, near Dupont Circle in Washington.

†Our gang of workers that year drank a lot of milk, which was apparently unusual, and Donna did not like to buy milk for us. She and Norman considered buying a goat to supply our needs.

conversation, Norman noted that I made a lot of pancakes. Then he said, "I hate pancakes."

One day after work, I was changing the oil in my Volkswagen bug* when Norman came to talk to me. He told me that I had been slow in performing a certain task that day, and he suggested ways to be more efficient. He spoke carefully, as if he were worried of being hard on me. Then he looked at the car and said, "I hate Volkswagens."

Life with Norman would have been easier if making a living by farming were not so hard. The farm made its money mainly by selling produce at sidewalk stands in Washington, and we had to leave the farm as early as 2:20 a.m. to set them up. The one Wednesday stand required Norman and one worker. The two Saturday stands required Norman and Donna and three workers, and the twins would go along too.† We would first visit wholesale markets in the city. If we had grown more produce than we could sell retail, we would leave the excess for wholesale. Otherwise, we would just buy additional produce that we could sell at our stands. Then we would go to set up these stands.

We were ready to leave the city by six in the evening. The trip back to the farm took two hours, and then we had to put unsold perishables into a walk-in cooler. So a market day was long. Still, it was good to see where the money was coming from, to be back in the city and to see lots of people. The day was such a stimulus that one could have trouble feeling sleepy that night. This was a problem, since one really did need rest.

We hauled most of our produce in one large truck—a truck

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*It was my mother's car, which for some reason I had at the farm for a couple of weeks.

†The Wednesday stand was at Georgetown University; the Saturday stands, in Glover Park and Adams-Morgan.

with a sliding door in back. If we needed more room, we used a pick-up truck as well. On the way to Washington in the early morning darkness, Norman would usually have one of us workers drive the big truck, while he slept in the passenger seat. On the way back home, Norman drove, but whoever was sitting next to him had to listen to him. He was not a conversationalist. He had no interest in hearing what his passenger had to say: he never asked a question. However, he frequently turned his head to glance at his listener as he talked, and so one felt obliged to give him an occasional acknowledgement.

The summer was hot and dry. The driness was not a tremendous problem, since we had irrigation-pipes and a creek to draw water from. We did spend a lot of time moving those pipes around. The heat was a good thing in one sense: it was harder on Norman and Donna than on us young people. When our overseers felt too hot to work, they would often let us stop too.

On hot afternoons, Norman would drive with his daughters down to the fields, and he would ask us whether we wanted to take a break. The proper answer was, "Yes." We would climb in the pick-up truck and ride over to the swimming-hole, a wide and deep section of our creek. We would strip and dive in, not bothering with bathing-suits. Once or twice I picked up a leech on my foot. Ward used to stand in one place in the water, head bowed, watching for fish. The twins would play with inner tubes. Norman would bathe for a while, then return to the shore to lie in the shade. The rest of us would swim to the sunny rocks on the far shore, though it was hard to find a seat among their sharp edges.

Sometimes on those hot afternoons, we should have preferred to return to the house without a swim, but this was generally not an option. When Norman offered us a break, a swim was what he meant. If we did not want to swim, we must not be too hot to work—though as Hal once said, maybe Norman just liked to see us naked and to have us see him thus.

Early in the summer, it was common to take an afternoon break. There was not much picking to do, but mostly weeding, and it was easy for Norman to figure that the weeds could wait. In the second half of July though, more and more crops matured. We began picking on Sundays. Norman had told us in the beginning that we might have to pick on an occasional Sunday; but now it was clear that every Sunday was going to be an occasion. Gerry rebelled. He told me on a Saturday evening that he and Elise were going to spend the next day in Washington, and I would be welcome to come along. When I mentioned the picking, Gerry said he was intentionally ignoring Norman's excessive demands. As it happened, Karen and Hal had already left the farm for the rest of the weekend, so I would be the only one there on Sunday, if I stayed. Being more dutiful, or foolish, than Gerry, I did stay.

When I saw Norman the next morning, I told him that everyone else had left. He handed me a list and said "Well, here's what you have to pick." But then he started complaining to me about his irresponsible workers. I argued the workers' position as I could.

What I remember most about the conversation is Norman's saying about my comrades, "They don't care about me, they don't care about my family." It was a childish complaint. Though it may have been valid, we might have spoken likewise of him. He complained that nobody had thanked him for any raises in pay he had given, although I had thought it was *understood* that salaries would go up every month.* I recalled a Saturday morning when Donna was sick, so that Elise had to be awakened—robbed of four hours' sleep—to go and take Donna's place at market. I mentioned to Norman that Elise had never been thanked for taking Donna's place. Norman did not think she needed to be thanked, since she was just doing her duty.

After our talk, Norman and I did some of the picking together, but left the rest for the others to do. That evening, Norman put a note on our kitchen table saying that we would start work an hour earlier on Monday. I considered assuming that the note did not apply to me; but then I started work with everyone else anyway.

Gerry induced Norman to declare that we would work on no Sundays after the first week of September. We workers arranged a schedule for the Sundays until then, according to which two of us would do a Sunday's picking, leaving the rest with a full day off. The first Sunday of our schedule was a day off for me. I had been to market the previous day, where I was met by an old friend, Nicolas, who drove me back to the farm and then stayed for the night. The next day, we went for a swim, planning to drive off afterwards for a tour of the countryside. As we walked back from the swimming-hole, Norman met us and called me aside.

Gerry and Hal were scheduled to pick. Gerry was already picking, but Hal was not on the farm; he and Karen had driven off on Saturday without telling anybody of their plans. Norman said that we could schedule the picking any way we wanted, but as far as he was concerned, each of us was re-

*Salaries were nominal, around $300 a month, though we had no expenses, unless we wanted health insurance—which I did have.

sponsible for every Sunday's picking, so if the picking did not get done that day, he would yell at me as much as at Hal. Norman shook as he said this, as if it were all he could do to keep himself from having a fit. Nick wanted us to leave without doing any work, but I decided that I ought to help Gerry. Nick then decided to help too. However, Gerry would not hear of our helping him. He said that he would do all the picking himself, to avoid ever feeling obliged to work on his *own* day off. So Nick and I drove away. We passed Hal and Karen as they drove towards the farm.

A prospective employee was visiting the farm that day, and for some reason she decided to come back and work with us. Norman said that he thought she had a good understanding of what farm-life would require of her. She lasted two days.

Lisa arrived on a Wednesday afternoon, while we were still at work. She went for a swim. The next day was especially long. Near the end came haying, a strenuous task. I suppose there are several ways to deal with hay, once it is cut and dried in the field, but Norman's way was to drive a tractor, which towed a baler, which in turn towed a wagon. The baler raked up the hay and tied it into rectangular parallelepipeds.[*] These bales were fed onto the wagon, where two of us workers would stack them. A full wagon was taken back to the barn, where we stacked its contents in a loft.

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[*]In the word "parallelepiped," the stress should fall on the antepenult. The word used to be spelled "parallelepipedon," which was a direct transliteration of the Greek *παραλληλεπίπεδον*. This is compounded of *παράλληλ-* "parallel" and *ἐπίπεδον* "plane surface." The latter Greek word is in turn compounded of *ἐπί* "on" and *πέδον* "ground." Thus, unlike the vowel O in "parallelogram," the second E in "parallelepiped(on)" is not just a linking vowel. There is no mathematical object called a "piped."

I don't think Lisa rode on the wagon that day, but she did unload it and set the bales on the elevator into the loft. Her ungloved hands became blistered from handling the twine that bound the bales. Next morning, she picked cucumbers with Gerry and complained about her sore hands. Gerry urged her to go back to the house and ask Donna for something to put on them. Finally, Lisa did go, but according to Donna, she just packed her things onto her motorcycle and rode off, saying that we were all a bunch of nuts.

Upon her arrival, when asked how long she would stay, Lisa had said, "If I like it, the rest of my life." After her departure, we speculated: had she come one day later, she might have missed one of the hardest days of the year, and so might have stayed longer, getting strengthened by months of work for the hardest days of the next year.

No doubt Lisa should have worn gloves when throwing hay around. Perhaps somebody had recommended them. Conceivably I had, though not strongly, since I never used them myself, and so I assumed that anybody could do without them. *My* first day at the farm was also a long one, and it also ended with the baling of hay. Gerry and I filled two wagons with bales that day. Furthermore, the elevator was broken, so we all had to get the bales into the loft by hand. I just lived with the blisters I got. My hands toughened in time.

Hal's plan to leave the farm on the last Friday in August was the cause of some bitterness. For his departure would leave only four workers at the farm, three of whom would have to go to market on the next day. Elise's and Gerry's parents were coming to visit, from New Jersey and Tennessee respectively, and naturally both children wanted to stay at the farm on Saturday to greet them. However, they could not convince Hal to stay one more day and go to market in their stead.

Fortunately, Elise's friend Andy had been visiting that week, and *he* was able to go to market.

On Saturdays at that time of year, the Hunter family and one worker took the big truck to Washington, while two other workers followed in the pick-up truck. On the way back, the Hunters took one vehicle and the workers another. Each group was free, either to go out to dinner or to go straight back to the farm. On this particular Saturday, Andy was going to stay in Washington after the market. Elise and Gerry had plans to meet their parents for dinner in Berkeley Springs. They asked me to make sure that Karen and I came straight back to the farm, so that it would not be left unattended. Norman did not like workers to leave the farm before he himself got back. "The work-day isn't over until the big truck is unloaded," he would say. But he could hardly complain if at least *some* workers were still at the farm to do the unloading.

The Hunters took the big truck and went out to dinner after market, but Karen, Andy, and I wanted to go out too. Gerry and Elise had not made of Karen the request that they had made of me. I figured that if we did not take long to have dinner, Karen and I should certainly get back to the farm before the Hunters. I carelessly assumed that Gerry and Elise would leave the farm for their dinner-engagement, whether we were back or not. So the three of us went to an Italian restaurant in Adams-Morgan, and then Karen and I said good-by to Andy and drove back to the farm.

Alas, Elise and Gerry had waited for us, though they were an hour late to meet their parents. They had worried about what might have happened to us. I was ashamed not to have kept my word to them. My consolation was the thought that they ought to have told their wishes to Karen as well as to me. At any rate, the two of us together might have had the sense to return on time.

Tim, our next new comrade, arrived a week from the next day, on the first Sunday of September. Karen was going to leave in another week. Tim said that he figured farm-work was better than flipping burgers in his hometown of Cumberland, Maryland. Otherwise, he did not talk much, did not ask questions, and had an unsettling look in his eye; but he could work quickly.

It so happened that Tim's first week at the farm was the week of Nathaniel's visit. I was glad for the opportunity of conversation with a friend from St. John's College, but I also put Nat to work along with the rest of us. When I started feeling contrite, and I urged him to go off and enjoy himself for a while, he still stayed to work. He got along well with my comrades. It was Tim's turn to cook dinner on Friday, but Tim had little experience with cooking, especially vegetarian cooking, and so Nat cooked with him. He baked a cake in honor of Karen's last day of work on the farm. On Saturday, he gave her a ride back to her home in Great Falls, Virginia; then he went on to his own home in Annapolis, after stopping to visit our stand in Washington.

A week later, the Hunters drove from that stand to the beach, planning to return to the farm in two days. Norman had told us what to do in his absence. This included some work on Sunday. I said that I thought our Sunday tasks were over. He said he hoped we would give him a break, since there were things that just had to be done, and Sunday was the best day to do them. I failed to point out that if they *had* to be done, he should forego his vacation and do them. Silly me, I figured he would soon be giving *us* a vacation. I expected Gerry to put up a fight over the assignment of Sunday work, but he kept quiet.

On Sunday morning, Gerry told me that he did not want to work. I was prepared to argue that he had implicitly agreed to work; but then he said that he was willing to work that day, only not until later. Elise expressed similar sentiments. The two of them spent the rest of the morning watching Olympic coverage, brought to the Hunters' television by their dish-antenna.

I was in my corn crib later when Gerry and Elise came to tell me that they were quitting. They had had enough of Norman's oppression. I then understood the need to sit down when hearing bad news. I tried to argue that there was something to be gained from putting up with Norman. I recalled words from Martin Luther King's great speech, "Unearned suffering is redemptive."* It was an irrelevant reference, but in any case, if I myself had been able to tolerate Norman, it was only because I could see that Elise and Gerry were trying to do the same thing, and having a hard time of it. I knew they would always be sympathetic with my own complaints. Farm-life would be dreadful without them to talk to.

Norman withheld part of his workers' monthly pay, to keep them from leaving early. If they stayed until Thanksgiving or Christmas, they would receive their full pay. However, Gerry had confirmed through an attorney that Norman's practice was in fact illegal, and he and Elise were prepared to sue, if they had to, to get from Norman all of the money that they had earned. They would rather that Norman gave them the money freely, by way of acknowledging what he never had before, that they had been valuable workers.

*I had saved a copy of this speech, as it had been printed in the *Washington Post* on August 28, the anniversary of the 1963 March on Washington.

Gerry and Elise met with Norman after his return, and he acknowledged his shortcomings as a boss. They agreed to stay on, and I was glad.

A week later, Tim was gone. Before dawn on a Friday morning, I was awakened by the sound of a car driving up to the farm, then voices. I went back to sleep. When I got up, I learned that the car had been Donna's, driven by Tim. Our buildings and vehicles were on a hill, and so Tim had been able to roll the car away and start it out of earshot; but when he returned, he had to drive all the way back. Norman heard the car, came outside, and found Tim at the farm's fuel-tank, ready in his ignorance to put diesel in a gasoline-powered car. Norman made Tim leave the farm at once, on foot, with all of his possessions, including the amplifier for his electric bass-guitar.

What made Norman so eager to get rid of Tim was something Norman had not told us. He himself had not known it until after he had hired Tim. Tim had a police record that was "as long as your arm." A friend of Norman predicted that we had not seen the last of Tim.

A former employee of the farm was staying with us at the time of Tim's dismissal. Jim had once worked at the farm for five years. I used to wonder what had made him leave, while Gerry wondered what had made him stay so long. With Tim gone, Jim decided to finish the season with us.* Less than a week later, on Thursday, October 6, we had our first frost. We picked tomatoes, whether red or green, into as many boxes as we had, and then we set the green tomatoes in the greenhouse

*Jim told me later that he regretted this decision almost immediately. Of course the decision was not Jim's alone. Norman had to agree to hire him back, and he was resentful of Jim's having left before.

to ripen. It was good to think that most of our picking ended with that task.

A week from the following Saturday, Jim and I were working alone on the farm. In the morning, I went into the house to use the Hunters' bathroom, to avoid subjecting myself to the coldness of the outhouse. After using the facilities, I wandered across the hall to Norman's office, attracted perhaps by the pictures on the wall. When I turned to leave, I saw Norman's marijuana plants hanging to dry behind the door.

I had been at the farm for a while before I saw Norman smoking a joint. Afterwards, the sight became increasingly common. I assumed at first that he had a friend nearby who grew marijuana; then Karen discovered where he grew it himself. The drug clearly caused him problems. He smoked it to combat stress, but the drug only masked stress and ended up making things worse. He once told me that he would get chronic headaches. I did not tell him what I thought obvious, that marijuana use had something to do with those megrims.

On the Saturday when I saw Norman's drying plants, Jim and I were to can some tomatoes. We put jars of them on the stove to be sterilized, then went down to the fields. We were pulling up the sheets of black plastic that had kept weeds from our crops. As I was pulling, I saw a car drive towards the house. The tomatoes were ready to come off the stove anyway, and so I walked back up to the house myself.

I did not see the car at the house. While I was at the stove, I heard a noise at the cellar door. I looked out the window over the sink, and I saw my old comrade Tim fleeing, with Norman's marijuana plants cradled in his arms. I went outside and heard a car drive off.

Tim looked pathetic as he fled. Why should he run? *I* was not going to try to stop him; but he just did not know *who* might see him. Such was the troublesome ignorance of a criminal. I could well imagine the thrill he felt as he and his accomplice* drove off; but how ephemeral it must be!

When Norman returned from market that evening, he was only mildly disturbed. "I don't mind losing the marijuana," he said; "I just don't like knowing that Tim has it. Well, at least he didn't get the good stuff."

Next morning though, Norman claimed that Tim had stolen two thousand dollars, or maybe one thousand—at any rate, enough so that Tim could be charged with a felony. This monetary theft was probably a fiction, though I was willing enough to believe it at the time. Norman said that the money was receipts from Wednesday's market; but Gerry pointed out to me later that Norman habitually put his money in the bank on the day after a market.

Before calling the police, Norman wanted to be sure that I would assert positively in court that I had seen Tim run off, but not say what I had seen him run off with. I said that I would not commit perjury.

"Why not?" Norman asked.

Norman heard later that Tim had been caught in Maryland for some other crime, and that he would be tried for that crime, and would serve any resulting sentence, before being brought

*I assume there was an accomplice, who owned the car. Tim had no driving license. He had *said* it was because he had never bothered to get one; and I had been naïve enough to believe this. Later in the day when Tim stole the marijuana, *Hal* turned up with an accomplice. He said he just wanted to show his friend the old place. The tour must have included the edge of the field where Karen had found Norman's marijuana plants growing. So Hal was too late, unless the plants taken by Tim had been harvested somewhere else. I did not tell Hal about Tim's earlier visit.

to trial for the robbery in West Virginia.*

Pulling up the plastic in the fields was our last agricultural duty,† though we still had other sorts of duties to perform. We baked sweet things, like cookies, to sell at market, and we worked on finishing the kitchen in the apartment. The usual situation was that Gerry and Elise did the baking, while Norman, Jim, and I did the carpentry. It seemed unfair thus to divide the chores so consistently. There was urgency to the baking, while the carpentry could go at any pace. Also, I thought that Gerry had especially wanted to learn something about construction. When I asked him, he said that indeed he had wanted to learn, but that he was resigned to learning some other time, since he did not want to work with Norman or Jim. I do not know what Elise's feelings were, except that she and Gerry both were counting the days until Thanksgiving, which marked the end of their commitment to the farm.

It had not been clear to me that I did not want to stay at the farm for another season. During the summer, I had reasoned that I was enjoying myself overall and that another summer could only be easier. The problem was that I did not know with *whom* I might have to work. At any rate, I figured in the fall that I was willing to stay on past Christmas, if Norman had any use for me. I told him so, though his response was non-committal.

However, as I talked to Elise on one of her and Gerry's last

*When Norman reported the robbery to the police, the police were sorry he had not called them on the night when Tim had taken Donna's car. Apparently there had been a rape in Tim's home town of Cumberland that night, and rape was already on Tim's record. I never heard anything more about Tim or my testifying against him.

†Except harvesting Christmas trees, and cutting pine boughs and making them into wreaths, as mentioned later.

days at the farm, I wondered how I could *ever* have offered to stay at that wretched place any longer than I had to. My friends told me they were relieved that I had come to my senses.

We worked until the Saturday before Thanksgiving, and then Gerry and Elise moved out their things. I went home for a week, there being no farm-work to do. It was joyous to have whole days of freedom from submission to Norman. We three old comrades spent an evening together in Washington. But the holiday was marred by my knowledge that it would end with a lonely return to the farm. At least I knew that by Christmas I should leave it for good.

Norman was disagreeable when I got back, for he had had to put up with holiday house-guests, and the last of them still had not left. One day soon after my return, while I was making applesauce for market, Norman had a fit over my inefficient and improper method, although it was the method I had used on other occasions, and he himself had never shown me *any* method. He threw pots and pans around—not around the room, just around the stovetop. He muttered about why I couldn't do things as they had been done at the farm for twelve years. The performance was spectacular, and I nearly laughed at it. I tried to talk to him, but then he stormed away, saying he had things to do. Hal used to call him "Stormin' Norman."

'Twas the Christmas season, and the farm sold trees. We had a grove of them, though Norman did not want to cut them until he had used up the trees he had bought from a friend nearby. Norman calmed down once he had sold a few of these. Jim and I spent time cutting boughs from wild pine-trees and making them into wreaths. Our work-days ended early.

Winter approached. Jim slept, warmed by the wood stove in the apartment, but I still slept in the corn crib. Donna used to say that I was going to have to move to the apartment myself, but then Norman would point out that previous inhabitants of the corn crib had stayed there until Christmas. I took on the challenge of staying there myself.

I never knew how cold the nights *had been,* but a weather-radio told me how cold they were *expected to be.* When I heard a prediction in the single digits Fahrenheit, I almost fled to a heated room, for I did not know how I could bundle up at night any more warmly than I had been bundling already. Then I figured out a way, and I did stay nearly warm enough in the crib. However, when temperatures rose back near freezing, I was relieved. When they were to drop again on my last night but one, I gave up and went to sleep in Karen's old room. I should soon enough be living in a heated house anyway.

2 The view from 2014

In May of 1987, I graduated from the Santa Fe campus of St. John's College, and I went back home to live in Alexandria, Virginia, in the house where I had grown up. I did not know what to do with my life, and I presumed on my mother to allow me time to figure it out. I did ask my former high-school teachers in Washington to refer students to me if they wanted a tutor; thus I earned some money and some teaching experience. A year later, I went to work on an organic farm in Berkeley Springs, West Virginia. By Christmas, I was back home in Alexandria, applying to the graduate program in mathematics at the University of Maryland, College Park. I thought I might still have to live at home while I took some undergraduate courses. This turned out not to be the case, except for one undergraduate course that I took in the summer of 1989. Meanwhile, I wrote something about my experience at the farm, namely the first section of this document.

In my last two years at St. Albans School, I might have seemed destined to pursue mathematics. My matriculation at St. John's College might then be seen as a rejection of this destiny. My mathematics teacher at St. Albans inspired appreciation for, and excellence in, his subject; but unlike some of my other teachers, he was not an admirable person. Though he welcomed students to hang out in his classroom at the end of the day, his attitude towards us, however playful at times, was rough and confrontational. I did not want to be like him, and I did not know anybody else in mathematics.

I may also have agreed with my aunt, who told me college was a place for learning something new. She recalled her own elation as a college student upon realizing that she was learning something—in her case music—that she had known nothing of before.

During and after my time at college, I had no clear picture of a career worth pursuing. I did actually wonder if a job in advertising were possible, since I was fascinated by how advertisements were designed to manipulate people. I thought of lexicography as well, having developed many opinions about the *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (Sixth Edition, 1976). My copy of this dictionary had been given to me by my godfather as a high-school graduation present, and I nearly wore it out in college.

Advertising and lexicography were not serious career options. I left St. John's, declaring that I would study physics, philosophy, or mathematics—but not right away.

Living again at home in Alexandria, I did apply for a few jobs that were listed under Education in the employment section in the *Washington Post.* I did not get them. When I saw the help-wanted sign at the Indian Delight vegetarian carry-out, which I had patronized when in Washington over the last couple of years, I applied for that job too; but I was not the person. I actually considered responding to a newspaper advertisement for an entry-level plumber; then I realized that this was a job for somebody who could do nothing else. I obviously *could* do something else. What might that be?

It turned out that I could be a farm worker. I found advertisements for farm workers in the *Washington City Paper.* I answered them, and I ended up with a job.

I had no realistic conception of what farm work would involve. I think I pictured something like the life of a hermit-scholar in a Chinese painting. My picture was corrected when I first visited Sleepy Creek Farm. I actually worked in the field that day, along with everybody else.

Norman was trying out a new method of mulching. Apparently it was not successful, because when I went back to the farm to stay, Norman revived the old method: drop bales of hay along the rows of vegetables, then go back and cut these open. The baled hay could be separated into layers, and with these we would tile the spaces between the rows of vegetables.

On the day when I first visited though, we tried spreading freshly cut, unbaled hay between the vegetables. Apparently this was too labor-intensive, even with the step of baling omitted. It was too hard to bring loose hay to the vegetables.

I drove home that night with sore muscles. They stayed sore for a few days. Farm work would be a new kind of education.

I did become strong at the farm. Comrade Ward actually noticed and commented on this. He did not have to. When you are always throwing around bales of hay, or hefting crates of squash onto the wagon, your body adjusts. Likewise will it adjust to spending all day under the sun, even shirtless, as we male workers ended up being as the summer grew hot. Given that workers always saw one other naked anyway, either at the shower or at the swimming hole, the female workers might have gone topless as well; but they did not.

Later in the summer, after spending all of one Saturday working at our vegetable stand in Adams-Morgan, I was to stay over in Alexandria. I had been up since two in the morning, and I had been standing since six, keeping displays full of produce, or adding up customers' purchases in my head. But when the workday was over, and I was walking to the subway, I felt exultantly energetic. I was stronger than I had ever been before.

I learned to *eat* at the farm—and to cook. I mean I really learned to put food away; and when it was my turn, I had to learn to put enough food on the table for six hungry workers. When I first visited the farm, Gerry asked me if I liked to cook. I said I was becoming interested, but did not know much yet. I did not understand the significance of the question till I was working at the farm, and I saw how important food was to us.

The farm needed our strength. This taught me the vulnerability of manual labor. In the kitchen one night, I was trying to shake loose the few dried beans that were stuck in the bottom of a jar. I remembered that the heel of one's shoe was recommended as a good place—not too hard—to strike a tuning fork. I struck the jar against my boot heel, and the jar exploded. A shard cut into my finger. Hal took me to the emergency room in his car. The doctor on duty asked me what my job was, as he was stitching me up. I then understood that to many local people, an injury like mine could be a real problem.

Norman had hired me for my brain, only insofar as that brain could direct my hands to perform certain tasks. My performance was now inhibited. A few days later, my comrades told me Norman had wondered aloud whether to give me a "vacation." I suppose this was a euphemism for laying me off. He did not do this; but he complained when he saw me avoiding the use of the hand with the bandaged finger.

Not everybody is suited to life in the country. As I remember it, Hal was always wanting to go to music clubs back in DC or Baltimore. I think the rest of us enjoyed the country just fine. We did once go out to the pizzeria in Hancock, Maryland. We were not quite so isolated as we might have been; out in the field, we could hear the traffic on Interstate 70.

My corn crib was near the walk-in cooler. When I went to bed after my first day on the job, I was soon startled by the noise of the refrigeration unit kicking in. I would be awakened throughout the night by this noise. After a few days, I got used to the noise and slept through it. I think back to this time when I am awakened by the pre-dawn prayer call, blasted through the loudspeakers of our local mosque in Istanbul.

I read from Aristotle's *Physics* at the farm, and I talked about it with my comrades as we were out picking okra. I worked on exercises in Apostol's *Mathematical Analysis.* I read F. R. Palmer, *Mood and Modality* (Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics, Cambridge University Press, 1986): I had picked up this book from the Georgetown University bookstore during one of our Wednesday markets on the campus. The farm gave me reason to question an assertion of Palmer concerning English modal verbs:

> They do not co-occur: there is no **will can come,* **may shall be*, etc. (though in a few dialects there are some very restricted possibilities of co-occurrence such as *might could*).

In my copy of the text at this point (page 33), I see that I have pencilled in "shouldn't oughta done": this is from a song that I must have known well when I quoted it at the farm, but that now I can barely hear in my memory. I cannot identify the singer. A web search comes up with other songs that feature the same co-occurrence of modal verbs. Palmer would just say those songs are in dialect. Well then, in the dialect of Norman and Donna at the farm, the modal co-occurrence "mighta shoulda" was allowed.

They also said "leave go," where I and my citified comrades would say "let go." Communication could be difficult in other ways. One day Ward was up in the hayloft, stacking the bales that we were feeding him with the elevator. He made a gesture like one I had learned as a child, riding in a car on the highway: a motion as of pulling down, which would induce truck trivers to honk their horns. But Ward's gesture meant, "Turn off the elevator!" I did not understand this.

Ward might as well have been Jennie Agutter's character in the 1971 Nicolas Roeg movie *Walkabout.* Lost in the Australian wilderness, she tells an aboriginal boy, "We want WATER. I can't make it any plainer than that." Not knowing English, the boy does not understand. In the same way, I did not know Ward's gesture-language. It is true that, in the movie, the girl's little brother could make his thirst clear with a gesture to the mouth.

At the farm, Donna was trying to tell us where to go in the field one day. She resorted to using a diagram. I could not understand it, because it turned out to be reversed, as if in a mirror. Donna was dyslexic. When I did figure out the error in her map, she complained that I made things too complicated.

And Donna was a teacher, or at least a former teacher. I suppose some tension between Donna and Norman was due to Donna's now being on the farm full time, rather than at school. Also, the family income was now coming exclusively from the farm, and Norman complained that market receipts were down.

If Donna was not the greatest of teachers, Norman was no teacher at all. He resented having to explain to us city kids what to do. But at least we were docile, and we had no farming ideas of our own. If we were told to pick spinach by cutting it at the top of the root with our knives, then that is what we did. When country boy Ward forgot his knife one day, he just pulled up the whole spinach plants, with roots attached. Norman did not like this at all. The rest of us would not have taken Ward's liberty.

According to Donna, once when Norman advertised in a West Virginia publication, a whole family of hillbillies showed up in their jalopy. Norman would not hire them, but he let them stay overnight; after that, said Donna, the room they used practically needed fumigation.

I say *Norman* would not hire them. Probably Donna said, "*We* would not hire them." But one day in Adams-Morgan, where Donna was in charge, a customer complained that we were selling California table grapes. She understood that we had to sell produce we had not grown; but why sell produce that was boycotted by the United Farm Workers?

"I might agree with you," said Donna, "but I don't make the decision."

"Who makes the decision?" asked the customer.

Donna knew she was in trouble. "My husband," she mumbled.

The customer rolled her eyes and left. Donna put her foot down. We sold no more grapes in Adams-Morgan.

My whole life has been spent at school, in one capacity or other—except for my tour of duty at Sleepy Creek Farm. This is my chief reminder that not everybody is like the Clerk of Oxenford, of whom Chaucer says, “gladly wolde he lerne and gladly teche.”

When I first picked zucchini, I missed some, which turned into baseball bats by the time we picked again. When we picked corn, we all missed ears: Norman said he found them in every row. This should not have been surprising. It did not necessarily mean that we had been inattentive. It meant our eyes had not yet learned how to see properly. Norman should have recognized this, accepted it, and acknowledged it to us, instead of scolding us.

We did learn to see what needed picking, be it a ripe strawberry or a weed. After some weeks on the farm, finding myself on a mown lawn, I instinctively bent down to pick a weed. Before the farm, I would not even have noticed the weed. Making an image with a *camera obscura* is simple. Actually *seeing* what is in the image is not.

Another day at Adams-Morgan, Donna complained after I came back from a long break. She had been left with just Tim at the stand, and Tim needed constant reminding to put more produce out as the displays emptied. But Tim was new. Would he have learned to do his job in time? Maybe not. Another Saturday, it was Gerry and Elise working in DC with Tim, and they had to visit National Airport (I do not remember why) on the way back to West Virginia. Tim sat in the pickup truck while Elise and Gerry went into the terminal. I was surprised to learn this; I thought Tim might have been curious to get out and look around.

“Have you ever known Tim to be curious?” asked Gerry.

Perhaps I had not; but we had not known Tim for long.

We college kids might have been distinguished from the likes of Tim in our ability to stick to a job, once we knew what it was. Would Tim have learned attentiveness at the stand in Adams-Morgan? He stole away in Donna's car before this could be found out.

There was another person associated with the farm who could not stick to a job. Curtis would help out at our stands in the city, and once he came to the farm itself to stay for a few days. Indeed, Norman brought him back from the Wednesday market one day, but left him to be fed by us workers. It seems he had once done a stint of work at the farm himself, but it had not lasted. Having the task of packing vegetables in crates lined with newspapers, he ended up reading the newspapers.

Such was the story I heard, probably from Elise. I explained it by another story: Curtis was the beneficiary of a trust fund, and did not have to work. Mine was a materialist, Marxist explanation, Gerry said. Gerry himself had studied Marxist economics for a master's degree at the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania.

During one Wednesday market at Georgetown University, I visited the library and happened upon a catalogue for Catholic University. I saw that the philosophy department offered whole courses on single books of Aristotle, such as the *Physics* and *Metaphysics.* I do not know now why this appealed to me then, but it did. I was going to apply there, as well as to the mathematics department at Maryland. Then, in a dream, it became clear to me that anything but mathematics was foolishness. I do not remember any other content of the dream, but this message was clear enough, as perhaps it should have been all along. I went to Maryland and became a mathematician. Eventually I found myself thinking back to life on the farm, and I edited my earlier writing on that life, and I wrote these new words.

3 About this document

I wrote the first section of this document in the first half of 1989 using the WordPerfect word-processing program. A floppy disk with the file may still exist somewhere. A printout sat in a drawer until, in June, 2014, I retrieved it, scanned it to a `pdf` file, then broke this file into separate pages, using the `pdftk` program, so that I could run these pages through the optical character recognition program at `http://www.onlineocr.net/`. I combined the results into a `tex` file. The OCR program made few mistakes; but it did confuse a couple of commas with periods, and a capital E with a capital F; and it overlooked the first-person nominative pronoun "I" when this ended a line. I corrected these mistakes. I made quotation marks directional and double, as by replacing `'stuck'` with ``` ``stuck'' ``` so that the TEX program would typeset this as "stuck". I made paired hyphens "`--`" into triple hyphens "`---`" so that TEX would set them as em-dashes "—". I made a few stylistic changes, as by breaking some compound sentences into two and by trying to clarify some descriptions. I added the footnotes. Then I wrote the second section of this document.

I do not remember how I composed the first section. I had no diary to work from, just my memories. My focus seems to have been on personalities. I could not yet know what my farm experience would mean to me in later life. This is the main subject of the second section, written, like these very words, in 2014.