Every week for the past thirty years my father has
gone to Washington, D.C. and sold vegetables on the street.
One of the problems with being a farmer, and especially
an organic farmer, is that people think they know you already.
They think: “Oh, I bet he’s earthy.” They say: “You must
have named your son after Arlo Guthrie, because you’re
hippies.” They wonder: “How can he stand being so dirty
all the time?” But you don’t know anyone until you talk to
them for a while. Maybe years. And it's too much to hope
that you’ll know my father when you’re done reading this.
But I hope you’ll at least see a person who loves vegetables.
My father always wears the same thing: a blue work shirt
and brown pants. I have never seen him in jeans except
in pictures from the seventies. He used to wear a T-shirt
occasionally, but always one that had the name of the farm
on it. He has also always worn the same boots, eight-hole
Redwings that he bought from Locke’s, the general store a
few miles from my house. Until Pauline Locke died, she
kept a full section of boots and shoes in her attic.
My father is six-feet-two-inches tall. He has always been
trim, though I remember him drinking Slim Fast shakes
for a few weeks when I was little. He weighed himself every
morning on the scale we use to weigh cases of cantaloupes
and cucumbers. Though it sounds silly to say this about
your own father, he is handsome. And though I never have
seen him flirt, the women he deals with often seem interested
in what he has to say. When I was four or five we used to
stop at The Big T, a fast-food place in Mercersburg, a town
nearby. I remember he always asked the young woman
cashier for the recipe for the chili, and she would smile and
look down at the counter.
My father married my mother in 1973. One of her friends
from Skidmore was the girlfriend of one of his friends
from the Navy. My mother took the train down from New
Hampshire and went to spend a weekend on the plot he
was farming at the time. She had been a newspaper reporter
and a waitress. She wasn’t sure what she wanted to do with
her life. But she had worked in the woolen mill that her
grandfather owned, and it was a time when people were
interested in making things with their hands again. She said
that after that weekend she knew she would marry him. My
mother is just as important to the farm as my father, but this
is a story about vegetables, and that is my father’s love affair
more than my mother’s.
The farm is in south central Pennsylvania, near exit 180
on the turnpike. That’s about halfway between Pittsburgh
and Philadelphia. It’s built in a hollow at the end of a
two-mile dirt road called Anderson Hollow Road. It has
approximately 120 acres, of which about twenty-five are
under cultivation. The Augwick Creek runs through it. A
high ridge almost encircles the property, so the farm sits in
a shallow bowl. My parents bought it in 1974. It used to be
a dairy farm, and the little white concrete shed beside the
barn is still called the milk house, even though it’s been
used for irrigation supplies for thirty years. There’s a con-
crete ring in our yard about twenty feet in diameter where
the silo once stood. My parents sold it to pay the doctor for

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my birth. You can see the rebuilt silo along Squirrel Hill Road over in Hustontown.

A farm has lots and lots of jobs that need to get done every day. The chickens need to be fed and watered, and the eggs collected. Vegetables need to be planted every day so that those being picked today will be replaced. Beds need to be made and rows laid out. Mowing is a job that never ends. Zucchini and yellow squash need to be picked three times a week, tomatoes are an all-day job at the height of the season, and corn needs to be picked extra early so that it stays cool.

There are a lot of people who do this work. They fall into three categories: the interns, the hourlies, and the locals. The interns are a group of people interested in sustainable agriculture, who hope to learn by doing. They live in cabins built in various places around the farm. They don’t have electricity or running water. Their gathering point is the summer kitchen, built onto the back of the barn. The kitchen has six screen windows that are six feet high and three feet across. It has a collection of old sofas and chairs, some hooks on the walls for guitars, and a big table. Every morning at seven o’clock, the interns meet in this room. Everyone picks a chair, and then my father walks in and sits down at the table. He has a list of jobs. People give him updates on the crops they are responsible for. They discuss the weather a lot.

The hourlies live near the farm, but they aren’t interested in agriculture. Their fathers and brothers are farmers, and farming is all they talk about. When you talk about the same thing all the time, it gets really, really boring. They are all women and are very good at specific vegetable-related tasks. They take the big bags of basil from the field and put it into smaller four-ounce bags. They can measure exactly four ounces with one hand. They bunch beets and know exactly how many make twenty-five pounds. They put it into smaller four-ounce bags. They wash lettuce and cut away exactly the right amount so that slugs have nowhere to hide. They are the only people on the farm who can plan on leaving by a certain time. That’s when they go home to their own farms.

Even though sometimes the farm can seem like a closed system, it needs local people from the outside. The trucks need to go to the mechanics. Chicken feed needs to be picked up at the mill. Hardware needs to be bought from the farm supply. Whenever anyone leaves the farm, my father presses a list into their hand of all the things he needs. The people who supply these things know how to do a particular task well or how to provide some specific item. They fix tires and irrigation pumps. They sell six-inch pipe and carriage bolts and cotter pins. They adjust the cooling unit on the cooler and machine replacement tines for the cultivator. They usually don’t have much patience for distraction or unnecessary complication. They do a job and then they move on to the next thing. Overthinking things isn’t usually a problem on a farm.

For example, when my father first walked into the house that he had bought, a family was still living in it. There was a little girl in a wheelchair with a fresh tracheotomy, watching the rest of the family butcher a deer on the kitchen table. This kind of focus on the task at hand can make them seem sort of otherworldly, but these people know what they’re doing. Butchering a deer is a job. A kitchen table is a good surface to work on. Once it’s over, you clean up and move on to the next task.

When my father first started selling vegetables, he brought them to people’s front doors. He started doing this when he was a very little boy growing up in Norwood, Massachusetts. He would pull a wagon around the neighborhood. After he dropped out of law school, he started doing the same thing in Washington, D.C. Eventually there were too many customers, so he stayed in place and people came to him. He went to four different neighborhoods and rang a bell so that the people would come out and meet him. Over the years, the bell went away. There were fewer stops, because more people were willing to travel. Now there is one market, and thousands of people come every Saturday morning from all over D.C.

Every Saturday my father gets up at 3:30 in the morning. It’s still dark outside. My mother has made coffee the night before, and it’s sitting on the counter. The dogs get up to see what’s happening, but then they go back to bed because it’s too early. My father goes out to the packing shed where the coolers are. There are two coolers: one warm and one cool. Some vegetables need to be kept warmer than others. Basil needs to stay warm or else it turns black. Corn needs to stay cold or the sugars convert to starch and it gets tough. Tomatoes don’t need a cooler at all; they are kept in the tomato cave.

The coolers are totally full. The day before, someone has made up the pallets. Each pallet takes up approximately twenty-five square feet of floor space. The really tall ones are ten feet high. Building a pallet is complicated. Things that go on the bottom need to be strong. Peach baskets are stiff, and they form a perfect five-by-five square. When the peaches come from the orchard the baskets are piled high. A standard half-bushel is mounded, because when people buy fruit they like to think the mound is free extra stuff. To move the peaches on a pallet, someone needs to go over all the baskets and make them flat. A piece of plywood, called
a “peach board,” goes on top of each basket so that the peaches don’t get smooshed. Nothing is more smooshable than a ripe peach.

The next layer on the pallet might be a vegetable that comes in stiff wax boxes, like beans. A standard bean box is called a “one and one ninth” because it is one bushel plus one ninth of a bushel. That may seem like an odd measure, but it has a purpose. It’s the difference in volume between how a machine fills a box and how an actual person does it. At some point, big vegetable wholesalers got tired of buying boxes that didn’t look full. They looked this way because when a machine fills a box it leaves some empty space, and the beans settle in transit. But on my father’s farm the beans are picked by people. Bean picking is piecework, so these people get paid by how many pounds they pick, rather than by how long they work. This means that when a box is full, the picker doesn’t get paid for the time it takes to leave the field and get an empty one; that’s wasted time when they could be picking beans. So they shake the boxes to eliminate any wasted space, and fill them as heavy as possible. At night, when the tallies go up, they compete to see who has the heaviest boxes.

The third layer might be half-bushel boxes. Squash goes in a half-bushel box. When the squash is picked, a wagon is pulled slowly down the rows by a tractor. From the side of the wagon, a conveyer belt juts out fifteen feet. The pickers walk down the rows following the belt. This conveyer is built on a frame made out of an aluminum extension ladder, like the one you use to paint your house. The only people in the world who would use this machine are small vegetable farmers. Not too small, though, because on a really small farm you do everything with your hands since you can’t afford equipment. The conveyer belt is built by Amish guys on a neighboring farm; they sell a few a year. Amish people are good at making things that work.

Strawberries might go next. They come in flats that hold either eight quarts or twelve pints. Picking strawberries is a terrible job. They grow close to the ground, under a thick cover of leaves. You have a choice: bend over so that your back kills you, or crawl along on your hands and knees. Hay is laid between the rows for mulch, and it scratches. There’s something called diatomaceous earth on the leaves—a fine dust made of tiny marine creatures. This dust repels slugs, but it makes you sneeze. A few years ago my father bought something called a Drangon. It has two padded beds built around a lawnmower engine. The pickers lie face down on these beds with their arms dangling down to pick the strawberries. It’s driven with two paddles that are manipulated with the picker’s feet. The Drangon is built in Denmark. Scandinavians are also good at making things that work.

Following is a list of some of the other vegetables that go on pallets. This is less than half of what we sell. The list might seem overwhelming. I catalogue the vegetables here not because I want you to remember them all, but because I want you to get a sense of bounty, of what a person can grow from the earth with a seed and some water. If you scan this list, and a few items jump out at you, that will be enough. My father doesn’t love all of these vegetables equally; he’s particularly fond of tomatoes and corn and kohlrabi, but the value is in the choice. When you are a farmer, you get to choose what you’ll grow and then what you’ll eat. Bringing this choice to others is what my father does.

The list: thyme, okra, apples, celeriac, snap peas, snow peas, english peas, lima beans, cannelinni beans, fava beans, edamame, daikon, french breakfast radishes, finger radishes, Easter egg radishes, black radishes, turnips, rutabagas, parsnips, thubarb, asparagus, standard tomatoes, purple cherokee tomatoes, tangerine tomatoes, green zebra tomatoes, red zebra tomatoes, sun gold cherry tomatoes, pear cherry tomatoes, diva cucumbers, pickling cucumbers, gerkins, euro cucums, lemon cucumbers, red oak lettuce, boston lettuce, corn, zucchini, yellow squash, sunburst squash, squash blossoms, blue potatoes, yukon gold tomatoes, Russian banana fingerling potatoes, red carrots, sorrel, oregano, cilantro, chives, sage, lemon mint, mustard, Indian heart plums, yellow plums, apricots, nectarines, oyster mushrooms, enoki mushrooms, portobello mushrooms, shitake mushrooms, lacinato kale, red Russian kale, collards, brussel sprouts, broccoli, broccolic raab, cauliflower, dandelion greens, mizuna, swiss chard, fennel, dill, blueberries, raspberries, blackberries, gooseberries, Alisa Craig onions, cillini onions, leeks, pea shoots, garlic, garlic scapes, hubbard squash, acorn squash, butternut squash, pie pumpkins, jack-o-lanterns, jack-be-little pumpkins, standard beets, chiaogga beets, golden beets, bok choi, spinach, purslane, eggplants, green peppers, brown peppers, red peppers, yellow peppers, cantaloupes, sweet baby watermelons, kohlrabi, shallots, and jerusalem artichokes.

My father’s market is set up in northwest Washington, D.C., in a neighborhood called Cleveland Park. The houses are big, and the cars are old Volvos with window stickers from schools like Oberlin and Vassar. Lots of the houses have very beautiful gardens that someone spends a lot of time in. Mostly Democrats live here. Republicans live out in Alexandria or Reston, where they can get more house for the money.
My father’s customers come from these houses, and he has known them, and their children, for a long time. Lisbet is Dutch and lives in a big yellow stucco house, with a beautiful swimming pool in the back. When I was little I would go over and swim while my parents worked. When Lisbet’s husband was very sick, she still came to the market every week, though she sometimes cried while she talked to my father about endive or carrots.

Marcy Bounds lives in the same well-kept Tudor that her mother did. Mrs. Bounds was one of my father’s first customers. Marcy always wears a pantsuit and pearls, even on Saturday mornings. Her hair is jet black, her skin is pale, and she has a pinched smile. It was always rumored among the cashiers that she worked for the CIA, and people would call her “Natasha” behind her back. I saw her on a panel this winter in Cambridge discussing roles for women at the Agency.

The white-haired man has never had a name. He is obsessed with health and is desperately skinny. His teeth are very bad. For fifteen years, he has worn a sweater every day, even in August. In D.C. this is strange. Every week he buys a huge amount of one vegetable. He tells us all about how this vegetable is a miracle, and that he isn’t eating anything else. Sometimes it’s ten pounds of basil. He buys five twenty-five-pound boxes of cantaloupes. He fills up plastic bag after plastic bag of tomatoes and asks for the rotten ones that we’ve picked out of the boxes. He stopped coming last year, and someone told us they thought he had died.

My father is very proud of his customers. Michael Jacobson is the director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest. Joan Claybrook is the head of Public Citizen. When I was little, Walter Mondale lived up the street, and he would come every week with his wife. When he was running for president, Secret Service guys would watch him pick out his corn and tomatoes.

The trucks are unloaded, and the boxes of vegetables are lined up on the ground. They are all kept closed, though the early risers gather around and say, “I don’t want
to bother you, because I know you’re busy, but….” They’re eager to see what’s in the closed boxes. The cashiers begin to set up their stations. When I was little we used hanging scales, and everything was priced at forty cents, eighty cents, or a dollar twenty. Hanging scales are mostly accurate to a quarter pound, and each of those prices could be easily divided in the cashier’s heads. The tallies were done on brown paper bags. Now we have calculators and electronic scales set up on rickety card tables. We don’t take credit cards. We offer an IOU to anyone who needs it. In thirty years, no one has ever failed to pay us back.

My father’s famous phrase is “folks.” He says, “Folks, we’ve got some delicious peaches this week.” Or, “Folks, if you haven’t tried kohlrabi, just slice it thinly and sprinkle a little salt on it.” As soon as he says “folks,” heads pop up all over the market. These people know that they can trust what comes next. You earn that kind of trust over years and years of telling the truth to the same people, over and over again. When you taste a vegetable that is good, you know it. It’s very easy to decide if someone has told you the truth.

When the market is over, my father goes home. He always stops at McDonald’s to get a cup of coffee, and usually at a truck stop to take a nap in the grass. After he gets home and unloads the truck, he goes inside to read the paper. He’s too tired to do much of anything else.

I was sitting with my father on the back porch a few days ago, after we got home from market. He said, “I hope that those people appreciate what we’re bringing to them.” My mother said, “Of course they do, Jim, that’s why they come.” But he isn’t convinced that they really, really appreciate the vegetables. He’s spent most of the years of his life worrying about vegetables.

When I came back to Cambridge I had three shopping bags. One had eight ears of corn, a bag of basil, and eight yellow squash. The next had two pints of cherry tomatoes, four pounds of green beans, and ten potatoes. The third one had two bunches of chard, four bulbs of garlic, and a dozen eggs. Usually when I’m home I eat like most busy people do in the city. In the morning I might grab a muffin that has been baked in an oven in an industrial park. I’ll have a slice of pizza at a meeting or eat an overpriced salad made by a person wearing a hairnet. Maybe I’ll eat some M&Ms and then cook a dinner of some spinach from California and a chicken that has been roasted in the store. But everything in my three shopping bags had come from my father’s farm. At some point he had worried that the chickens didn’t have enough clamshell in their diets to make the eggshells hard. He worried that the potato digger had nicked too many of the delicate skins. He lay in bed one night and thought about whether the tomato room was at the right temperature to keep the cherry tomatoes fresh. When I eat that slice of pizza, or that chicken, I think about what’s on TV or next on my schedule. But when I ate what was in those three bags, I thought about how delicious it was, and the fields and the chicken coop. And mostly, I sat for a quiet minute, and I thought about my father.