November 7, 2024

Once More to the Farm

Allie suggested, vigorously, that I join him and his family at Rainbow Farm over Columbus Day weekend, and I'm thankful for his vigor. This would be a reprise of the family trips we took to Cam and Jan's over Columbus Day, which he loved so much that he'd get sad before we left home, imagining how hard it was going to be to return on Monday. I think we all felt that way. Leaves turning, a fire in Cam's study, all kinds of animals, something major always being built or fixed, Jan's chicken pot pie. But I think, like the rest of you, I felt reluctant to return to the place that meant so much to us, because, well, because no Cam. But I took the plunge, deep into time and memory.

Driving up, the years collapsed. Leaving Route 95, to take 4 west, it could have been forty years ago. After a couple of miles, the sharp right turn, towards Auburn, where the old RedWing shoe factory—now abandoned—looms on the left side of the road. Then, Auburn—a vast landscape of car dealers, truck dealers, plow dealers, Auto Zone outlets, and fast food places—most notably the Arby's that was Rusty and Jean's favorite restaurant. Lobster Roll to die for. Somewhere along that strip was a dinner/dance place called Rolandeau's. Didn't see it.

Farmington's changed a little but not much. Liquid Sunshine, Don's IGA, the more upscale grocery across the street—all gone. But there's the Franklin Savings Bank, where Saskia would drive through every Friday in the Volvo to secretly withdraw funds from Cam's account. Security camera. Busted.

The bookstore—Devaney, Doak, and Barrett—is still there, still owned by the guy Cam used to play chess with. So is the sort of funky music store, right next door., where I always bought something I didn't need.

Reny's, of course, exactly the same. Signs offering "Christmas Layaway Plan!!" in the window. The old fashioned medical supply store, on the corner at the end of the block, which had prosthetic limbs in the display window, has been gone for years.

After a sandwich at the Orange Cat Café, I drove out of town, towards Strong. There, on the right, is the old home and law office of Frank Underkuffler, now empty. Frank—Cam's local attorney and friend—was more than a little stunned when Allie and I appeared at his door two days after the accident, to explain that we had found a new will, which Frank knew nothing about, which now included Yana the Ukrainian wife.

The will hadn't been notarized or witnessed, and whatever other complications there were, executing it would clearly involve communicating and dealing with Ukrainian authorities. Frank was a good guy, but you got the feeling his last big case was a dispute involving the Farmington Elks Club. (The Elks, by the way, had packed the Comfort Inn in Wilton, where I was staying. Statewide meeting in Farmington. While I was there, the Elks mostly lingered around their bus in the parking lot, smoking.)

Leaving Frank's behind, there are the the Margaret Chase Smith apartments, Mr. Blue Motel, then Jack's Trading Post, purveyor of all types of unhealthy things. There are Trump signs, but nearly an equal number of Harris Walz signs, though there were fewer signs in general than I thought there would be.

When I turned on to Streeter Road (nice wooden sign, Bopp's Doggy Day Care) I noticed ahead of me, some distance away, a large, dark vehicle, bigger that a car. I got closer, and lo and behold it was the Power Wagon, gleaming green in the autumn sun, and moving along at a good clip. It felt like I was being guided into a safe harbor after a long voyage. Very freaky and wonderful experience. Ritter explained, when we arrived, that he'd "gone out looking for a bird."

The place looks great, and Taylor and Ritter were wonderful hosts. The power had gone out Saturday morning, but the generator kept things illuminated, and the wood stove kept things warm. Sybil, Bauer (or Leo, as he's called half the time), and Otto are really cute and friendly and took instantly to Johnny and Colin. By the way, has there ever been a better name than Otto Bopp?

It's a busy and happy household, and Ritter seems engaged and productive. He takes courses online, most recently one on Aztec civilization, and is always doing something or other. He and Taylor seem like wonderful parents. The kids are definitely learning to be tough, and spend a lot of time in the woods, and they also get a lot of love. Sybil's beautiful and lanky and intriguing. Leo, or Bauer, or LeoBauer, is always swinging from something, usually upside down. And Otto? He looks like a little space creature, with a bald head and buggy eyes and a permanent smile on his weird little mug.

It was okay being there without Cam. I guess enough time has passed. Also, I think he'd be awful proud of Ritter and his family, which made the whole trip bearable and enjoyable. On the other hand, Cam always had a hard time showing pride in Ritter. On Sunday, we all walked up to Jan's, Sybil and Leo holding Johnny's hands, through the woods, and had a nice visit. Jan seems good, and Ritter said she's doing well health-wise. She had made and delivered Allie's favorite birthday meal, chicken pot

pies, the day before. And Swedish cream and strawberries. But she had no interest in staying for dinner, which I completely understand—it was a circus of children.

That's my report, though I didn't mention that every single aspect of that farm evokes so many powerful recollections, layered throughout the years, that it can get overwhelming. Was it just last year that I spent an entire weekend sitting in the leather chair in the study, fire blazing, reading David Copperfield? No, more like twenty five years ago.