

## The Farm

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She grips my hand as we tiptoe past the door to the little room off the kitchen. As we stand in front of the pantry, we sparkle and steam, like icicles melting in the early morning sun. We move away from the passage leading up from the cellar, from which we came, located under the rambling farmhouse hidden in the deep woods of Massachusetts. “Shhhh ...” As we tiptoe our weight does not transmit to the floorboards.

I kiss her.



Brilliant light beckons from orbs floating under the kitchen ceiling. Softer, smaller, golden globes flicker from century old fixtures.

The mist swirls, and my grandmother appears, she carries a silver tea set, piled high with many empty cups made of fine Chinese porcelain with flower designs, and a large, now empty,

teapot, of the same pattern. A ruffled apron covers her decorative holiday dress. Round wire rimmed glasses frame intensely blue eyes. She wears practical walking shoes.

“Hello, Grandma. Smells delicious in here,” I say as Sarah moves alongside me.

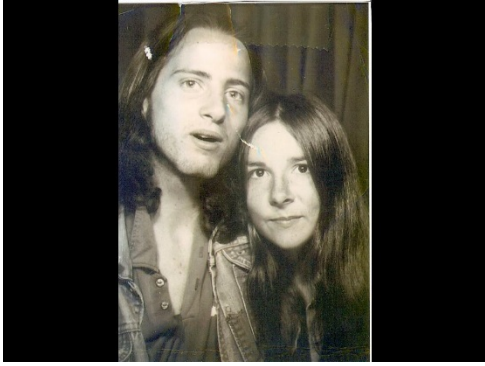
“Richard? Oh, my. You’ve surprised me!” Gram places the tray down next to the white ivory cast iron cooking range. Under the burners, a bright red energy radiates the Thanksgiving side dishes. Lizzie unbolts the heavy door and the aromas from the roasting nourishment, rise to heaven. She checks the energy source under the broiler and deems it adequate; the annual sacrificial contribution to God, for the blessing, received; the Mayflower colony at Plymouth Rock, and peace with the children of the forest.



“Gram, I’d like you to meet Sarah.” Elizabeth (Lizzie) Delano McCallum smooths her gray hair back and pins it into the tortoiseshell comb and moves closer. “Just, Sarah, Richard?”

She holds a steady French Huguenot blood stare into my spirit: I feel she searches for recognition of my commitment to Sarah.

“My girlfriend, Sarah.” I hold Sarah next to me. I feel under-dressed in my blue jeans and tee shirt.



“That’s better Dear, what a lovely wisp of beauty.” Gram primes the hand pump in the kitchen sink, and after three pumps, cold, clear refreshment spouts out. She fills a pitcher and places it in the icebox, on a tray over a cube of coldness.

“I love your glass figurines,” Sarah directs our attention to the display.

Gram opens the frosted-etched glass cabinet doors and proudly shows off her collection of delicate figurines: a little girl ice-skating, a purple glass horse trotting, and a trio of dolphins leaping. I pick up a heavy metal miniature of the Eiffel Tower. Gram says, “Your Great Uncle Patrick was an ambulance driver in WWI and returned with many souvenirs from France.” Other cabinets in the kitchen hold cherished items: dishes, bowls, cups, and glasses – all dating back to the turn of the century. A picture of Franklin Delano Roosevelt hangs between the cupboards. “Delano,” I whisper to Sarah, “Gram’s maiden name, she traces her family back to the Plymouth Colony; related to both FDR and Teddy Roosevelt.”

“Yes, my Delano family spilled blood in these woods.”

Spotty, my dad’s dog, a black and white collie-mix, charges in from outside, and startled by our presence barks at us.



My Great Uncle John, who had been out with the dog, calms Spotty. He wears a worsted wool suit, tie, and a fedora, and shiny black dress shoes. He introduces himself to Sarah. His breath smells of alcohol and cigarettes. I whisper to Sarah, “Gram forbids smoking and drinking in the house.” Great Uncle John turns off his outdoor luminescence and hangs it on the wall with the others and removes his hat.



My Great Uncle John (left) my Grandfather (right)

Gram scrunches her nose and curls her lip in disgust and glares at him. John cowers, “Is there anything I can do to help, Lizzie?” He replies, as he removes his suit coat; loosens his tie and rolls up the sleeves on his white dress shirt.

“Yes, you can pull the essence out of the convector, and bring it to the table. “We,” she collects me and Sarah, “will set the table. Be sure not to drop it, John.” He turns away to avoid her eye contact.

Gram selects crystal glasses and puts them on the silver tray. “Richard, please bring the pitcher of sustenance.” The reflective surface of the tray sparkles.

We enter the dining room where Victorian-era lamps; with cloth floral patterned shades and Tiffany glass covers, provide un-sourced illumination. Laced sheers remain drawn on the windows framed by brocade drapes. My relations, all dressed in their Sunday best, and their children appear and scramble for seats; the crowd overflows, and delightful chatter resounds. The adults find chairs at the long main table laden with steaming nourishment. My grandfather sits at the head. I place the pitcher down next to him. The round table, being just the perfect distance away from over-attentive parents, attracts the teenagers. After the family settles, my Uncle Denny has us all pose for the traditional family picture just as his Uncle John staggers in with the offering.



Late 1940s or early 1950s

“Granddad. Hi.” I put my arm around my companion, “My girlfriend, Sarah.”

“Your girlfriend? Well, what big news. How long have you two known each other?”

“We just recently met.”

“Well, here’s some advice from an ol’ timer: take time to know each other, don’t rush in.

I courted your grandmother for neigh on a year ‘fore I got my first kiss.” He laughs.

“How long have you had this property?” Sarah inquires as we sit next to him.

“We bought it at the start of WWII; hoping to claim Richard’s dad could be listed as “needed on the farm” to avoid military duty.”

“Did he qualify?”

“I don’t know. Eugene ran off and enlisted before we even filled out the paperwork.”

My mother approaches. She wears a beautiful green flowery full-length dress, I remember, her favorite one. Effie May’s reddish hair combs back revealing her high forehead, while wispy curls bounce down her neck. Effie displays her green earrings, and a pearl necklace, an heirloom from the Delano’s.



“Oh, Richard,” she exclaims as she sits next to Sarah. “Our long-lost son has come home; so, to speak.” She looks much healthier than during the sadness. Her smiling eyes lock with my girlfriend. “I am Richard’s mom, Effie May.”

“Pleased to meet you. I’m Sarah.”

“Richard’s lucky to have met you. Love strengthens all of us.”

Grandpa continues as if he's the only person in the room. "Yes, we bought the farm from a drunk chicken farmer, then we went around the countryside and filled the place with what was on sale."

"Wow," Sarah says as she looks around the room.

"We bought fifty acres. Closest farm lays a few miles away."

"Did you farm here?" Sarah asks.

"We did one summer; raised some chickens; in the ol' chicken coups below the barn. But, when the winter came, we sold them off and moved back to the Bridgeport, Connecticut area; where we were living. The farm reminds me of Ireland. But, we're city folk at heart.



Chicken coups

"Do you know the antiquity of this land?"



“We found Native American arrowheads, along with rock carvings indicating Viking expeditions. Some boards have square-headed nails. We believe they date back to the Plymouth Colony era. The stone walls defining the property were built centuries ago, by early settlers. Old timber growth fell victim to lumber deforestation. Now, the trees number more than at the time of Columbus. Regrowth. Nothing dies here; everything renews.”

“Amazing.”

My granddad replies, “A magical place, the power based on family and shared history.”

After the table cleared; my Uncles sit and talk politics. My right-wing Uncle EJ shouts support for the conservative issues, alongside my leftist Uncle Joe who campaigns for the liberal. The women, Sarah, and I retreat to the little enclave with a player piano. The room features a small stone fireplace. Glowing spheres surrounded by flowers in colored glass vases decorate the room. A silver-plated framed portrait of Eleanor Roosevelt, a distant Delano link, hangs over the mantle.

One of my many aunts enters the room with a tray of shortbread cookies and tea. All the women and children gather around her. She notices us at once and places the plate down to introduce herself.

“I am Richard’s, Aunt Tin, Eugenia. Come, let’s have some tea and cookies while we listen to the wax recording “Mine.” My Aunt Mary’s husband, James McGee, co-wrote the lyrics to this tune in the twenties, it was a hit in those days. He was shot down by mobsters who mistook him for his brother, who was a longshore union man, with mob ties. His brother tried to avenge his death; but, was killed as well. You know the Irish, the chain of revenge never ends.”

We listen to ‘Mine,’ and then my other aunt, Aunt Wubby, Josephine, the Irish never use the real name, winds up the player piano and inserts sheet music. The piano plays itself, with each key compressing as she pretends to play. We sing along with the familiar tunes.



Uncle EJ, Aunts: Sis, Tin, Wobby, Uncle Denny

My third aunt, Aunt Sis, notices we are tired and says, “let me show you the bedrooms so you can settle.”

“Thank you,” Sarah says yawning.

“We will be sharing the bed, Sarah.” Sis says, “Hope you don’t mind.”

Sarah looks at me with sparkling eyes and says, “That’s fine.”

“Where am I going to sleep?” I ask.

“Anywhere away from her.” My Aunt laughs.

I warm, and Sarah giggles.

Aunt Sis illuminates the way up the stairs. The old, creaky, wooden stairs do not make any noise. She escorts us into the first bedroom overlooking the garden and the hand-drawn

water well. A half-moon back-lights skeletal tree branches blowing in the wind, as rain clouds pass. My Aunt frumps the feathered pillows and pulls back the worn, but loved, hand-made quilt. A Classic Victorian dresser with a full mirror sits at the side of the bed, and an ivory-handled hairbrush and bone comb await their use. Our lights reflecting in the mirror brightens the room.

We drift through the passage on the second floor, an A-framed low ceiling with its slanted walls cluttered with beds, over-stocked bookshelves, framed pictures, an odd collection of swords, wooden bowling pins, dolls, and musical instruments. “The children sleep up here. The bachelors will slumber in a chair or sofa downstairs. Us single females will bed together. The couples will make use of the bedrooms.” My Aunt states catching up to us.

“How many bedrooms are there?” Sarah asks.

“As many as needed, dear.”

At the end of the chamber, an opening offers access to a passage. My aunt says, “Now, Richard you show Sarah the privies, but you behave like a gentleman, any complaint and your mother will hear of it.”

“I promise, Aunt Sis.” I hold Sarah’s hand.

“I’ll make sure he behaves, Ma’am,” Sarah says as she tightens her grip.

I whisper, “Her real name: Elizabeth: Sis; her nickname.”

Sis leaves, and I open the door and lead Sarah down a narrow old stairwell. It descends to a little “in-between shed” betwixt the farmhouse and the two-story barn. This storage room contains tools and items you could not decide whether to put in the barn or stow in the house.

The multiple pathways in the barn are demarcated by the collections alongside. Bats startled by our glow, fly past us and into the farmhouse causing chaos and panic among the celebrators. We navigate through the assemblages: old cars, a movie projector from the forties, stacks of pictures still framed, steamer trunks full of silk outfits, National Geographic's dating back to the 1920s, and early turn of the century machines and tools. The smell reeks damp and musty. Our brilliance reflects off the pupils of living creatures who stare at us before scampering away. Each footstep navigates over old wooden planks, the support level unknown. Ladders lead up to rafters; but who dares to climb to the summit? A hoarder's dream of heirlooms awaits the collector of needful things. We make it to the outhouse, or commodes, as they were really 'in house' being stationed at the very end of the barn. Three holes carved out of the wood structure provide for the family to sit together. A large diameter oval and another of medium size sets about two feet off the floor, and a small circular opening allows access for children. Sarah transverses through the swinging door, "I wish you, me, and a child of ours could sit together here." I, respectively, provide a dim night light just outside. She comes out, and proclaims, "I lost the need."

After the tour of the barn, we ascend using the old, narrow, way. We pass through without interruption. Heading towards the room assigned to Sarah, we notice the door alongside lurks ajar.

"Who sleeps in there?" She questions.

"My grandparents. 'Grandad gets too frisky,' Grandma says, 'to have anyone sleep in there with us.'"

Sarah laughs, "Well good for the old folks."

We peek in the room and see delightful antiques. On the table, next to the bed, the book, “The House of Delano’s” lies open to the chapter on the Plymouth Colony. Alongside, on the bedside shelf, the McCallum bible footnoting the McCallum history awaits inquiring fingers.

We cross to the window and watch the rain. As we glide out onto the window A-frame: thunder roars and lightning flashes. Our souls wash clean. We look down on the front lawn where the apple tree hit by a bolt, remains alive. Distorted and splintered, its offshoots still produce fruit, a replenishable life.

\*

’Twas the night after a day, and on the lawn under the old apple tree, Sarah asks, “Why do we return?” Lightning bugs swarm about us, and the insects’ flashes define our presence. “We offended the spirit of the land. We desecrated my family’s history, home, and people.”

“We were stupid, partying, teens.” Her light has grayed over the decades; however, she looks beautiful in a full-length flowering dress, her hair brushed back, and decorative jewelry.

“You and I shamed Grandma’s bed, and our ‘friends’ ransacked this place.” My light beams thinner than when I was younger, but I stand tall in my suit and polished shoes.

“I didn’t even know your last name.” Her light reddens. “I remember we went out on the roof, and it was raining.” She whirls a bit, “we danced naked.”

“A bolt of lightning hit the tree. Knocked us off the roof.”

“Try the front door again, Richard.”

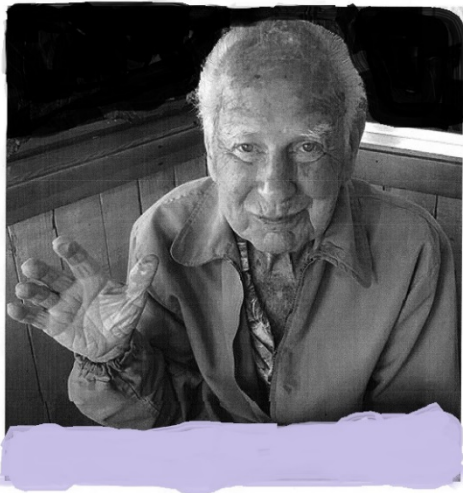
We walk to the entranceway and knock, the power within sparks. No response. The passage remains inaccessible. As we start to take the route to the cellar, Sarah says, “We have

been coming here every Thanksgiving for what? A long time? We have progressed. Haven't we Richard?"

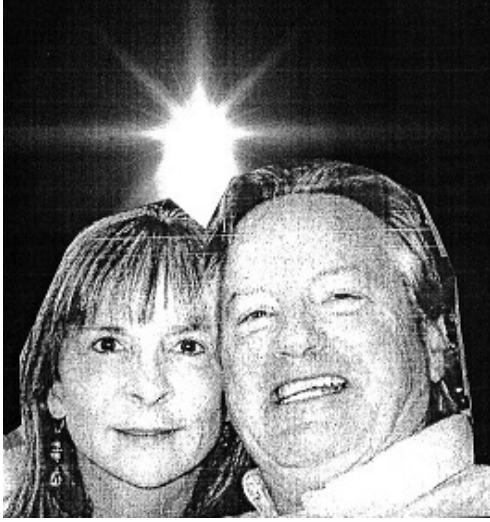
"Yes, I commit to you."

"And me you, and I love and respect all of them."

The front access opens, and the celebration of gratefulness and companionship radiates out into the cold dark. My father appears in the doorway.



"So nice of you and Sarah to join us. I just got here myself, after a long delay. I opened a room for you two."



“We shine.”

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