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The Last Barn

There's a saying in Southeast Georgia that when a farmer builds his last barn, he will die.

Well, I know an aging farmer whose fields are sprouting outhouses. In the past year, he has built a tractor shed, a corn crib, a smoke house and even a screened-in shelter next to his fish pond. All out of scrap lumber.

My friend Rheta Johnson, acclaimed syndicated columnist at the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, recently wrote about an elderly woman who paints plastic jugs and strings them up around her yard. The woman said she wasn't finished. "I'm not finished," she repeated.

My seventy-year-old mother has raised seven children of her own and dozens of other people's children. When one of my brothers died a few years ago, I read in his obituary the names of sisters and brothers I didn't know. My mother explained that she had legally adopted some of the unwanted dozens. In 1994, she suffered a massive stroke--that's doctor-talk for brain and body shutdown; since then she has taken to raise a two-year-old abandoned boy. She's not finished.

I am fifty-three. I am writing another novel, though I doubt I'll live to see even half of the twenty-eight I've already written in print. That's a total of twenty-nine lives I've lived, including my own. I have more short stories than I can keep up with: I write them, send them out, then wait and wonder which magazines or journals got which story--will I hear from them? I'm always surprised when I get an acceptance on one of the stories. I'm surprised too when I get a rejection, but not very bothered by them. I'm challenged. I don't worry about not publishing another novel, but I do worry about losing the urge to write.

My twenty-six year old son, Frank, is nothing is not obsessive-compulsive--he got it honest. I prefer to think of what ails us as having a passion for what we do. Before he graduated from high school, he promised to try college for two quarters; when the second quarter ended, he quit and went to work with his daddy. In less than a year, he had turned a barely-surviving construction company into a thriving one. He read all he could find on asphalt paving, then consulted and hired a local asphalt man who had retired from the state highway department. They love the smell of hot asphalt first thing in the morning; they don't care that their boot soles are weighted with tar at the end of the day. Southland Contractors, Inc. now pays ten men fair wages--something hard to come by in Southeast Georgia. Together, they are making our flatwoods a little flatter and blacker. And they're not finished.