

COVER PAGE

Life in the Palms

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~ 3587 words

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Printed December 3, 2006

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Not I, probably no one, likely not even any of themselves, ever asked them what it was they did or what the point of it might be. They farmed. And the point of it was that they lived. Another year. And now and then they took a trip to town and maybe Aunt Mildred bought a new dress.

Their life was what the anthropologist Ruth Benedict, following a 19th-century conceit, labelled Apollonian – a rational and pastoral life rooted in Aristotelean practicality, moderation, and avoidance of trouble. It was a deep wisdom, I would concede even then, but for me there was a deeper truth, a more biting truth, and that was what Ms. Benedict called Dionysian – the hedonistic worldview of the visionary, a commitment to the extreme (such a dirty word nowadays) and an exquisite appreciation of the worldly passions – for all their artificiality, impracticality, immoderation and well-known but perhaps overdramatized association with unpleasant consequences.

The philosophy of moderation, in action and expectations, seemed to me underlain by a sense of life as a given. It did not countenance desperation or exultation. It was the embodiment of the concept of continuity – it said that the flow of life is almost always glacial and gradual and diffuse (in other words, historical), so that the world at any given moment is very much like it was in the recent past and like it will be in the immediate future. One could hardly argue with this; it is patently true. But that did not make it compelling, to me, as a cornerstone of philosophy. First of all, change was only “almost always” smooth and gradual, and even this was true only in a statistical sense, looking at things in the large. But sometimes, and in some places, change was continually sudden, extreme and unexampled. Moreover, if one looked far enough into the past, or the future, or ventured away from the present locality, or viewed events on a small enough scale, one quite commonly observed profound distinctions, one found even the pervasively varying and discontinuous changes we call chaos. As artists have always known, and quantum physicists have recently discovered, what we see depends upon how we look – or, as the physicists would say, what there is depends upon what

we're looking for.

In a world of continuity, one remains in balance by being continuous, and since it is obviously impossible to survive in a mostly continuous world by being continually extreme, Aristotelean wisdom counsels that one should be continually moderate. But I have always believed that in fact it is sufficient to be occasionally moderate, and that what is really important is that one should be moderately, even frequently, immoderate, because the ripest fruit, the richest discovery, the most meaningful and compelling experience, is always to be found on the distinctly immoderate edge of things.

But I am getting ahead of myself. The summer I visited the farm I was fifteen. Hip farm people had by then learned the words to *Mares Eat Oats*. Hip wasn't even called hip then; it was hep. (Of course, farther south, hep also meant assistance, as in, "Little Richard hepped me git hep.")

For some reason or other I spent part of that summer with my father, who didn't much care for sharing anything of his, including time, with anybody, and at some point he drove me out to the farm and left me there for a few days—maybe a week; I don't really remember. The farm was owned and run by four of my father's aunts and uncles, MacPhersons they were, descendants of long-ago Scottish immigrants: Aunt Mildred, Aunt Eleanor, Uncle Clarence and Uncle Vess. Unmarried and childless, they worked their family holdings and lived together in a large, white two-story farmhouse nestled among great old trees—white oak, black walnut and buckeye—in north-central Pennsylvania. Uncle Clarence, the eldest, was 72.

My father drove me out there in one of those dark, stifling massive automobiles everybody had after World War II. An old Buick or something. The trip took five or six hours, during the latter half of which we didn't pass through a single town that had more than one stoplight. I felt a little like Dostoyevski being transported to Siberia.

We arrived just before suppertime. The aunts and uncles all came out to greet us. The deal was that I'd work on the farm with the rest of the family, and I could see no reason to object to that. There certainly wasn't anything else to do.

After we'd taken a brief tour of the barn and the yard, looked at the cornfields and

the cows and the pig sty, my father, who was headed off on a trip of some kind, left. Uncle Vess took me down to the machine shed to see the tractor and showed me some postcards he'd picked up in Paris after the Great War, of half-naked but otherwise unremarkable-looking women. I felt vaguely embarrassed that he found them so titillating. I wondered if he'd ever really seen a naked woman. But he obviously relished the notion that he was entertaining me, so I feigned prurient interest.

Thus fortified, we walked around in back of the shed to a small hillside pasture where the bull was grazing. When it saw us, it looked up slowly. "See that, hangin' down there under the bull?" Vess asked. Well, yes, you could hardly not see it. "Well, that's the bull's baloney!" Okay, I didn't know. I didn't exactly believe it, considering that he seemed to find it faintly amusing, but then I didn't really care. The only bull with which I was familiar was Ferdinand, one of my main childhood heroes, who, though bred and trained and exhorted to be a fierce *toro* in the bullrings of Spain, thoroughly preferred to sniff the flowers in his meadow and steadfastly refused to fight. My kind of guy. Since the story didn't include an episode involving a shapely young heifer, there'd been no mention of Ferdinand's baloney. The MacPherson's bull also clearly had a more normal taurine disposition. If you weren't a cow, he wanted to kill you. Even when he pretended to be paying no attention you could feel his dark hot eyes following you everywhere. His churning rhinoceros brain was continually gauging whether, with a sudden lunging rush and a sinuous sweep of those black horns, he might get you.

Whether the MacPhersons had grown up in the house they now occupied, or whether any of them had ever contemplated marriage, I did not know. Quite likely they'd all been born in this house, doubtless even more remote seventy years earlier than it was now. Their older sister, my father's mother, had moved to the city and had three children. Perhaps that seemed sufficient procreation. At the turn of the century, when they'd been young, life for most common people had been very hard. Perhaps the farm, and their parents, had needed them. Perhaps no viable alternative had presented itself.

Evolution, contrary to popular misconception, does not rest upon some grand

supposition that none but the fittest survive to reproduce – that claim is manifestly false and would be a fatally flawed strategy besides – but only upon the commonsense observation that the least fit tend to be non-survivors and non-survivors tend not to procreate. Great lines, on the other hand, die out all the time.

In the evening the men finished up their work while the women did the dishes, put away the leftovers, perhaps set a small fire in the sitting room, and made a dessert. Afterward, everyone sat around talking and eating ice cream or brown betty and maybe listening to the radio for an hour or so. Then they went to bed. At nine-thirty or ten o'clock. I found it passing strange, and have ever since, that grown people go to bed just as the evening is beginning.

On the other hand, they rolled out of bed about 3:30, as near as I could figure. They'd let me sleep 'til 4:30 or so, and by then they'd have breakfast on the table and already have begun the morning chores. The food, I must say, was sumptuous. Breakfast consisted of heaps of perfectly cooked scrambled eggs, strips of bacon, potatoes, greens, butter and raw milk – all from the farm, fresh and full of flavor. You cannot buy food like that in any supermarket. The meat they served could have been properly chewed by a toothless person. The egg yolks were orange – not yellow – and had a distinct earthy taste that's missing from the eggs of chickens who are fed nutrient pellets and styrofoam.

Well, never mind that. The food was excellent, and it was always present in great quantities. Mealtimes were pleasant enough, unlike the psychodramatic affairs I was used to at home, but everyone pretty much tended to his eating – which was how they lived their lives in general. On task. Undiverted.

As soon as breakfast was over, the old men and I would walk down the road through the chilly early daylight to the barn, where about thirty guernsey cows waited to be milked and set loose for a long summer's day meandering through the farm's gently rolling pastures. Sometimes, particularly if they had to wait too long for this, they would all start mooing and lowing and pushing against their stalls to express their impatience. The grazing critter is a creature of habit. It doesn't seek a Dionysian life,

though one might make an exception for the moments when it makes whoopee with that baloney. Otherwise, though, it's pretty much chew and moo. This is their pleasure and they don't like being denied it.

Clarence and Vess (and the women whenever that was necessary) milked their cows by hand. One by one, each cow would be led out of its stall and attached to a restraining collar. Then somebody would bring up a stool and a bucket and reach under the cow and start pulling and squeezing pairs of teats, one in each hand, squirting the thin streams of milk into the bucket, over and over and over again until the bucket was nearly full. Each bucketful would then be transferred into a ten-gallon milk can that weighed about eighty pounds when it was full. The white-haired men carried them two at a time.

When the milking was done, we turned the cows out into the pastures. Just where they could go during the day was regulated by a system of gates and fences that separated various areas of the farm. This must have been an exciting time for the bull, too, as he nervously searched the breeze each morning for any sign that some of his harem might be in the mood for baloney. Cows make no secret of their estrus, though, and it is all pretty predictable, so Clarence and Vess usually knew before the bull did, which meant that the bull's participation would be anything but spontaneous or even dignified. On most days, though, the cows required no additional attention until they came wandering back late in the afternoon to get milked, have a treat, such as a flake of alfalfa, and sleep in the safe comfort of the barn.

Once the cows were out Clarence would harness up the team of big old Belgian horses, Abe and Charlie, while Vess and I hoisted the cans of warm milk onto a heavy wooden flatbed wagon. With Clarence walking and clucking behind them, the horses would come clomping and neighing in tandem out of the barn, a little frisky but always serene, and Clarence and Vess would attach their traces to the wagontree. Then we'd get aboard and slowly make our way back down the bumpy road toward the house, turning off before we got there to go instead to the springhouse, half-buried in the ground, where it was dark, wet, and – most importantly – cold, and where the milk would wait

until the local coöp dairy came by to pick it up. From the few gallons they kept for themselves the women skimmed off some of the thick cream and whipped it into butter, or set some aside to curdle into cottage cheese, or served it at meals, raw, cold and delicious.

Toward midmorning one of the uncles would take the horses, harnessed to the wagon or some other implement, and go lumbering off up the hill to a field of grain or corn, to plow or rake or fix fences, and the other uncle and I would often go up to the barn, perhaps to the loft to turn the hay. By ten or eleven o'clock the hayloft would be an oven, and, if we were pitching hay, roiling with dust. The MacPhersons didn't bale their hay but kept it loose in a huge pile, from which it could be thrown down through a gaping ten-foot-square hole in the floor to the animals below. "Last guy we had up here fell through that hole," Vess said, "and the pigs ate him."

After the hay had been cut, and then raked and rolled for a few days until it was dry, we loaded it onto wagons and brought it to the barn. With a block and tackle suspended from a beam that extended out from above the hayloft door we would lift great bundles of the dusty green stuff up and into the loft until the wagon was empty. Then the horses, roused from their contemplative daze, would begin the long plodding walk back to the field while whoever was in the loft – me, usually – pitched the newly delivered hay onto the mountain already there. Often there was time to lie down and take a nap or just sit in the high doorway and look out over the hills and watch the clouds drift and merge and blossom and dissolve themselves in the blue sky.

The uncles, like their ancient horses, seldom paused or pondered as they went about their work. They did not counsel or practice heroic work – lifting things that were too heavy or moving any faster than necessary – but they also wasted neither time nor motion. Sometimes it was not apparent at all that anything was being accomplished, but after awhile I'd always see that something had been accomplished, even sometimes something rather startling, such as clearing a ten-acre field of every stalk of dried grass that earlier had lain there in endless windrows curling toward the horizon, one after another in a gentle geometric rhythm. Step by step, little by little, piece by piece, each

task would be done. And no sooner would it be done than a new project would be underway, often without a word, as if it had been decided at the moment of creation what work needed to be done, in what sequence, in what way, by whom, for every day of every year of all time, and all that was left for us to do was to go about it until the sun set and time ran out.

Around noon it would be time for lunch and usually by then I was ready for something less strenuous. The uncles would leave me behind when they returned to the fields, assuring me that whatever they were going to do wouldn't be much fun, and the aunts would take me out to the vegetable garden behind the house, alongside a couple of dozen trees that comprised their orchard – apples, cherries, peaches and even a pear tree – heavily laden with new fruit. The garden was large and most of it was open to the afternoon sun, but the area near the house was shaded by the huge old trees. The aunts had adorned it here and there with benches and little whimsical statuettes of squirrels and cupids, an arbor that carried a heavy burden of Concord grapes, many different kinds of flowers, and several birdbaths.

Sometimes I would help with the weeding or pick tomatoes or raspberries or feel around in the soft soil for early potatoes, but mostly I was free to do whatever I wished, which often as not meant wandering off into the orchard where, alone with my thoughts, I could pretend I was somewhere else, in another time, engaged in some adventure, conquering mustachioed villains and rescuing maidens, struggling and celebrating with imaginary friends those great and glorious deeds of which there are all too few in real life. The aunts, like the men, went about their work quietly, ceaselessly, seemingly oblivious to the world beyond the farm.

The business of the outside world, presidents and wars and market crises, crime and fashion and rumors and newfangled inventions – well, all that had nothing to do with the MacPhersons nor they with it. If there had ever been a time when they had been involved with the larger world, it was long past and well forgotten. The universe to them was this farm, its soil, its springwater, its hills and creeks, its fences, its trees and fields and gardens, its barn and house and outbuildings, its cows and horses and

chickens and pigs. The farm was life. It was self-contained and self-explanatory. Everyone knew what to do and when and how to do it. The farm prospered, and their labors bore ample sustenance, and sometimes, when the crops were good and milk prices high, it gave one or two of them a brief vacation or a new gadget for the kitchen. Nothing more seemed necessary; desiring more would have seemed vain, pretentious, covetous, ingracious. Certainly none of them ever wondered what they'd rather be doing. There was no such thing – they did what they did because that's what they did. Nobody envisioned quitting this life except by death because there was not, in reality, any other life. Nor was there anything to rue about this life: it was simple and well-understood and there was always food on the table. Pray, what more might there be?

After supper one night, I went out onto the back porch that looked northeast over the garden and the orchard. The tops of the trees and the hills beyond were washed in a golden light, while below it the fields were cast in shadow. The screen door squeaked as it opened and I could smell Clarence's pipe.

"Your dad called," Clarence said. "He'll be here tomorrow around lunchtime."

"Unh," I replied. "It sure is pretty here."

"Peaceful."

"Yeah."

"Kind of boring though."

He didn't say, "for a city boy," like I'd thought he was going to. I liked him for that. "Yeah," I said.

"Be glad to be gettin back to it, eh?"

"Yeah. But it was fun."

"We don't get too many visitors."

"The food was great."

"Yep." There was a long pause. "Vess was in Paris when he was young. In the first war. Did he tell you?"

"Yeah."

"Too many people, he said."

“Unh.” I thought of the horses. I liked the smell of them. Their rough nuzzling friendliness. They reminded me of the horses that had pulled the milkman’s wagon and the hucksters’ carts during the recent war.

Now only the upper fringes of the treetops and the peaks of the hills were bright with that copper-colored light. Almost everything was dark and in shadow. It seemed natural, and yet odd, that here on the farm the sunset signified the end of the day, whereas in town and to me it meant only the beginning of the evening.

Next morning Uncle Vess took me up on the hill behind the barn to shoot woodchucks. We didn’t see any woodchucks, but we plinked away with the .22 for an hour or so, kicking up rocks and snapping twigs. It was easy to see that, had any woodchuck dared show its head above the ground, even I could have put a bullet in its eye and, as Uncle Vess said, “blown its ears off.” I was glad not to have to blow a woodchuck’s ears off; it seemed enormously messy and cruel, and pointless besides. But shooting was fun and I was good at it. It was one of the farm’s few forms of recreation, though of course it had a practical side—varmints can do enormous damage to crops. On the other hand, it seemed out of place in this pastoral land.

When my father arrived, I was glad to be going.

On the way home I thought of the steaming clouds that burst from the nostrils of the horses in the cold morning air. I remembered the great muscles that strained under their glistening, sweat-drenched haunches in the hot afternoon. I thought of them standing motionless, perhaps for half an hour or longer, in the middle of a field, under the trees, or wherever they happened to be, while their driver walked away and busied himself with something or other. A draft horse is as good at standing still as it is at bending its enormous strength to the task of pulling a loaded wagon uphill.

The farm, like these powerful, tranquil beasts, was a sort of Eden where sturdy work brought simple but ample rewards and all who lived there were at ease in their flowing harmony. But I was Dionysian, as I am today. I could not be still for long. I liked change. Like a mustang on the wild prairie, I felt truly at ease only in motion, the faster and more sinuous the better.