

Martin Sodomka

How to Start a Farm

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TECHNICAL
FAIRY TALES
EDITION



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'Did you finish your studies, then?'
'So it would seem.'
'What are your plans now?'

'To invite you to coffee and cake at the Metropolitan.'

'And after that?'

'After that I'd like to spend the rest of my life with you.'

'We have accommodation for you only,' the grumpy clerk at the Brook municipal office told Gerry. 'No one said anything about the young lady. Besides, national service in the borderlands isn't open to girls.'

'We wish to live in the cottage that was my great-grandmother's, number 52. Her name was Cotter.'

'Oh, so you're a Cotter.' Her tone was friendlier now. 'The house is just up there. But who can say if it's still habitable? We can hook you up with electricity. A water supply will be less straightforward to arrange. It was stopped to prevent the pipes from bursting in winter.'

'I remember drawing water from a pump with my mum,' Gerry remarked.

'There are water mains in Brook, using the original wells.' The clerk was smiling now. 'You must be Lucy's son.' Her tone was suddenly familiar. 'When you next speak to your mum, please say hello from me. We used to play together as children. I spent my

summers in Brook. Anyway, I suppose you have the keys. If the place proves uninhabitable, I'd be happy to put you up for a few days. You don't start work till next week. That'll give you a few days to settle in, and there's bound to be a lot to do at the cottage.'

'What will my work be?' Gerry asked.

'You'll join the state **agricultural holding**. For the next three years, you're going to be a farmer.'

'Would you have any work for me?' Nina asked shyly.

'There's work for everyone in the borderlands,' the clerk replied.

'I'm a nurse.'

'There'll be a fight for your services, then. But there are no medical facilities here in the village. You'll have to commute twenty kilometres to Higher Town.'

'There's nothing at all in Brook?'

'I'm afraid not. Not long ago, a farmer was complaining to me that she couldn't find any good workers. Do you like animals?'

'I suppose so,' Nina said softly.

'How about sheep? Would you mind working with them?'

'I could give it a try,' said Nina with a shrug.

'Very well. Let's meet back here at seven on Monday morning, when I'll show you to your workplaces. In the meantime, you can settle in. Welcome to Brook!'

Having thanked the clerk, Gerry and Nina walked out into the afternoon sun. Gerry had but a dim memory of where the cottage lay. Eventually they found it and its adjacent barn on a hillside above the village, on land covered with thistles and untamed wild roses. The place obviously hadn't been maintained in years. Gerry felt his spirits plummet, but he didn't mention this to Nina.

'Let's go in,' he said with forced cheer. 'It's time to wake Sleeping Beauty!'



AGRICULTURAL HOLDING

An agricultural holding, more

commonly known today as a farm, is a basic unit of agriculture. Whatever we may call it, it tends to comprise a group of residential and farm buildings situated close to land on which crops are grown and/or animals raised. Most farms have a single owner – the farmer – who lives and works there with their family, although some farms belong to the state. Sometimes a number of farms merge to form one large one; in the totalitarian past, this often happened against the will of the original owner. Farms thus grouped together under the state are known as cooperatives and run by a chairperson.



Gerry passed through the old gateway to the state agricultural holding and headed for the building where he thought to find his boss. As he was crossing the yard, two employees of about his age came out of one of the huts.

'Who are you looking for?' the smaller of them asked Gerry.

'You'll be one of those wimps who hole themselves up in the borderlands to stay out of the army,' said the second, a chap with an unnaturally red face, quite unprovoked.

Though taken aback by the rudeness, Gerry recovered quickly enough to reply with exaggerated politeness. 'That's right. Pleased to meet you.'

'Leave the army out of this, Rudy,' said the first, putting his colleague in his place. 'Come on, I'll take you to the chief.'

'Hello, young man, and welcome to our farm!' called the round-bellied master across the smoke-filled, overheated office. He appeared forgetful and was obviously very busy. 'I must admit, I had rather forgotten you would be joining us today.'

A telephone rattled on the desk. The master grabbed the receiver and barked into it: 'Yes!' He nodded a few times before saying, 'One moment.' With the receiver away from his ear, he said to Gerry's companion, 'Take him with you on Eltie, Vic. Go and do the field by Long Ridge.'

'What kind of chap is your friend Rudy?' Gerry asked Vic when they were back in the yard.

'His name's Joey, not Rudy,' replied Vic with a smile. 'We call him Rudy because of his red face.'

'And what's the Eltie?' Gerry wanted to know, as they approached a huge tractor of unusual design.

'Allow me to introduce you,' said Vic, pointing at the **tractor**. 'Meet articulated tractor LT 180. The

180 refers to her horsepower. One of the biggest monsters at our celebrated enterprise. I should introduce myself too. The name's Victor, but everyone calls me Vic.'

'Gerry.'

'Pleased to meet you, Gerry. Let's get this thing started and head out.'



TRACTOR

Tractor means "one who pulls", an accurate description of this machine's function. As well as pulling a trailer, plough or seed drill, a tractor pulls all civilization – towards prosperity. Before the tractor came along, farmers' ploughs could only be worked by draught animals. There was a severe limit on how much work a ploughman and his ox, mule or horse could do in a day. Once he had a tractor, the ploughman's productivity increased many times over. An early tractor could pull as many as four ploughs at more than three times the speed of an animal. The monster tractors of today can do very much more, of course. A hundred years ago, 60% of people worked in agriculture. Today, thanks to advances in technology, the work is done by a mere 4%. The rest can lie on the sofa and read this book.





Nina's first working day got off to a much more pleasant start. She was welcomed by Flora, a kindly, easy-going older lady. Before going to the sheep, they drank herbal tea in the conservatory of Flora's tastefully decorated house. Flora was more like a spiritual leader or shaman than the owner of a farm, Nina thought. The tea was extraordinarily delicious. Nina asked where the herbs had come from.

'I gather and dry everything myself,' Flora explained. 'Before you reach the woods, there's a meadow filled with flowers, where conditions are ideal for growing what I need. We cut the grass with scythes only. We don't use fertilizers or chemical sprays. We blend the herbs into medicinal teas following ancient recipes, although, sad to say, much once known about these was lost forever when the old settlers left. Anyway, do tell me how such a pretty young miss has ended up in Brook! I'm not suggesting that life here is bad, but youngsters aren't exactly flocking to these parts.'

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'I'm here with my boyfriend,' said Nina. 'He's chosen three years' work in the borderlands over military service.'

'He's done right. I've never understood the point of armies and wars. Because of armies and wars, this beautiful region is abandoned and run-down. But you'll like it here, I'm sure. The locals have their quirks, but all told they're a good bunch. Most are descended from folk who migrated here after the war. So, where are you staying?'

'Gerry – my boyfriend – had a great-grandmother in the village. We're staying in her cottage, above the church.'

'Old Mrs Cotter's place?'

'Yes, I believe that was her name.'

'She was a good soul! The Cotters were among very few old settlers to stay here after the war. I have most of my recipes from her. She taught me how to use a spinning wheel. It's no small thanks to her that I built up this sheep farm.'

'I noticed her spinning wheel at the cottage.'

'That must be a lovely antique. I'd be happy to teach you how to use it. Winter evenings in Brook can feel long.'

After they finished their tea, Flora stood up. 'Let's go to our lovely **farm animals**, Nina. I keep the sheep mainly for wool. By local standards, my breeds are quite exotic.'

They reached the meadow, where the sheep were grazing. 'You'll see the llamas not far away,' said Flora. 'They're very likeable creatures. We process the wool ourselves, and we dye some of it too. It sells out straight away, some of it to customers as far away as Manadam. We also make brynza and other cheeses. We'll go to the cheese dairy when we finish here.' She turned to Nina with a look of kindness. 'I'm glad

to have a helper here. Recently, it's been rather more than I can comfortably manage alone.'



FARM ANIMALS

Our species is neither fast nor strong. It has no claws or sharp teeth, and its sight and sense of smell are pretty average. Yet it has reached the top of the food chain owing to the soft, jelly-like substance enclosed in its skull, with which the brains of other living creatures on our planet can scarcely compare. The farmer benefits from the farm's animals not by their brain power but by what they provide – notably eggs, milk or wool. Some animals are used for their strength and endurance – although by now these abilities have been largely replaced by machines. That animals are also bred for their meat and skin is, of course, in direct conflict with these poor creatures' interests. But the lord of creation is an omnivore, and besides, vegetarianism isn't for everyone. A good animal farmer makes sure to care for animal wards as well as possible, so allowing them to live out their allotted time happily.

As well as parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters, the wedding guests comprised enough old friends from Manadam to fill a bus. Gerry spoke with Mr Zeal and Mr Christian, old family friends. Many new acquaintances from Brook came to the wedding too. As soon as the village mayor had performed the ceremony, the party began. It was held on the impressive premises of the former dancehall, with its beautiful large windows, inlay coffered ceiling and polished parquet flooring. The band imposed on Gerry by Rudy was a pleasant surprise. The musicians' fine playing soon won over the Manadam public. Rudy performed special effects with his face: when

he soloed, it changed from red to purple.

'So you really intend to stay here always?' Gerry's sister Zira could hardly believe it. 'Won't you be completely cut off? What about your cultural life?'

'It's true that we can't get to the theatre,' Nina admitted. 'Instead of going to cafés, we sit on our bench by the house and enjoy the view, or we go to the inn. Gerry and I share a favourite cultural activity – book-reading. We can do that anywhere. We recently found a couple of cinemas and a well-stocked music shop that sells the same LP's as we can get in Manadam. As you can get in Manadam, I should say.'

'But I'll miss you. You will come home sometimes,

won't you? To see us, I mean.'

'I really don't know. When you have your own farm, you don't get to travel much. Maybe I could ask Flora or another friend to look after the animals for a few days. You could come to Brook more often, though. I know it looks a bit gloomy now, with winter on the way, but you can't imagine how lovely it is here from spring to autumn!'

'Apart from your cottage or the inn, is there anywhere to stay?' Zira asked.

'Gerry and I will give some thought to that. There's a spot on the meadow near the woods that would make a lovely campsite in summer. That would surely generate interest. Families from the town have started coming here recently. The children inspect the cows and pigs, ride a pony, stroke the sheep. **Agri-tourism**, they call it.'

'You'll never get me to sleep in a tent, Nina.'

'I know. You'll stay with us, don't worry. As soon as we get around to it, we'll convert the attic into a proper guest room.'

When it came to the giving of wedding presents, Gerry's parents handed the newlyweds two slips of paper.

Gerry looked at them in confusion. 'Bus tickets? To Higher Town?'

'That's right, bus tickets,' said his father. 'We're taking a trip together on Monday, aren't we, Mother?'

'We are,' said Gerry's mother. 'We'll have something nice at the pastry shop, then we'll visit the Land Registry and have the cottage and its land transferred to you.'

Gerry's eyes widened. Nina blushed.

'But what about Zira and Arnold?' Gerry asked, as the news sank in.

'Don't worry, we'll make everything right and fair with your sister and brother,' his mother assured him. 'It's nice that you should think of them.'

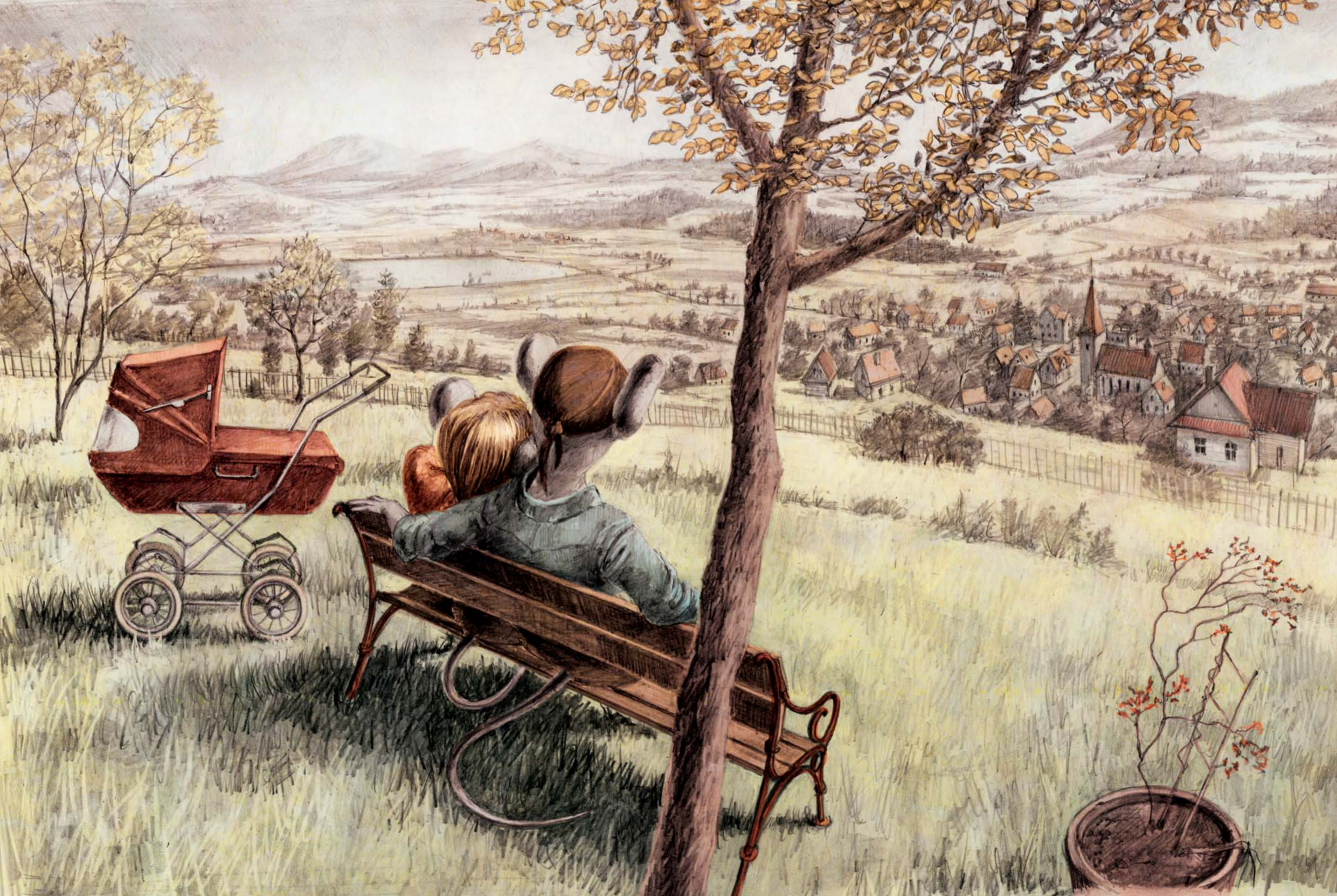
'But what if things don't work out for us here? What if we have to come back to Manadam with our tails between our legs?'

'You must make sure that doesn't happen. We trust you to manage, don't we, Dad?'



AGRITOURISM

Many city-dwellers miss nature in their lives, so they take trips to forests, mountains and watercourses. Some get a taste of what it is to be a farmer: they work with animals, get their hands dirty, experience the smells of the country. Most tire of this after a while and return to their comfortable city existence, although a few tourists are so captivated by the experience that they decide to move to the country.



'We're going to stay, then?' said Nina.

'Of course,' said Gerry. 'Too bad we can't plant that lovely, highly profitable blue flower in the same field next year.'

'I'm sure you have a plan. What is it, actually?'

'The plan is always the same.' Gerry looked at Nina. 'To spend the rest of my life with you.'

'You're such a chatterbox!' said Nina, digging him in the ribs. Then she looked into the pram. 'Oh my, someone's waking up!'



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Having been excluded from school, failed student Gerry must either serve in the military or perform replacement military service in the western borderlands for three years. Gerry's decision is made when he learns that his parents own a cottage out west, an inheritance from his great-grandmother. He persuades his girlfriend Nina to try her luck in the remote village with him. They arrive to find the countryside beautiful and the air and water clean. But the locals seem peculiar, and they encounter many unexpected problems. Will the two incomers, spoiled as they are by big-city life, pass the test set by their new rural home?

For romantics ages 7 and over



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