
FARMGIRL ANGST

BY MARILEE FOSTER



FARM FAMILY PLANNING

Out behind the Barzseski farm, when I had my garden there and Sophie was still alive, she'd come out and tell me how hard she used to have to work. Not only in the field—planting, weeding, picking—but in the kitchen too, turning the abundance, the onslaught of late summer, into winter's sauces, staples and marmalades. Twelve hours cutting corn off the cob. "Oh, and the beans," she says, "the tomatoes." And with her arms she gestures and insinuates a slow churning grind.

I do not know for how many generations her family farmed on Hedges Lane, but I know she was the last. There are no farming heirs for that land, and this spring it was sold for development.

Our farm is like that farm was: a family farm. It has been in the Foster name for over a hundred years, successfully passed from fathers to sons, divided by brothers, diminished by sisters, until my father's legacy. He managed to purchase back from non-farming cousins the home farm: the original dirt of our ancestral heritage. He tells me how his father and his uncle used to keep cabbage all winter long, in an open field, near the house, where my asparagus now is. They made a long, narrow bed of straw, the cabbage went on top, then more straw, and then the men took shovels and trenched around the entire bed. As they dug, they threw the dirt on top of the straw, covering it. It would last until almost spring like this, uncovered bit by bit as appetite mandated. He tells me we ought to try it some time.

My mother and I have never spent half a day in the proximity of a hot stove. When we pickle it is with leisure not urgency. And yet preservation in our household is not obsolete, it's a different kind of effort now. We are in the partially cursed, partially privileged position that we needn't worry about the beets going unused when we are faced with a whole farm to "save."

If we don't do any estate planning, when my parents die, my siblings and I will be presented with a tax bill estimated to be about \$20 million. I know some people drop that in a weekend. For Dean and me, such an unmitigated owing spree would cut heavily into other important expenditures, like seed. No seed, no farm. It's called the death tax for obvious reasons. It is triggered by the death of a sole proprietor and then it can kill off the hopes and ambitions of a few more before it's done.

While there are many tools to save farmland, to date there are none which can save families along with it. We work together in the present, but there is meager consensus for the future. My father says he just wants us kids to have the same opportunities he had "to farm this land." We get all the professional help currently available: accountants, bankers, lawyers, land trust executives, insurance agents, hypno-introspective therapists. There is a steady audition of suits and pearls who sit across from my parents at the kitchen table and launch hypothetical plots, go searching for loopholes. All of them are costly, all of them tedious, weighing assets and wants, the volatile ingredients of estrangement.

Beyond death, there are other situations that can cause the demise of a family farm. Divorce. But, ironically, I have long thought the best strategy to keep this farm in the family would be this very thing. My parents could amicably divorce, and remarry the very persons my brother and I intended to marry. And then, assuming our parents pass away before we do, we could marry our true loves and inherit the farm, tax-free. This takes the concept of family farm to a whole new level of self-preservation. □

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