

SAMPLE CHAPTERS
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GUARDIAN AT THE GATE

*Lessons from a
Cape Breton Childhood*

Ian Glasgow



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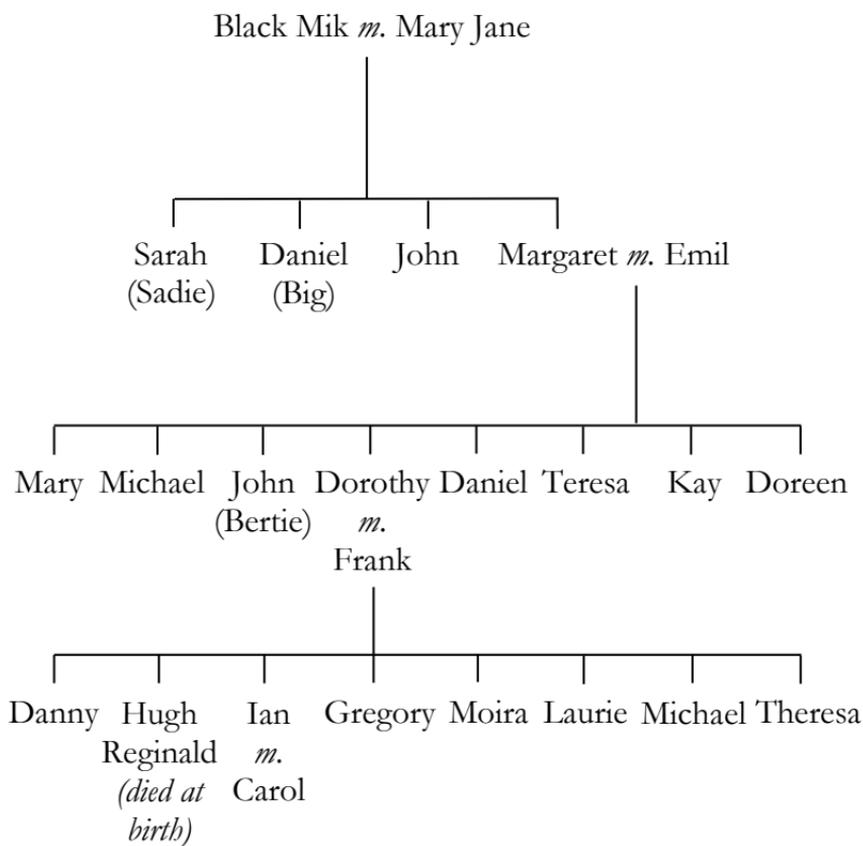
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Contents

<i>1</i>	The Setting	1
<i>2</i>	Change Comes Our Way	32
<i>3</i>	Rooted Relations	58
<i>4</i>	On Becoming Adult	74
<i>5</i>	Remembering Silly Times	89
<i>6</i>	Sudden Changes	105
<i>7</i>	Older Not Wiser	122
<i>8</i>	Some Adults Are Like That	139
<i>9</i>	When Silly Becomes Serious	151
<i>10</i>	Little Lessons	172
<i>11</i>	Memories Recalled	181
<i>12</i>	Really?	201
<i>13</i>	Sad and Funny	207
<i>14</i>	Transitions	220
<i>15</i>	Seeding Understanding	239
	Epilogue	247

Family Tree



Dedication

I dedicate this story to Big and Sadie as the book's point of origin and the source of many truths I learned in my life. I also dedicate it to my wife Carol who provided the support I needed to move some of life's lessons from the recesses of my memory to paper where they could be properly shared. Carol is my greatest supporter and most constructive critic. She read each word many times over and commented with appropriate advice when I faltered. Finally, I dedicate this story to Owen and Mitchell, the first of my grandchildren whose lives deepened my sense of wonder and left me needing to write this story. They were followed in time by Madeleine, Jasmine, Jackson, Dylan, Jace and Ariel, all blessings and treasures who now share in its dedication. Collectively, they deepened my need to tell this story.

CHAPTER 1

The Setting

THE WAKE. I overheard snippets of stories about Big Dan as I moved from the edge of one group to the periphery of another. Dan MacNeil or Big Dan or just Big, for that is what my brothers and I called him, had been a man of few words.

He looked comfortable lying there, which was an odd thought to have, given he was dead. Thankfully, there wasn't a plastic smile pasted on his remains. When Big was alive, smiles squeezed from his eyes slowly, keeping pace with the way he used words. No amount of artistic flourish by someone preparing him for the casket, could recreate that remembered mischief on his lifeless face.

It felt odd standing here listening to the murmured sighs around me. Big had raised other people's kids, my mother being one, and taught my brothers and I to make hay and shoe his stubborn Clydesdale. That last one needed a good knowledge of words having less than five

letters. Big even shared his dog Blaze with us, and that memory is still perfect.

Big had been a miner and farmer, and he and his sister Sadie owned a farm that two of my brothers and I visited often. Whenever we stayed there the five of us would pick up where we had left off, as if there had been no interruption in our previous stay. Filling the water buckets, emptying ashes from the coal stove, or taking an aging horse for a drink, consumed little of our time. There was considerable opportunity for mischief when we stayed on the Farm and adventures took us to the four corners of the property. Memories of those adventures overwhelmed me now as I looked over at Big in his coffin.

Big's silent face reminded me that he often spoke in sentences of five words or less. My questions to him would generally be answered with "Over there" or "Why are you asking?" His instructions could be cryptic "Go easy with that harse, haul back on those reins" or "Fetch that." All would be spoken while a crooked finger pointed in the general direction of what or where he meant, but really seemed to point in all directions at once. I rarely asked for clarification, preferring instead to have corrections where necessary, mumbled at my disappearing back. I never had what you could call a real conversation with Big.

My younger brother Greg looked as uncomfortable as I felt. Big called Greg ‘the other fool’ and me, ‘the fool’. I knew this because my older brother Danny told me. He also said that Big liked us. Danny had been called ‘the helper’, which meant he got more chances to turn the grinding stone and pour water on it, or spit when there was no water to pour. Watching Big and Danny from a distance, you could tell they had ‘real’ conversations. There would be none of these for me now. Memories stirred as I looked at Big and I felt another thought surface. “I am more than memory,” I imagined Big saying.

I shivered as the thought receded.

Seeing my reaction Greg came over and asked, “What happened?”

“You remember how Big would say something and expect you to know what he was talking about?”

“Yes,” he said.

“Well he did it again!”

“When?” Greg asked.

“Just now,” I said.

“How could that be?” Greg asked, looking over at Big.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“You imagined it?” Greg asked, looking at me.

“Probably,” I agreed.

“Maybe he’s going to haunt you,” Greg said with a smile. Then his mood changed, and his eyes misted. “I miss him,” Greg said. “Mother used to say, we should make more room in our heads for what Big had to say.”

I was looking at Big as Greg was speaking and the words “Good Advice” came to mind. I kept staring at him half expecting to see a smile on his lifeless face. There was none of course, but I could imagine a twinkle in his closed eyes. I had no idea that more of Big’s cryptic advice would soon be coming my way.

* * *

REACHING. Big prayed. I know that because I saw him kneeling beside his bed late one afternoon. Big didn’t notice me, and for once I respected his privacy. I’d seen the effort it took Big to get up from a kneeling position when he was working, so I knew praying that day must have been something he really wanted to do.

I was there when Big was taken away to die. A phone call to my mother on a Friday afternoon raised the alarm that Big was ailing and brought us rushing to the Farm. Big’s kidneys were failing. He was holding fluids and had grown too weak to get upstairs to his bedroom. For several days, Big had been sleeping on a couch in the sun porch. When he could muster

the effort, he made slow trips outside trying without success to empty his bladder.

When we arrived, Big was weak, but conscious. My mother kneeled before him and asked how he was feeling. "Fine," he said, reaching slowly for his glasses, "but I could use a little help outside." Big was less than fine and in considerable discomfort. My mother helped Big to the door then turned away while my father held him as he tried to pee. Big wouldn't let a woman help him do that.

The effort failed and as a nurse, Mother knew what was happening. She looked at my Father, shook her head, then took my hand and walked out of Big's earshot before saying; "I want you to call an ambulance Ian, while I talk to Sadie to prepare her for Dan's leaving. Your Father will stay with Dan." I dialed the operator and asked for an ambulance. When I returned, Big was back on the couch with his eyes closed.

It wasn't long before the ambulance arrived. The attendants entered the porch and stood by my Mother as she told Big it was time to go to the hospital. Big allowed the paramedics to move him slowly to the door. Once there however, he placed his arms against either side of the door's frame and froze in place. Big hated hospitals, having lived in one for much of two years after an explosion in the mine he was working. He hadn't wanted to die in the coal

mine, and I expect he didn't want to die in a hospital.

The attendants couldn't overcome Big's brace without hurting him. It was a small moment of defiance. Big wasn't ready to leave. I noticed the strain on Big's face and a drop of black saliva from a tiny plug of tobacco as it squeezed between his lips and dripped slowly down his stubbly chin.

"Stop!" my Mother barked, in a voice that carried more authority than I ever remember her using. "Stop," she said again more gently, directing her comments at the attendants and my Father, not at Big. Coming up behind Big, she ducked under his arm and stood quietly before him. She looked into his eyes, then placed a hand gently under his arm and said, "Dan, let go, I will hold you."

Big looked at his surroundings, taking in every detail. When done, he looked at my Mother without accusation or anger. She pulled on his arm and he allowed her to move his hand off the doorframe. With the aid of the attendants, she walked Big the few steps to the stretcher. She continued holding his hand as he was lowered to the stretcher and rolled out to the ambulance. Mother entered the back of the ambulance with Big, still holding his hand, and stayed with him as the door of the ambulance closed. That was the last time I saw Big alive.

His time in the hospital was short. The doctors removed fluids that had been bloating his failing body and that made him more comfortable. He died three days later.

When Big's wake was over I went home not knowing my stays on the Farm were over, or how much I would come to miss that place. Values had been so clear on the Farm and there had always been a right and wrong way to do most things. Soon, I would be seeing a much different world.



Sadie



Big Dan MacNeil

* * *

YEARS BEFORE. It was Monday in mid-July, and we were well into my school's summer break. By nine o'clock that morning, Big and my brother Danny were bent over the grinding

stone, sharpening tools for the Fall's haymaking season.

Danny turned the stone's handle while Big pressed the long thin mower blade firmly against the spinning wheel. His hands tilted the blade, moving it by miniscule amounts across the stone, first to one side, then to the other, honing the blade to its proper sharpness. As the wheel spun, excess water spilled away, along with blotches of dark chewing tobacco stained spittle, the other liquid used to lubricate the spinning wheel. The spittle would work its way slowly on to the blade, then wet Big's fingers before splashing over the edge of the spinning stone. Big didn't seem to mind any of this, which I expect had something to do with the fact it was his spittle.

Big took care when he spat, having learned the need for caution from a previous failure at this practice. Danny had been turning the wheel's handle but moved his hand at just the wrong time and a gob of black goo landed squarely on his fingers. Big stood up so quickly he almost dropped the mower's blade. He stomped off to the house where he stayed until supper time. Danny figured Big was embarrassed that he missed the wheel. When it was my turn to spin the stone, I carefully stayed out of the way whenever liquid tobacco squished from Big's stained lips to the stone's spinning

surface.

Because Danny was already helping Big that morning, Greg and I were free to wander the Farm with our cousin Sharon, who was visiting for the day. Sharon was fearless and visited infrequently, but when she did it was an event. Once we were out of earshot of Big, Sharon turned to us and said, "Help me find the biggest spruce tree in the woods." Sharon was the first to spot just the tree. I looked it over carefully, but not knowing what I was evaluating, kept silent. Sharon paraded around the tree then pronounced it perfect.

The tree was tall and straight and for reasons I did not yet understand, passed muster. Thick branches extended well out from the trunk, creating a gentle slope from the top of the tree to the larger branches nearer the ground. Sharon slipped carefully between two branches at the bottom of the tree, then quickly climbed to the topmost branch.

The command to follow came from her back. When Greg and I were close enough to touch her shoes, she turned and said, "Find the place where a large branch is sticking out at the bottom of the tree and every branch above it ends just a little closer to the trunk, because," she said, "that's the best place to slide. Like here," she said; and without warning, leapt out from the centre of the tree, throwing her legs

straight out in front of her!

Sharon hit the first branch in a seated position. She held that position for only a second, although it seemed like a long second, then down she went, crashing gently through the branches one after another, sliding further and further from the center of the tree. Young legs and supple bones had no trouble handling the shock, as her feet finally slapped the ground. Strong branches had slowed her descent and what should have been an ungainly fall, had been an artful slide. Sharon's face beamed her pride at the perfect descent. She twisted her neck and looked up at me, now in sole possession of the tree's peak. Yelling from the ground, she said, "Kick your feet straight out Ian, and slide down on your bum."

On her command, I leaped from the tree, throwing my feet parallel to the ground, as I had observed her do only moments before. My bum slapped the first branch with a resounding smack. My second to defy gravity seemed to pass a lot more quickly than hers. Plunging to the ground, I crashed through the branches, sliding further and further from the trunk's center. I arrived on the ground bum first. The descent had been less than perfect. I was stunned and thrilled at the same time. I rubbed where it hurt and looked up just in time to see Greg flying out from the top of the tree, missing the

first branch entirely. Smaller and lighter his descent looked practiced as he slid from branch to branch, bending but not crushing one branch into the branch below. Greg slid safely off the last branch, to stand beaming with pleasure beside us.

On my second leap, I discovered why it was a girl that had invented this game. Sitting on the ground for a second time, I waited for my head to clear and the pain in my groin to ease. I was painfully aware of the need to perfect my technique if I was ever again to bounce without consequence from one limb to the next. Sadie arrived on the scene just in time to observe my second leap from the tree. The distress caused by what she had seen was written on her face and that put an end to tree sliding for a while. While work had always come first on the Farm, there was always room for play and play we managed to do very well indeed.

* * *

THE MACNEILS AND EMIL. Big was born in 1889, and Sadie six years later. As adults they shared a sense of privilege when either spoke of being a MacNeil. It was something grand to be of Scottish descent, better still to be a “MacNeil” and best of all, to be a Barra MacNeil.

The MacNeil's twenty-three-acre farm was located just outside North Sydney, a small sea coast town on Cape Breton Island. The Island was and still is a grace-filled part of creation. In the early 1900's industries in the area included farming, fishing, shipbuilding and coal mining. Also important were the ferry links to Newfoundland.

Immigrants to the area felt attachments to homelands they had left behind. Upon arrival, some found they shared cultural habits and a history with groups already well settled in Cape Breton. Where this happened, the new immigrants could blend seamlessly into their communities. Others, without those ties to existing communities, had to build new relationships from the ground up. That was the case for my immigrant grandfather Emil Arac.

Emil's politically dissident father had been dragged from his Latvian home never to be seen again. After that, nothing could dissuade Emil from leaving Latvia forever. Luckily, Emil's prior service at sea as a young deck hand facilitated his leaving. When he was eighteen years old, Emil jumped ship in North Sydney, Nova Scotia to start a new life. Emil had picked up shipwright skills while at sea and was able to use those carpentry skills in the coal mines of North Sydney. While he hated being underground, the work provided Emil an opportunity to pave the

way for some of his siblings to emigrate to Canada.



Old and only picture of Emil.

Somehow, Big's sister Margaret met and married Emil Arac. Emil and Big were coal

miners and may have moved in the same circles. Emil was, by all accounts, a handsome man who liked fine clothes and to dance. That may have been enough to catch my Grandmother's eye. Their first meeting must have been memorable as Emil was soon able to converse in Gaelic.

With his marriage to Margaret, Emil became a member of the MacNeil clan, a solidly rooted Canadian family. The MacNeils used their skills at farming, mining and carpentry, to support family, and friends when times were tough. Emil's growing family benefited from that generosity. His father-in-law Black Mik, a commentary on his black beard, was a contractor. Black Mik helped Emil and Margaret build their first home close to the MacNeil farm on the Gannon Road.

A few years after that house was built, an innovative land settlement program operating in Western Canada caught Emil's eye. The Government of Alberta hoped to expand its farming population and to that end created a grant program promising land in return for service. Settlers could acquire ownership of a quarter section (160 acres) by contributing labour and a promise to clear a specific number of acres each year. That was an attraction that became Emil's anchor, and in the end a millstone that bound Emil to the West—and separated him from much of his family forever.

In 1926 Emil and Margaret set out for Alberta leaving their daughters Mary and my mother Dorothy in the care of her brother and sister, Big and Sadie. Eight-year-old Mary was left because she was in school and didn't want to leave, while my Mother was left to keep Mary company. Supporting that decision was the MacNeil's belief that until a home was able to receive the Arac's daughters, the West was no place for those young girls. My mother was just three years old and her apprenticeship to life's hard lessons had begun.

Travelling with Emil and Margaret on their westward journey were their sons Michael, John, and Daniel. When they reached Alberta, the Aracs settled in Sexsmith, approximately four hundred- and fifty-kilometers northwest of Edmonton and twenty-five kilometers from the town of Grande Prairie. In a 1928 publication Grand Prairie laid claim to being the largest town in Peace River County; population 1,200.

The Aracs planned to reunite their family when a home was built. When the trek started, Margaret was pregnant with her sixth child Teresa. In the five years that followed Theresa would be joined by two more sisters born in the west. This was the time known as the Great Depression, a difficult period by any measure. Twice in those five years Margaret tried to make her way East to reclaim her daughters. Both

times she was turned back by the weather. Winter, with its unpredictable weather, was the only time Margaret could travel, as summer was a time to support the men working the fields.



Mother, two years further along.

Those five years were a busy time for the Aracs. In addition to clearing fields for farming

and working the cleared land, Emil's skills acquired as a shipwright and working with the MacNeils, enabled the construction of the family's second home. His daughter Teresa credits Emil with having a farmhouse in Nova Scotia so early in his immigration story. When remembering this she says, "the fact that the house still stands today (in North Sydney), shows that the hands of the MacNeil's were on it. And," she adds with pride, "he built the same house again within five years in Sexsmith, Alberta." Clearly, Teresa was as proud to be an Arac as she was a MacNeil.

As their first five years in the West were ending, tragedy added a burden to the Arac family when Emil and Margaret's five-year-old son John drowned in a reservoir on his way home from school. Margaret, pregnant at the time, plunged into the dam to save him but couldn't. Margaret died a year later. Some thought she died of anemia, others of a broken heart.

After her death, the children living in Sexsmith were taken in by friends and family. My Aunt Teresa remembers the time well. She remembers seeing Margaret's coffin being made and lined with black satin. "There were a few men working on it in the living room," she said, "and my younger sister's crib was moved to accommodate the effort." She remembers a

chocolate bar one of the fathers had given her, a purple slip that was knitted for her with “a very fancy stitch with pinkish mauve around the neck ... that purple slip ... we all had it for a long time.” Such is the nature of trauma, that memories like this are stored and treasured forever.

After Margaret died, her mother, Mary MacNeil sent Sadie to bring the Arac children back to North Sydney where they would be safe and well-cared for. In telling this story Teresa said “Only a matter of days after the funeral, we left for the East. They put a stove pipe in the large hay wagon, covered the wagon, and we travelled warm from Sexsmith to Grand Prairie.” Accompanying Sadie were Margaret and Emil’s children; Danny, Teresa, Kathleen, and Doreen. Michael, the eldest son, had been left to help his father with the farm. The great Canadian interior would now separate the eldest brother and Emil from the rest of their family. Danny, the only boy making the trip, would be sent back to Sexsmith at the age of fourteen, into the care of an uncle.

In the end homesteading had delivered little on its promise. Providence had smiled however, when chance and circumstance made Big and Sadie guardians of their nieces and nephews. The gate to the MacNeil’s Farm had opened wide for the returning children. They would

thrive there under the watchful eyes of the guardians to that gate.

Emil never abandoned the homesteading experiment, nor did he reclaim his daughters from the East. I asked Aunt Teresa why the Arac parents had never returned for their children, before Margaret's death or Emil, after. Her answer wasn't complete and picked up on the tone of judgment in my voice. "You don't understand the times Ian, and you don't understand what the Depression was like."

Teresa was right, I didn't. There were other things I didn't understand. For instance, what it must have been like to be eighteen and lose my father in a war-torn country. I didn't understand what it was like to work my way across an ocean and upon arrival in a new land, work in a coal mine that I hated. Then there was the hardship imposed on an entire country by the Great Depression. I was still however, left with my first question unanswered.

Years later when my brother Danny asked Emil why he left Nova Scotia, Emil said he had been "land-hungry." When she heard those comments repeated, my Aunt Teresa protested, "My father and his brother John, hated working the coal mines and being underground. I understand why he would jump at the opportunity to acquire a piece of the best farmland in the country for a price he could afford, his labour."

My Aunt was clear about what she meant. Working the land was better than working in a black tunnel that sunshine never penetrated. She admitted the decision “was a more painful story for the Mother who was leaving land and more.”



The Arac family. Mickie on the left, Margaret with Danny on her lap, Mother standing on a chair, Bertie standing on the floor, Mary on the right.

Something in Aunt Teresa's comments, told me I had asked a question that wasn't mine to ask and that I had been too quick to judge the course of my grandparents' lives. Eventually I would see my mother's take on this situation and realize that judging the consequence of someone else's reach should be left to those paying for the price of that reach.

* * *

DANGEROUS PASTIMES. "Hello," she said, "I'm back."

"Hi Sharon," I said taking note she was not alone. Sometimes, when Sharon visited the Farm, she brought a friend. Today, a pretty girl named Janet was with her. Janet was fourteen, the same age as Danny and Sharon.

"We're going to a school dance," Sharon said, pointing to Janet as the other part of the we, she meant. "We need to practice, so we're going to practice with you and Greg. Not Danny," she continued quickly. Sharon knew perfectly well, Danny would never get roped into something like that.

Dancing as it turned out, meant standing close together and turning in frequent circles while listening to music I didn't like. Dancing with Janet was accompanied by a strong smell of perfumed soap. Greg and I endured one

whole record before revolting.

“But we have two more records!” Janet protested.

“I want to help Danny test his new invention,” I said, “and you can too,” I added.

Sharon didn’t say anything, but I knew she was interested. It was equally clear Janet wasn’t. Danny’s newest invention, ‘the slider,’ had spilled from his mind the previous week. He had attached one end of a rope high enough up a tree to be scary. The other he fixed closer to the ground on a second tree a distance away. Once the slide was over, it would be an easy jump from the low end of the rope to the ground.

Danny had thrown a much smaller rope over the one stretched between the trees. On one end he had fashioned a loop as a foothold. His instructions were to put a foot into the looped end, hold on to the other end and jump away from the tree. Gravity would do the rest. Danny had tested his invention the previous week, but hadn’t told us he slept on his belly for a few days after that, recovering from his fall.

Sharon was the first to jump. “Here,” she said, “I’ll take those,” then grabbed my gloves and started up the tree. When she reached the rope, she stepped into the loop and was gone. Her ride was spectacular.

Everything went so well Janet decided to take a turn. Janet climbed to the launch posi-

tion, placed a foot in the dangling loop, closed her eyes and slid away from the tree. I watched as Janet slid ungainly between the trees screaming at the top of her lungs. Halfway between the trees the rope broke and down came Janet. She landed flat on her back in a bunch of ferns. The ferns were home to a family of garter snakes, a secret that made the slide even more exiting. Running to Janet's rescue we lifted our knees to our chins, hoping to avoid a slithering encounter.

Janet's mouth was a moving oval, opening and closing as she struggled to fill her hungry lungs. We stood around looking down as her face turned purple.

"She's not breathing!" Sharon screamed. "What can we do?"

"Nothing," Danny said, "She'll breath in a minute." He sounded confident.

"How do you know?" Sharon demanded to know.

"Happened to me," Danny confessed.

The four quadrants of Sharon's face seemed to compete for best expression as she struggled with her feelings.

"She just lost her breath," Danny explained.

As we watched a sucking noise came from Janet's throat then her lungs unlocked, and she gulped in air. After that she howled. Anger and tears took over her face as she climbed to her

feet. When vertical, Janet shared that anger with each of us in turn.

“What was that!” she screamed, pointing at the tree then the broken rope then before anyone could answer, pointed her face south and headed for home.

“She didn’t really want an answer,” Danny said, as we watched her stomp away. “I’m glad she’s alright though,” Danny added. “Turning to me he said, “I know where there’s more rope.” I smiled, because it was my turn.

I never had another dance lesson after that and come to think of it, I never saw Janet again either. It seems Danny, Gregory and I were better at seeing the merits of taking risks than the consequences should things go awry. Were it otherwise, we might never have learned anything of lasting importance on the Farm.

* * *

THE FARM. By 1945 Big and Sadie had finished raising the children in their care. Their brother John still lived with them and would until he died. In his later years John communicated little with anyone outside his own head. His life had been shaped by illness compounded by an accident, both of which returned him to a state of childhood dependence.

As a family, the MacNeils had survived the

rigours imposed on Canada by the Great Depression. Big had mined and farmed while Sadie had kept the inside of the house operating smoothly. Working underground would have taught Big to focus on what was directly ahead of him as his work was captured for display in the circular cones created by the light of his helmet. The realities of Big's life as a coal miner and Sadie's as the mother to someone else's children, were complicated by the need for farmers to constantly stroke the soil. Teasing food from the ground was complicated, as nature's ever-changing ways determined what could be done on the Farm and when.



Danny, Ian, Sadie, Moira, Mother holding Laurie, Greg in front.

The ebb and flow of life for Big and Sadie

was interrupted at one point when an explosion in Big's coal mine hospitalized him for the best part of two years. Burns covered much of Big's body and it fell to Sadie to carry the day while he recovered. That was my Mother's world as she grew up to become a nurse and went on to have eight children of her own. My Mother was proud when it was time to introduce her oldest children to the now elderly Big Dan and Sadie. In due course the Farm would become my anchor point just as it had my Mother's.

Life had changed in North Sydney by the time my brothers and I, and occasionally my sisters Moira and Laurie, visited the Farm. Sadie had a husband now. She had married late in life to a widower named Alex who was still raising children of his own. Their brief attempt to cohabit failed and they settled into a routine where Alec took to visiting Sadie twice a week. It was an arrangement that worked for them.

When I stayed at the Farm, I found glimpses of its history in rusted artifacts stored in the old barns. During the summer time, my siblings and I helped press some of those artifacts into feeble service. As we did, we benefitted from the wisdom that time had visibly carved on the faces of Big and Sadie. Each in their own way shared their wisdom with us. Without even knowing it, our character was being formed as we helped crop hay in the heat of a blazing

summer sun. We learned to work without complaint as we turned the soil for a springtime planting. There was respite in gentle breezes as the sun dried our weary frames and comfort in the routine of chores. When the chores were done, we played and in that we found comfort too.



A favourite place to relax at the back of the Farmhouse overlooking Sadie's roses. Danny's first Birthday.

The Farm I knew was a twenty-three-acre parcel of partly-worked land. Gone were the chickens and the few head of cattle that had been there in prior years. Now, the fields only produced small amounts of potatoes, turnips, beets, and carrots. The rest of the cultivated property grew hay to feed 'King', the Clydesdale, now just a pet. A farmhouse capped the

top of a long-inclined dirt driveway. The gate at the end of the driveway was only closed when the Clydesdale grazed. Crudely fashioned stools leaned against the base of fence posts on either side of the gate. Old men told stories from those places of honour knowing full well when facts were blurred by fancy. When listening unobserved, the stories I heard were imaginative tellings. Such was the character of the place.

The yellow farmhouse was well maintained. The kitchen, with a coal stove, a pantry and a storage cully, were on the ground floor of the two-level structure. This floor also boasted the main living room and an adjacent, but rarely used sitting room for guests. That room was outfitted with the home's finest furniture, covered in plastic. The dust covers were removed and stored out of sight before greeting special guests. An out-of-tune piano finished the room perfectly. Most guests were members of the family, so there was rarely a need to defrock the furniture to honour their visit.

While there was no running water in the house, a little cubby hole in a corner of the kitchen held two buckets of cold well water. A counter against a side kitchen wall had three drawers and a sink. The sink's gray water was piped outside. Once winter froze the ground, water from the wash basin was thrown out the back door.

Sunday morning baths took place in the kitchen, usually before the coal stove brought the kitchen's temperature up to cozy. A basin of lukewarm water on a newspaper in front of the kitchen stove got the process started. Weathered hands accompanied by the strong smell of soap would scrub my back. I would face the stove to take my bath, letting what warmth there was seep into every nook and cranny it could touch. My back however would face the opposite wall and shiver uncontrollably. It was an experience befitting the place.

Bathroom protocols were flexible. There was the outhouse of course, but if you were sick, or the outside was just too cold, there were options. If you could carry out the task standing, then a quick visit to a tree near the back door did the trick. If that didn't get the job done an indoor toilet was improvised for a child's convenience. The toilet amounted to a bunch of newspaper spread on the floor. There wasn't a place to sit and the consequence of falling backward was significant. The performance took place in the privacy of our bedrooms. Newspapers were a treasured commodity in the home. They were known to contain the musings of local politicians. The children's indoor toilet met with Big's approval. We seemed to have found the highest and best use for all those musings.

Stoves in the kitchen and living room heated the downstairs, and transoms in the ceiling, funnelled snippets of heat to the upstairs bedrooms. Sometimes with the heat came the murmuring comfort of late-night conversations. Many nights Greg and I tuned into the sounds of whispering voices, before drifting to sleep. A sun porch abutted two sides of the house and a window overlooking the porch made it possible to climb to a landing at the top of the roof.



The tool shed shares this picture with Mother and Danny. Nowhere else is it remembered.

Coal and tool sheds leaned into their tired

footings a short distance from the house. Except for the coal, the contents were more rust than metal. Not far from the sheds was a partially collapsed henhouse and beside that, the functioning outhouse. On the opposite side of the house was a weather-worn barn. The stall to the right of the door was King's. A horse-drawn mower, a rake, and hay cart were stored in the barn and still used to harvest the Clydesdale's winter feed. Big's scythe leaned up against a side wall. The rest of the space was mostly storage, blanketed by dust and cobwebs. The heart of the keeper couldn't let those things rust unused elsewhere. Stillness and the stale smell of scattered keepsakes seemed to lament time's passing here. Anyone taking in the silence of the place could feel the repose. The slow transformation of the barn's contents into formless remains seemed imminent, but unrushed.

If time had stalled there, our lives would have been complete. It didn't of course. When it was my time to leave the Farm behind, I took with me the sure knowledge that the Farm had been a place with a sense of purpose. I would as a result of that, demand purpose from every place that followed.

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