

Three Roods Charm

By Michael Short

I would be lodged in a glacier. I would be crushed and granulated into sand and grit along with the boulders stuck beneath the ice, sliding inches per day with titanic power, scraping me along the bedrock leaving striations, traces of the glacier's path, where bits of rock and bits of my bone scratched the crust. I would be pressed into the earth, plowing up hills and drumlins and denting out valleys, which would soon—"soon" in geologic time—become glacial lakes. I would come to rest, finally, a heap of debris either pulverized from the glacier or plucked from the valley floor. My bone reduced to rock flour and my body kneaded into the ground over hundreds of miles, I would leave no evidence of my existence.

If I existed ten thousand years ago in the same location.

But glaciation ended, the ice receded, and central North America saw its last cube melt centuries ago.

How fortunate, I thought, that we live in an interglacial period. Shirtless and sweaty, I leaned against my shovel and peered into the hole I had just dug. "That'll do," I said aloud. The sun warmed my back, crickets hummed in chorus, and deerflies bit my sides as I wiped my brow, taking a moment to scan the rolling countryside and marvel at the lasting significance of the glaciers compared to my own insignificance as a farmer.

This was my third day as an intern at Three Roods Farm in Columbiaville, Michigan. Greg had sent me to the edge of his property to work on his reforestation project. The wheelbarrow held five saplings he had nurtured for months in the greenhouse, and now he entrusted them to me.

"Are you sure you want me to plant them without your supervision?" I asked earlier that afternoon.

"You're a bright young man, Michael. I think you can dig a hole."

And so I did. For two hours I dug holes of equal depth and diameter without lifting my head. When sweat burned my eyes, I stepped back for a rest. That was when I noticed the dropstone. At the edge of the clearing lay a small boulder. On the drive up to Michigan, I had noticed fields, gentle hills, tall grass, shrubs, and pine trees, but not a single boulder.

"Glaciation, of course," I said. The crickets didn't seem to care, but I was fascinated. I looked up at the sky and realized that ten thousand years ago, ice would have piled up to the clouds. The sun would not have been visible. Where clouds now drifted, this boulder had drifted miles from its origin suspended in the ice. And when the glacier melted, it dropped from the sky into this field where no stones like it ever existed. This glacial erratic was a foreigner, an alien to Three Roods Farm as was I.

And yet, we both belonged.

* * *

"Did David Bowie bother you at sunrise?" Greg asked.

"Huh?" I said.

"What I meant was how did you sleep?"

"Oh. Wonderful," I said. This was my first morning at Three Roods Farm, and I made sure to sound cheery and willing. I hadn't a clue what chores might await me.

“I’m sorry, but did you say David Bowie?” I asked.

“Yes, but never mind for now.” Greg seemed pleased about something. He was the kind of guy who carried himself confidently without fringing on arrogance. “Well, we’d better go feed and water the chickens first thing. Nicole can give you a full tour of the farm later. She’s our summer intern—you’ve met her, right?”

“Oh, yes,” I said. “She actually showed me around last night.”

“Wonderful,” Greg said, as if that had always been the plan.

I trailed him in the morning dew out to the barn. The grass was tall and wet and irritated my legs despite my attempt to follow his steps.

“That means you’ll have some free time this afternoon. Maybe you and Nicole can go swimming at the nature preserve. And if you’re lucky…” he paused but didn’t look at me. “...you’ll meet Deer and Justice.”

“Who?” I asked.

He hesitated again, and I swear he winked at me, but I couldn’t tell. Greg frequently exhibited a shrewd yet mysterious smile and made you feel like a puppy awaiting a treat. He could have winked after every sentence without the gesture seeming inappropriate.

“The neighbors, of course,” he said at last. “But now, meet the kids.” He unlatched the gate to the chicken pin and held it open. “After you.”

The chicks were yellow, brown, and black, and at first, they ran away in terror, but then the cluster looked at me expectantly and approached with caution.

“These are my babies,” he said. “All forty of them. You can count them if you’d like.”

“Hmm.” I couldn’t think of anything else to say. In fact, I would say ‘hmm’ a lot during my stay at Three Roods. “They’re cool.”

“No, count them,” Greg said. “I need to know they are all here.”

I realized ‘if you like’ was Greg’s gentle way of saying ‘do this, please.’ Embarrassed, I began counting in my head, but I waved my fingers around like I was directing an orchestra as proof of my diligence. “I count forty,” I said.

Greg displayed his knowing smile again. “Me too.”

I reached down to scratch my legs, which still irritated me.

“Did you bring any long pants?” He asked. “You’ll want to wear them in the future.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll be fine.”

I remembered almost laughing at the sight of Greg earlier that morning, but now I understood his dress. He didn’t look ridiculous, he just looked like the typical farmer, pitchfork-in-hand, any child would envision while singing old Macdonald had a farm...

“Ok, well let me show you the operation I run here,” he said.

Rubber boots, denim overalls, patch of chin hair, glasses, tall and slender frame except for a rounded belly, and brown calloused hands—ee i ee i oh.

“When the kids grow up, which takes about six months, they start laying.” He picked up a wooden egg from a shelf. “These are for encouragement. But in the meantime, we feed them—a lot. Their poop is their most valuable product for now, so I keep them well stocked with an organic mixture of feed.”

“How come it doesn’t smell in here?” I asked.

That smile and ambiguous wink again. “I’m glad you asked.” He bent down and grabbed some of the bedding. “I get this hay from a friend over in Romeo County—no chemicals in it, he assures me. I add two or three inches to the floor each week, and by the end of

the season, I'll have three or four feet of compressed hay and poop—you can't ask for better fertilizer.”

“So is that what makes Three Roods a permaculture design?” I asked.

“Well, its certainly part of it, but we strive for efficiency in all of our projects. And we have many.” He closed the gate. “I'll have you change the water, add two scoops of feed, and spread some fresh hay in a minute, but first let's see how our mothers are doing, shall we? Oh, and watch out for Schnitzel,” Greg said as I followed him out of the barn and around to the coop where the hens strutted up and down the run. “He probably won't eat the chickens if he gets in, but he'll scare them half to death.”

Schnitzel was young, tireless, and his wet nose came up to my belly button. Despite his size, he seemed friendly and didn't scare me. “Good boy,” I said, patting him on the head. “You stay here.” I squeezed through the cracked gate and into the pin without breaking eye contact with the German Shepherd.

“So does Schnitzel have a specific function in the permaculture design, too?” I asked.

“No,” Greg said. “He's just cool.”

I laughed. I was starting to feel more comfortable around Greg, even during long silences, and he seemed to enjoy my questions.

“Speaking of cool dudes,” he said. “This is David Bowie.”

I looked up to see a rooster with a large orange cockscomb staring at me. His head was tilted, his eyes black and piercing, and his left leg poised two inches above the ground. Without warning, he kicked up dust and ran around in circles shrieking frantically.

“Oh shut up,” Greg said, shooing David aside. “We're here for the ladies.” Then he turned to me. “So Mike, have you ever collected eggs before?”

“Nope.”

“Well there's nothing to it. Only about six lay at a time, but we have eighteen.”

I lifted my finger and started waving it around again.

Now Greg laughed. “You don't have to count them. They don't go anywhere. Just lift them up gently with one hand and feel beneath them with the other. They won't peck you.”

I timidly reached beneath the warm hen and pulled out three eggs.

“Great. You've got the hang of it,” Greg said. “When you make a dozen, bring the carton inside. And don't forget to feed, water, and add hay to the chickens when you're done.

Any questions?”

“I don't think so.”

The clever smile, the half wink, the approving nod. “I'll see you at lunch then.”

* * *

Three Roods Farm, like myself, was teeming in every sense of the word. For the land, this quality was visible. A nature preserve adjacent to the farm sheltered ponds and lakes that brimmed with fish. Bees swarmed around stacks of wooden boxes behind the barn—Robin, Greg's wife, practiced apiculture on the side. The hens laid a dozen eggs or more each morning. Schnitzel barked and bounded within his fence. In the fields, dandelions grew the size of baseballs and sprayed their myriad seeds into the airstreams. Weeds pervaded the rows of raised beds, but sometimes these were beneficial as a cover crop, I would learn, and other times they could be foraged and blended into a smoothie with flax seed oil called “green drink.” It smelled like decaying vegetation (which it was) and tasted like sour hummus causing me to request carrot-apple juice, the other house

specialty, in the future. The weeds could also be fed to the chickens or added to the compost bin—this was permaculture in action—nothing wasted, everything cycled back into the self-perpetuating system.

Interns and guests trafficked in and out of the house and the fields—some stayed for days, other for months, but fresh and interesting faces always bustled about the grounds. Nicole was my age, a college dropout from a broken home who seemed saturated with peace and enjoyed leading yoga. Dr. Veejay was Greg's college roommate at homeopathy school in India. His accent was thick, and he rarely talked to the interns because, Greg later explained, he was a highly esteemed guru in India, and therefore he regarded us interns—along with most women—as servants. Sid was a young but frail man who headed a non-profit for hurricane relief in Sri-Lanka. Trish was an old maid who mixed drinks at a golf course back in Detroit, but enjoyed coming to Three Roods whenever she could afford, which was never, but she came anyway.

I teemed with thoughts and questions—suppressed, invisible, beneath the surface—until the farm pried me open like a child would a Venus Flytrap, releasing my buzzing inquiries into the air alongside the dandelion lint. With my freshman year of college finished, my head crawled with slippery questions about my father's sudden death, my liberal arts education, and my skepticism regarding religion. The thoughts were like leaf piles of sticky notes that needed raking up into a single narrative. I wished they could be summed up in a single narrative.

I asked the slippery questions. Did I talk about my dad's heart attack because I wanted attention and pity for having missed my college orientation? Was my growing interest in theology derived from a need for emotional comfort, a security blanket rather than a genuine faith? Is it wrong to pursue religion only after a tragedy? Am I, like C.S. Lewis, "the most reluctant convert" because of my intellectualism, or do I enjoy dragging out my confusion and grief by blockading myself from answers?

For eight months these questions pierced my conscience loudly, but I muted them. When summer arrived, I chose to farm because I can relax outdoors, I have an interest in the environment, and I find physical labor both invigorating and therapeutic. I chose Michigan for no reason at all. It was far away, it was a change—I wanted both. But when I arrived at Three Roods, I discovered that, like the crickets and the deerflies, I could no longer mute my thoughts. Perhaps I knew this would happen. Perhaps I chose to farm because I knew I would be forced to think, forced to confront these issues.

Thinking about God and death, I often observed the insignificance of human life everywhere. I imagined scenarios where people die and the world continues spinning on without a blink. My grandfather held my dad, at age four, over a volcano by the ankle just to scare him—a sick joke. His grip could have failed. My father was a hang glider pilot. His strap could have broken. I am a rock climber. My rope could snap. The mountains, the lava, the rocks, the clouds, they don't care. Why should I?

But then I stretched my examples to a larger scale. What if a glacial episode occurs again? Not just myself, but most of the country would be reduced to rock flour and dropstones. Permaculture bases itself on harmony and balance; the good weeds enrich the soil or provide a source of food for humans, but the bad weeds become compost, which enriches the soil or becomes a source of food for chickens anyway. Well, glacial episodes are natural and occur in cycles—where is the harmony and balance in

that? What grand design drives those cycles? Unless the balance requires the extermination of mankind, I don't understand.

My thoughts were no longer muted. No, at Three Roods Farm they became as loud and apparent to me as the geologic history of the land I tilled. Glaciers had shaped this land, defined it. So did my thoughts shape and define me, and therefore it made no sense for me to suppress them, mute them, and keep them invisible.

In retrospect, my choosing Three Roods was a lucky coincidence. With no experience, I didn't know what to expect, but Greg and Robin welcomed me into their home, taught me about permaculture, and shared with me the peace and wisdom they had gained from it. All would agree, Three Roods Farm sprouted magic—cultivated a mystical allure. It comforted Nicole and gave her a sense of home. It brought Dr. Veejay and Sid from across the world to discuss plants, farming, and new organic techniques that could advance homeopathic medicine or sustainable agriculture. It kept Trish coming back. “It's the conversation, the people, the land, and simply the aura,” she told me after dinner on my first night. “I call it the Three Roods Charm,” she said, smiling at me through her rotten teeth. “Just wait and see how it will affect you.”

* * *

“So who are Deer and Justice?” I asked Nicole on my last day. “No one will give me a straightforward answer.”

“Are you in the mood for a swim?” She challenged back.

Despite talking about it every day, I had yet to visit the nature preserve for a swim. And moreover, I was beginning to feel dismayed about leaving. There were people I regretted not getting to know, and there were nooks of the farm I hadn't explored, yet I felt satisfied about my time at Three Roods and nostalgic in the sense that I couldn't have conducted my stay better.

“Yeah. Let's go,” I said. I was sick of playing this mysterious game, and I aimed to meet the strange neighbors for myself. The nature preserve wasn't visible from the farm because it sat beyond one of the slow-arching glacial hills. Nicole and I walked down the gravel road together holding hands. This had become our custom, but it was not one of romance; rather, it was one of amity and peace. I was dumbfounded when she first suggested it, but the gesture never felt awkward, so I stopped questioning it. Nicole's serenity was justification enough for me.

At the end of the drive, we came upon a simple wooden house with a large porch. A sign in the front yard read honk before approaching. Nicole stopped.

“HEEEYY!” she shouted. “DEER! JUSTICE! Michael and Nicole are here for a swim.” I started looking around and let go of her hand, but she snatched it back up. “Shh. Do you hear anything?”

“No. Why don't we just knock?”

“They aren't inside.”

“You don't know that.”

“And what you don't know is that Deer and Justice are nudists. They spend all day in the garden out back...gardening...in the nude.”

“Oh.”

We crept around the corner of the house and stopped again to scan the garden. “I think I see them,” I said. “Yep. And either they are wearing brown clothes or they are really tan. Ok, yeah, they are definitely naked.”

“I told you. Deer is going deaf and usually takes her hearing aid out when she gardens.”
“Wonderful,” I said. “Oh, look, one of them is waving. They see us.”

We began walking down the hill and into the garden. “They don’t talk much,” Nichole warned me, “so don’t be offended. Greg describes them as militant vegans, and that says a lot coming from a jaded organic farmer.”

The sixty-year-old couple had donned bathing suits by the time we reached them, and they stood leaning against their hoes. “Good afternoon, Nicole,” Justice said. “And you must be Michael.” I had been right; their skin was very tan and leathery. “Are you guys here for a swim?”

“Yep,” said Nicole, “Michael leaves tomorrow.”

“Well, we won’t keep you, but if you’d like a tour of the garden, just let us know. And the canoe is tied up on the dock.”

Nicole grabbed my hand again. “Thanks, have a good time gardening.” The couple said nothing but nodded and walked back toward the row of sunflowers. I looked after them, but Nicole jerked me around and led me away. “They are probably undressing already. Let’s go.”

We spent the afternoon lying facedown on the floating dock in the middle of the pond. I could feel my ribs bruising as I peered into the water with my head hanging over the side of the planks and my hands cupped perfectly still beneath the surface. I waited for a sunfish to swim in between my palms, and then I slowly raised them. “I caught one!” I said. “I’ve always wanted to catch a fish with my bare hands.” Nicole seemed surprised, but then she frowned.

“You’re going to let it go, right?” she asked.

“Of course,” I said, lowering my hands and letting the fish glide out of my grip.

“Michael,” she said, frowning again, “is there something you want to talk about?”

I was confused. I hadn’t given any indication of needing to talk, but yes, I could think of multiple confessions of mine that needed a listener. I wondered if she could sense my suppressed thoughts, if she could sense how Three Roods drew them out of me. I wondered if she had any idea about what kind of conversation she was inviting.

“Just speak your thoughts.” She clasped my hand from beneath the water and raised it onto the dry dock. “I’ll listen.”

I took a deep breath. “It’s about my dad, you know.” She didn’t respond, so I continued. “And how he has influenced my attitude regarding religion. In a year I’ve gone from stark atheist to intrigued theologian. That can’t be right. I’m becoming the kind of person I hated in high school. The weak person, the person buying into the myth. I was cynical—it’s like a faith of its own.” I stopped. “Look, I’m not doing a very good job explaining this. Can I start over?”

“Sure, go ahead.”

“In high school, I would force myself to smoke cigarettes just to prove I could conquer addiction. I would hold the smoke in my lungs until my eyes watered. Similarly, I would sin on purpose just so I could appear like a “polluted rag” before God. That’s the worst kind of arrogant. I was assuming that I was strong and could easily overcome addiction. I was assuming that unless I tried to sin, I would have nothing to confess. And now it’s the same with my Dad. I talk about him all the time. I tell people who don’t want to hear. I tell them not because I think I need to, but because I think I should. Really, I’m fine, I

am. And that's what worries me. Why am I fine? Why does my father's death not destroy me?"

"Do you still smoke?" she asked. I thought she was missing my point.

"Well, sometimes. I mean, no, not really."

"So there's your answer. You already said it—you're arrogant. Despite what you think, you are addicted, you are a sinner, and you are not fine. You want to think you're fine and that you only tell people about the tragedy in order to meet their expectations. But you tell people because you need to, not because you want to. Stop being a coward and admit it."

That's when my head came crashing down like a dropstone from the sky. Nicole's harsh words, spoken softly, triggered a succession of epiphanies. All of the thoughts that dominated my consciousness for the past eight months seemed to intertwine. I rolled over on my back and stared into the cloudless sky, the transparent block of ice that had once come to rest precisely where I lay, in a hill-trough, and melted into a glacial lake, which would eventually brim with lily pads and fish. Where a continent-size mass thawed over centuries, I now floated, and my thoughts seemed to thaw in an instant.

This was my logic: The human race is an example of permaculture, a permanent culture whose goal is self-perpetuation. Humans die, but the culture survives — reproduces, evolves, and adapts. But individuals, too, are microcosms of this permaculture design, because although we are finite, we persist off of harmony and balance just like the chickens and the compost at Three Roods. Inside our brains, we keep ourselves in check; we maintain the harmony and the balance of our thoughts and emotions. I told people about my father in order to maintain my balance, which was tipped askew with his death. I couldn't tell if I was fine or a wreck, but through acting fine yet talking about it, I accounted for both options.

But permaculture, no matter how natural or healthy or organic it may seem, is neither permanent nor natural. In geologic time, the record of human existence will be preserved in rock layers, sandwiched between both older and younger layers, neither of which will bear a trace of our culture. And while permaculture may appear cyclic, it really has a finite endpoint, like humans, on the Creator's larger cycle of floods, droughts, and glacial episodes. Not all cycles seem natural, we will discover, when the ice creeps south again and we scream 'unnatural' and 'unholy' while the God of glaciation above sighs a frigid sigh. He sees the larger concept of time where dropstones, Three Roods Farm, and my father and me are all just fossils bereft of the charm that lives only in moments.