

1 Seeking Walden

It's said that if you want to figure out your life's passion, look at what you loved as a child. When I was growing up, I loved Barbies. You might think, there's a girl who'll go far, what with Astronaut Barbie and Internist Barbie and Professional Figure Skater Barbie. Actually, I predate all those ambitious, take-the-world-by-the-horns Barbies. In *my* time, back in the sixties, all Barbie did was sit around and look hot and wait for Ken to ask her out.

But I also loved to read, especially fairy tales like *Sleeping Beauty*, and stories about gutsy, courageous girls like *Jo March* and *Laura Ingalls*. And when I wasn't reading or hanging out with Barbie, Midge, and Skipper, I was playing in the woods behind our house. Maybe I was living out fantasies inspired by *Sleeping Beauty's* forest hideaway, or *Laura's* "Little House" series, but I found my bliss climbing trees, building forts and riding my bike around Woodland Hills, a new development perched on the rural edge of St. Cloud, Minnesota.

My husband, John, was an outdoorsy kid too, with a childhood a lot like mine. (Minus the Barbies.) Your mother sent you outside to play after breakfast, and except for lunch, you were supposed to stay there until it got dark or dinnertime, whichever came first. But then, you didn't really want to be indoors anyway. Certainly not John—from what I can tell, he *lived* "The Dangerous Book for Boys." He'd roam nearby woods and fields with his little gang of friends, playing Robin Hood or cowboys and Indians, coming home so dirty his mom would have to hose him down.

Later, as a young husband and father, John got his fresh air nurturing a small vegetable plot for his family. But it could be the outdoor activities so many of us love as adults, like camping, hiking, and gardening—and I hear vacations on working farms are getting popular!—are a way to free our inner tree-climbing, mud-lovin’ child. To return to a simpler time, when most people lived on farms—or at least *knew* a farmer. A time when you spent far more of your life outside than in.

Whatever it is, I never stopped loving the outdoors, and John never lost his longing for wide open spaces...a love and longing we indulged with our mutual passion for gardening. But there came a time when we both yearned for a deeper connection with the land...for a more peaceful life, one more attuned to nature’s pace. Okay, that sounds pretty highfalutin’—all we *thought* we wanted was more room for a kitchen garden, and a little quiet in which to enjoy it. Regardless of our goal, our journey to that life began the day we reached our tipping point with urban noise and traffic and crowds...when John and I bucked our play-it-safe, risk-averse natures and decided to leave the city. *Little Farm in the Foothills* is the tale of our fifty-something leap of faith, to seek out a slower, simpler, and more serene lifestyle on a rural acreage. And embrace a whole new way of living.

Who’d have guessed how complicated “simplicity” could get. Or that serenity and reinventing your life was no match made in heaven.

Before I hit my Boomer years, I’d never seriously considered living in the country.

Despite my woods-playing, I hadn’t spent much time in the true boondocks. In elementary school, I’d been a Campfire Girl, but my group never went camping or sat around a campfire—much less lit one. I’d gone tent camping exactly once in my life, a post-high school girlfriend getaway memorable only for the fact that for the entire three days, we’d frozen our eighteen-year-old tushies off. In June!

Anyhow, I’m all for city comforts. Call me picky (I’m the first to admit I’m annoyingly germ-conscious), but I’d always been sort of revolted by the idea of an on-site septic system. There’s all that “stuff” in a tank right next to your house, for Pete’s sake. And I liked city

water. The only well water I'd tasted was loaded with sulfurous compounds, and the rotten-egg smell wafting up from your glass would set off a gag reflex. I didn't want water from just *anywhere*—it could be unhygienic, okay? I have a B.S. in environmental studies. I *know* about contaminated groundwater. I wanted my drinking water from nice clean municipal water treatment plants.

But water was only a side issue. In my youth, I'd had the kind of country experience that would turn most people off permanently.

2 🍃 Down(er) on the Farm

My brief fling with rural living was not, as Jane Austen would put it, felicitous. My first husband had been a farm boy, and had worked all through high school at a neighbor's operation, milking cows and making silage. After Terry graduated, though, he was done with farming—he planned a career in a technical field instead of a cornfield. But the third year of our marriage, when he was languishing in college after a stint in the Navy, he had a change of heart. One November day, Terry decided that country life would be a great way to recharge his batteries, and took a job as a milker on a large dairy farm.

As a young mom with a toddler, I suppose I was game for a new adventure. The night before the job started, we were invited to our new boss' home for cherry pie. I took in the Van H.'s cozy farmhouse, with the gingham tablecloth and colonial-style maple furniture, and smiled at Mrs. Van H., thinking, *this could be fun*. Then again, it could've been the yummy pie...but still.

My smile lasted right up until I walked into our new home. Farm employees, you see, are often supplied with a place to live. Our on-site residence, near the milking parlor, was a beat-up single-wide trailer that should give you new sympathy for the housing plight of seasonal farm workers.

The Van H. farmhouse was about a quarter-mile from the farm, while the mobile, I kid you not, was sitting right next to, and I do mean practically right on top of, the cow pen adjacent to the barn. This place was the filthiest dwelling I'd ever moved into. Grime and

mouse droppings everywhere. And you understand I was more germ-conscious than most people. Probably more germ-conscious than most bacteriologists. Farmer Van H. was of Dutch descent, and though I hate to perpetuate ethnic stereotypes, aren't the Dutch supposed to be big on cleanliness being next to godliness? For a year, my sister had lived in The Netherlands, and told me how those tidy Dutch homemakers kept their homes spotless. They even swept and washed the front steps each day. "Clean" was their middle name. Well, this guy was the exception to the rule.

Although my days were full already with Carrie, our fifteen month-old baby, and doing a newspaper motor route I shared with hubby, I embarked on Project Mobile Muck-Out. Every fixture and appliance, every cupboard, windowsill and inch of floor had to be wiped down and sanitized. I was a whirling dervish, a younger, poorer Martha Stewart on a mission.

Around midnight of the third day, I stripped off my well-worn rubber gloves, and gazed around with satisfaction. With my house clean, the mice droppings only a memory, I felt like a whole new woman. Life was back on track.

Or so I thought.

Here in Western Washington, the prevailing air mass off the Pacific Ocean means it never gets all that cold—mostly in the forties, even in the middle of winter. This being the case, apparently Farmer Van H. felt that certain house amenities were an option instead of a requirement. Like insulation. The mobile had no skirting beneath it, or other protection from the elements. We had to keep the electric furnace going day and night, and the place was still frigid. Not surprisingly, our first electric bill exceeded a month's worth of groceries.

Despite the trailer's inadequate underpinning, I figured that since I hadn't seen any mice in the house, there weren't any. My blissful ignorance didn't last long. One evening, alone with Carrie, I settled her into her highchair for dinner. I opened a cupboard to get out a package of pasta and out jumped a mouse. It landed on my thigh and scampered down my leg.

"Aacckk," I screamed, leaping back. Shuddering in revulsion, I screeched again, then glanced at the baby. She promptly burst into

tears. I managed to pull myself together—despite the sensation of mouse feet lingering on my leg—comforted Carrie, then examined my food supplies. The mouse had been munching on our lone loaf of bread, and the pasta package had holes in it. So, this loathsome species could actually *eat* through plastic bags. Out went the bread, and on my next trip to town, I had to spend some of our meager grocery money on two sturdy Rubbermaid bins for food storage.

Strapping my rubber gloves back on, I resumed my search for mouse droppings. Not only did I have a freezing house next to a cow pen, I had to share it with mice.

3 🌿 Thank God I'm (Not) a Country Girl

Now that I was unofficially a farmer's wife, I had to adjust to a different kind of lifestyle, which included a more cavalier attitude toward living things. One day, outside the milking parlor, I found a dead calf. Now, I know “stuff happens.” But did Mr. Van H. (who shall otherwise remain unnamed) need to leave this poor little dead thing lying out in the open for three days?

Farm life was also more isolating than I'd counted on. Being a full-time mommy, I had to forgo the bicycling I'd always enjoyed, so for fresh air, I'd take Carrie for a stroller ride each day. But here on the farm, walking was out too—with the nearest town about eight miles away, the only accessible road was the busy highway fronting our humble abode. I could hardly take my baby for a jaunt on the road shoulder while double-trailer semis roared by.

One day, desperate to exercise, I packed Carrie into her baby-backpack, hoisted her onto my shoulders, and ventured into the denuded cornfield next to the dairy barn. About halfway across the field, I met our boss, Farmer Van H. “Out for a walk, are you?” he said with a chuckle.

“That's right,” I said, smiling. Okay, he'd housed us in pigsty, but other than that he was a really nice guy. “This break in the rain won't last long.”

“You know, I just painted the field,” said he, with another *hee, hee*.

I kept smiling. Painted the field? “That’s okay. I really want a walk.”

Well, there’s one good thing about winter in the country: the cold sort of covers up dairy farm smells. It took me about a quarter mile of hiking to figure out what he meant by “painted.” He’d just spread manure all over the field, manure that now covered my lone pair of sneakers. And the only way home was to retrace my steps through the cowpie-laden field again.

My one opportunity for a change of scenery was my part-time job delivering newspapers. It wasn’t exactly dinner out on the town, or even a trip to the library. But for a few hours, ensconced in our little Nissan, I could get away from that beastly trailer.

Driving a motor route isn’t the mindless activity you might imagine. It’s not just a talent, but an art form, shooting a rolled-up paper into a square plastic tube, calculating how hard to brake so you can hit your target and still keep your car moving. For entertainment, I had two cassette tapes (remember those?), a Haydn trumpet concerto and one of Gerry Rafferty’s, the ’70’s popmeister. Driving along country roads, I’d crank up “Baker Street,” and sing along with some guy’s dream about buying land, and giving up booze and one-night stands. I had minimal experience with booze, and none with one-night-stands, but at twenty-three, with a husband and baby, I reveled in my temporary freedom. Taking in the beauty of the Cascade Foothills around me, ringing our county’s farms and fields, I inhaled the brisk—albeit manure-scented—air drifting into the car. Despite our crummy digs, at moments like these, I could say life was pretty darn good.

Then real winter set in.

Once or twice each season, our mild winters take a holiday when northeast winds sweep down from the Canadian prairies. This easterly flow pushes aside the marine air, and brings bitter cold. And a local geographical quirk ensures that there’s no escaping this wintry blast: a river valley to the north funnels that biting wind straight into our county, especially the flat farmlands. When you’re used to

forty degrees Fahrenheit, the wind chill of these northeasters steals your breath.

One January day on the Van H. farm, a northeaster blew in. A bummer, since our electric bill would go from painful to through the roof, but certainly no tragedy. But in our under-insulated home-sweet-home, something more sinister was at work than a little cold air: by day's end, our plumbing froze solid. And how could this happen so fast, you might ask? Another feature of the trailer was that the wastewater exited our place via an unwrapped pipe. You might think Farmer Van H. was unaware of this arrangement, except this unprotected pipe was clearly visible from every direction.

Later that night, the plumbing backed up into the toilet and bathtub. The boss turned out to be as cavalier about housing repairs as dead livestock removal. After three days of hiking up to the milking parlor to use the facilities inside (when it was unlocked, that is), or being reduced to peeing in a five-gallon bucket in a freezing, sewage-filled bathroom while Farmer Van H. ignored our phone calls, I put my foot—in its manure-stained sneaker—down. “Terry,” I said to my husband, “we’re leaving.”

He felt badly about ditching Mr. Van H., but at that point, he could choose his boss, or his family. He chose wisely. After I'd packed up our things, I left the farm and country life without a backward look. Maybe I wasn't exactly scarred for life, but I came away with enough Post-Sewage Stress Syndrome to dream about backed-up toilets for months.

Me, even *entertain* the notion of moving back to the country?
No. Way.