

Disco Night

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HUDSON, New York, has the self-conscious magic of a young witch. At dusk the beams of sunlight crusade in unyielding stretches across the clouds and fall limp in exhaustion and ecstasy over this hill and that barn and those trees over yonder (etc.), all while several women wearing different shades of white gather in front of al fresco vending machines and yell (use their al fresco voices) about taxes and plastic bags. Hudson is somewhat of a self-contained ecosystem; it is an organism, a growth on the fertile, inviting spine of the Hudson River. It's a city that created itself and survived on itself and lied down on itself and picked itself back up again, but not as a homogenous being with homogenous concerns: the life force of Hudson is, like all things once notorious, complex. The full time agrarians of Columbia County shared their world for a long time with first generation industrialists (captained by four men who called themselves, sans irony, The Proprietors) and today that world is summered by well-groomed pseudo-industrialists exercising their right to Paid Time Off.

18,000 years ago a receding glacier up and melted itself in just the right spot, between the Catskill Foothills and Esopus Creek, creating the exceptionally fertile Hudson River Valley. The river runs 315 miles from the Adirondack Mountains in Upstate New York down to New York City where it drains into the Atlantic Ocean. The area known today as Hudson was purchased by the Dutch from the Mahicans in 1662. It became an area of thriving agriculture known as ‘the breadbasket of the Colonies’ until the opening of the Erie allowed the Midwest to champion wheat and corn and shitty Interstate rest stops and all things Indiana, devastating Hudson.

But, just after the Revolutionary War, a group of whalers worried out loud to each other about the vulnerability of their businesses in Nantucket and Martha’s Vineyard. Representing a group of many whalers and sailors from the area, four men (the ones who called themselves The Proprietors) purchased the Hudson area from the Dutch in 1783 and proceeded to build a city from scratch. They built harbors, wharves, and warehouses; distilleries and barns; later, knitting factories, cement factories, cigarette factories. In 1785 Hudson became the first town officially incorporated by a State inside the freshly birthed United State of America. The whole thing was lit, again. So the locals tolerated the brothels, the bootlegging... the sins!!! Hudson became internationally notorious for its fertile, cultured underbelly: at one point, downtown Hudson was home to no less than 15 brothels and 15 public houses.

The area (its aesthetic makeup at least) became culturally significant through the paintings of the Hudson River Valley School (which wasn’t really a school but more of a vibe influenced by Romantic ideas about an idealized nature, a nature tame and in harmony with man). Thomas Cole was the father of this school, both he and his star pupil, Frederick Church, lived on different hills overlooking the South Bay of the Hudson and painted the magical view until they died looking at it.

Church’s estate, *Olana*, sits at full attention atop a steep but sleepy hill. The house would seem haunted-mansion-y if the tint of its orange facade wasn’t quite so spicy. The grounds are vast and winding and a little lazy, open dawn til dusk to the public. At its peak, where the house sits, you can see 30 miles over the river. The bay is almost perfectly framed, tunnel-like, between two sets of rolling hills covered by thousands of trees that Church had planted on the grounds. It is almost unreal to see and seems like the kind of thing that, if you saw it everyday, you might just disappear inside yourself completely and live an abstract life—one filled with the strange rituals of attempting to reproduce, in perpetuity, even the tiniest nugget of the place’s beauty.

Eventually, though, the School went out of style and the whaling industry came to a not-particularly-screaching halt. The last whaling ship sailed from Hudson in 1819, and by the 1850’s the railroads had transected the mouth of both Bays, running from Boston to New York City and stopping between the two in Hudson. The turn of the century saw the more visceral effects of the industrial revolution. More factories came; more brothels and bootlegging. For a long time, the local police turned a blind eye for the sake of the economy, but in 1951 State Troopers raided Hudson. Then the town that was once a thriving Red Light District became an opposite-of-thriving Red Light District.

But Hudson has had many lives and will have many more. In the 1980’s, members of the Gay community—many of whom were antique dealers and small business owners—gave Hudson a new new beginning again. Many antique stores and boutiques were opened in the area, old houses bought, old factories bought. By this time, most of the hard industry in the area had slowed down or left. So Hudson redefined itself again—it has become quite the cultural hub with *Art Basilica* in town, *Mass MoCA* nearby, James Beard chef projects aplenty, and so many **antique shops** you would think the people there had evolved to only eat, drink and shit antiques.

3FortySeven (one of the shops in town, its specialties being GIANT stuff and GIANT rugs) shares a building with Backbar (James Beard et. al.). Backbar has a Malaysian thing going on, fare-wise. It has an aggressively noticeable atmosphere, like that of vaguely eastern laundromat, but for kings. (Lots of loose fabric, the good stuff).

It's pleasant, though, and the food is satisfyingly tasty, with the kind of flavors and textures that make your shoulders hunch up and your neck go limp and your cheeks pull back and the deep of your throat go, "Mmmmm," quietly in victory. I ordered the Laab—slow-pulled pork with some spicy lime flavors that sit at the tip top of your tongue, almost out of reach—presented in the context of a DIY lettuce-wrap situation (which I initially ruled out because work yuck). I also got a cocktail, whatever the guy next to me was having (a slushy punch version of The Missionary's Downfall).

The guy next to me, Michael Davis, was the designer of the place (and of Fish & Game, a five-dollar-sign-on-yelp restaurant in town—both are, of course, *in cahoots*.) On the other side of me sat a man Michael knew. I sat on the corner of the bar and they both talked across the hypotenuse of my dinner. It was only awkward (and only slightly) because we had all briefly acknowledged each other way back at the beginning of the whole affair. The non-architect guy, Scott, asked me if my bracelet was made by his ex-fiance (and then went on about his ex-fiance for a bit) and then Michael arrived. After this brief nothing, we were all obliged to figure out if we were going to continue acknowledging each other's existences. No one could really land on a decision so I spent most of my meal eavesdropping and trying really hard not to look it. We chatted again, though, before I left. Michael and Scott were both calm and kind and interesting and rich-looking in their own special rich-person way, great hair etc. Very chill. The architect recommended I come back in town for *Spiegel tent*, a bizarre (possibly bourgeois) annual circus-like dance/music festival.

Those are the kind of things people do in Hudson these days. And then there are the farmers.

By the grace of a Taurus New Moon, I encountered kindred spirits hovering all kindred-y and spirit-like at Hawthorne Valley Family Farm just north of Hudson where the roads are unmarked and the ticks unappeasable. I spent some days there, first at the beginning of spring and then again at the beginning of summer. It felt to me like two different seasons but a *season* is technically (farm-wise) one full year of all the weathers.

The Hawthorne Valley Farm is one of those farms that has a little booth at the farmer's market in the city and everything is wonderfully expensive and quaint—small vegetables that seem at once to be excessively well-nurtured and premature. Everything is a little small and a little frail on purpose, because that's what organic means. The farm is beyond picturesque: a white house sits in front of a red barn that sits in front of a tsunami of blooming hills. The valley is narrow and a road runs through its belly. Just across the road from the farmhouse are other houses, each rivaling the next in quaintness and delicateness and beauty. A few feet up the road is the little Waldorf school that teaches the children of the valley God knows what (addition? cursive?) as there are no computers.

Hawthorne Valley Family Farm is a biodynamic farm, meaning, not only is it completely organic in every conceivable way, but, like every good educational system, there's also a little bit of magic involved. Biodynamic farming is a practice of Anthroposophy, a school of thought pioneered by Rudolph Steiner in the 1920s based on a view of nature as a living, self-sustaining organism. The practice considers a farm to be an ecosystem, a self-sustaining entity, and its practitioners use material, biological and spiritual rituals (called 'preparations') to stimulate a farm's inherent fertility. A farm lives and breathes on its own, and in this way has a spiritual integrity: it has a soul.

The whole thing is steeped in Jesus, but there is something undeniably transcendental about the practice. Around the turn of the century, religious dogmas were still somewhat dominant over scientific dogmas, but there weren't yet many alternative spiritual options that considered the observable, physical world. It was also around this time that farms were becoming industrial supermachines, using tons of chemicals and overworking the land. Steiner was the first to call for wholly organic farming practices. He gave a series of lectures in Germany—first published in English as *The Agriculture Course*—that described both specific organic techniques and preparations along with a social and spiritual model founded on organic and community supported agriculture practices. It was a movement about food and about life.

Biodynamic farming is, in the discriminating eyes of science, a pseudoscience. But to think of the practice as a science misses the point. One of the official biodynamic 'preparations' involves fermenting manure in cow horns (usually cows from your own herd that have recently died), which are buried in the fall and dug up in the spring. After the horns are dug up, the manure is extracted, diluted and used as fertilizer. Sacred herbs, like yarrow and chamomile, are added to preparations and herbal remedies as well. A biodynamic farm should have a large enough herd to produce its own fertilizer for all or most of its crops and the farm should have enough acreage for its animals to graze and feed naturally: the point being to allow the farm to sustain itself—its life force—through its own natural fertility. And the preparations are, in a way, offerings from and to the life force. They are about having a connection with the earth beyond labor. The spiritual aspect of biodynamic farming is really just an expression of man's insatiable desire for depth, that endless labor of jamming all the subtle influences of the cosmos into every inch of earth.

The people who work the farm don't necessarily consider themselves believers, twenty-year-olds in general are not that spiritual. A twenty-year-old is far too entrenched in his relationship with himself to have room for one with the universe. And the smart ones doubt the inherent goodness of nature. Yes, sure, organic is better than chemically processed, but is nature 'good' 'for' you? Just because something grew from the ground without any categorically

scientific ‘help’, should you rub it on your face in the name of Goodness? Is something that was grown biodynamically *beyond nature* in some way? Can you really make your skin cells woke??? Maybe not. But to deny the spiritual nature of wellness in the name of science is to bastardize our temporal experience of the physical world.

Me and Paul and Lily talked about this for a while around a fire one night. Paul and Lily are both farmers at Hawthorne Valley Family Farm. About 5 or 6 people are working the farm on a daily basis, planting and harvesting for market and for the Farm Store. I came to know both Paul, who was on his third season at the farm, and Lily, who was on her second.

Paul is handsome. He sometimes wears glasses that are too big for his face and that his face does not really need (though after a while they do seem to suit him). His tall figure does not compromise his quiet presence. In fact his tallness is sort of like his glasses: excessive but not ultimately unbecoming. A 27-year-old farmer-by-choice is categorically a gentle soul. He asks you good questions, the same way Emily (his sister and my good friend) does. The Brandensteins are very good at asking questions. Emily, a ruthlessly clever storyteller, has mastered a science, and Paul, a little bird that is too big to be a little bird, has mastered an art.

Lily, the other farmer with whom Paul lives in the farmhouse, is no less handsome. There is a robustness to her rich spirit and energy, like a ripe peach. When I first met Lily, Paul was giving Emily and me a tour of the farm. We were wandering around the barn, taking hundreds (thousands!) of pictures of cows. Paul was lecturing to no one in particular and Lily sprinted by, barefoot, cackling, and yelled, “Stop lying, Paul!!!!!!!!!!!!”

Paul works the land but Lily works the animals. She rises every morning around 4AM, six days a week. Working until around 7PM, she moves the cows either in or out of pasture, she milks the cows, she knows the cows. She knows when they lose weight, when they gain weight, when something is wrong, when they have a baby, when they are going to have a baby. She communicates with them. She says, though, that she knows they do not love her. She says she has learned a lot about love from these cows. A relationship with an animal is not necessarily socially fulfilling, but it is fulfilling. It’s something different than human love, which is complicated and full of words and signs and symbols. A relationship with an animal is about responsibility—an intimate responsibility connected deeply with the work of sustaining and nurturing life.

Lily grew up in Brooklyn and went out to San Francisco where she worked at a cheese and wine shop and then at a restaurant consulting firm. She got tired of helping pancake chain restaurants make too much money so she came to Hudson. Her work on the farm is gratuitously demanding—biodynamic organic practices are arduous at best—but her work is immediately, in a physical way, fulfilling.

Weekend workdays at the farm are usually low key. I woke up around 6AM and got to the farmhouse around 7, where Paul and I had coffee in his kitchen. On the walls were lunar calendars and dried leaves, on the counters were books: a cookbook that challenges political correctness, a thick Steinbeck missing its cover. We walked outside where Paul smoked a cigarette and stared at the big hill out past the greenhouses, as he does every morning.

For the first hour, we bagged pea shoots for CSA members. CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) is a membership-based patronage system, designed by Steiner, where a person can pay a subscription fee upfront to a local farm and receive weekly harvests. CSA supports local farms the same way being a museum member supports a museum, the idea being that the whole community benefits from the relationship: the farm—fiscally; the community members—food-wise; and the locality as a whole ideally becomes closer, allowing the community itself to model a self-sustaining ecosystem.

The rest of the morning we spent seeding. Of the approximate one thousand cabbage seeds I planted, I probably only fucked up about one hundred. Paul and I sat across from each other dropping tiny seeds into tiny planters one by one by one with our tiny fingers, using tweezers to pick up any seeds we drop into the wrong square. Two other farmers shuffled in and out of the greenhouse as we planted. When you only have to do it for one day (and not even a whole day), the whole thing was somewhat therapeutic.

Saturday nights do not go unobserved. During the first evening I was at the farm, we prepared to go out. Lily came running into the farmhouse, screaming, took a shower, and then came running down again, screaming. The screaming was pleasant, like a loud baby's laugh. She came down with wet hair and linen overalls, all virgin-prairie-farmer-chic-looking. Her hair dried and she became all the more radiant. But when her hair was wet it was a deep dark brown and her milky skin came out at all openings from the overalls.

We put our name in for a table at the local spot, Lil' Deb's Oasis. The project (all restaurants in Hudson are called projects) is a converted space that opened just over a year ago. The original restaurant, a locally beloved greasy spoon, was owned by a woman named Deb. With Big Deb's blessing and input, the space became a hip evening eaterie whose ambiguously gendered staff serves not-so-ambiguously South-American-inspired dishes ("tropical comfort food"). At first look, the decor is sort of throwback-y. But, when you finally get seated and are looking out over the vinyl floral table cloth from inside the very depths of the best seat in the house, the aesthetic proves itself to be deeply contemporaneous. This is just what the world looks like now. It looks like sea foam blue and neon pink. It combines 'neon' and 'tropical' and hand drawn sans serif in new and arguably authentic ways. The tropical flowers are plastic, the tiki fringe is paper, the soft low light is actually soft low neon, and the clientele are beautiful twenty-something gender non-giving-a-fuck farmers. And even though it all looks, at first, like some kind of ironic nod to something Other, it's really all just us nodding in affirmation to the accomplishments of our own taste.

I sat by Lily. When I talked she was quiet and she listened. I was flattered by her quietness, I felt interesting. She told me about her life and her work and how exhausting it is. She misses people (human people and not cows) and having a life outside of labor. She says that before she had momentum and now she doesn't. *What is momentum?* I wondered.

The waitress gave a Homer-esque epic re: the specials. I was so moved by her assiduousness that I insisted on ordering exactly whatever it is that she recommended. She, of course, recommended the most expensive thing on the menu. I backed down on my insistence and order the second thing she might recommend: the sweet plantains and the llapingacho. I did not regret it.

After dinner we went to the local meat market in town, it was disco night and Lily insisted. This place had *energy*. The air was thick with energy, sexual energy, and an unwelcoming amount. Everyone was looking at everyone, it was like being in Los Angeles, but weirder, if you can even imagine. People didn't just look at you, their look grabbed at you—it wasn't like two pairs of marble eyeballs bumping into each other and bouncing off in embarrassed directions, it was like four rogue eyeballs made of velcro sticking to each other and peeling away with a loud, unmistakably plastic-sounding rip that would not go unnoticed in a movie theatre or a library or a disco.

Everyone was exceptionally healthy-looking. (This seems to be the theme. Fresh air, physical labor, natural food. These people are beautiful prize horses.) Most of them had probably worked today and will not work tomorrow for the first time all week. As we stood there watching a Saturday night unfold, Lily, without breaking the divine

continuity of her glide past us to the bathroom, grabs our arms and says, “Best Night Ever.” At first blush, the whole thing seemed like a pageantry of irony, but it was not. It wasn’t a commiseration, it was an invitation.

We got on the dance floor and started moving around in that self-conscious way where we were looking at each other and mirroring each other, because, in public, only in the way the *other* person is moving *their* body is it acceptable to move your own. Then there were some sudden awkward movements: someone had made an unwelcome advance at Emily. We looked around to see she had disappeared. It was scary in there, there were so many eyes. We failed to find her anywhere in the bar and sent Paul to look around outside.

Lily insisted on dancing though, unphased by the whole thing, the incident, life in general, etc. We got to the dance floor and I started doing that self-conscious moving thing again. (What I was doing was really just like standing, but with extra moving—extra parts in motion that are not usually in motion—and I’m sure that’s exactly how it looked.) Lily was standing still with three fingers on her forehead between her closed eyes, pinky free-floating. She was swaying a little. She peeked open one eye as if she sensed me watching: “I have to get into it,” she explained. And then she closed her eyes again and for a whole song she stood like this, eyes closed and swaying. And then she started dancing like I have never seen anyone dance on a dance floor in my life. It was good magic. I had seen the dance team at my high school and I’ve been to the ballet and I’m a music photojournalist for God’s sake. I’ve seen professional dancing but not really and not this close.

That’s not to say this was professional, though, this was not business. There was no hesitation, there was only the continuous flow of this young dairy farmer’s soul. Whether she was releasing something or taking something in was not exactly clear, but I’m *sure* it was an exact evocation of whatever it was that hung heavy in that room. She moved and she moved and she moved and she didn’t stop moving and it was so beautiful and so good and deeply, cosmically inspiring. It was work without labor. Every now and then she would open her eyes to me watching her with my jaw hanging low and swaying in the wind, and she would smile. I remember her winking when she smiled (the kind of wink you give someone when you’ve been caught and don’t care), but I know she didn’t really.

Lily kept dancing and I went out to find Emily sitting outside with a handsome circle of young vaping farmers. These people all seem to be in a place in their life (much like every single person alive at any given moment) where they don’t know what the fuck they’re doing and have rejected everything the world (the city) has offered. It is not a permanent state but it is definitely salient.

As their raspberry vapor clouds blew downwind into our faces, I tried to tell Emily about the dancing. Our cab (a man driving a rogue minivan) picked us up around 1:30AM (which was 45 minutes after we reached our DONE point). The security guard had a brief but intimate affair with the patio door’s lock, unable to latch (or open?) it. (Or maybe unsure how a door operates in general and was just trying things out. It’s unclear.) Paul asked the cab driver about his life but his question game was not strong this late in the night. He asked the cab driver if he had been playing Wii or something. In response, the cab driver turned on the radio really loud.

We arrived back at the farmhouse and before we all turned in, Lily stood in the kitchen and thanked each of us for an amazing night. The next morning she will wake up at 4AM and move 40 cows from a barn to a pasture and back. And then do the same thing every other day after that, with a Disco Night thrown in when needed.