SULLIVAN'S CORNER
THE LAST YEARS OF THE FARM

POST # EIGHT
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PART TWO — WHAT BECAME OF IT ALL

THE LAND

The Land

THE INCOME FROM THE STAND did help, but Nellie and Frank still needed to economize in every small way.

One of the savings adopted after Nellie's retirement was to buy less coal for the furnace, and burn wood from their own land instead. Getting firewood in had become difficult for Frank, but Jack promised to help, and came throughout the fall to work with him — cutting and lugging and piling it in the cellar. With a two-man saw, they cut standing deadwood at the knoll. Then they bucked it down into firewood using the hit-and-miss engine, remounted on the saw wagon to drive its twenty-four-inch circular blade.

Jack was no longer split between two worlds by this time. He was done with his old life on the farm, and the work that took its place had him away much more than there. In her diary, Nellie noted the occasional visits when Jack stayed over, but those were becoming rare. He was driving a tractor-trailer rig on long distance hauls — gone for days at a time, taking fish, packed in ice, from Gloucester to destinations all across the country. He enjoyed the adventure of being out on the highway, the authority of the Commercial Driver's License that he carried, and the wallet full of cash the company issued to cover expenses.

The money to be had from farming could not compete with the wages Jack earned on the road — or the freedom. As his independence grew, Jack's presence at Sullivan's Corner faded to a few things left in his room. But still he made sure to be there to help with any heavy work, and he stopped in at other times too. Every so often, on a return leg, headed for Cape Ann, he'd get off Route 128 and take the Turnpike to Topsfield Road.

The noise of an empty truck rumbling down the gravel driveway would announce his arrival — finishing with a short hiss from the air brakes as he parked near the barn. Then Jack would walk back to the house to tell whoever was around about the places he'd just been. And ask about things at the farm. And whether he was needed for anything.

Outside the barn, the trailer reeked of its recent load, so different from the smells of the farm. And yet, in the acrid odors of both there was an odd similarity — organic and elemental.

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BY JANUARY, enough firewood for the winter was already in when Jack stopped by one Sunday. It was the 10th, Nellie's birthday. It had snowed overnight, a mix of snow and freezing rain, and the first real accumulation of that winter. Twenty miles to the south, near Boston, they got only rain, but the ground in Ipswich was covered with two to three inches frozen into a thin granular crust. Too little even to conceal the grass stubble in the fields, but it was enough, barely, to go sledding.

I had been off to the knoll with Johnny and his brother Ben, and a toboggan that once belonged to Jack. And there Jack was, just leaving the old house when we returned, the other two towing the toboggan with me on it, both of my legs broken. An unseen hump — a protruding rock maybe, or a fallen branch — had rerouted the sled into a tree. It was Jack who carried me, nine

years old, in to my parents. Then he went across to tell Nellie and Frank. It was a distressing day, but not the worst of recent developments.

Nellie turned seventy-five that day. The last traces of auburn were gone now, and her hair was well along into deep gray. Not long before, she had gotten fateful news. A cancer was growing. The end was indeterminate, but there would be no surgery, no attempt at a cure. There was little that *could* be done. Few would even be told. In character, she knew, when the time came, she would die at home, not in a hospital. But, before facing that, Nellie was concerned about two things. First, she wanted to be sure Frank's situation was secure. And second, that after Frank was gone, the house and land, her lifelong home, would go to one or more among those who she considered to be her rightful heirs.

The small retirement benefit Nellie enjoyed from her decades of teaching would not continue to Frank, and the income from the stand was not enough for him to get by on. But her only wealth was the property, and Nellie had long wanted to leave that to someone with a connection to the place, someone of a younger generation, someone she could hope would come to care for it as much as she did. In recent months, she had written a rough draft for a will to dispose of her estate. It was never completed, maybe because it projected wishes beyond the control of such a document. The terms were direct though, and give a pretty clear idea of her desires.

All of Nellie's possessions were to go to Frank, "while he is able to carry on," and then pass on to John Clasby—with both her husband and my father requested to provide a home for Jack Thompson, "for as long as they feel he is deserving." And, in the event that my father would die before Frank, everything was to go to Jack and to me, equally, provided that we, "furnish a home for Frank Smith until his death."

So began 1954, the year Nellie kept the diary.

Several weeks later, in early February, Nellie recorded a meeting with neighbor Lawrence White, who was an attorney with the prominent Boston law firm of Ropes and Gray. It may be that Mr. White had approached her previously, sometime over the three years since he and Jane had moved into the old DeBlois house. No matter how it started, the Whites had made a proposal: they wanted to buy all of Nellie's land below the orchard and garden — all the way to the river.

Certainly, as abutters looking out on the pasture and mowing fields, they would have grown concerned when those went out of use after the cows were gone. And, with the surge of new home construction all around, they may have reasonably feared a similar fate for these meadows. Nellie's entry that day was unreceptive: "White came — No business." Just the same, her neighbors' interest was not to be easily dismissed. There was a serious need at hand.

The pasture and mowing fields together formed a middle-ground that one crossed to reach the woods and the river beyond, and all of it, fields and woodland, held enormous sentimental value for Nellie. Yet none of it had a practical purpose at this point. So, gradually, she came to see how the Whites' interest aligned, in part, with her own — by keeping that land from being cut up into the house lots that most buyers would want it for. That prospect alone held some comfort for her. Then too, when she was gone, Frank would be left with nothing other than that land to sell for his support anyway.

Nellie faced a dilemma. This land was to have been her legacy. While the money could provide security for Frank, the result would be that little of the farm was left to pass on. It was a difficult choice, and half a year would go by before there was a conclusion.

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WHILE CONSIDERING WHITE'S OFFER, as another spring came around, Nellie and Frank decided to have one more flock of turkeys. It would, one supposes, make things seem normal. And, of course, they did it for the earnings. It wasn't the large count from years gone by, when scores of Bronze Turkeys were raised, then sold between Thanksgiving and Christmas. Jack told me once, in later years, there were times when they'd raised a couple hundred. I have trouble visualizing that. Call it three dozen this time, enough for customers of long standing who would be asking for one to be reserved for them. Supermarkets were beginning to carry frozen turkeys then, along with their usual approximation of "fresh killed" ones, but the quality of both was uneven, and, to some people, having a proper bird for the holiday meal continued to require a trip to the farm where it was raised.

The poults arrived in late April, via Railway Express. They came in a shallow corrugated box—perforated with air-holes—and lived indoors for a while, in a brooder pen that occupied most of the sun porch. It was an octagonal sheet-metal tray, with shallow sides and a conical hood, and a heating coil to keep the chicks warm.

Outdoors, repairs were made to the hutches and fencing at the turkey yard. Once the birds were big enough to go into the turkey yard, they had to be herded into the field coops every night, providing a perfect excuse for a boy freshly recovered from broken legs to wrap up piano practice, and get out to help with the roundup.

All summer long, the Plymouth made regular stops in Brown Square for hundred-pound burlap sacks of feed from Ipswich Grain Company. No expense was spared. Nellie and Frank both wanted these birds to be the best there were. The cost meant that this venture, like the milk business, was another marginal

enterprise. Certainly the months of labor were barely compensated. And then, of course, the real work came, just before the holiday—killing and dressing them all, and matching up sizes with customers' orders.

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AS AUTUMN APPROACHED, the culmination of this difficult year began in a fitting way. Two hurricanes, Carol and Edna, struck the region within a week of each other. The first, Carol, was the more severe for Cape Ann. At Category 3, it was the worst storm to hit the New England coast since the notorious un-named hurricane of 1938.

On August 31, a general alert went out a few hours beforehand as a mobile sound-truck drove about town announcing a state of emergency. Two days later, *The Chronicle* reported widespread wreckage from one-hundred-mile-per-hour gales that destroyed many of the once plentiful elms that lined streets throughout town, and stripped ripening fruit from the trees at the Dodge and Goodale orchards. Two-thirds of the town lost electric power and telephone service, and with roads everywhere blocked by fallen trees, it took several days before many residents were restored.

There was damage to property all around, but other than trees down, and getting by for a while with lanterns and candles, the farm came through intact. The turkeys had all survived—for the time being. And the barn, rebuilt six years before, was unharmed except for some torn roofing.

Then, in late October, Tommy O'Brien died in Portland. He was fifty years old, and remarried, with a young son, Thomas Joseph III. Tommy was never completely well, but I know from tales my father told—boyish pranks played on each other in their youth, and a shared interest in amateur radio—there had

been good days, times of happiness and even promise during his years on the farm. His story was surely as full as any, but most of it was never shared with me. And when I was older, and might have asked, I didn't. It wouldn't surprise me to learn there had been more behind his daughters' summer visit than was revealed. In any case, there's reason, in what was overheard from time to time, to think that his life had held one trouble after another. And at the end, as with Nellie, there was a protracted illness without any chance of recovery.

As Tommy's condition worsened, concern grew about final arrangements. The funeral would be in Maine. But he had no roots there, and, with him unable to work near the end, the family was in straitened circumstances. So, Nellie decreed that he should be brought home and buried in the Sullivan lot—and she would not have it any other way. She was the oldest of what Tommy had for kith or kin, and perhaps no one cared for him more. And she knew, of course, that the day was coming when she would join him there.

On October 26, Tommy O'Brien returned to Ipswich to be laid to rest.

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IN THE WEEKS after Nellie first rejected Lawrence White's offer, the two met again, and by April, they had arrived at a solution that looked promising to satisfy both. Over the summer, details were refined, and in early November, documents for the sale of land were ready to be signed. The pasture and hayfield that the Whites faced out on, together with some swampy woods beyond Corliss, twelve-and-a-half acres in all—half of what remained of the farm—would go to them.

The deal also accommodated Nellie's desire to keep some of the land. Two areas were excluded from the property that the

Whites had sought. One was very small, a half-acre secondary garden plot, on the Corliss side of the cart path, which Frank wanted for growing corn to sell at the stand. The larger piece was the land beyond the mowing field: the knoll, and the woods on the river. Even at this stage Nellie could not part with that. If she ever thought to live anywhere other than the house on the corner, she and Frank would have built a place on the knoll. And Nellie carried the hope, still, that one day someone belonging to her would have a home there. Perhaps Jack would return, after all, or someday, maybe John's child. How could one know? What mattered was to hold on to it.

In the negotiating, some of the considerations had been practical, some sentimental. Surviving papers show attention to both kinds. In a letter from Mr. White in April, two concerns of Nellie and Frank were addressed:

> I will give you and Mr. Smith … the privilege of passing over that land, along the stone wall on my present boundary … where you have been accustomed to walking down to the Ipswich River and back. … Also, … I will give you and Mr. Smith personally the privilege of removing gravel from the existing pit on the land … consistent with your needs for gravel for your own use.

In return, the Whites would get reciprocal rights of access to the river. But setting off the land on the river for Nellie to retain was more complicated. With the fields going to the Whites, the hill and river area would be landlocked, inaccessible. To solve that, the old cart path alongside the fields was incorporated into the deed as a right-of-way to the lower land. In exchange, Nellie accepted a restriction that no more than one house might be built there.

So, the bargaining indulged both sides, and legal papers were drawn up by Larry White himself. With that, when the sale was executed on November 12—garden field, turkey yard and orchard notwithstanding—any possible future for the place as an operating farm was finished.

Hard as it must have been selling the cows off, this was probably worse. Animals could be replaced, but the fields they were parting with contained all of the potential for any continuation of real farming. Still, Nellie was content. Frank was provided for. And, beyond her remaining property, the fields would continue to be open land, as she had always known them. And, she had held on to that part of the place which meant the most to her—something to leave behind as her legacy.

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AS THE FOURTH THURSDAY in November drew close, old customers from over the years called to check that there would be a turkey for them. Details were gone over: How big? With the giblets, of course? And when would they want to come get it? A list was kept for Frank, who soon would be at work in the basement of dad's shop—butchering the birds, and weighing and hanging them from chalk-numbered nails in the floor joists above.

As ever, Thanksgiving dinner was at the old house. Despite her weariness, constant those days, Nellie's round oak table and sideboard were filled with every usual item. Thanks were given, and the turkey received acclaim from all. At the finish, Frank concluded the meal with a familiar comment, "Well. Pretty good—what there was of it. … Aaand, plenty of it—such as it was."

It was an expression we heard countless times, at high meals and low. As a compliment, it was perfectly oblique—and it never failed to vex my mother when it was directed at her—but from Frank, moderate in all things, it was the highest praise.

Pretty good, what there was of it. That was, it seems, the year's moment of grace. The farm that had sustained the family—Eugene and Ellen, their daughters, husband and wards—for more than eight decades, had run out of time. Yet, again, it had provided this feast.

After the table was cleared, Nellie sank into her big armchair with the forceful sigh that, by then, attended every exertion. Pies were put out, and, through the late afternoon, friends and family—Nellie's cousins from town, Smith relations from Rowley and Georgetown and Byfield—stopped in to exchange the conventional pleasantries.

Even with all of the trials of the past year, it *was* a thankful day. The scale of Nellie's hopes had been reduced, but a version of her wishes had been achieved—and in greater measure than she might have feared at times. The money from the land was less than could have been had if it went to a developer, but it would provide for her and Frank's needs for a while. And the river land was preserved to the future.

Where Kate had essentially devoted herself to a single calling, Nellie's was a divided life. The confining world of the schoolhouse was not the central concern in Nellie's heart. Teaching was her career, but continuing the farm—the legacy from her parents—held at least an equal share of her purpose. And, it was the part that most defined who she was.

Late in January 1955, Frank telephoned Doctor Conley, who came one last time. He was soon followed by Monsignor Burns. The recent weeks had been ones of great discomfort, and at the end people said to Frank, correctly, that this was a blessing.

Like Kate, Nellie was buried from the house on the corner. She, especially, would have nothing to do with the borrowed elegance of a funeral home, when she was so proud of her own. Again, the casket and flowers were set in the front room, and the china last used at Thanksgiving was put out with refreshments for the mourners. Three months after Tommy O'Brien had been buried in the Sullivan plot, Nellie Smith was placed there too.