Chestnut Hill Farm

FRANCES BEER

Des fragments de souvenirs lui reviennent de son été passé sur une ferme alors qu'elle avait huit ans. Elle se rappelle les plaisirs de marcher pieds nus dans le foin, de monter à cheval sans selle, de laver la vaisselle à la pompe, de cueillir les haricots. L'influence de cette famille rurale a marqué ses années à venir.

Some sixty-five years ago I first went to the Farm, along with my older sister, Kitty. I was eight.

Our father had been an officer in WWII, and subsequently had to go to some sort of army camp each summer. Our mother, with our little brother Billy, went up north to stay with a friend. So Kitty and I were sent off to the Farm.

I don't recall that there was an explanation for this, though I know that our parents were friends-of-friends connected with the Farm. But there we were, heading up a long tree-lined lane toward the farm buildings: a big old barn to the right, with a stretched-out house behind it on the crest of the hill. Pasture and hay fields to the north, crop-fields to the south. Cows, a horse, hay, beans, corn. The real thing.

But the first reaction we had was one of terrible homesickness. Right away, the first night, we wrote desperately to our mother that we could not stay here, though we had a lovely room to ourselves with two little white beds and lots of books: she must come and rescue us.

Within a short while, however, we got some sense of how the wonderful Farm worked, and of its occupants.

First of these was Hazel "Marnie" Albertson—the nurturing grandmotherly presence who presided over the south end of the house, which included her formal garden, and who immediately took us under her wing. Her garden was surrounded by blue spruce, with a mown lawn and reflecting silver ball on a pedestal in the centre. Marnie's book-lined living room stretched the width of the house, overlooking the garden, with windows all along the sunny south side.

In the middle of the house, and the family, running back-and-forth, there was Jeannie, Marnie's hard-working, frazzled daughter, who got the food on the table, and the dishes washed, and the house generally taken care of.

Then at the north end, close to the barn, there was handsome, tanned, and sometimes surly Kay, Jeannie's husband (and Lester, his helper), who worked the Farm. They took their meals, silently, in the kitchen, while the rest of us ate at long tables on the big outside porch, facing west and overlooking the Merrimack River. After the meal, and as the sun set, the tables would be converted to a dishwashing assembly line: one warm basin for the rinsing, a hot one with suds for the washing, and a then a boiling one (fresh off the stove) for the final rinse. I especially liked to be in charge of the last basin, and with tongs to lift out the steaming dishes and put them in the rack to dry.

The Farm seemed to be a sort of bed-and-breakfast as well as a farm, since there were quite a few visitors staying there besides my sister and me. Amongst them were two pleasant young actors who were doing summer stock in nearby West Newbury—one was Martin Balsam; I would have liked to contact Marty to learn more about his Farm time, but sad to say, he died in 1996. The other was a very kind and very pretty woman whose name I've forgotten, but who did my braids in lovely special ways, especially for the evening we went into town to see their

performance. She wound the two braids around my ears and pinned them in place. It was my first experience of feeling elegant (and the last for many years).

But at the other extreme was Harry, who'd had a lobotomy, and just wandered around.

He was not scary, he was just not there—I guess parked by a relative who didn't want to have to deal with him. I can see him very clearly, to this day, paunchy in his plaid shirt, with glasses. I don't recall that he ever said a word.

It seemed to me, even then, that it was Jeannie who really kept the whole thing going, though Marnie and Kay held power at the Farm's opposite poles. My information (probably from my mother, who was not necessarily a dependable source) was that Kay and Marnie hated each other, that Kay was alcoholic, not considered worthy of the cultured Albertsons; nonetheless the Farm needed to be farmed, and Kay Berkenbush was the answer. For his part, he no doubt saw Marnie as a snob, and as a fake leftie (he'd come to the Farm from the steel mills in Pennsylvania).

Between the Farm folk, the great food, the fresh air, and what Kitty and I were beginning to feel as a marvellous liberation from ivy-league, and sometimes pretentious, Harvard, we realized that we wanted to stay at the Farm forever.

We now dreaded hearing back from our mother.

How ecstatic we then were when our letter to her came back as "undeliverable." We'd written the address incorrectly, or she'd given us the wrong one; and so we were now free to revel in the barefoot joys of the Farm for a whole summer month.

I've started with the humans, and their possible tensions. I'll get to the animals later.

Marnie was our first secure point of connection. She'd turn down our little white cots and read us bedtime stories.

Later we learned that she had a log cabin up in the woods, to the north of the hay fields. One evening she invited us to come along with her. The fields were sharp from the newly mown hay, so we learned to walk a special way (we were always barefoot), smoothing down the stubble with our toes before planting our feet. Marnie's cabin was magical, surrounded by woods and cut off from the Farm and any other outside reality.

By the time we got up there it was dark outside. There, by kerosene lamp, she read more books to us. The main one I remember was by Charles Kingsley, *The Water Babies*, about the adventures of Tom the chimney sweep. These days Kingsley is considered politically incorrect, but then (1863), and in Marnie's time (she was born in 1883), he was seen as an idealistic socialist, campaigning against the abuse of children. This was the side of him that Marnie showed to us, though she did not preach.

After we'd been there a few nights with Marnie she let us sleep there alone. Even more magical. We were not supposed to light the kerosene lamp, but we did (no doubt at my rebellious sister's instigation, though I'm sure I agreed). We were discovered by having left the burnt-out match on the counter, but we were not punished, and were able to continue our nights at the cabin. No doubt Marnie, herself the rebel, admired my sister's independence.

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Later, back at our room in the big house, next to Marnie's, I found *Rabbit Hill*, a wonderful book that I think has influenced me for the rest of my life. Or perhaps, the other way 'round, it resonated with beliefs and feelings I already had.

The plot of *Rabbit Hill* had to do with the little vulnerable critters, with whom I identified, who had lived there forever, and the humans, who hadn't. The last, long-gone folks at the Farm had been ne'er-do-wells who didn't give a dang about the garden, or the fields. The old house had gradually been falling down since then.

When Little Georgie the rabbit brings news that New Folks is a-Comin', Rabbit Hill is a-stir. Will they be good folks, or bad? Will they be gardeners, or trappers? The animals hold their breath.

The first sign of the New Folks is when they drive up the lane, and make sure that they don't run over any of the animal folk along the way. As they unload their car, it's clear to the eager, watching little animals that there are no traps, guns, or poisons. So maybe these particular humans just might be all right.

Further developments prove this to be the case, despite the doubts of the skeptical rabbit uncle. Georgie gets hit by a car on the main (not the Farm) road, and Uncle thinks the Folks have taken him to the Farm house to be tortured,

or at best held hostage. In fact, the bunny is being nursed back to health, with little splints on his back legs, and he makes a dramatic re-emergence on Mid-Summer's Eve, when the animals have gathered near the Farm garden. The high point comes when a large and shrouded object, overlooking the garden, is unveiled—a statue of St. Francis, the animals' patron saint, holding out his hands. At the foot of the statue is an inscription: "There is Enough for All." Beneath lie piles of all the animals' favourite foods: grain, clover, corn, fruit: indeed, enough for all. The patriarchal red buck declares that from now on the Farm garden will be off-limits, to which all the smaller animals readily agree. They are never disappointed: every night a heap of their best-loved food is left for them at the statue's feet.

In retrospect, it has not escaped me that the new folks' farm bore a significant resemblance to Chestnut Hill Farm.

This ideal, of the possible symbiosis between human and animal, has remained crucial to me throughout my inner-city life; I have fed the squirrels and birds—especially the loyal starlings and sparrows who stay with us over the winter—and protected the roof-top homes of generations of raccoons. This past summer a mother raccoon and her three kits, with their little black masks, visited my backyard every night. The kits were very friendly and I had to restrain myself from giving them snacks, because I know it is not good for them to come to trust city folk.

I had been an animal lover since I can remember: Albert Schweitzer became my childhood hero after my mother told me that he cut off the corner of his shirt rather than disturb a cat who was sleeping on it. (She also used the example of the devout Schweitzer as a way to get me to go to Sunday school, from which I'd been hiding in a closet.)

I subscribed to a publication of a magazine called "Our Dumb Animals," published by the SPCA. What the SPCA (in those days) didn't know about animals' ability to communicate could fill a book. Having read *Rabbit Hill*, I certainly knew better. My subscription came as a result of the acquisition of my dear golden SPCA dog: little Taffy, a great communicator, especially of delight. How high he would leap (and sometimes pee with joy) when I got home from school. He was my best friend except for Marcia, who lived across the street, and whose dog's name was Floppy. Taffy and Floppy were also best friends.

The Farm family was larger than I've indicated. Kay and Jeannie had three children: Dick, Peggy, and Kip, who lives with his wife in nearby West Newbury.

Dick has recently died at eighty-four, having lived on-and-off at the Farm since he was six months old. He was a literary hero of sorts. In Virginia Burton's 1939 *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel*, Mike brags that he and his supposedly out-dated steam shovel, Mary Anne, can dig the foundation for the new Town Hall in a day. Which they do.

But before the book's publication, Virginia confided a dilemma to her Farm friends, the Albertsons and the Berkenbushes. She had written Mike and Mary Anne into a literal hole — they were stuck at the bottom of the excavation for the Town Hall basement, with no way to get out. Dickie, then about twelve years old, suggested the steam shovel could become the building's furnace. It was a simple notion, he said. "[There was] a garage in town that had a steam heating system, so I was familiar with it." That became the happy ending of the story, acknowledged at the book's start.

Thinking of the Farm family takes me back to my own family and has made me wonder, again, as to why I am so drawn back to Chestnut Hill. My father was a great and influential university scholar. But he still kept hold of his bucolic Ohio roots: he could make willow whistles and kites, and played a mean harmonica, though he and my mother had purposefully left small-town America behind. He camped, hiked up mountains, and swam lakes. My mother was attracted to the intellectual and social energy of Harvard, but was fundamentally radical and earthy. She majored in biology, teaching us about photosynthesis, cell division, and other natural marvels. She also taught us various left-wing anthems from the thirties: "*Avanti Popolo!*" she would sing at the top of her lungs, clenched fist in the air. At a international horse show in the fifties, won by Spain, she was the only person in the stadium who refused to stand up for the Spanish national anthem, so great was her hatred for Franco. So perhaps in the Farm I found a combination of some of my parents' positive qualities, uncomplicated by ivy-league baggage. Marnie was the radical intellectual; Kay the true working man.

Kay's share was not always easy. The big barn had recently caught fire, and Kay had scars on his arms from trying to beat out the flames as he saved the cows. The newborn calves were taken from their mothers, who cried and bellowed, to be crated and soon turned into veal.

We kids did begin to understand that this was part of a life cycle (though to this day I cannot eat veal). To give milk, the cows needed to calve; to get milk the cows needed to be bred. Otherwise the Farm could not survive. Not much room for sentimentality, though I like to think that some of the heifers were kept to augment the herd.

Money was very tight. One vivid memory I have is of Jeannie. She'd been shopping and had parked at the crest of the hill to unload the groceries. The brake failed and the car started to roll downhill. She came dashing out of the house, and managed to grab onto the open door.

Dragging onto it she tried to stop it from its inevitable course. Of course she couldn't. The frantic look on her face has remained an indelible image for me. Partly as one of what near-poverty really is (the repairs can't be afforded, but we can't get by without the car). And partly because of what I took to be her obvious fear that Kay would be angry with her: Jeannie, who was supposed to manage everything.

Still, on the sentimental side, there was marvellous Dolly, the mare. Old photographs of the Farm always show a grazing horse, so I think of her as part of the Farm ethos: any true farm had to have a horse.

Dolly would come down to the barn in the mornings to get her grain, at which point my sister and I would grab and groom her and put on her bridle. I don't think she minded, or she would have made a fuss. We'd jump up on her, bareback as well as barefoot, and canter over hill and dale. Never a buck from her. Darling Dolly.

Then there were the dogs, Andrew and Prince. They were brothers, part German Shepherd, but (as often happens in human life) were of opposite temperaments. Tawny Andrew was outgoing and cheerful, always ready with wagging tail to roll over for a tummy rub. Dark Prince was terrified of people, hiding whenever any one came near. It became my mission to try to overcome his fear. Perhaps he'd been beaten by someone. As I'd identified with the little critters in *Rabbit Hill*, I identified, even more fiercely, with Prince.

For days and days I followed him around, as he fled from me. I crawled under beds and into other odd spaces, in the house and in the barn. I probably carried treats with me. Eventually he began to relax, and not to fear me; or perhaps, just to expect me. It was a great joy to me (and I hope to him) when he finally came to trust, not only me, but the other Farm folk. Along with *Rabbit Hill* and Marnie's cabin, my friendship with Prince was an important part of my growing-up.

My sister and I have tried to figure out the chronology: I later went back to the Farm without her, more than once on my own, perhaps once with my brother Billy. (Kitty found an entry in her diary saying, "The kids have gone back to the Farm.")

What I recall about these later visits is that we were expected to work. We kids, a couple of them neighbours, would head down to the fields and pitch in as best we could, picking beans and corn, loading bales of hay onto the flatbed truck. We knew that the hay was for the cows and for Dolly during the winter, and the beans and corn for the people. Next day, after the picking, we'd go out to the shed by the barn, and help Jeannie with the canning. She'd show us how to put up the vegetables that the Farm folk would depend on in the months ahead. I still have a scar on my thumb, which I treasure, that I got when my knife slipped as I was trying to cut a bruised part from a cob.

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But then, after lunch, we had our reward, and were taken by Jeannie to the nearby ocean beach. We swam and played in the surf. I remember lying on the hot, hot sand, first shivering, then warming as I dried in the sun, delighting in the sand's heat.

Now, so much later, I've done a great deal of research about the Farm. I have collected information from the Internet, but my richest source has been a memoir written by Frances Davis, *A Fearful Innocence*. She was from a poor New York Jewish family, but her parents moved to Boston and from there came to know the idealistic, left wing Albertsons at Chestnut Hill Farm. As a child, she spent many a summer at the Farm, and describes the barefoot children's freedom in glowing detail. Later, however, she went to Spain as a wartime journalist. Hence the title of her memoir: she contrasts the idyll of the Farm with her ghastly experiences in Europe. Never again was it possible for her to believe in the innate goodness of mankind, though after a severe illness abroad she went back to the Farm to be healed.

I learned from Frances' memoir that Hazel and her husband, a congregational minister, had bought the Farm in the 1920s with the goal of creating a utopian community, trying to integrate the intellectual and the physical: to live/learn from literature and philosophy; and to learn/live from the land. There were, at that time, hundreds of such communities across the continent. The Great Depression and WWII pretty much put an end to such dreams. But in the early Albertson days at the Farm the ideal seemed possible.

Scholars, intellectuals, students came from Harvard and New York by train and tram to the Farm (there was even a tram stop at the end of the lane). Hazel made bloomers for all the young women so that they would not be hampered by their skirts; they wore their hair long and free. They all hayed, chopped wood, and read poetry to one another. Walter Lippmann came to the Farm and eventually married Faye Albertson, Hazel's step-daughter. Yes, it did seem that this utopia might actually be a reality.

But of course these new folk were privileged, wealthy, and young. They were ardent, politically enlightened. But in most cases they ended up back in the lap of their own class, the establishment. Hazel's husband decamped, for greener female pastures, though he always maintained an interest in the Farm. At some point the Farm's economies declined to the point that they had to operate as a bed-and-breakfast, which was, of course, to our great advantage.

Kitty and I have had a creative, nurturing relationship over the past many decades, and I believe that much of this can be attributed to our time at the Farm. We learned about sharing, about the wonders of the land. Our peace-loving and ecological views converge. What greater gift could there be for two sisters than to have bonded through the inspiration of the Farm: Marnie and her cottage in the woods, the old mare Dolly, the books, the earth, the dish-washing assembly-line?

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JOCELYN WILLIAMS

Then

When I wear this once scarlet scarf I feel
your waxed lips and your nose tip
against the pink of my cheek and am filled
with age seventeen.

Jocelyn Williams's poetry appears earlier in this volume.

MADELINE SONIK

Bad news

When I turned thirteen
my father called
all my friends
"bad news"

as if upon their faces
he could read the headline
    "DISASTER"

like planes exploding into buildings
and plagues swallowing up vistas of earth
 famine, fascism, fanaticism
competed with the "F" words rolling
from their teen-aged tongues

in everything they said and did
they announced annihilations

and the eye make-up
and cigarettes
he examined me for

(a witch-hunter combing
intimate parts for moles
and multiple nipples)

all signs of the wicked
      sexuality
he could neither keep
for himself
or prevent me from growing

Madeline Sonik's poetry appears earlier in this volme.