

A young girl with long dark hair, wearing a dark dress, stands in a field of tall grass and dandelions. She is smiling and holding a large bundle of dandelion stems with white seed heads. The background shows a line of trees and a fence under a soft, overcast sky. The overall color palette is muted greens and yellows.

# THIS LIFE IS IN YOUR HANDS

ONE DREAM, SIXTY ACRES,  
AND A FAMILY UNDONE

— A MEMOIR —

MELISSA COLEMAN

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This Life Is in Your Hands

*One Dream, Sixty Acres, and a Family Undone*

Melissa Coleman

 HarperCollins e-books

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# **Dedication**

*For my sister Heidi*

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## Epigraph

—*but beauty is more now than dying's when*  
—e. e. cummings

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## Prologue



**View of Nearings' Cove (Photograph by Ian Coleman.)**

**W**e must have asked our neighbor Helen to read our hands that day. Her own hands were the color of onion skins, darkened with liver spots, and ever in motion. Writing, digging, picking, chopping. Opening kitchen cabinets painted with Dutch children in bright embroidered dresses and pointed shoes. Taking out wooden bowls and handing them to my mother, Sue, to put on the patio for lunch. As Mama whooshed out the screen door with hair flowing and child-on-back, the kitchen breathed chopped parsley and vegetable soup simmering on the stove, and the light glowed through the kitchen windows onto the crooked pine floors of the old farmhouse where I stood waiting.

It was a charmed summer, that summer of 1975, even more so because we didn't know how peaceful it was in comparison to the one that would follow.

"Ring the lunch bell for Scott-o," Helen called out the window to Mama. She liked to add an o to everyone's name. Eli-o, Suz-o, kiddos for the kids, Puss-o the cat. We were the closest she had to children.

As the bell chimed, Helen took my small hand and turned it upward in hers. The kitchen was warm but her skin cool and leathery. Mama returned with Heidi as I stood long-hair-braided and six-year-old brave, holding my breath. We knew about Helen that when she didn't have something interesting to say, she'd change the subject. She smoothed my palm with her thumbs and looked down but also in her cropped granite hair holding the dusty smell of old books.

"Tsch, what's this?" she asked of the marks I'd made with Papa's red magic marker.

"A map," I told her, proud of the artistry on my fingers. "A map of our farm."

"Pshaw." She tossed my hand aside like an old turnip from the root cellar.

So she read Heidi's palm instead. Heidi was a blue-eyed two-year-old, "an uncontainable spirit



everyone said. Even she held still, mouth open, breathing heavy, snug in the sling on Mama's back and Helen smoothed out her little fingers.

"Short life line," Helen muttered, bending toward the light from the window, then paused as catching herself too late.

"What do you mean by short?" Mama asked, brown eyes alert, mother-bird-like. "Thirty, for years?"

"Oh, it doesn't mean a thing," Helen said, and began to mutter about the overabundance of tomatoes in the garden.

Seven years earlier Helen had thought differently, perhaps, as she read my father, Eliot's, hands when he and Mama visited, looking for land. Some say hands hold the map of our lives; that the lines of the palm correspond with the heart, head, and soul to create a story unique to each of us. Understanding the lines is an attempt to understand why things happen as they do. Also a quick way to figure out who might make a good neighbor. Helen and Scott Nearing, authors of the homesteading bible *Living the Good Life*, wanted young people around who would find the same joys in country living as they did. Their philosophy held the promise of a simple life, far removed from the troubles of the modern world. The good life.

"Very strong lines," Helen told Papa that summer of 1968. He had the deepest fate line she'd ever seen, and wide, capable hands. With hands like his, they could do anything. And such a nice-looking couple, too, young and clean-cut—Papa with his sandy tousele of hair, blue eyes, and straight nose. Mama's long, dark hair parted in the middle and kindly chestnut eyes. Shortly after that visit, my parents received a postcard from Helen and Scott offering to sell the sixty acres next door. That's how we came to be back-to-the-landers, living on a farm cut from the woods without electricity, running water, or phone on that remote peninsula along the coast of Maine. Trying something different to see if truth could be found in it.

"The Vegetable Garden," the sign at the end of our drive said, "Organically Grown," with the vegetables in season listed beneath: carrots, lettuce, tomatoes, zucchini. Past a gravel parking lot, the driveway thinned to a grassy lane curving around the orchard and down a gentle slope to a wood-timbered stand with wet-pebble shelves full of fresh produce for sale. Customers and farmworkers came and went as the surrounding gardens ripened beneath the pale disk of midday sun and cicada thrummed regular as your pulse. On the rise by an overarching ash tree sat our small house, its slanted roof and front eyes of windows looking across the greenhouse and gardens below. The only home I ever known.

Heidi and I were always outside, naked and barefoot, dancing on the blanket of apple blossoms, skipping along wooded paths, catching frogs at the pond, eating strawberries and peas from the vines, and running from the black twist of garter snakes in the grass. We lay in the shade under the ash tree, gazing up at the crown of leaves and listening to the sounds of the farm—birds calling, goats bleating, chattering of customers at the farm stand, and whispers of tree talk.

When you focused on the leaves fluttering in the dappled light, they vibrated and shimmered in one, becoming a million tiny particles. You felt a shift inside, and you began to vibrate too, on the same frequency as everything else. All secrets were there, all truths, all knowledge. You had to search with your heart to find what you were seeking. It might not be spoken in words, it might be hidden

rhyme, in song, in images. You knew the tree and the earth were the same as you, made of particles like you, come together in a different form. You loved it all as you loved yourself.

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**T**here are reasons why nothing lasts forever.

Papa says it was the little red boat Heidi must have carried down to the pond and set afloat. One of our farm apprentices said she was the kind of child who wasn't afraid of anything. Another thought it was the black crow that hung around the farm that spring, a single crow being an omen of death in the family. Someone else suggested it was her lost caul, the rare birth sac myths say will protect against drowning. Others blamed it on our lifestyle—not a proper way to raise children.

Mama usually says it was the rain. She didn't worry about us girls playing by the pond because the pond wasn't that deep during the dry months of summer. But when it rained, the pond filled and turned black as the water caught in barrels under the eaves.

None of these things alone tells the whole story. Only in looking back can you see a pattern in the threads of life, interwoven with the events that would tear them asunder, and within that pattern lies the knowledge I'm seeking—the secret of how to live.

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## Chapter One

# Family



**Eliot with goat kid and Sue with Lissie, a few days after birth (Photograph courtesy of the author.)**

**F**or the first nine years of my life, Greenwood Farm was my little house in the big woods, located long ago and far away up the coast of Maine as it was from mainstream America. Five hours from Boston, three from Portland, along winding roads that became successively narrower from Belfast to Bucksport to Penobscot, until they finally turned to dirt. If you were a bird, you could shorten the trip at Camden by cutting over the scatterings of fir-pointed islands on Penobscot Bay—North Haven, Butter Island, Great Spruce Head, Deer Isle. Viewed from above, the islands formed bright constellations in the dark sky of water, a mirror of the universe leading you back in time.

Just past Pond Island, you'd see the forested head of Cape Rosier reaching into the sea from the mainland and a sandy line of beach, beyond which a narrow road wound up through a blueberry field and disappeared into a dappled stretch of forest. A mile in, our land was surrounded by the cape's uniform blanket of fir, spruce, and the purple scrub of blueberry barrens.

On a morning in early April of 1969, as my future parents were clearing brush under the bare crown of the ash tree next to their new home, two sparrows circled once, twice, then alighted on a branch to announce their arrival with a familiar melody of clicks and twseets. Surprised by the sound, Mama raised her head to spot the diminutive brown birds with patches of white at the throat. "The white-throat," she exclaimed, an armload of brush resting on the pronounced swell of her belly. She

always loved sparrows best—so joyous in their simplicity. “They mate for life and come back every year to the same place to build a nest,” she added, having checked it in her *Peterson’s* before.

“A sure sign of spring,” Papa replied, giving a low whistle through his teeth before returning with renewed vigor to his work. Easter would fall that Sunday, though they’d lost track of such dates before then—spring was a resurrection with or without a holiday.

It was not the spring of hyacinth, lily of the valley, and drunken bumblebees, but the New England spring that comes just before. Mud season. The last pockets of snow melted away as rain fell from the sky in steady gray sheets, filling hollows and ruts with dark puddles. Ice crystals released their hold on soil that sank into a primordial muck.

“Son of a gun,” Papa said. “The ruts in the driveway are up to my knee.” The white VW truck wallowed like a pig when he revved up and tried to drive through. Sometimes he made it, sometimes he didn’t.

“Looks like we’d be having the baby at home even if we didn’t want to,” he said after one unsuccessful attempt.

Mama’s belly was the perfect half round of the wooden bread-mixing bowl, a defined mound under her favorite anorak with the fur-trimmed hood. It appeared before her when she exited the outhouse and entered the door of the farmhouse. Her face was round too, glowing like the moon. Standing at the kitchen counter preparing lunch, she looked normal from behind, but when Papa came and put his arms around her, they could rest on the curve of her belly as his hands searched for the shape of a foot or leg.

“There, Eliot, there again,” Mama said. “Movement.”

His larger hand pressed next to hers, waiting for another kick.

“Yes, I felt it,” he said. “I really did that time.”

“It could be any day now,” Mama said. She felt something changing inside, a slowing down and getting ready.

Scientists say my waiting self could already hear the chirp of Mama’s voice, the ha-has of Papa’s laughter, the thump of feet and the click of Normie-dog’s paws on the wooden floor of the farmhouse. There would have been the shush of sweeping, the crack-shatter of Papa chopping kindling, an explosion of firewood dropped into the bin, the crunch of gravel outside, goats bleating as they waited to be milked, water splashing at the spring. Most of all, I would have felt the constant sound of Mama’s heart beating, a steady drumbeat on a rawhide surface, blood rushing through valves in her arteries and capillaries, keeping me alive. A new home awaited, one Mama and Papa had worked hard to make safe from what they saw as the dangers of the outside world.

Six months earlier, on October 21, 1968, my parents had moved from Franconia College in New Hampshire to a makeshift camper on the sixty wooded acres Helen and Scott Nearing sold them for \$2,000. There was no mail service, no telephone or electrical wires, no plumbing. All of that ended a mile down the road at the Nearings’. Mail was picked up at the post office, the one public building in Harborside, a tiny town located four miles from the homestead along the western side of Cape Rosier’s coast. Calls were made fifteen minutes away on a pay phone at a store off the cape in Bucks Harbor, also home to the famous Condon’s Garage, where Sal gets a spark plug as condolence for his lost tooth in the children’s book *One Morning in Maine*.

“Cape Rosier looks like the profile of a moose’s head.” Mama pointed out to Papa on the map of Holbrook Island and its neighbors to the north made the distinctive shape of horns above the dot for

the town of Harborside, a round unnamed pond in the middle was the eye, the head of the cape was the nose, and the Breezemere Peninsula hung below like a chin under an open mouth. This moose head appeared to be almost an island, with only a thin neck holding it to the mainland. They laughed when they learned that the Indian name for the cape was Mose-ka-chick, which actually meant “moose rump.”

Their sixty-some acres made a nostril in the moose’s snout, about a mile from the ocean and two hundred feet in elevation above it. A dirt road wound up from Nearings’ Cove to curve along the southern edge of the property before heading back out to the sea on the other side. Across the way were the undulating rock and scrub of a blueberry barren, and beyond that stretched the uninhabited head of the cape at the tip of the moose’s nose.

The site of my future home was only a rise in the forest surrounded by spruce and fir, a cluster of birch, and the large ash with its healthy crown of branches. “This seems like a good place to begin,” Papa had said, standing beside the tree. “We’ll have to start building right away before winter.”

“A home of our own, at last.” Mama sighed, and that image alone soothed her. She felt a twinge in her stomach, like a feather stroking the inside, and hugged her expanding belly with her arms. She hadn’t realized how homeless she’d been up until that point.

While Mama’s father was Harvard-educated and her mother descended from a passenger on the *Mayflower*, they never aspired to be part of wealthy Boston society or had the money to become so. Papa’s parents, Skates and Skipper, though not rich, were in the *Social Register* and part of the beach tennis, and country club circles of Rumson, New Jersey. “Fonsy people,” Mama liked to joke with blue-blood affectation. Young and in love, my parents hoped to make their way without concern for the *Social Register* and Harvard degrees and to leave behind their respective family affairs—shuffling off the shell of the past to grow a future of their own making.

During the last two weeks of October, Papa shoveled out a hole eight feet deep, six feet wide, and ten feet long—where the root cellar would sit beneath the house—and laid the foundation with rot-resistant cedar posts. A self-taught carpenter and woodworker, Papa learned from odd jobs and projects, including renovating the interior of the hunting lodge where they lived in Franconia. Though he’d never actually built a home before, he had a book, *Your Engineered House* by Rex Roberts, that broke down the process into an easy-to-follow plan.

He sketched a layout based on the blueprint in the book, eighteen by twenty feet, slightly longer than wide, with south-facing windows in the front. A shed roof rose from the back at an angle and extended past the face to provide an overhang for the front porch. Reverse board-and-batten construction would be used for the exterior siding, as Roberts suggested—meaning the inner wall studs made the seal beneath the exterior boards to save on wood. After the \$2,000 for the land and other expenses, their \$5,000 savings was dwindling quickly. Papa wished he could have cut and used the trees from the property, but there wasn’t time to let the wood cure, so the lumber came from the local sawmill—cedar posts, planed pine boards, and two-by-fours. Regardless, they were able to keep the cost down to \$680 to build the house we called home for the next ten years, at a time when the national average for a home in town was closer to \$20,000.

Papa’s tools consisted of a handsaw, hammer, level, measuring tape, and carpenter’s square. On top of the foundation he laid the beams that supported the floor, then the corner and roof supports and wall studs. He nailed on the floorboards, roof, and walls, leaving breaks for windows. Rock wool insulation was unrolled between the studs, and black tar paper served for exterior roofing. The easy part was that there were no electrical wires or plumbing to worry about, no refrigerator, washer, dryer, toilet, bathtub, or other appliances to buy. Food would be stored in the root cellar, accessed by a trapdoor from the

kitchen, and the bathroom was an A-frame outhouse located in the woods at the edge of the clearing.

As Papa worked on the house, Mama returned to Franconia with a trailer attached to the VW truck for the rest of their things. Noticeably pregnant, she managed to move the cast-iron cookstove onto the trailer with the help of friends. Next she herded the goats and chickens into the back of the VW and drove the seven hours to the farm. The chickens lived in a coop next to the camper, and the goats ran free. Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, and the Monkees drifted in from the outside world on the battery-powered transistor radio as Mama and Papa cooked over a portable Coleman stove and showered with a plastic bag of water hung from a nail to warm in the sun. The camper was cramped and cluttered, but they kept up the illusion that they were on an expedition and it was base camp.

The first snow fell while Papa worked beneath the protection of the new roof. “We can’t move until it’s done, otherwise we’ll get used to it like this and never finish,” he told Mama. The interior walls took shape, with planed pine boards nailed vertically from floor to ceiling over the insulation. To the front of the side door sat the wood cookstove, surrounded by an L-shaped counter with an embedded stainless steel sink, a ship’s nautical water pump, and a water container below. A dining table made of varnished pine boards and crossed-log legs, with tree stumps for chairs, sat beneath the tall south-facing windows looking out under the overhanging roof. The far back corner walls were covered with bookshelves above built-in L-shaped benches that Mama would cover with maroon padded mats for a “sofa.” In the corner behind the kitchen, a raised sleeping loft over closet storage formed the bedroom space. The only appliances were a galvanized grain mill clamped to the kitchen counter, the radio, and kerosene lanterns.

On a walk along the coast with the goats, Mama found a piece of driftwood that she carved and painted with their names, “Eliot and Sue Coleman,” and nailed to a post where the rutted path to the house left the public dirt road. By December 1, a little over a month after they started, Papa declared the house complete. As anticipated, the four-hundred-square-foot space felt like a mansion after the cramped camper, and the accumulating snow made its comforts all the more welcome.

**W**hen Mama told Helen Nearing, her new neighbor and mentor, that she was pregnant, she expected congratulations from the woman who was becoming an alternative—if opinionated—mother figure.

“You should have waited,” Helen clucked instead. “One needs time and energy to make a foundation as a homesteader. Children will use all that time and energy.” Mama recounted the incident to Papa, but passed it off by saying Helen probably didn’t value the joys of childbearing because she was not herself a mother.

When the local doctor in Castine refused to do a home birth, Helen stepped up to suggest a midwife she knew named Eva Reich. The Reich home and laboratory, Orgonon, was located three hours west of Rangeley, Maine, but Eva lived with her husband on an organic farm in nearby Hancock. Eva’s father, Wilhelm Reich, the noted psychiatrist, scientist, and former associate of Sigmund Freud, gained notoriety through his experiments with a natural energy that he called orgone, but was put on trial by the FDA in the 1950s for his unorthodox methods and his attempt to collect this energy for healing purposes. The government, in an amazing act of censorship, had Reich’s orgone accumulator destroyed and many of his books burned, and Reich died soon after in prison. Eva later adapted her father’s theories in her work with children, using what she called butterfly touch therapy as a way to heal traumatized or colicky infants, but in the 1960s she was simply part of the small network of midwives supportive of home birth at a time when the establishment frowned on it. Papa planned to call Eva from the Nearings’ phone the minute Mama went into labor.

“Let’s just hope she arrives in time,” Papa said.

Four years earlier, when he was age twenty-six, a child of his own had been the furthest thing from Papa’s mind as he approached the buffet in Franconia College’s dining hall. A small college of three hundred students, it had a campus located on a ridge near Franconia Notch on the site of the once grand Forest Hills Hotel, affectionately dubbed “the wedding cake.” Athletics included the fringe pursuits of kayaking and rock climbing, and students were required to sign up for work programs—cleaning buildings, serving meals, washing dishes, and other daily tasks.

My mother, age twenty, was on meal duty that day. A slender sophomore in an embroidered Indian shirt, she had clear skin, square jaw, and hazel eyes set off by dark braids falling to her shoulders. Having dropped out of Lawrence University, where her parents had encouraged her to go, she decided instead to ski bum in Vermont at Mad River Glen. It was her first act of defiance, and she found reward in the carefree life of the mountains. Come summer she applied and was accepted at Franconia for fall, joining a community that shared her alternative inclinations. Behind the buffet, she glowed with newfound confidence that brought out her natural beauty. When she served Papa a scoop of mashed potatoes, their eyes met, and a spark of possibility ignited.

Mama’s pupils widened in surprise, then contracted as if exposed to too much light. There was confidence in Papa’s blue eyes and quiet smile that made her heart beat more quickly and set off a sudden flutter in her stomach. Everyone was in love with the handsome new graduate-assistant Spanish teacher; his wiry athleticism and passion for whatever he was doing—for life—drew people to him. He also happened to be partial to petite brunettes.

“I’d like some more, please,” Papa said to Mama, returning for seconds. When he returned for thirds, he invited her to go camping. Back then, teacher-student relationships were commonplace, but Mama told herself she wasn’t about to become a cliché. She said she had a paper due. Papa found her wholesome yet shy manner intriguing. He asked again. Life reached out its hand, the bittersweet smell of fall in the air.

“Yes,” Mama said.

**M**ama’s water broke on the afternoon of April 9, and events unfolded according to plan—that is, until Eva’s car got stuck in the mud. She had to walk the last mile to the homestead, worrying she wouldn’t arrive in time. Mama was lying in the bed loft in darkness, the contractions rippling the bow of her belly and clenching like fists between the bones of her hips. She breathed and sweated as Papa held her hand, assured by her confident grip. She’d been through birth before with the goats and knew it would happen on its own.

“Someone’s here,” Papa said as Eva, a middle-aged woman with mellowing Germanic features and short gray hair, bustled in and gave Mama a shot of natural sedative to help with the contractions, then walked down to the Nearings’ to ask Scott to pull out her car. When she returned with Scott, he helped Papa boil water to sterilize the clamps and left them to wait. Around 1:30 a.m., after eight hours of labor, my slimy head crowned. Suddenly Eva was talking loudly to Papa. The umbilical cord was caught around my neck, and my face was turning blue. Eva quickly slipped a finger under and got the cord loose enough to cut. After the head, the rest of me slipped easily free, and I emerged sucking my thumb, apparently unperturbed that I’d almost strangled to death. Eva tied the rest of the cord into a knot, and Papa cut it from my belly button. A girl. They laid me on Mama’s chest, and I immediately began to nurse.

Eva helped clean the loft but saved the placenta, suggesting Mama eat some to replenish the blood.

and nutrients lost during birth and help contract the uterus. Mama was not offended because she knew the mother goats ate their placentas, too, so she tried it raw, remembering it as tasting like liver. Papa was amazed at how quickly her belly shrank back to normal—after a week of nursing, she was her regular slender self.

The name Melissa came from the book *Look to the Mountain*, for the pioneer woman who with her husband, Whit, settled in New Hampshire's North Country, near Mount Chocorua, in the mid-1700s. As teenagers expecting a child with no money to buy land in town, they traveled by birch-bark canoe to the wilderness, where they claimed their one hundred settlement acres, built a home, and lived off the land.

As it turned out, Helen's hesitance about children was not unwarranted. I arrived on the same day as a large delivery of strawberry plants, asparagus roots, and fruit trees that needed to be planted immediately, and one of the goats kidded a day later. The quiet of winter was over, and spring had arrived. Mama and Papa did the only thing they could—they embraced the challenge with all the energy and optimism of their youth.

**A**fter Papa called family from the Bucks Harbor pay phone to announce my arrival, Mama's mother, father, and sister Marth came up to visit, driving from Lincoln, Massachusetts, to find life for themselves, most part harmonious within the new pine cabin in the muddy clearing. Mama sat on the padded benches holding me in her lap, trying to act as if having a human baby at home was as normal as it was for a goat, but the harmony she worked so hard to foster began to unravel under the inquisition of her mother, Prill. Mama had called eight months earlier to say she was pregnant, and not to worry, because she was planning a home birth.

"Sue, dear, are you sure that's safe?" Prill asked, her voice taking on a familiar pinched tone.

"My brothers and I were born at home," my grandfather David said in the background.

"Shushh." Prill motioned to David, holding her hand over the receiver. "*Your* father was a doctor."

In the 1960s, though we were only a century removed from a norm of home births, the old ways were branded just this side of witchcraft. To educate themselves, Mama and Papa read *Natural Childbirth* by Grantly Dick-Read, the British obstetrician who developed the modern concept of natural birthing. He believed that the social and emotional fear surrounding a hospital birth caused tension in a woman's body, making the natural process unnecessarily difficult. Not surprisingly, his theories were met with resistance from the medical community, accustomed as it was to using drugs and other methods Dick-Read deemed unnecessary.

Papa liked his in-laws and encouraged Mama to give them the benefit of the doubt. "You've got a legacy of Yankee and Puritan skepticism behind you," he said. "Not an easy thing to live with, but that's what makes you so tough." Three centuries earlier, Mama's ancestor, the pilgrim Henry Samson, left his home in Henlow, Bedfordshire, England, as a teenager to seek his fortune on the *Mayflower*, landing on Plymouth Rock in 1620 and celebrating America's first Thanksgiving the following year. Since that time, the family had become less adventurous and more Puritan. In one memorable incident, Mama's grandmother Nanna forbade Prill to elope with a handsome stranger from Kentucky. Nanna was domineering, "the Shark," the family would whisper in later years, and she was not about to lose her only daughter to a southern man.

"We need to keep the family together," Nanna told Prill with a hinting dismissal of Prill's father, who was asked to leave after being discovered in bed with the maid. Attractive and well liked, Prill found a husband closer to home, one of the four Lawrence brothers she knew from summering



Westport Point, Massachusetts, near Cape Cod. The son of a Boston doctor, David went to day school at Belmont Hill and on to Harvard like his three brothers, once going on a double date with JFK. He and his brothers especially loved to ski, often hiking up Mount Washington in spring to compete in the annual Inferno, a downhill race on the steep slopes of Tuckerman Ravine.

“My dear, they were adventurous boys,” Prill would say. It was likely these hints of her father’s adventurous spirit that Mama clung to in her own search for a fulfilling life, and found most appealing in Papa.

As a child growing up in Nyack, New York, Mama preferred the summer months when the family packed the car and headed for the guest cottage next to Nanna’s house on Westport Point. In a style typical of the region, the weathered cedar-shake shingles of “the Wing” had faded in the salt air to a silvery gray that matched the stone walls of a once-thriving agricultural community. Mama loved the simpler life there, and the farms. What she didn’t love was the weight of Nanna’s often oppressive opinions, heavy on her family’s shoulders. Prill and David were afraid to stand up to Nanna and do whatever she wished, suppressing their emotions with classic Yankee stoicism.

“I want to go to Putney,” Mama implored, referring to a hippie boarding school in the mountains of Vermont that her uncle had attended, and she never forgave her parents when they said they couldn’t afford it. They moved to the Boston suburb of Lincoln, where Mama attended high school and began to disappear. She was quiet and polite, but underneath there was something missing, some deep unmet expectation of happiness. She longed to spend more time sailing and skiing with her father, but his work as a bank vice president consumed him. Perhaps her expectations were too great, or perhaps her needs ran counter to what her family had to offer, but by the time she finished high school, she was already looking down alternative paths for fulfillment. When she met Papa, she glimpsed the possibility of a different kind of life, and she jumped for it.

**M**ama’s jaw tightened as her family surrounded her, filling the small space of the house. She handed me to her mother, who sat down in the rocking chair where Mama liked to nurse me. When I arched my head back in my grandmother’s arms, thinking it was time to nurse, Prill quickly handed me back to Mama. Prill had grown up during the transition from the discipline method of child rearing to what many termed the permissive methods of Dr. Spock. Her own parenting style had been a little of both, but in Mama’s mind everything she did was wrong, even things like referring to bowel movements as “BMs” and pee as “tinkle.”

Then as Mama lifted her shirt to nurse, my grandfather got up and left the room in discomfort. “I don’t like to breast-feed our children,” Mama had declared to Papa during her pregnancy, and he heartily agreed. In 1969, more than 75 percent of babies were fed commercial milk formulas. As a result of women’s staying in the workforce in the wake of World War II and the well-financed marketing of formula companies, baby formula had become the norm and breast-feeding nearly taboo.

“The German chemist Justus von Liebig developed the first commercial milk formula,” Papa explained to his in-laws. “He’s also known as the father of the chemical fertilizer industry. That’s what convinced me our children should be nursed.” As in the garden, Papa wasn’t about to trust a chemical substitute to take the place of nature. Though they may have been somewhat skeptical about Papa’s passionate explanations, Prill and David were charmed by his enthusiasm and tried to ease into their role as grandparents. Mama, however, remained in a constant state of defense, unable to relax until her family packed up to return to Massachusetts.

**T**hree years earlier in Franconia, it was a certain book that set my parents on this unexpected course of their lives together. Thinking of that book, I imagine it as an old genie's lamp waiting in that dimly lit health food store. Its magic was of the kind books possess when they come into our lives at the right moment to show us what we need to learn. As my parents opened its worn pages, their future was released.

Not long after they met, Papa told Mama he wanted to get a yogurt maker. Mama suggested a trip to Hatch's—she was looking for a grain mill to grind flour. In the 1960s, you couldn't easily buy whole wheat flour or real yogurt—you had to make it yourself—and Hatch's was one of only a few natural food stores in the southern New Hampshire–Vermont area where you could find these weird sorts of things.

“There are almonds and cashews in bulk,” Mama said enthusiastically as they drove over to Southbury in Johnsbury on a late fall day. “And coconut peanut butter, which is almost better than mixing tahini and honey. And an energy drink of tomato and lemon juice mixed with brewer's yeast and live yeast powder. What a boost!”

“Hot damn,” Papa said.

Health food united Papa and Mama as much as, if not more than, their love of the outdoors. “How are the nuts and berries today?” more traditional friends liked to tease. Papa came to whole foods as an athlete needing to maximize his nutritional intake, but Mama's interest in healthy eating started as a way to keep her weight down. An aunt had given her *Let's Eat Right to Keep Fit* when she was a pudgy teenager, and she adopted the whole and raw foods advocated in the book to find the slender figure she would keep for the rest of her life.

Mama and Papa shared a growing anger when shopping at supermarkets filled with rows upon rows of packaged and canned processed foods, or when seeking something other than fast food on a road trip. Why did it have to be so hard to find good, healthy foods that nourished the body rather than depleting it? Before the industrial revolution and the world wars whole and fresh vegetables, meat, and grains had been more commonplace, but the factories and economic growth of the 1940s and '50s supported processed and canned food and the convenience of the supermarket. By the 1960s, but foods were all but outlawed in favor of prepared meals and mixes—“empty food,” some called it. *A* one of Papa's favorite cartoons stated, in reference to the neutron bomb: “It's called the junk food bomb. It destroys populations while leaving profits intact.”

Advertising had done its job—overworked women wanted to buy their food ready-made instead of slaving in the kitchen like their mothers. The problem was, no one yet knew the effects these “easy” foods would wreak on the health of the nation.

As Mama and Papa entered the white clapboard New England–style house at 8 Pine Street, a bell rang to alert the owners, who lived above the store. Hatch's was founded by former missionaries from India who had become missionaries of health food. Mama and Papa were greeted by the scents of candle wax and sage, and by the Hatches' son David, who wore a one-piece blue jumpsuit, his long hair pulled back in a shaggy ponytail. His wife, Carol, was breast-feeding her baby in a chair by the cash register.

“Welcome, welcome,” David called, pattering nearby as they shopped.

There were bins of dried peas, kidney beans, lentils, brown rice, spices, and, of course, whole groats to grind into flour and cultures to make yogurt. In the back of the store was also a lending library with books about natural living. Papa was drawn to one on healthy eating called *Faith, Love, and Seaweed* by the father of Olympian swimmer Murray Rose about the diet and mind-set that would

the gold in 1960, and the less useful *Breatharianism*, about living on air. A month later they were back, not for the liver drink, which Papa found unpalatable, but for the bulk food and books.

“You’ve got to check out this one,” David told them, pointing out Helen and Scott Nearing’s *Living the Good Life: How to Live Simply and Sanely in a Troubled World*, the 1954 edition, with a print of the cover of a green wheelbarrow behind a row of maple trees. The pages were well worn.

“This is right on,” Papa said, reading the book aloud to Mama back at the cabin they shared in Franconia. In *Living the Good Life*, the Nearings told the story of leaving New York City in 1932 to become homesteaders in Vermont—turning an old farm into their primary livelihood, building a stone house, maintaining an organic garden, and living off the sale of syrup from the maple grove on the property.

“We left the city with three objectives in mind,” the Nearings wrote in their conversational but self-serious tone. The first was to live independent of the economy; the second, to improve health; and the third, to find liberation from the unethical trends in society. Ultimately, the Nearings sought to make a living “with our own hands.” What Helen and Scott were talking about in *Living the Good Life* was not exactly revolutionary, except that in the 1950s and early ’60s, it was. To give up your hard-earned place in the socioeconomic hierarchy and forgo modern conveniences was blasphemy; self-sufficiency was a threat to the status quo. But to Papa, the Nearings’ book was far from a threat—homesteading sounded like the next great adventure.

I’ve climbed all the real mountains I want to climb, Papa thought to himself; here’s a way to put those skills to use on a lifelong expedition, a mountain with no top. And Mama was eager to climb with him. They didn’t want to be hippies in the traditional sense, having no interest in drugs or communes; rather, what appealed to them at the deepest level was the sentiment espoused by Henry David Thoreau over a century earlier, when he moved from the town of Concord to a rustic cabin on Walden Pond.

“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately,” Thoreau explained. “To front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life.”

They found that the idea of going back to the land was far from a new sentiment, and Americans taken as we are by the romance of nature, seem to find the concept especially compelling. After Thoreau, the nature essayist John Burroughs left his job as a federal bank examiner in the 1880s to take up residence in the Hudson River Valley at a remote cabin called Slabsides, where he wrote about conservation and farmed in relative simplicity for the times. Then, at the height of the Great Depression, economist Dr. Ralph Borsodi began an experiment in “voluntary simplicity,” a concept that led him to move from his native New York City to a farm in the countryside, as detailed in his 1933 book *Flight from the City*. *Living the Good Life* was now inspiring a new generation of discontented city dwellers, and soon the political climate and energy shortages of the 1970s would spark the coals of the back-to-the-land movement to flame.

**F**rom December to March, after they moved into the farmhouse and before I was born, my future parents lived “the good life,” as defined by the Nearings, striving to follow the Nearing formula of four hours a day of bread labor, four hours of intellectual pursuits, and four hours of social time. In other words, divide the day between hands, head, and heart. Hands: chopping wood, making food

woodworking, sewing. Head: reading, learning to play the dulcimer. Heart: caring for each other talking and laughing together.

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The smells of wood smoke and simmering onions from soup filled the little house; the root cellar was stocked with vegetables they'd brought from their Franconia garden, as Mama planned for the birth of their first child and Papa prepared for the birth of the first garden. Mama sewed baby clothes and Papa made a wooden-handled box to carry his seeds, and a tool chest from leftover lumber carving it with Scott's saying, "Work as well as you can and be kind."

They referred to *Living the Good Life* as their guide:

We would attempt to carry on this self-subsistent economy by the following steps:

1. Raising as much of our own food as local soil and climatic conditions would permit.
2. Bartering our products for those which we could not or did not produce.
3. Using wood for fuel and cutting it ourselves.
4. Putting up our own buildings with stone and wood from the place, doing the work ourselves.
5. Making such implements as sleds, drays, stone-boats, gravel screens, ladders.
6. Holding down to the barest minimum the number of implements, tools, gadgets and machines which we might buy from the assembly lines of big business.
7. If we had to have such machines for a few hours or days in a year (plough, tractor, rototiller, bull-dozer, chainsaw), we would rent or trade them from local people instead of buying and owning them.

"That list was our initial guideline," Papa told a visitor. On the Nearings' advice, they also developed a five-year plan to define their goals. "A plan is essential," Papa explained. "There are so many things to do that unless you follow a plan you may end up doing nothing except think about how much there is to be done. That first summer and autumn we planned to make a garden, build a little greenhouse in front of our living room windows, and dig another root cellar to complement the one we already had."

One of the many obstacles to self-sufficiency that winter was lack of firewood. The green wood Papa cut that fall needed at least six months to cure. "I'll be damned if I'm buying wood, of all things," Papa said. "We're surrounded by it." Each challenge, he began to realize, had a solution. While clearing more trees, he noticed that the thick dry branches at the bottoms of old fir and spruce trunks had up to fifty rings of growth. "It's such compact wood it makes for slow burning," he told Mama, pleased to find a temporary source for heat and cooking fuel that could be cut and used immediately.

The pulse of material needs began to slacken. The less they satisfied the urge to buy things, the more the craving—as with sugar, carbohydrates, and alcohol—began to wane. The drugs of the modern world were only a mirage of need easily forgotten in the absence of fulfillment. "I used to buy a new article of clothing when I was tired of wearing what I had even though it was nowhere near worn out," Mama wrote in the journal she kept during those early years. "Now we try to have clothes we like and wear them until worn out (being patched over and over)."

"Use it up, wear it out, make do, or do without," was the homesteading adage, and it served them well.

When the Russian revolutionary classic *Dr. Zhivago* played at an Ellsworth theater, it alone

merited emerging from hermitage. Papa grew a Yuri mustache, and though Mama preferred him clean-shaven, she indulged his fantasies by sewing him collarless Russian peasant shirts. They added the Russian “ski” to their names, which implied honor—Eliot-ski and Sue-ski, the dog Norm-ski, and one of the goats would be dubbed Goat-ski—imagining they were living the subsistence life that Dostoevsky and Tonya led at Varykino when the revolution forced them into hiding at a remote family estate.

**P**apa had a picture book of European farms with rich ancient soil and gentle rolling hills that he would look at in the evenings by the light of the kerosene lanterns.

“This one.” He’d point out to Mama. “This is my favorite.”

They dreamed of a patchwork of fertile beds spreading out from the house in all directions, with careful paths and neat rows of plants. However, when they looked out the front windows that spring of my birth, the reality was tree stumps in all directions. Papa had cut as many trees as possible over the fall and winter, climbing up to saw off the branches for firewood, then felling the trunk and sawing it into logs to cure for next winter’s wood. Once the snow melted, the carnage emerged, resembling the aftermath of a forest fire.

Living primarily on food grown or hunted yourself was a daunting concept in the supermarket era of the 1960s and ’70s, and for many back-to-the-landers, the biggest challenge. Added to our situation were the short growing season, thickly forested land, and poor soil.

“Whatcha growin’?” the Maine joke went, one farmer to another.

“Rocks,” was the dry answer.

Despite the obstacles, the natural affinity Papa had found in his first garden at Franconia inspired him and encouraged him to keep at it. As Mama nursed me in the rocking chair by the front windows, Papa declared war on the army of tree stumps with a pick, mattock, and handsaw. He’d heard from Scott that if you sawed the side roots and taproot from the center of a fir trunk, you could pull the whole thing out with your hands. He tried a small one, chopping the roots from the trunk with the mattock, then pushing it back with the pick to detach the taproot with the handsaw, and voilà! The stump came right out. Not all the trees were so easy. Some took hours to release. A friend of the Nearings told Papa he looked like Paul Bunyan, swinging his ax and wresting the trees from the earth with his bare hands.

“Ever thought of getting a chain saw?” the fellow asked innocently.

“We’d rather do without and work more slowly in peace,” Papa replied in his affably military manner. “A power saw is an unnerving noise. It pollutes in every way, the vibrations and the stench it makes.”

“We prefer to use nature’s lawn mowers,” he added, pointing to the goats that ran free like a troupe of horned groundsmen, nibbling at the foliage, brambles, and trees to leave a nearly manicured, if a bit hoof-trodden and bark-chew, landscape.

The sight of Papa tearing up stumps, struggling to grow food for our little family, assuaged Mama’s old fears. He was so full of vitality, an athlete in his prime, it seemed nothing could stop him. She wanted to climb inside his arms and stay there always, but the twelve- to sixteen-hour workdays and his part-time job left little time for that. The next year we would sell vegetables at the farm stand for income, but that first year Papa worked odd jobs for Helen and Scott and other townsfolk for \$2.50 an hour, to bring in cash on top of his work at our farm. Mama’s day had multiple demands as well—hauling water for the pump sink in the kitchen, grinding grain with the hand grinder for baking bread.

preparing meals, sewing and mending clothing, caring for me, and helping Papa while I napped.

“It was unremitting labor, the hardest time we had to go through,” Papa would later admit in an interview with Stanley Mills, a visiting friend of the Nearings who published a quarterly hand-typed newsletter detailing our back-to-the-land exploits. “If you’re going to homestead without private means you have to take it seriously,” he explained. “It would have helped to have more money so that I could have given all my time to homesteading instead of taking outside work. Heaven knows, there was enough to do on our place. When winter comes, there’s no going off to California. You have to stick it out and work much longer hours than the Nearing work formula suggests. We never had any doubts it was worth it, but at first we didn’t realize self-sufficiency means nineteenth-century primitivism.”

After the stumps on the half acre in front of the house were removed, Papa divided the area into twenty- by forty-foot plots, using a commonsense approach to small-scale agriculture. “We chose the size of the plots for their convenience,” he told Stanley. “It’s one fiftieth of an acre. Much information is available about needs and yields of land in terms of acres. In spreading lime, it’s common knowledge that acid soil requires at least two tons of lime an acre. To find out how much a twenty by forty plot requires, simply divide two tons by fifty. This amounts to eighty pounds, and lime comes in eighty-pound bags. So one bag each plot.” The lime served to decompose the vegetation and neutralize the acidity of the forest floor, thereby releasing the nitrogen that had been locked in by the acid and allowing for the growth of healthy soil bacteria. Next Papa tilled in compost and manure and staked out string in careful rows to transplant seedlings and seed the hardier crops.

Mama carried me on her chest or back with a cloth sling while she worked. After the gift boxes of Pampers from Mama’s parents ran out, she put me in plastic panties over safety-pinned cloth diapers that she washed by hand in the ocean and hung to dry in the sun. Since we might be outdoors for hours at a time, she would augment the cloth diapers with the same dried peat moss we used for toilet paper. It’s no wonder I would potty-train before the age of two. By midsummer I was able to hold my head up and roll around in the little playpen made from Mama’s old purple poncho blanket draped over a wood frame. I can feel in my bones the chirp-cluck-brooding sounds of the chickens busying in the dust nearby, the smells of scythe-cut grass, freshly tilled earth, wet Normie-dog, and wood smoke from the cookstove as I lay on my back and babbled to the sky, grabbing my bare feet with my hands.

The garden was also finding its feet. The acre between the well and the house had, amazingly enough, become a rough version of Papa’s imagined patchwork of garden plots with a network of trodden paths. The apple orchard grew as I did on the hill next to the garden, with saplings of varieties suited for the cooler climate: Northern Spy, russet, and Spy Gold. Come August, as Woodstock was giving voice to thousands of muddy festival-goers in New York State, we were celebrating a bounty of exceptionally large vegetables, including cabbages that literally weighed forty pounds. It wasn’t until a couple years later that Papa learned that this abnormal growth was due to the release of all of the naturally occurring nitrogen that had been stored in the forest floor over the years. “The founders of the spiritual-ecological community of Findhorn in Scotland saw the forty-pound cabbages in their first garden as a spiritual sign, but it was most likely the same nitrogen release we saw,” Papa explained, amused.

At the end of the long summer days, my parents fell to sleep exhausted, knowing they would be woken any number of times in the night by my crying before getting up at first light to start working again. Creating a living from the land with a newborn baby was indeed every bit as challenging as Helen had predicted. Each day was a swarm of obstacles. All they could do was stay focused on one task at a time and see it through to its resolution.

My grandmother Skates arrived in September, joined by Papa's sister Lyn, her husband, Lucky Callen, and the four kids, Paige, Chip, Lindsay, and Hunter. They'd driven the nine hours north to find out for themselves "what the heck we were doing up in the woods of Maine." Papa's family was more modern as we were not, and upstanding citizens of one of New Jersey's oldest and wealthiest towns. The Callens lived in the updated house on Blackpoint Horseshoe in Rumson, where Papa grew up, while Skates had built her own modern home across the field by the river, with a dock where she liked to fish for snappers.

The year of my birth was the year of the first moon landing, Ted Kennedy's Chappaquiddick incident, the Stonewall riots, Charles Manson's murders, and the advent of no-fault divorce, signed into law—ironically enough—by a Republican governor named Ronald Reagan. In this Age of Aquarius the songs of Bob Dylan, the Grateful Dead, Joan Baez, and Crosby, Stills & Nash were giving voice to change. The turmoil brought on by hippies, radicals, and folksingers made Papa's family nervous. They were supportive of America, capitalism, and the status quo. More than that, they were staunch Republicans. Nixon, who had taken office that January, was their hero.

"Nixon," Skates said, "will return the world to equilibrium."

Skates's tall figure stood out in bright blues and whites against the browns and greens of the farm as she walked up the garden path to the house. She wore a striped shirt over wrinkle-free shorts with a perfect crease down the front, glasses hanging on a beaded cord that matched her blue eyes like Papa's and white hair styled in perfect short waves around her high forehead. Lyn and Lucky and the kids followed, a model WASP family of the 1960s, blond, fair-eyed, fresh-faced, and appropriately androgynous in pressed khakis and polos of light blues, yellows, and nautical stripes, their whites bright and unstained unlike our permanently dirty grays.

Skates often said Papa must have inherited his adventurous spirit from Thomas Coleman, the man at the root of the Coleman family tree, who left Wiltshire, England, on the *James* for the New World in 1635. Thomas was awarded a land claim on Nantucket, where his son went on to marry Benjamin Franklin's aunt, and their son hunted whales from the harbor. As American settlers, they lived by necessity in the ways we would live by choice two centuries later—growing and hunting food, cooking and heating with wood or whale blubber, using an outhouse. Thanks to in-law Benjamin Franklin, as well as Thomas Edison and others, by the 1900s, Americans would have electricity, running water, telephones, and the automobile. Food would be bought at the store, vegetables grown commercially, and cooking done on reliable gas or electric stoves. Life was good for Americans—the Roaring Twenties had arrived.

It was in this privileged time that my grandfather Eliot, nicknamed Skipper, undoubtedly for his love of boats, met Dorothea Morrell, a spirited girl from a fun-loving family in Morristown, New Jersey. She was a tomboy debutante with sporty tastes—skiing, fishing, hockey, and tennis. The nickname Skates came from the time she was playing hockey disguised as a boy for the Morristown pickup team and got knocked down, her hat falling off to expose curly, long blond hair. "A girl on someone on the other team yelled, "and she skates."

"Skipper was handsome, and a good athlete," Skates told us, athleticism garnering her highest esteem. His parents had moved from Long Island to the well-to-do suburb of Rumson, New Jersey, known for the oldest lawn tennis club in the country, a beautiful beach club, and easy access to Manhattan by train. When Skates and Skipper married, they set up house in the renovated boathouse of the Coleman estate on a tributary of the Navesink River. Aunt Lyn was born in 1936 and two years later, Eliot Warner Coleman Jr. came into the world at Morristown Memorial Hospital.

“He came out smiling,” Skates claimed. She smiled, too, it was such a joy for her to have a son. ~~W~~ still joke that he was like her own little baby Jesus. ~~T~~ There were so many pairs of knitted boots among the baby gifts, the nickname-prone family dubbed him “Boots,” which later became “Bootsie” much to his chagrin. Boots was sent to private school at Rumson Country Day and then to prep school at St. Paul’s in New Hampshire, where his cousins also went. He was a star cross-country runner and lacrosse player, though a mediocre student. Papa made close ties with friends and teachers, but was by spirit independent, even then preferring V8 to Coke. Though he was teased for it, he stood up for himself, to the point of once getting his nose broken in a fistfight in the dining hall.

“Attaboy, Boots,” Skates likely said about the tiff. She ruled the home, children, and Skipper with confident belligerence to any view outside her own. Skipper, who was slightly shorter than Skates at five feet eleven inches, was a quiet and gentlemanly husband, some said henpecked. He served in the navy and after the war commuted to Manhattan, where he worked as a stockbroker, making a decent living at it, though never enough to be rich. Instead they did what they should have known better than to do—spent the capital from his inheritance. Skates’s sister and friends were all well-to-do, driving her to keep up with her tennis partners both on the court and off.

“Those were the years of the Hemingway model of adventure,” Skates explained. She and Skipper passed on their love of sports and the outdoors to their children, teaching Boots and Lyn to fish and ski as soon as they could walk. They had a cruising boat, the *Here We R*, that they took out on summer weekends, and in winter they escaped to warm locales to fish or up to Uncle George’s lodge in Stowe, Vermont, to ski. Papa began to notice that when his parents were outdoors, they seemed happier and drank less, and he felt his own spirit lift and heart beat more rigorously as he skied or climbed in the clear air of the mountains.

“Hello, Bootsie,” Skates and the Callens chorused when Papa emerged from the farmhouse to greet them. Skates kissed us all with her red-lipsticked bow-shaped mouth, smelling of soap and something brighter than soap that made a shield around her, separating her from the dirt and organic smells of the farm.

“That perfume is enough to take the paint off a car,” Papa said when she was out of hearing, wrinkling his nose about the smell, and Mama laughed. To Skates, we must have seemed victims of rural poverty, and boy, did we smell. Skates gave Papa a hard time about needing to take a bath, and especially about us not eating meat.

“You’re too skinny. You need protein, working so hard out here,” she said. “Kids need protein too. Are you sure it’s okay for Melissa?”

Papa was eloquent as always in his defense of vegetarianism, explaining that humans had been vegetarians for centuries, and animals had as much a right to live as we.

“Boots says he doesn’t believe in killing animals,” Skates said pointedly to Lyn in reply to Papa’s lecture. “Well, neither do I. I have the butcher do it.”

Everyone got a good laugh at that, and tensions eased, until Papa yelled at the boys for playing with their cork gun in the garden.

“No guns on my property!” Papa admonished.

“It’s just a harmless toy.” Lyn defended her children, but put away the gun.

“Why does he have to be so self-righteous?” she complained to her mother when Papa was out of earshot.



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