

Charlie and Good Taste

I came back to your most excellent Houston County this past weekend, the first of the hard freezes, the first morning where you really got the idea of what was in the cards for all of us. As we drove through the marvelously contourous Root River Valley I was reminded again of all the reasons we fell in love with the place all those years ago.

It was 1976 and I was beginning to look for a new life. My marriage had ended and I was tiring of my business dealings (at the ripe old age of 27). So I hit the road for a few months, golf clubs in the trunk, songs on the radio, a few bucks in the bank with an invitation to come down to the Nodine area and meet some folks who had recently established a farm on the edge of the woods.

Reformed Denverites is what they were, no strangers to a beautiful place, their scouts had found a marvelous region generally called The Driftless. Like the Rhine River Valley, folks said, green hills rolling down to an old river system undisturbed for all these eons by the relentless glaciers of the last ice age, nature's enormous road grader scraping everything flat for millions of square miles all around us. But not here. We were cosmically lucky that all those generations ago, this island on either side of the Mississippi was spared the blade and allowed instead to mellow in its water and greenery, maturing to what we see now. It's a very old system, very rare and very precious.

So these expatriate Coloradans made their way here and started a new life full of experiments and mistakes and long laughs and salty tears. Each of them was instantly interesting to me, wonderfully different from each other, held together by love and the ambition to make an honest go of it. Being a dislocated Chicagoan living in the Twin Cities they were oh so conveniently located on my route, down the stunning River Road from my new city to my old one.

So my trip would go something like this. Roll out of bed and start driving through Hastings and Red Wing until my golf radar sensed an unseen local course begging me to stop and play a while. These rounds played in rural splendor, usually alone, me and the ball, the course and me, were some of the happiest moments of my very happy life. I'm glad I gave myself permission early on to take the time to pay attention to things other than making a dollar.

A lot of my friends were richer than I but I venture to say that none were happier. Still true, still me.

So I would play my round and climb back in the car feeling that delightful tired feeling you feel after a satisfying physical endeavor (I have always been a player who walked and carried his bag) and drive the remainder of the way down to Annamari Farm. That's what they called their place, a splendid forty acres of woods and pastures made for the likes of these adventuring souls. They had a way of sidetracking me from my destination in Chicago, sometimes for days and days.

There were such meals and such conversations and such laughs and such stories as to be completely beguiling. We lacked nothing. There was nothing missing from my day and I remember thinking that I was the luckiest person on the planet. Which brings me to Charlie the Bull.

Charlie was a high strung testosterone ridden youngster who weighed in at about 600 pounds. His eyes were at my shoulder level and this city boy was grateful that Charlie was staked in the barnyard, behind a fence and clear of my path to the house. One fine spring day, after a zennishly excellent round of golf (I was shooting scores in the mid seventies in those days) I parked the car, grabbed my duffle and started toward the house.

I vaguely remember noticing that Charlie's gate was open but paid no attention. I was happy and focused on dinner and a beer. When around the corner came Charlie, a snapped rope hanging from his nose ring, taking a position between me and the house. Now, as I told you, I am a city boy by birth and one of the things that sticks with a city boy is an abiding fear of beings which are five times bigger than himself and totally lacking in reason. Charlie had both qualities.

I froze in my tracks; the bull started scraping the ground. I made eye contact and he lowered his head fixing me in his stare. I swear I heard him say, "Do you feel lucky, punk?" And then my back went out, no kidding, a huge spasm just above my left hip dropped me to the ground. Charlie ambled closer, no doubt intrigued by the idea of stomping on a prone human. I started yelling, "Tom, Tom, I've got a problem out here!"

So, here I am flat on my back, Charlie standing over me when Mary comes out the kitchen door and screams, "Tom, Charlie's killing Eddie!" Then Sir Lancelot arrived. Now, Tom was the farthest thing from a knight of the round table you can imagine, chain smoking, long bearded, in his underwear and mud boots but I was counting on him. Six long strides over to where his bull had me on the ground, squaring up to Charlie and uttering a string of marvelous expletives beginning with, "Charlie, you big dumb son....." And wham! He punches Charlie in the nose. Charlie blinks as if someone had flicked his ear and backs away, chagrined. End of contest. The bout had ended in the first round on a TKO. Charlie returned quietly to his yard while I was still on the ground thinking that, up until a minute ago, this was one of the best days of my life. But here I am saved from and toddler by a stoner.

A few weeks later on my return visit I was served a steak. I used to say that revenge is a dish best served cold. I changed my mind that day. I don't think anything ever tasted so good as that sliver of Charlie did.