SULLIVAN'S CORNER
THE LAST YEARS OF THE FARM

POST # NINE
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PART TWO — WHAT BECAME OF IT ALL

THE FARM IN REPOSE

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The Farm in Repose

IN HIS YOUTH, my father's life was deeply affected by three remarkably caring women. First, Margaret MacRae, his mother's sister, had held the Clasby family together after his mother's death and throughout his father's subsequent illness—and raised six children who were not her own. Then the Sullivan sisters took him in, restored his once diminished prospects, and helped with the passage to adult life. With Nellie's passing, the last of these exceptional women was gone.

By this point he'd lived at Sullivan's Corner for almost thirty-seven years. Thirty-three of them had also been spent at General Electric, in the career that was encouraged by Kate. John's life and livelihood, like Tommy O'Brien's and Jack Thompson's, was not to be of the farm. Each in his own way had wanted something different from what a farm could provide. But, while John was not much engaged in the operation of the farm in the years since school, he had remained there, at Sullivan's Corner, helping whenever someone needed him. The duty occurred infrequently, discharged sometimes by little more than the fact of being there. Nellie, forever independent, had remained responsible for her own welfare to the end.

To be that comfort and counsel had meant being near at hand. Several times during his years with GE my father passed up

transfers to other cities that would have advanced his career, in order to remain near Kate and Nellie. The last such opportunity occurred just after Nellie's death, when GE moved his department to Schenectady. For him to remain at the River Works plant required retraining in another field. It set him back in seniority, but dad shifted to a group designing gear systems for ship turbines which GE continued to make in Lynn. Again, there would have been a promotion for relocating, but at this point it was Frank who would be relying on him, and on my mother.

Of the numerous people that Kate and Nellie Sullivan helped during their lives, my father chose to be the one who repaid by staying close by. If he saw it as an obligation, one never got the sense that he chafed at an unwelcome burden, or resented any lost chances. Beyond any notion of debt, he had grown enduring ties to them, and to this unlikely place that became his home.

And, for all of the recent losses, John Clasby's world there was not without renewal and promise. Another child was on the way, and life on Sullivan's Corner filled with the fresh hopes that go along with each such new beginning.

The year ahead would be arduous, and somewhat worrying with Frances pregnant at fifty. Doctor Conley, nearing retirement, was openly concerned, and proposed that her progress be watched by a younger specialist. It was a daunting summer too, very hot, and another pair of back-to-back hurricanes. But despite everything, in early November 1955, a healthy second son, Daniel Emmett, was born.

The world my brother came into was completely changed from the one of eleven years earlier. The neighborhood was swelling with young families. In town, the depot was in disrepair, and soon to be demolished. A modern grammar school was under construction though, to replace the aging wooden structure of Kate's old Winthrop. And the high school had gone to double sessions to

handle all the students coming into the middle grades. Less than fifteen miles from Ipswich, a regional shopping center was going up on Route 128 that would draw families away from old town centers and nearby cities alike. And, modern technology—the age of the transistor—was just getting going. Within two years, the moon would not be alone circling the earth.

For Dan and his generation, this place would be very different, and so would everything around it.

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THE MONEY realized from the land sale was crucial to Frank. In retrospect, the surrender of that property seems as if it was never really a choice. Some funds were needed immediately for Nellie's final expenses, and for taxes and other obligations. Plus, the house needed a new furnace and a modern stove—ones that didn't require manual feeding. Still, Frank had some reserve left to work with and his financial status was stable for the time being. The receipts from the stand, after two full seasons, remained meager but helpful.

Unfortunately, a problem had developed in the business. For all of his talents, Harry was plagued by a demon that kept getting the better of him. After a year or more of back and forth between being sober and not, his unreliability at the store caused things to fall apart for good. In April 1955, they formally dissolved the partnership.

Taking Harry's place in the store, Frank continued the business that summer, but the hours there kept him from other chores, and once again the orchard went untended. It had gotten beyond what he could manage anyway. He was facing the question of how long he could keep the stand going.

In weighing this, Frank discussed the impact of losing that income with my parents. While there was not enough money left from the land to sustain him indefinitely, there also was never any question that they would see to his needs, in any event. But, much like Nellie, Frank wanted that remedy as a last resort, if at all.

In the course of things, the matter also became a regular topic of conversation between my mother and her sister. Over the years since their mother passed away, Constance and Vincent were regular weekend visitors at our house, so my aunt was familiar with not only the general circumstances, but most of the details as well.

Cons listened to the growing concern about Frank's plight, and had an idea. While Frank was never eligible for Social Security from his years of farming, it was possible the Grasshopper Plains business might qualify him.

During the Roosevelt administration, Cons had a position in the state agency that managed the early years of the Social Security program. She had kept up on later developments, and knew that an amendment in 1950 had extended Social Security to self-employed individuals — other than farmers. If Frank could show that income tax had been paid on a sufficient level of earnings from the store, he'd be entitled to a monthly retirement benefit. The threshold was six quarters of self-employment, earning at least four hundred dollars a year.

First she had to persuade Frank that there was no shame in requesting this assistance — it would be something he had earned. Then, the business records were reviewed. Over the first two seasons, the stand had comfortably surpassed the amount for Frank to qualify.

Connie prepared the application herself, but the first try didn't work. It took an appeal, and more documents, and almost another year. But with persistent effort she succeeded. On reconsideration, the benefit was awarded — with retroactive payments. So, in the end, while the stand never yielded the kind of earnings imagined

at the outset, the simple fact of its existence, and its modest contribution to the economy, made the whole endeavor worthwhile. It gained Frank a small but critical supplement toward his basic needs, and allowed him a final measure of self-sufficiency.

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ONCE NELLIE'S ESTATE had gone through probate, Frank completed her final wish by extending ownership of the old house and the remaining property to my parents as joint tenants along with himself.

After all the years with so many people about, and so much activity, the old house had fallen very quiet. Frank lived on there looking after things and tending the grounds. Some days he'd walk down to the orchard—stopping among trees that he'd set out as slender whips when he was a younger man. Occasionally, he made entries in the same diary that Nellie had kept. In April 1956, he noted planting sweet corn in a small patch that Mr. Andreozzi had tilled for him. I remember the Golden Bantam seeds sprouting in homemade tarpaper pots, on the back porch, same as always.

That was the last summer the garden lot was planted. Next year, for the first time in anyone's memory, no crops would be grown on this land. The barn still stood, quiet, like the house, except for a small creaking noise when the big doors swayed a bit with the wind. The structure had given many years of service—before and after its roof collapsed under snow—but by this point its function had become unclear. Traces of barn smell remained, but hooves no longer drummed the floor. It existed as no more than a storehouse for old harness and ropes and other relics of the farm—pitchforks, watering pails, a foot-treadle sharpening wheel—none of it needed any longer.

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FRANK KEPT THE STAND GOING for another season, maybe two. In general, his complaints were sparse, seeming no worse than before. He visited back and forth with his sisters. And he and John Bradstreet went on helping each other keep after their places. He even took in a young family who roomed there for a while, and they livened the old house up nicely for him.

Fridays, he'd ride into town with us and take care of his own shopping. My mother sent supper over to him every day, and he came for dinner with us on Sundays. Frank survived Nellie by seven years that way. He lived to watch Dan grow to age six and begin first grade, and saw me halfway through my last year of high school—soon to leave for college.

Once in a while, Jack would visit, usually on a Sunday, with a young child or two in tow. He had married in 1956, and around that time stopped going out on the road. Instead, he switched to a job as a longshoreman in order to stay close to his family. When he came by, he liked to bring the older ones along to show them the place where he grew up.

During high school, with farm activity all in the past, my own attention shifted elsewhere. First to the interior world of my father's shop, where I took to learning my way with tools. Then, in a curious twist, and quite by chance—long after old Joe was gone—I wound up working for a while with horses of a different kind, when the Snows hired me to help care for theirs.

Despite the fact that I had never so much as put a bridle and bit on Joe—and had a lot else to master—I found myself, for several years, after school and during vacations, tending a half-dozen quarter horse polo mounts and highbred hunters. Feeding and grooming them, mucking out their stalls, tacking them up to be ridden, and turning them out to pasture. And, along with general barn chores, came the occasional job of helping get a summer hay crop in.

Some days, I imagine, Frank would have seen me go off around the barn, and head down the well worn path to the fields—before, farther along, crossing the wall to the stately Brookfield stable. He could reasonably have wondered what might come of that.

Unplanned, and out of the ordinary as this episode was, my time with the Snows proved to be a broadening experience—in a number of ways—and one that has stayed with me, much as the late years of the farm have. During another formative stage, that work was a kind of schooling that gave me a direct feel for things I had watched but not done. And, in ways that were unforeseeable then, that exposure became a bridge of sorts, which spanned from the small nearby world of childhood across the very different places I went afterward.