

# GOD'S FARM

BY

## LAWRENCE CAMPBELL

When the family said grace, I kept one eye open so that I could observe everyone at the table and make sure I was doing things right. "Lord, we thank you for this wonderful weather," the father began. "And for bringing us these guests, and for giving us our health, and for the ability to do our work, and for this food." I kept my elbows on the table and my hands locked together, mouthing along with the prayer. "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ"—I kept my lips still for that part—"Amen." *Amen*, I whispered, along with the rest of the family, and wondered how long I could keep pretending I was a Christian.

Two days earlier, I had driven from New Haven, Connecticut, to New Haven, Kentucky. I'd arrived a day early at my destination in the Shenandoah Valley, and decided

to kill time by visiting Kentucky's famous Bourbon Trail—assuming, since it was also part of The South, that it would be down the road. It turned out to be a 453-mile journey through a blizzard on Big Savage Mountain. After the storm, I stopped at a gas station in Lexington. Inside, a young girl was explaining to three older men why she hated babysitting. "I can't wait until I get my own kids," she said. "Then I can beat 'em." One of the men, slumped over the counter, raised his head slowly. "Until they get bigger'n you," he said. "Then they'll try'n beat you." That was when I began to feel out of place. "Well, I'd love to get me a pack of those Camels right there," I said, spontaneously adopting a ridiculous Southern accent. I paid for my cigarettes and started to walk out.

"Thank y'all," I said, which made no sense.

In Kentucky I visited the Heaven Hill Distillery and the Abbey of Gethsemani, which produces whiskey-soaked desserts. I bought a bottle of eighteen-year-old Elijah Craig at the distillery, and half of a fruitcake at the abbey. By evening, I was tired, homesick, and nearly too drunk to drive. I pulled out my phone and searched for a motel and a strip club, which felt like the right thing to do. I found a Motel 6 next to a Hustler Hollywood, and started heading that way. I imagined drinking myself into a stupor as fat Kentucky women peeled off their clothing. I quickly called my girlfriend. She was shocked and disgusted; she tried to persuade me not to go. I wasn't fully convinced until I walked to the club and realized it was a sex toy store, and closed.

At the motel, I ate the monks' fruitcake without utensils. It was spicy and moist, full of nuts and dried fruit, and it stuck to my fingers. I washed it down with the bourbon, drunk from a thin Motel 6 plastic cup. I stared at the cup, waiting for the bourbon to dissolve right through it. Occasionally I would lick my fingers and look out the window

at the red neon Hustler Hollywood sign.

When I arrived at the farm, run by an evangelical family, I met the other young men and women applying for the same farm job. I told them where I was from, and one of them shook his head. "I hope I never, never get a reason to go to New York." Another prospective worker agreed: "I'm happier out here in the sticks."

Work began at sunrise, with an hour to feed the animals before breakfast. I hauled two buckets of grain for the chickens and rabbits, and chatted with the farmer's son as I poured out the feed. He pulled one of the rabbits from its cage and tossed it in with another. They chased each other in tight circles until the first rabbit abruptly mounted the second. After several quick thrusts, the first rabbit fell over on its side, momentarily paralyzed. The son turned to me: "That was a successful breed." I went back to feeding the chickens and noticed a dead bird in the corner. I asked what I should do, and the son told me to feed it to the hogs.

I spent that afternoon with one of the farmhands laying hay for the cows, and bringing water to the

pigs. I told him about my visit to the monastery, and he seemed interested. He asked me what my religion was, and I said I was searching. He told me that his very closest friend was the Lord Jesus Christ. I thought to myself, *Well, my closest friend is Henry*, but all I said was, "You're lucky." When I left the farm, he handed me a small pamphlet. It was creased with use but still legible: "So You Want to Know God." I tossed it into my car with some sausage and a beef tongue, which thawed as I drove back north.