

The Alien Corn (1973)

It turned out to be nothing like that. I was invited to Worthington by a very interesting man named Paul Gruchow. Paul had actually hired me for my first reporting job at the University five years earlier -- which he didn't remember, because I lasted all of three days. Since then he had become a Congressional aide, a farmer (a very bad one -- he once plowed under an entire field of planted corn in an effort to weed it), and now, a newspaper publisher. He was also a well-known regional writer about the prairie and other rural issues. He saw an article of mine that he liked, about the sinking of the ore-ship Edmund Fitzgerald in a storm on Lake Superior, and offered me the news editorship on an impulse.

Alas, Paul didn't do his homework. Worthington already had one homespun author-journalist, himself, and neither it nor he required a bumptious younger applicant for that position. So when I showed up for work, the two of us were chagrined at our inability, despite good intentions, to work together. Basically, the problem was that I was too young and too eccentric. I was good -- the Daily Globe, always a good newspaper for photos and stories, also became a well-designed newspaper under my regime.

But my judgment was impaired by too many years of surrealism. My first week, a wire story came in about a family in Parma, Ohio, near where I grew up. The kids in the family paid a neighborhood bully \$50 to kill their father, because he wouldn't let them watch TV after 7 PM. The bully proceeded to kill the father. I knew this town, and I felt I knew this situation far from the prairie. And I thought that entitled me to lead the page one story with the following snide headline:

Don't Like Your Dad?

Do What These Kids Did

So it was that during my first week on the job, the adult readers of Nobles county, afraid that their children would pitchfork them to death in their sleep, clamored for my removal. Things got better after that, but a cloud of suspicion hung over me. It was as if a

surrealist poet was running the daily operations of a small town newspaper. It put Paul in a dicey position, and the comity that existed between us dwindled.

But I loved the town, and I loved the stories that Paul and other people told me -- stories of courage and pain and devotion. One involved a very well-known stringer on the paper, who wrote a biweekly "what's happening" column. Let's call her Marge. Marge told this story to Paul, and he told it to me.

It seems Marge was put up for adoption as a baby girl by her mother. But this mother, instead of disappearing, hung around. She found out who adopted the little girl and moved in next door, and proceeded to become best friends with the adoptive mother, and "neighborhood mom" to her own daughter. As Marge grew to adulthood, she was very close to her mother next door. When her adoptive mother died, her real mother became even closer. When Marge was in her thirties, she stumbled upon information in her birth records that revealed that her good friend was her real mother. But it was too late -- much, much too late -- for the two Lutherans to acknowledge they had been living a loving lie all these years. So they maintained the fiction for another twenty years, even after the mother's health failed, and Marge took her in and nursed her through her final illness. It's a beautiful story of commitment and cowardice. I hesitate to tell it here, even in disguised form, for fear of causing inadvertent pain. But it's too good not to.

Another story involved the gargantuan 6'10" prairie novelist Fred Manfred of nearby Luverne. Fred was a wonderful character who couldn't quite write a genteel English sentence to save his life, but wrote forty novels about the locale he called "Siouxland" anyway. His book *Lord Grizzly* won a National Book Award, so he had qualities of scope and message that belied his prose style.

His books never sold in any number, but he lived a glorious life, building a frontier writer's home overlooking the Blue Mounds of Luverne, with a captain's tower of the lichened bluffs to write from. And his generosity was boundless -- in his 60s he deeded the property to the local parks system, with a understood

gentleman's agreement that he could reside in the place so long as he lived.

But the parks system betrayed him, and seized the property for park purposes while he was still alive and kicking. He protested, he sued, he bellowed for justice -- and was denied. So Fred Manfred packed up all his belongings and moved to the opposite lip of the river gorge and built a second house with his own hands. And this time he built it facing away from the parklands. And his many boxes of books, he buried in Hefty bags deep in his back yard, as a sign of his betrayal.

I uncovered a few stories of my own. A local pastor told me over lunch that a problem in his parish was the phenomenon of "prairie patriarchs" -- incestuous households on the grasslands, isolated farmers who see their daughters as akin to his cattle, subject to their stewardship.

A story this juicy could not be left alone, so I proceeded to write a three-parter, heavier on suggestion than on specifics, describing the challenges pastors and counselors had dealing with this Neanderthal issue. It was a topic that no one wanted to see on the front page of their newspaper, it being an extremely Christian community. Again, I looked outside my office window to see mobs lifting flickering torches. This was the last straw for Paul, who suggested that I stick to editing, and leave reporting to the staff.

Despite my surrealism, I adapted quite well to rural life. Rachel and I rented an acreage from a wonderful farm couple, two miles outside the nearby town of Kinbrae (pop. 15). Every day I would rise at 5:30 and drive the 16 miles to the newspaper to start assembling the day's paper, column inch by column inch.

During our two years in Kinbrae, I had the opportunity to show that I too had prairie grit. Rising at 5:30 meant I was up well before the snowplows. And it was imperative that I be on hand each day -- our staff was too small for someone else to fill in for me on an emergency basis. So I became adept at getting to work in all kinds of weather. I drove to work once with a slim, sinuous

tornado dancing in a beanfield beside me, perhaps 400 yards away.

In the winter, it snowed, and worse, the prairie winds never ceased blowing the snow in new shapes and depths. One morning I awoke to a snowfall of, on average, six inches of depth, but occasionally, up to 14 inches of drifted depth. I fired up my 1969 Chevy Nova, automatic transmission, and began the 14 mile trip down dirt roads to the paper. The trip took me just under two hours, because the car kept breasting the snow and grinding to a halt. In the city this would be the end of the matter. But I needed to get to the office -- my readers, for perhaps the only time in my life, needed me.

So I devised a technique for getting the car through these drifts. Every time I stopped, I would take the jack from the trunk, and lift the front end of the car about four inches over the snow. This put all the weight of the car on the rear wheels, where the torquing action was. Then, with the car still raised, I would drive forward onto the jack. It was like releasing a spring -- the rod of the jack would go *sproing!* and fly off into the snow somewhere. My job was to simultaneously move the car forward through the drift, and watch to see where the jack parts flew, so I would still have them for the next drift.

I stopped about a dozen times between home and the first plowed road, about nine miles away. On the very last push, the jack rod flew about eighty feet into a ditch and disappeared. I found it the following spring, standing upright amid a stand of cattails. More importantly, I arrived at the newspaper before 8 AM, red -faced and drenched in perspiration, and ready to kick ass.

Needless to say, rural life prompted many book ideas. I immediately began compiling a book of poems called *Borrowing from Minneapolis (to Pay Saint Paul)*. This was breakthrough writing for me, because none of the poem in the book were about me, and nothing was weird or dreamy or surrealistic. In fact, I was doing the writing Paul Gruchow forbade me from putting in the paper -- and some of it was awfully good. I dug up an oral history about a mean man from Hector, in the 1910s, who tied

dynamite to his dog's tail, and slapped her to drive her away, but instead she came back to the house and dove under the bed, and blew everything and everyone up.

Another was a portrait of my yoga teacher Dr. Arya, and what I imagined the arc of his life must be, to be raised a proper Brahmin in India, and to emigrate to the US, where his only marketable talent was to teach meditation, and how he succeeded, and bought a big brick house in Minneapolis' northeast neighborhood, and an Irish setter dog, took up scuba diving.

I wrote about how my artist friend Ray visited from Boston, and I showed him the lay of the land, leading him to a special scene only I knew about -- an abandoned barn, in the back stall of which a cat was mummified in the classic arched-back, defensive posture. Every muscle of the cat's body had shrunk and clung to the skeleton beneath. It was a harrowing, horrifying, and yet strangely beautiful artifact, and Ray loved it. Years later, he would invite me to an exhibition of his sculpture and charcoal drawings in Manhattan, and the last item in the exhibit, hanging from fishing line in thin air, was the mummified cat. He had snuck back later that night, on the farm, and absconded with the found object.

I even wrote a poem about the grassfires that used to rage across the prairie, roasting cattle where they stood in the fields -- from the perspective of the cattle, and their dread of high winds. A friend found this gruesome story hilarious, because the poem uses "thought-balloons" to convey the animal's internal

Everything was a story for me, and I was the poet-reporter. It was one of the most thrilling periods in my writing life. And it was the beginning of the steep decline in my publishability. Maybe it was the fact that the offset revolution, in which printing was cheap, was coming to an end (printing remained cheap, but paper prices rose). But I think it was the fact that my writing was now adult, was now about something -- and editors found that less appealing than my anything-goes earlier work. *Borrowing from Minneapolis* was the first book poems in the 1970s that I could not find a publisher for -- and of course, it was the best.

I also spent months mapping out a colossal novel, a satirical *Brothers Karamazov* about the rarest of crimes, a small town murder. It ported to the prairie the true story of a Coast to Coast hardware store owner in the river town of Winona named Donald Howard who fell in love with his cashier, a high school cheerleader, and accordingly decided to kill his wife. He hired his best friend Bruce to do the deed, on the sole condition that he make it look like an accident. Bruce, not being too bright, shot her instead. For two months, the hardware store owner worked assiduously with police to find the murderer -- the whole town was on his side, as he wept for the TV cameras that came down from the Twin Cities.

Then, as clues increasingly point back to him, he bolted, taking the cheerleader with him. He disguised himself as a riverboat gambler for several weeks -- this was in 1975, not 1875. Finally he was apprehended in New Orleans and put in jail, but escaped, for about a day, when the cheerleader smuggled a file into his cell embedded in a cake!

Eventually, the murderer was tried and sentenced to many years in Stillwater Penitentiary. It was determined, during the trial, that his motive for the murder was not lust for the cheerleader -- but anxiety over his wife's demand that he expand his business and open up a second store.

What made the story so great for me was not just the cartoonish actions of the main characters, but the reactions of the people of Winona. I remember a letter to the *Minneapolis Tribune* from a Winonan, saying, in effect: "You city people experience murders routinely, so it has lost its power to affect you emotionally. But here in Winona, this is very new and very disturbing."

I may be getting some of the details a bit wrong here, because I immediately fictionalized the story to fit into a prairie, not a river setting, and doing so meant changing details in my own mind. But the essence of it is 100% true, and I truly believed it could be as big a dark comedy as, oh, *Even Cowgirls get the Blues*. I would cram all my Worthington stories into it, too: the mother-daughter story, the Fred Manfred story, even the prairie

patriarch story. I would tear the sod roof off that whole sick rural lifestyle.

But I found I couldn't write it. Donald Howard had two school-aged daughters at the time, and I learned that the foolish crime of their father took away their mother, whom they loved, and their father, who was their sole surviving parent. His story was not, as I imagined, really a comedy, but rather a funny tragedy. So I let the idea slip away. The villagers with torches, who I knew would gather if I ever made another joke at their expense, talked me out of it.

Shortly after I arrived the paper hired a reporter named Russ Vogel, who was raised a few miles away. He returned with his new bride Mary, a spirited girl -- I would call her a wise guy if there were a feminine equivalent for that, because she had a mouth and a wit and she wasn't shy about using either -- from somewhere in the regular Midwest. They were both younger than Rachel and me, and very bright and decent, and we took them under our collective wing, like younger siblings. Russ reported on area news, and Mary tended bar at the local Holiday Inn.

A few months after their arrival, Mary learned from a medical exam that a mole on the small of her back might be cancerous. The doctor excised it, biopsied it, and gave her a clean bill of health. But a subsequent blood check indicated that the mole had metastasized. Mary was told she had no effective defense against a notoriously fast-spreading malignancy.

In small towns, everyone knows what is happening to everyone, and there is always family or neighbors to help people in trouble pull through. But Russ and Mary had no local resources except the newspaper, and newspaper people are famous for being standoffish. I would like to say that Rachel and I stayed with Russ and Mary to the bitter end, but in fact we were inconsistent, losing track of them for weeks at a time.

Now, driving the endless township miles to and from town, my car radio would seek out religious stations, and I would listen in amazement as crazed radio preachers, from stations below the

Mason Dixon line, aided in their transmission by the flukish miracle of solar flares, called out Satan and exorcised sin. I asked our landlords, Bob and Lucille, if I could accompany them on Sundays to their Presbyterian Church. I attended, and communed, and sang, and ate cake afterward.

One time Rachel and I ran into Mary tending bar, and the light that used to pour from her eyes had all poured out, and all I saw was worry and despair. I sat with her for an hour as she narrated her stations of the cross, how one doctor said one thing, and another said another, and her hopes rose and fell, and shot back up, and then crash-dived. I hadn't felt so helpless since my sister was hauled out of her bedroom on a stretcher, in 1961.

A few short weeks later Mary lay dying in the local hospital. Rachel attended her during the last week, when Mary was so sick she vomited tumor. It wasn't *Love Story*; it was a gruesome, wrenching, awful death for such a powerful, beautiful young woman.

At the funeral, attended mainly by the news staff -- Mary's mother, from whom she was estranged, never came to Worthington, either before or after her death -- the minister asked if anyone wished to testify. No one moved, and rather than have the moment slip away, I stood in front of the people who worked with me, and began blubbering about Mary.

I asked what we could possibly know about a God that permitted such a thing. I knew that life was perilous, and our chances of being spared are slim. I talked about my sister, and how I missed her, and how sharp Mary was, and how badly I felt for her and for Russ. And while I was blubbering it occurred to me I was feeling something else as well -- a kind of ecstatic gratitude for even the horror of this death, because the horror told us the truth that the rest of our lives hid from us, that we are all on a hellbound train to death and dismemberment -- but our minds shield us from this simple truth of being alive. Tears were rolling down my face as I turned to Russ and blubbered a paradoxical thank you.

No wonder the guys in the newsroom, the beat reporters, showed

me so little respect. I was too weak for the business I was in. I was an emotional tourist. And I shudder to think what good my demonstration did Russ, who came around to our house the day after the funeral, handed over to us his album of pictures from his wedding, for us to hold onto -- they were his only pictures of Mary -- and then he vanished.

We ran into Russ again ten years later. He spent eight years brooding, and then began to ease back into life. He remarried a woman named Cindy, and they were caretakers of a apartment building in suburban Saint Paul. One night, I drove to the complex, and slipped the pictures of Mary under their door.

But back in Worthington, our Wobegon experiment was coming to an end.

And when Rachel got word, in our twenty second month on the prairie, that she was accepted for graduate study at Yale, I thought, one door closes, and another opens. And I was glad I didn't get trapped, like the other reporters, in that tiny city.