

# *The Farm*

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**I**t's been three years since they opened "the farms". The Department of Mental Wellbeing thought this was a great idea for people who are neurodivergent. At least, that's how they started. It was voluntary at first, then they outlawed antidepressants and ADHD medication. The only options if you were caught with either types of medication was to go to jail or to the camps. Ronald Scobee, the head of DMW, was a long-time podcaster, and the only science courses he ever took were in high school, which he struggled to pass even basic biology. Yet, he was a huge donor to the president, so he got a cushy spot on the staff. In year two, they started sending transgender and non-binary people to the camps, believing that all they needed was some discipline in their lives, which they thought would clear their confusion about their gender. Now, it's illegal to criticize the president or his cronies. If you're found guilty, you're considered diagnosed with "derangement syndrome," and your sentence is straight to the camps.

Once you are sent to the camps, you are placed in a conservatorship. You have no control over your possessions, which were usually sold at auction, you have to forfeit all your money, and you lose all rights and

privileges afforded to everyday citizens. The people who ran the farm you were assigned to became legal guardians, their job was to see that your basic needs were met, and you were to work the fields on their schedules. Your accommodations were barracks, usually in a barn. A small percentage of the food you grew would be allotted to feed you, motivation to have strong harvests. As for your humble narrator, I was a journalist, investigating corruption of the administration. So, once I was caught, what better way to silence me than to put me in the beige suit, and ship me off to the camps?

Once you're found guilty, you're put in a cell to await transport, five o'clock sharp. The bus ride was around two hours through mostly dull surroundings. If it wasn't for the engine, there were times I thought the bus was just stopped in the middle of nowhere. And then, you arrive at this beautiful farm. Trees lined the drive, corn on one side, wheat on the other, as far as the eye could see. There was a special garage where we were unloaded and made to change. We were given a beige suit, the first letter of our "crimes" were over the chest area. For example, mine had a "D" for "derangement." Then, we were told to report to a barracks for our assignments.

On the surface, the people in charge were actually pretty nice people, at least better than you would assume for a labour camp. We were all separated by crime committed. I didn't understand the reasoning, since none of us were violent offenders. The meals were well prepared, and the barracks were always neat and clean. Yes, we did have to make our beds every morning, but it was already things I

was used to. You would always wake up two hours before your "chores" began. This would provide you with enough time to eat breakfast and stretch before beginning your workday.

Every few weeks, our chores would change. I started out making sure that the cows and pigs would have enough to eat. They would teach you how to drive the equipment, usually it was a couple of hours for the more simplistic machines, like front loaders. However, tractors would require a few days to a week to learn, and to prevent you from getting any ideas, you would be monitored at all times. All the vehicles were equipped with the latest GPS. The best thing about being in the tractors wasn't the break from the sweltering heat, but you could listen to music while you were in the cab. However, the managers had to approve the music.

At the end of every day, you were expected to shower before eating dinner. You were allowed an hour or two for recreation after dinner. However, your activities were limited. The only books you could read were some right-wing bullshit from radio hosts who wrote books or the Bible, television was restricted to Vulpes News or Christian programming, of course you could play some card games or play board games, but all your conversations were monitored by some member of the staff. Walks were still permitted, but you were restricted where you could and could not go. There was a trail deep in the woods, but it was constantly monitored by either staff or the local Sherriff's office. Sundays were mandated church days, and

yes, some of us were forced to be staff for things like the potluck, or bingo. The owners of the farm truly believed that all we were missing was "the word of God," and we would "grow up."

I wasn't well liked by some of the staff, they knew why we were there. I was scum to the core, in some of their eyes, I could never do anything right, and I would get the occasional beratement and ridicule about how I was a reporter. "I'm shocked they didn't hang you, boy," one of the guards quipped, "you're nothing but unamerican shit, boy. How much did them commies give you to write that trash?" I knew better than to talk back, after all, they were the ones with the guns. While I had it bad, the transgender people had it worse. They were berated and beaten, but the worst of it came at night. Our barracks were right beside the queer one, we knew what was about to happen when we heard "hey faggots, gather 'round. We're going to make men out of you yet." Then, the assaults would begin. You could tell who got it worse the night before just by body language. No words were ever spoken.

I made a few friends, as much as you could in these camps. One of them was a wonderful non-binary person named James, but most of the prisoners called them "Hayden." The days at the camps were full of routine, but there would be nights that I couldn't sleep. I had to use the bathroom one night, and I heard faint screaming in coming from the queer barracks. I assumed it was just another assault from a guard, so I paid a little attention to it. The morning came, and I could sense the fear on a few people's faces. I asked

about Hayden and was told that they were paroled last night. This seemed a little weird to me, usually the process would happen during the day, but I was just told to just keep the questions to myself.

Another thing I found strange was the smell of the fertilizer. It doesn't smell like normal, something is off about it, it has a rather putrid stench. A familiar stench, something that I just couldn't bring up in my mind. The only time I smelled it was when I was working the crime beat. My mind kept asking if it was human flesh, but I just couldn't fathom the fact, no matter how sadistic this place could be, that they would use human beings in the fertilizer. I tried not to think about it, keep my head down, and concentrate on my work. I could never shake the question, but I just had to keep going. The punishment would have been served if I asked.

I've seen a few people drug the hole before, but never quite figured out what went on. As for asking someone, well, you never saw them again. All I know is that you just kept your head down, and work. Even if your mind breaks, you just pretend that you were fine and kept going. In orientation, I remember something about a three-strike system, but honestly, I was so out of it, I didn't pay much attention. I just kept my head down and kept working. I knew a few people that had been confined a solitary room, they would come back completely changed. Like they lost a part of themselves in the room. I've seen that before, when I was in Iraq. It's a classic sign of depravation, and enough to keep my silence for a while.

It's been almost a year here, and I have to admit, I am getting less afraid around here. I don't know if my sanity is breaking, or if there is something wrong with me, but I just feel those reporter instincts coming back to me. The more people that I would see on a daily basis disappear, the more I felt like I needed to understand and find these people. I finally decided to test the three-strike system. I decided to steal a roll during dinner and got caught. They waited until the middle of the night and took me out of the bed. I was still doubled over in pain and could barely see who was talking to me: "You were caught stealing, you know we have a three-strike system, as I feel punishment should be corrective. You will spend a month in the darkness. We'll see if you change your ways."

I was taken to an interior room, no windows, the only door was guarded. The only light came from a bulb attached to a wire, the bed was on the left side of the room, a toilet and shower on the right. The door was steel but had a slot where your meals were put through, mostly oatmeal. There is no one to talk to, the only sound you can really hear is the buzzing of the light. For the first few days, it wasn't too horrible, but then I slowly lost all sense of time. Since I wasn't allowed to wear a watch, I couldn't tell day from night, so sleeping became a problem. I remembered a story I did on a blind person; think it was called non-twenty-four. It's a condition where the circadian rhythms get interrupted, and sleep becomes near impossible. From what I remember, it puts a ton of stress on your body. That made it much easier for the hallucinations to start.

What little sleep I could muster would be interrupted by the hallucinations. I would see things in my room, for example, one time I saw fifty spiders jumping around, waiting for me to get out of bed. They looked hungry, ready to eat me. Another night, there would be several people talking in the corner of the room, they would look back at me then back in a conference, all I could hear was something about tenderizing me a little more. The last one began to trigger my paranoia. Hell, started questioning myself. Was I really doing the right thing here? My release date, I could feel something changed in me. The sunlight hurt my eyes, and it took a long while to adjust. Mrs. Breckenridge stood above me. "Do you have something to say to me?" She glared right through my soul; I quickly apologized and was reassigned to my bunk.

The next day, I was completely exhausted, but I was still expected to finish my chores on time. It was a battle, but I did manage to get my work done. The rest of the evening was spent with me trying to get a grip on reality again. Although, there was a part of me that felt so light, so relieved, it felt like I had a huge catharsis. Yet, the more I regained my bearings, the more determined I was to figure this place out. A few more months would pass before I would work on getting strike two.

I had to make this one count. It was rare to see someone come from strike two, so if this one was going to cost me my life, it had to be good. I would sneak around the best I could, gathering information on what exactly happens to

people around here. I would take little peaks when I had the chance, or if two guards were talking around me, I would pretend like I'm working, just to hear the conversation. I just had to know what being paroled entailed, but honestly, I would come to regret that.

The process, at least from what I heard, has a few steps. First, you have to be on strike two, I found out rarely does anyone even get sent to the hole because barely anyone makes it to strike three. Second, once you are on the list, you are picked at random. From what I gathered, this was to prevent any of the guards from making a knee-jerk reaction that would potentially expose them. Third, they get you in the middle of the night and take you to the woods. You are tied to two poles, so you're stretched out, almost like a star. Then, they begin to skin you while you're alive, carefully removing the human leather. Your skin is put aside, and your blood collected, presumably to be given to what's left of the health department, if they can use it, they store it for blood transfusions. The meat is then carved off the bones, with the tendons discarded. One of two things happen to your meat: the fertilizer or the pigs. The organs are placed into a box and shipped to the closest hospital. Finally, the bones are ground and mixed with the remaining flesh to be put in the fertilizer. Nothing was left to waste, at least in the camp.

I wanted to witness this for myself. Not for any sadistic purposes, but just I needed to see it to believe it. I would find reasons and ways to sneak into the woods, just to catch what was happening. I usually was careful about not



being caught. I was, after all, an award-winning journalist, and former veteran. I usually knew the ways of keeping myself safe. One night, I decided that it was time to "go big or go home." I really don't know what got into me, I had never been this reckless ever. Maybe there was some part of my ego that wanted me to become a hero. The ever-shrinking rational part of my brain kept asking myself even if I got the information I was looking for, then figured a way out, who would believe me? What would stop a publisher from just calling up either the camp or law enforcement. We know they're in it together, either way, I'm going to be screwed. I kept defending myself from my own brain by saying that it's my duty as a reporter to get the truth and speak truth to power, by any means necessary, even if it costs me my own life.

The people have a right to know.

I started to manoeuvre my way to the farmhouse, figuring out which paths the guards would check the least, and which entrances to the house would be the easiest. Lucky for me, I was on the detail that was repairing the storm cellar, so it didn't look too suspicious when I entered. I figured that if was caught, I would use the excuse of accidentally forgetting to leave a tool behind, so I had my hammer on me during my trip to the cellar. No one stopped me, hell, I don't think anyone even noticed that was headed in that direction. Even still, I kept telling myself that vigilance is the key, and that I have to keep sharp in case I'm caught.

I knew a few of the places from the cellar that would make it easy to get into the house. There were a few open

areas in the wall that was covered by chicken wire, to tell us what was next. I used the hammer to remove the nails over the chicken wire and made my way into a small space in the house. Since it was late, it was easier to sneak around in the house. I made it to the office. Which, again, I didn't realize wouldn't be guarded so lightly. I guess they thought if you can't get in the house, what would be the point in guarding the office. I shouldn't speculate on what others are thinking. I had to sort through a ton of paperwork. Also, where were the cameras? The rational part of my brain kept asking myself that, right as I began to go to the computer.

I did manage to access the computer; it was a lot easier than I thought. Now, to check the statements. The best thing about these camps or farms or whatever you want to call them being run by old people is they write their passwords down. All it took was to find the right sticky note, and I knew exactly how to access their bank accounts and figure out what really goes on around here. I noticed that the local blood bank gave them ten thousand dollars, and the CEO of a major hospital gave them around fifty thousand. What got me was how much the government would give them in subsidies. They get a three-million-dollar grant per month just for being a "wellness farm," twenty thousand per prisoner at the camp, and because they donate the organs, they get another grant. I was amazed at just how much these people got just for running these camps. I do know how expensive a farm is to run, but even under these conditions, they have to be just making money hand over fist.

That was confirmed when I saw the big donations to the local church. The church was a front to get money to recruit more Christian Nationalists to run for office. I remembered that from a story I wrote a few years ago, I also remembered my editor telling me how paranoid I was and that he wouldn't publish it because they "only reported the truth." Ha! Up yours, Larry. I finally got my proof. Who's paranoid now?

Part of me really started to believe that I could find anything on this computer, and maybe even a way out. Not much longer after that, reality started to set in. I was right, I was being set up. They knew that one day my reporter instincts would kick in, and I would attempt to expose them, even though, with society how it is today, I don't think it would have done much good anyways. As I heard the footsteps approach, I went for the little hole to get back down in the storm cellar. That's where they were waiting for me. I became the liability they wanted me to be, and now I'm all wrapped up and served on a silver platter.

The guards would take turns beating me, and if I made one hint of a move to defend myself, tasers would be administered. The beating only took five minutes, but it felt like five years. I was thrown back into the same cell as my first strike. I guess the guards wanted me to heal a little from my wounds, I was left alone for what felt like a month, but from what I was told, it was only three days. Strike two would be pretty sadistic. Every morning, I was stripped, had water that was nearly ice thrown on my body, and would be caned for thirty minutes. Then, I was tied to

a bed covered in salt, so, as they put it I "won't forget the wages of sin." The pain was mind-numbing, but after a week, I kept putting myself in a trance that would keep the pain to a minimum.

Two months passed before I was let out. It was tough to sit, tough to do anything. However, I felt the wrath of strike two. This time, something snapped inside me. I was going to get this manuscript out one way or another. This story had to be told. I also knew that being on strike two meant that at any time, I could be "paroled." It kept me up some nights. I would just hope that someone, anyone would see these notes if something were to happen to me. However, I am prepared, I am ready to meet my fate. If I die tomorrow, I am completely at peace.

That's the torture, isn't it? Not knowing when your name is next on the list. I think I hear someone coming.