

See you in a Hundred years

*See you in a
Hundred years*

FOUR SEASONS IN
FORGOTTEN AMERICA

Logan Ward



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For Heather

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Prologue

The past is our definition. We may strive, with good reason, to escape it, or to escape what is bad in it, but we will escape it only by adding something better to it.

—WENDELL BERRY

The twentieth century began on a Tuesday.

—IAN FRAZIER

I am standing behind a rundown farmhouse in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley. The yard is rank with weeds. A massive gray barn looms above. Something catches my eye, a jerky movement near the henhouse. A snake dangles from the rafters. It stretches its body over to an old window missing its panes. Doubling itself between the muntins, the serpent rests its head on its bulging body, soaking up the day's final sunlight. Mesmerized, I ease up the garden path for a closer look, shadows creeping like gnomes between the plants. The snake stares dead at me, tongue silently probing. It's a real beast, as thick around as my forearm and probably six feet long, brown-black—though in the dying light it's hard to tell—with faint diamond markings. Behind me, a crunching sound. I swing around to find Luther trundling up. "Da-da," he says in his raspy voice, arms outstretched. I scoop him up and hustle back toward the house, suddenly aware of those tender feet stepping through the high grass.

Of all the dangers we will soon face during our trip back in time, including gashing a shin with a wild axe swing, searing flesh on the woodstove, and getting kicked by our draft horse—due to arrive in three weeks—none worries me more than a snakebite. There are two breeds of poisonous snake found here in the Valley—the rattlesnake and the copperhead. Both are pit vipers, and both carry venom lethal to children under three. Last week, our son turned two.

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As we struggle to meet our project's start date, I am racked by doubts. I lie awake at night, tortured by visions of Luther toddling across a serpent coiled beneath a stack of rotting fenceposts—the lightning-fast strike, the innocent shrieks, the chance we won't even know it was a snake given Luther's limited vocabulary. And when the leg swells and blackens, there we'll be, miles from town with no phone, one of us—me probably, Heather staying behind to hold him—sprinting the half mile to the nearest house for help, praying I'll find someone home, and if not, running another half mile to the next.

I enter the kitchen and strap Luther into his high chair against kicks and screams of protest. Earlier in the day, Heather said that I was smothering her, that she'd go crazy if she didn't get a break from our frenzied preparations. Tight-lipped and petulant, she sped away in the station wagon to a yoga class, leaving me here to stew, distracted by the many unfinished tasks—fitting stovepipe, hammering together an outhouse, planting the beans and corn that will sustain us for the year—while also dealing with Luther. *Why the hell won't he stop screaming?*

When I return to the henhouse, the shadows are deeper. The snake is gone.



“Wait here,” I say the next morning, leaving Luther and Heather at the picnic table and marching up to the henhouse gripping a hoe. Three steps into the tall grass, I freeze. A different, smaller snake warms its scales in the sun.

“Here's one,” I say, eyes fixed on the snake. From the coloring and the shape of the head, I'm sure it's neither rattler nor copperhead, but that fact does nothing to calm my trembling hands. “I'm going to try to catch it.”

“What for?” Heather asks.

“To get it away from the henhouse. Snakes eat eggs.” In a few weeks, after our chickens have moved in and we're cut off from supermarkets, we can't allow a thief in their midst.

Sizing up the serpent, I try to remember if I've ever handled a live snake and faintly recall a school field trip, a candy-striped garter, and a funk that took forever to wash off my palms. *Okay, I think. Pin the head,*

PROLOGUE

and grab the neck, just like Marlin Perkins used to do. But when I extend the hoe, the snake jerks back and whips its body into a coil, tail quivering, head bobbing away from the blade. I dance around like a stooge, unable to gain the advantage.

“Just kill it,” Heather spits.

You don't kill non-poisonous snakes, I think. But I feel cornered and edgy, embarrassed by my impotence. A rage wells up inside me. I raise the hoe above my head and bring it down with a fleshy thud on the coiled body. I hack again, leaving the snake confused, hissing, mouth agape, and bloody. *Hack! Hack!* Soon the head hangs by a sinew and the body lies torn into several lengths. My arms are shaking. They sting from the blows. The anger leaves me like an exhalation, replaced immediately by shame.



Over the next few weeks, as we grind ourselves down preparing to begin our experiment—bickering, fretting, racing to and from town on the single-lane farm roads—the snakes haunt us. I find a snakeskin hanging like a giant condom from a limb outside Luther's second-story window and another poking out of the backyard downspout. I shoo snakes out of the barnyard and the grass encircling the house. A small brown patterned snake that could be a copperhead zigzags across the driveway. I hear a scream and rush to find Heather pointing at a fat rat snake sunbathing on the back step. “Why won't they leave us alone?” she says, having almost stepped on it. I go around the house jamming strips of T-shirt in knotholes in the floor after learning that in winter snakes slither up from crawl spaces for warmth. One day the old-timer who used to manage this farm delivers a warning. “I killed a rattler behind the barn a couple years back,” he says. “When it gets dry, watch out! That's when they come down from the mountains hunting water.”



PART ONE

Green

CHAPTER ONE

Goodbye, New York

In the City, you don't stargaze. You don't dig through wildflower field guides for the name of that brilliant trumpet burst of blue you saw on your morning walk. You don't hunt for animal tracks in the snow or pause in that same frozen forest, eyes closed, listening for the chirp of a foraging nuthatch. You forget such a creature as a snake even exists. It's as if New York is encased in a big plastic bubble, where humans sit atop the food chain armed with credit cards and Zagat guides. Native wildlife? Cockroaches, pigeons, rats. Disease transmitters. Boat payments for exterminators. Our story begins in the bubble.

The year is 2000, the dawn of a new millennium. The Y2K scare is barely behind us. Economic good times lie ahead, with unemployment at an all-time low, the U.S. government boasting record surpluses, and the NASDAQ composite index raising a lusty cheer by topping 5,000. The stock market is making everyone rich—at least on paper. Living in the wealthiest city in the wealthiest nation at the wealthiest moment in history, Heather and I should be happy. We aren't.

Which is why I find myself in the back of a cab one day, lurching down Park Avenue, all bottled up with excitement over the news I carry.

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Out the window I see cows standing amid the tulips on the median strip, with Mies's Seagram Building jutting up behind. They're fiberglass cows. One wears the broad stripes of some third-world flag. Another, the geometric lines of a Mondrian painting. My cabbie tilts his head toward the rearview mirror to catch my eye and says in a clipped Bombayan singsong, "I keep wondering what is the meaning of all these cows."

"It's art," I yell through the plastic safety shield.

"In my country, cows are for eating," he says, and it dawns on me that since cows are holy in India, he must be Pakistani.

Leaning up so I don't have to shout, I say, "Sometimes I wonder if people in this city even know where their hamburgers come from. Last Sunday I was at the Brooklyn Zoo pushing my one-year-old in a stroller, and this girl—she must have been twelve—looks right at a cow in the farm-animal pen and can't say what it is."

"A real cow?"

"A real cow. It was just a baby, but it was clearly a cow. Anyway, the girl's mother is getting frustrated. She keeps saying, 'Come on, you *know* what that is.' Meanwhile, my little boy's screaming 'moooo, moooo.' I couldn't believe it." I sink into the seat thinking *not my kid, never* and feel a rush of joy knowing just how true that is. Then I lean forward again. "I didn't stick around to see if she recognized the goat."

"In my country," he says, "goat is a favorite meat."

Just then another taxi swerves into our lane. "Hey!" my driver yells, slamming the brakes and banging the horn with the heel of his hand. The lurching and jerking stirs up the butterflies in my stomach.

At the intersection, we ease through a gauntlet of pedestrians, who stray into the street like ballplayers trying to steal a base. The ones hustling by on the sidewalks stare at their feet, mumbling and gesturing with their hands. Smokers huddle around the pillars of another corporate tower looking pathetic, all the glamour gone from their habit.

They all look terminal, the smokers and the non-smokers. The young, the old. The dapper and the bedraggled. All desperate, frenzied, bound for the grave, but too distracted to notice amid the crush of flesh passing through this landscape of concrete, glass, and steel. Until recently, I was one of them. Now I am leaving.

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“My kid’s going to know what a cow is,” I declare, feeling compelled to share my news. “My wife and I are moving to a farm.”

“You are a farmer?” he says, glancing doubtfully in the mirror.

“No. But I’m going to learn. I bet people still farm in your country. Regular people, I mean. To put food on the table.” And then, getting more worked up, thinking about this man and his decision to leave his home country, “Don’t you ever get sick of things here? Sick of the traffic, of living behind locked-and-latched doors, sick of the assholes? Jesus, you drive a cab. Your day must be one long parade of assholes.”

The driver swerves to the curb and stops. He stares at me in the mirror. About to protest, I see Bryant Park and realize we have arrived. I pay, grab the receipt, and charge into the street before the changing light hurtles traffic at me.

I enter a marble lobby against the afternoon exit flow and ride the elevator alone to the seventeenth floor, where I step into the offices of *National Geographic Adventure* magazine. It is a new magazine, a how-to offshoot of the venerable gold-rimmed flagship. Adventure—the pastime, the attitude—is hot. Stories about the frost-bit heroics of Ernest Shackleton and tragedy atop Mt. Everest leap off bookstore shelves. Patagonia is no longer just a place; it is a fashion statement. When I first met with the editor during the hush-hush days of the magazine’s infancy, the name was still a secret. “I bet you can guess it,” he said with a sly grin. “It’s a word you see everywhere these days.”

Sure enough, I pegged it.

Growing up, I devoured adventure stories—*Robinson Crusoe*, *The Arabian Nights*, *My Side of the Mountain*, about a Manhattan boy who runs away to the Catskills to live in a hollow tree. I hunted Indian arrowheads, panned for gold with my father, stood by as Dad blasted copperheads with scatter shot from his .38 caliber pistol. The idea of escaping the confines of society in the wilds of nature appealed to a shy boy with a big imagination, even if society was a sleepy South Carolina mill town. When I graduated college, I boarded a plane for Kenya with a folder full of topo maps—bush schools circled in red—and directions to the home of two American teachers. I found a teaching job and stayed for a year, collecting rain water in a barrel, cooking over kerosene, and writing aerograms home by candlelight. When I returned to the States, I moved

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to Manhattan and worked as an editor for a start-up digest called *The Southern Farmer's Almanac* (I was a southerner, though I knew nothing about editing or farming). In what little free time I had, I struggled to publish freelance articles. Finally, a decade later, *Adventure* is sending me to places like Uganda and Ecuador.

Now, I sit in the magazine's conference room with a different adventure in mind, trying to find the words to explain my plans to the young editor across the table.

"James," I say, "did you know that two-thirds of the people in this country can't see the Milky Way?"

"No. . . ."

"Don't you find that depressing?"

"Yeah, I guess so," he says, frowning, "but what's this meeting all about? You've got me curious as hell."

I hesitate, peering around at the magazine covers tacked to the wall. Beautiful people in colorful outdoor gear pose in front of glaciers and waterfalls and half-moon bays. "I can't write the *NGA Guide* anymore."

Nodding his head, James leans back in his chair. "I know it's a lot of pain-in-the-ass research."

"It's not that." More nervous than I had expected, I pause. "I'm . . . taking myself out of the twenty-first century."

"What the hell does *that* mean?"

"It means I'm burned out. Heather and I are killing ourselves to keep up. We want to try something different—you know, while we're still young." I explain our plan—to live the life of dirt farmers from the era of our great-grandparents. We have a lot of details to work out, of course, but the basic premise is this: If it didn't exist in 1900, we will do without.

"And that means," I say, "we're not going to have e-mail, phone, computer, credit cards, utility bills, or car insurance."

"That's awesome!" James says. "Sounds like a real adventure."

Heather's supervisor, Meryl, a public-interest attorney raised in Queens, has a different take on the idea when, a week later, Heather breaks the news that she is quitting her job. "You," Meryl says, "are fucking crazy."

Maybe we are. Like everyone we know in New York, we work too much. Job stress follows us home at night, stalks us on weekends.

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Heather's work at a justice-reform think tank and mine hustling freelance magazine assignments keeps each of us either chained to PCs or traveling. Within the past two years, Heather has flown to every continent but Australia and Antarctica to interview cops and meet with government officials. When she was seven months pregnant, she gave a talk in Ireland, flew back to New York and left the same day for Argentina and an entirely different hemisphere. We figured that if she happened to give birth prematurely, it was a coin toss whether we'd have a summer or winter baby.

As it turned out, Luther was born more or less on time in Manhattan, in a hospital towering over the East River. By the tender age of four months, he was already in the care of a nanny, leaving us feeling guilty for having to hire her and also guilty about how little we could afford to pay her. (We felt guiltier still upon learning from another mother that our nanny was locking Luther in his stroller so she could gab at the park. We fired her and put Luther in daycare.)

We spend too much money on housing and not enough time outdoors. We order dinner from a revolving drawerful of ethnic take-out menus and rent disappointing movies from a corner shop where the owner hides behind bulletproof glass. There's something missing from our lives—from our relationship—and yet we're too busy to confront the problem. At least that's our excuse. So the two of us plod through our days hardly talking. And at night we collapse into bed, kept awake by the sound of squeaking bedsprings in the apartment above but too exhausted for any bed-squeaking ourselves.

It isn't a physical exhaustion. The beneficiaries of a multi-generational pursuit of the American dream, we have traded the farm and factory work of our small southern hometowns for education and urban living. Instead of a tractor accident or a limb lost in some mercilessly churning assembly line machine, we suffer the stress-related ills of our times: anxiety, depression, e-mail addiction, debt.

My tipping point came the day my beige plastic Dell tower—the tool of my trade—whined to a halt. The screen went black. With mounting panic, I punched the keys and poked the on/off button on the front. Nothing. Fingers followed the dusty power cord from wall socket to box. Plugged tight. My mind reeled at the thought of all that accumulat-

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ed data trapped inside the wiry guts of a machine that I so little understood: pages of research, interview transcripts, an almost-finished article due three days earlier, book ideas, addresses, e-mail correspondence with friends and editors, family photos, business records, tax records. That computer was everything to me. And like a fool, I had not bothered to back it up.

Once I recovered from my initial panic, I thought back to my grandfather, a country doctor and cattle farmer. He was born in 1886, before all this so-called time-saving technology—cell phones that tie people to their jobs 24/7 and computers that keep them answering e-mails past midnight. Could someone whose tools were hand-shaped from iron, steel, and wood ever grasp the ethereal nature of lithium-ion-powered digital devices? This was my dad's dad—a mere generation stands between us—and yet he came of age in a world completely different from the one I know.

It dawned on me that no one yet knows the long-term side effects of Modern Life. Can we really adapt to all this brain-scorching change—the technological advances, the teeming cities, the breakneck pace of daily life, the disappearance of the human hand from the things we buy and the food we eat? Maybe my ambivalence about technology (and dread over my failed computer) was not something to be ashamed of. It was as if something in me shouted, *Hold on a minute! You've been staring at the computer screen too long. When was the last time you dug in the dirt or tromped around a field, not to mention had anything at all to do with producing the food you eat?* Maybe our disconnect with the natural world causes a sort of vertigo, and if so, maybe that explained my recent unhappiness. Or maybe I was just pissed off things weren't going my way. Whatever the reason, on that day I dreamed of escape.

And yet I dutifully called a Dell technician. With a wife and child, and a career to pursue, what choice did I have?

A few weeks later, I had a moment of clarity that in a flash changed everything. I was reading a newspaper story about an upcoming PBS show that pitted an English family against the rigors of 1900-era London life. Thinking back to my computer crisis and the question still ringing in my mind—*what choice did I have?*—I realized I had found my answer! Not the reality show itself, but rather its core concept—adopting the

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technology of the past. If I were so desperate for a change, why not travel backward in time as a way of starting over?

The year 1900 immediately felt right. I wanted to ditch certain technologies, but I did not want to be a pioneer, having to build a log cabin or dig a well by hand. The year 1900—almost within memory’s reach—would serve well. A bit of research bore out my intuition. In 1900, rural dwellers still outnumbered urban dwellers. In 1900, agriculture was still the predominant occupation, thanks to millions of small-plot American farmers who raised most of what they ate for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. In 1900, the motorized car—alternately called the viamote, mocle, mobe, or goalone—was still a novelty. In rural America, there were no televisions, telephones, or, of course, personal computers. People still wrote letters by hand. And this was crucial: In 1900, you could buy toilet paper.

I nervously told Heather my idea one Saturday as we juggled our fussy baby in a cramped Brooklyn pub. She smiled, and I remembered why I fell in love with her.



Four months later, we are heading south, crashing from pothole to pothole on the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, the Manhattan skyline jiggling in the rearview mirror of our beat-up Taurus station wagon. Heather rides shotgun. Luther squirms in back. Every other inch of space is stuffed with possessions. A moving van will bring the rest. My gaze drops from the World Trade Center Towers in the mirror to the mountains of gym totes and teddy-bear-filled Hefty bags threatening to avalanche Luther’s car seat. The plastic clamshell luggage carrier that I bought the day before at a Sears auto store off Flatbush Avenue rattles the roof rack, and I muscle for a slot in the fast-moving traffic.

We’re amped up and all singing together.

“Old McDonald had a farm. E-I-E-I-O. And on his farm he had a . . .”

“A REAL COW,” I yell.

E-I-E-I-O.

Three days later, we are exploring Virginia, home of Thomas Jefferson, who wrote that “cultivators of the earth are the most virtuous

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and independent citizens.” Though Heather and I are not farming yet, I haven’t felt so independent in years.

West of Richmond, released from the Interstate, we whiz past farmhouses, mobile homes, and rundown full-service filling stations, the kinds of places that sell live crickets and pickled eggs in big, brine-filled jars.

“Look, Luther,” I say, tapping my window toward animals grazing in a pasture. But he’s more interested in the goldfish-shaped crackers in his fist. Soon we’re turning off the state highway, easing the station wagon into a gravel parking lot beside a small house with a deck and a treeless yard. Flush with the profit we made from selling our Brooklyn apartment, we’ve arrived for our first real-estate appointment.

Jerry Byrd is tall with neatly clipped black hair and a black goatee, and he wears a golf shirt and tasseled loafers. The scent of cologne shadows him around the office. His wife, Ashley, appears dressed for a cocktail party, strange given the dusty roadside location. Jewelry spills from her wrists, neck, and ears; her hair stands in a meringue of stiff curls. In addition to real estate, the pair sells insurance and rents metal storage units, which stand on a piece of flat ground scooped out of the hillside out back. They’re a pair of red-dirt entrepreneurs.

It’s October, and I have packed long sleeves and wool sweaters. But it has turned hot—eighty-five degrees—and for days now I’ve worn the only summer shirt in my suitcase. It smells—and not of cologne. The contrast between these country slickers and us city yokels is as stark as the contrast between their shiny new Ford Explorer parked in the gravel lot and our Taurus, filled full of junk and dusted with cracker crumbs.

“I’ve got a couple properties in mind that are perfect for y’all,” Jerry says as we crunch back out to the cars. Heather and I glance knowingly at one another. We haven’t told him about our project. As far as he is concerned, we are a couple of disillusioned urbanites searching for greener pastures. Dollar signs probably danced in his head when I first phoned and introduced myself as a New Yorker shopping for country property.

We drive about ten miles on successively smaller and more remote country roads. Jerry is behind the wheel, while I take notes. Heather and Luther sit in back. Without exception, Jerry waves at every car and truck that passes, greeting some by lifting his index finger off the steering wheel and others by peeling all four fingers off the wheel in sequential order.

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My curiosity eventually gets the best of me. “Do you know everybody around here?” I say.

“No,” says Jerry, eyes never leaving the road. “Maybe about 50 percent of the time I know them. In my business, you can’t afford *not* to wave at everybody. You’ll see somebody at church on Sunday, and they’ll say, ‘I saw you the other day, Jerry, and you didn’t wave.’” His father, he says, waves at horses.

I think back on my childhood, when everyone in my town waved to strangers, and wonder if they still do. The terrain, too, reminds me of the pine-covered piedmont of my youth—the red dirt, the kudzu, the thick-et-choked new-growth forests. Childhood memories of weekend outings with my brother and father come rushing back, hot days spent digging for smoky quartz crystals, tracing moss-covered tombstones in forgotten, deep-woods cemeteries, and scouring newly plowed fields for Indian artifacts. I picture my father, stooping over the dirt and calling out to us, “Boys, I’ve got a sweat-er!” We would bound over the furrows to watch him uncover with slow, dramatic scrapings of soil—“sweating it out,” he called it—a half-buried arrowhead, our eyes bugging with the hope that it was whole.

“You ever find any Indian artifacts around here?” I ask Jerry. “I bet those fields are full of old bird points and pottery shards.”

“Sure,” he says. “Around here you find stuff left by the Fukarwi Indians.”

“Really?” I brighten, as if he is scratching away at a sweat-er. “How do you spell that?” I hold my pen poised above my pocket-sized reporter’s notepad.

“Don’t ask me,” Jerry says. “All I know is they were nomadic. Roamed all around.”

“Really? I’ve never heard of the Fukarwi.”

“Yeah. Story goes that the chief would stand on a hill peering out at the horizon”—Jerry raises his hand importantly to his brow, slowly pivoting his neck—“and he would yell ‘Where the FUCK ARE WE?’”

Jerry guffaws and slaps his knee with his free hand. At least three cars slip by without a wave.

The first place Jerry shows us, a fifty-five-acre farm in the middle of nowhere, is a real dump—shattered windows, plaster ceilings littering

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the floors, the land a barfight of brambles, vines, and low trees. As far as we're concerned, the only thing it has going for it is that it is in the middle of nowhere. The next place is equally disappointing, only for the opposite reason. Its eighty-odd acres contain an immaculate old farmhouse and a handful of the prettiest outbuildings you can imagine, all lovingly kept and only recently vacated. But the home's insides look too new and the farm, situated only a couple miles outside of town, abuts a four-lane divided highway.

And that's how it goes as we crisscross the state, aiming for the blank gaps between red and blue highway lines on our road map. Though we say goodbye to Jerry, we find other land brokers in other one-light towns. Like those Jerry showed us, the farmhouses we see are either too run down or too modernized. Our prospects dim. Sick of motel rooms and powdered-donut breakfasts, we begin to wonder if the right place exists at all. It's a tall order, buying a property today that is suitable for life 100 years ago. Small farms are a rare breed these days. And old farmhouses have updated kitchens and bathrooms, satellite dishes, electric well pumps, and other modern accoutrements. Thanks to freezers and the convenience of grocery stores, even farmers have abandoned their root cellars.

Then we find a farm named Elim, and things begin to look up. Located south of Charlottesville, near the broad, black James River, Elim is an attractive place—from a distance. A cedar-lined drive meanders over a rolling pasture to a hilltop, where a two-story frame house sits, its front porch grinning from side to side. In back are weathered outbuildings, the weedy remains of a kitchen garden, and some sort of fruit tree humming with bees. The pasture slopes to a creek, with a thick stand of trees springing up on the other side.

The owners, explains the real-estate agent, a middle-aged woman named Barbara, are a family of nine from Richmond, Seventh Day Adventists who bought the place in anticipation of the apocalypse that their Bible said would coincide with the arrival of the new millennium. The name comes from Exodus 15, verse 27: "And they came to Elim, where there were twelve wells of water, and threescore and ten palm trees: and they encamped by the waters." With the modern world going to hell, Elim was their oasis—until Y2K passed without incident and

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farm life lost its charm. Now they're looking for a buyer. When we hear this, Heather and I smile at one another. We, too, are seeking a patch of green earth for sanctuary and survival.

The closer we get, however, the more flaws scream out at us. Most jarring is the shit. It's everywhere—chicken droppings littering the yard, peacock poop dotting the front porch like wads of chewing gum on a subway platform, and a pile of not-so-fresh scat (dog? cat? toddler?) greeting us from the shaggy carpet of one of the bedrooms. The house is a wreck. We step around heaps of clothes, dodge toys cascading from closets. So much for the fresh-baked-cookie approach to hooking potential buyers. The place smells like a dirty kennel.

In the family room, the agent points to a black iron behemoth, the size of a compact car, sprouting ductwork that stretches through the house like aluminum tentacles. “The owner has a metal-fabrication shop,” says Barbara, doing her best to remain cheery. “He made this stove himself.” While the fuel the stove burns is 1900-compatible, the look and scale are post-World War II. I've been imagining us huddled around a quaint Franklin stove. This monstrosity looks more like a Franken-stove.

Clouding our judgment is the pressure to land a farm. Even if we sign a contract tomorrow, we're still at least a month away from closing—from being able to rip out electrical wiring and plumbing pipes, dig an outhouse hole, and make the myriad other period adjustments we'll have to make. We've got to start by spring, with a garden in the ground. The clock is ticking.

Despite our niggling concerns, we focus on the bright side of Elim—the remote location, mix of pasture and woods, stream that irrigates the property, functional outbuildings, fruit trees, and affordable price. A buggy ride away sits a country store that sells not only food staples and garden seeds but hardware. Seven miles in the other direction, down a quiet sandy road, is a feed-and-seed store, a real boon we never expected to find.

Elim even has a root cellar, or so we're told. Built by the God-fearing smithy, it's out back, entered through a chest-high black metal door that looks like a submarine's conning tower rising up through the dirt. But on this day the cellar—or whatever's beyond that black door—is locked,

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and Barbara does not have a key. We've got to see it, we say, without explaining why but knowing that without a cellar, a family in 1900 would likely starve. A proper cellar is a must.

While she tries to locate a key, we drive to the feed-and-seed. Heather stays in the car with Luther, who naps in his seat. I pop in for a look.

"Can I help you?" says a tan, fit man, fifty-ish, stepping from behind some shelving. He looks country in an aristocratic Virginia way, wearing a faded polo shirt beneath a buttoned work shirt.

"Yes," I say. "My wife and I are considering buying a farm down the road. I wanted to look around your shop."

A pleasant but skeptical look lingers on the man's face. "What kind of farming you planning on doing?"

I pause, not wanting to launch into the whole 1900 song-and-dance. "We're going to try our hand at making a living off the land."

"Is that so?" he says.

I don't have anything to add, and neither does he, so I poke around, handling objects that mean nothing to me and then knowingly returning them to their places. Checking out this store seems important, but I'm not quite sure why.

"Where's the nearest livestock auction?" I say, finally. "Somewhere to buy a milk cow."

"You sure you want a milk cow?" the man says, raising an eyebrow.

"Why wouldn't we?" I say, trying not to sound defensive. Truly curious to hear his answer, I almost reach for my notebook.

"Well," he says, "you've got to milk a cow twice a day, seven days a week, Thanksgiving and Christmas included. Pigs, chickens, horses, you can take a day off, and it won't matter much to them, but with a milk cow, it's twice a day, every day of the year."

I breathe a sigh of relief. *Of course you have to milk a cow twice a day*, I think, thankful he has not sprung some unknown fact about milk cows on me that might hinder our plans. Now that we have uprooted our lives, I worry daily about unearthing some modern-day can't-do-without that will fatally undermine our project's authenticity. Back in New York, as Heather and I first batted around our radical plan for escaping modern life—*could we really? do we dare?*—we gave ourselves one week to name a single reason why it would fail. We couldn't come up with one—

or at least one we didn't think we could overcome. A week later, we had a buyer for our apartment.

What this well-meaning stranger does not know is that no matter where we end up, without a car we'll be sticking very close to home for a year, Thanksgiving and Christmas included. That twice-a-day business is something we're counting on.

"Oh, we're prepared for that," I say.

With skepticism still painted across his face, he asks, "Where are you from?"

"South Carolina," I say. "Originally. My wife is from Alabama."

"As long as you're not from up North," he shoots back. "That's the only thing I can't stand. Yankees moving in, raising the price of land and taxes along with it."

Great.

"Actually," I say, "we spent time in New York. Ten years to be exact." It sounds like we were incarcerated.

He smiles and shakes his head. "That's it, huh? Get rich in New York and move south, where your money's worth something?"

"No, that's not it." But he just looks at me, bemused, as if to say, *Yeah, I've run across your kind plenty—city folks who decide they want to be farmers. Well, it won't last. It's a romantic fantasy. Just wait.*

Back at Elim, after phoning the owner, Barbara has found a key to the cellar's padlock. I slide a bolt and open a heavy iron door with a peep-hole in the center. I descend a series of iron rungs into a cramped bunker—formerly a concrete cistern.

"How does it look?" Heather says, hopefully, poking her head in through the hatch.

"Come see for yourself," I reply.

She creeps down the rungs and turns to take it all in. "Oh, my God."

The space—roughly six-feet-wide by ten-feet-long—is dark and dank and not even cool, thanks to the sun-sucking entry tower. Lining the walls on thin shelves are plastic bottles of lamp oil, car batteries, and swollen, oozing gallon cans of peaches and tomatoes. The floor and walls crawl with crickets and granddaddy longlegs. The stench of spoiled food and battery acid nearly turns my stomach.

See you in a Hundred years

“This is no root cellar,” I say. “It’s a bomb shelter.” And I shudder at the thought of a family of nine bunched shoulder to shoulder in this hellhole, waiting for the end of the world.



The concrete deathtrap is a deal-breaker, leaving us even more worried we might never find the right farm for our experiment. Shortly after we walk away from Elim, however, we discover a true oasis over the Blue Ridge mountains in the Shenandoah Valley community of Swoope. One glimpse of the real estate flier showing the 1885 brick farmhouse fronted by a sweet little porch with scrollsaw pickets and our fate is sealed.

And, yes, there is a root cellar. Redolent of seasons past, the cool, brick-walled space hunkers beneath the house, waiting patiently for potatoes to once again fill its bins and jars of preserves to line the rough-hewn oak shelving. The rusty water heater and nest of black PVC pipes in the corner don’t bother us. They are temporary, like the cobwebs spreading between the pine log joists. Over the next few months, we will remove them, along with all the other layers that have settled in the twentieth century’s wake.