



# BARNHEART

*the* INCURABLE LONGING FOR A FARM OF ONE'S OWN

a memoir

Jenna Voginrich  
author of *Made from Scratch*



Praise for  
***Made from Scratch***

“This fine, simple book is the real deal — and it will come as a great relief to people feeling some silent dread in a time of rising gas prices, food shortages, and the like. Much can be done — in your home!”

— **Bill McKibben**, author of *Deep Economy*

“This is an outstanding book for anyone yearning for the satisfactions that come with a simpler, more self-reliant, and sustainable life. I highly recommend it, for both country and city homesteaders.”

— **Cheryl Long**, Editor in Chief, *Mother Earth News*

“If you’re tired of being just another consumer, and want to take charge of creating your own life, this book is for you. It has both the how-to and the why-to. It reads like fiction but delivers a wealth of useful, down-to-earth information.”

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“Woginrich writes with an infectious enthusiasm and a dry wit that may have you ordering hens before you reach the last page. A delightful introduction to the simple (and not-so-simple) life.”

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“I can’t get enough of Woginrich’s life on her Vermont farm ... this book left me wanting much, much more.”

— **Debbie Stoller**, *Bust*

“It’s a how-to as well as a what-not-to-do.”

— **Boston Sunday Globe**, “Shelf Life”

“This book isn’t about having a farmhouse on acres of land, or a barn full of livestock, but about being more open to learning the simple skills most of us have forgotten.”

— **Deseret News**

“*Made from Scratch* is about being more open to learning the simple skills most of us have forgotten, and finding joy in the process.”

— **Homegrown.org**

“The book is chockablock full of ‘simple life’ advice on everything from creating

storage from scratch to gardening, with loads of 21<sup>st</sup>-century homespun philosophy to boot.”

— *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

“Her essays, supplemented with how-tos, are philosophical, humorous, and remarkably poised for a newbie writer.”

— *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

“Woginrich’s comfy writing style and gentle humor make this book a must-read for anyone who dreams of a simpler, handmade life.”

— *ForeWord*, November 2010

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Thanks So Very Much

How to Tell If You're Infected

**A CABIN IN THE WOODS**

**A VERY LONG WINTER**

**SHEEP 101**

**THE ARRIVAL OF RUFUS WAINWRIGHT AND BENJAMIN FRANKLIN**

**INTO THE GARDEN**

**MEET THE LOCALS**

**THE SOCIETY OF LAMB AND WOOL**

**THE HOOVES HAVE LANDED**

**GETTING MY GOAT**

**YOU NEED A TRUCK, GIRL**

**BUILDING PARADISE BROKE AND ALONE**

**SAVING SARAH**

**TURKEY DRAMA**

**A NOTE ON THE DOOR**

**THE SEARCH BEGINS**

**GOING HOME**

## Thanks So Very Much

Thank you to my parents, Pat and Jack, who have watched with grace and support (even when it confused the hell out of them) as their daughter evolved from an urban designer to a rural shepherd. My parents are the only reason I ever believed I could achieve whatever I wanted in this world, even if what I wanted was to be sitting with a flock of sheep on a hill.

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*For Mom and Dad  
The only reason everything happened*



## How to Tell If You're Infected

Certain people, myself included, are afflicted by a condition that's difficult to describe. It's not recognized by physicians or psychoanalysts (yet), but it's really only a matter of time before it's a household diagnosis. It's a sharp, targeted depression, a sudden overcast feeling that hits you while you're at work or standing in the grocery-store checkout line. It's a dreamer's disease, a mix of hope, determination, and grit. It attacks those of us who wish to God we were outside with our flocks, feed bags, or harnesses instead of sitting in front of a computer screen. When a severe attack hits, it's all you can do to sit still. The room gets smaller, your mind wanders, and you are overcome with the desire to be tagging cattle ears or feeding pigs. (People at the office water cooler will stare and slowly back away if you say this out loud. If this happens to you, just segue into sports banter and you'll be fine.)

The symptoms are mild at first. You start reading online homesteading forums and shopping at cheese-making supply sites on your lunch break. You go home after work and instead of turning on the television, you bake a pie and study chicken-coop building plans. Then somehow, somewhere along the way you realize that you're happiest when you're weeding the garden or collecting eggs from the henhouse. It's all downhill from there. When you accept that a fulfilling life requires tractor attachments and a septic system, it's too late. You've already been infected with the disease.

This condition is roughly defined as the state of knowing unequivocally that you want to be a farmer but, due to personal circumstances, cannot be one just yet. So there you are, heartsick and confused in the passing lane, wondering why you can't stop thinking about heritage-breed livestock and electric fences. Do not be afraid. You are not alone. You have what I have. You are suffering from Barnheart.

But do not panic, my dear friends; there is a remedy! The condition must be fought with direct, intentional actions that yield tangible, farm-related results. If you find yourself overcome with the longings of Barnheart, simply step outside, get some fresh air, and breathe. Go back to your desk and finish your office work, knowing that tonight you'll be taking notes on spring garden plans and perusing seed catalogs. Usually, those small, simple actions that lead you in the direction of your own farm can help ease the longing.

At times, though, you might find yourself resorting to extreme measures — calling in “sick” to work in the garden, muck out chicken coops, collect eggs, and bake bread. After all, this is a disease of inaction, and it hits us hardest when we are furthest from our dreams. If you find yourself suffering, make plans to visit an orchard, a dairy farm, or a livestock auction. Go pick berries at a local U-pick farm. Busy hands will get you on the mend.

And when you find yourself sitting in your office, classroom, or café and your mind wanders to dreams of the farming life, know that you are not alone. There are those of us who also long for the bitter scent of manure and sweet odor of hay in the air, to feel

the sun on our bare arms. (I can just about feel it, too, even in January, in a cubicle on the third floor of an office building.) Even though we straighten up in our ergonomic desk chairs, we'd rather be stretched out in the bed of a pickup truck, drinking in the stars on a crisp fall night.

When your mind wanders like this and your heart feels heavy, do not lose the faith, and do not fret about your current circumstances. Everything changes. If you need to stand in the slanting light of an old barn to lift your spirits, go for it. Perhaps someday you'll do this every day. For some, this is surely the only cure. I may be such a case.

We'll get there. In the meantime, let us just take comfort in knowing we're not alone. And maybe take turns standing up and admitting we have a problem.

*Hello. My name is Jenna. And I have Barnheart.*

## A CABIN IN THE WOODS



**I HAVE A BAD HABIT OF RENTING HOUSES** from the other side of the country. When I was moving to Idaho, I found an old farmhouse online and made arrangements to live there from an apartment in Knoxville, Tennessee. There was no reconnaissance trip out West to find a home, kick floorboards, and inspect chimneys. This had to be quick and dirty: a lease, a check, a handshake over telephone wires.

When I accepted my current job in Vermont, I needed to do that dance again. Most people with a bit of cash and some luck can find a small apartment and waltz right into their new town. I, however, was developing this agricultural habit and needed a rental that could handle my desire to turn someone else's backyard into a farm. The hunt was on.

I called a half-dozen places before I started losing heart. Landlords are thrilled to hear you're a young, responsible professional, imported to work at a big-name company, but when you start asking if they've ever had their soil tested and what their stance on roosters is, they suddenly have a cousin who really needs the place. Getting a rental house isn't an easy thing to do when you want to rip up sod, install a coop of chickens, and share your living quarters with two large, shedding dogs. Yet I asked, and searched, and begged. A girl's got to try.

I was on the prowl for a new home somewhere in Bennington County, which was close to work and seemed to have a lot of farms around it. I scoured the Internet and local Craigslist ads. I looked up local papers and pennysavers online. My sanctuary had to be out there somewhere.

I had been able to get a taste of the place when I was flown in for an interview a few weeks before my search got into the teeth-grinding stage. I drove around back roads and land outside Manchester and was unsettled at the price of rentals I came across. Some places cost more to rent for a week than I'd be making in a month. Then I remembered the newspaper I'd folded up and stashed in my suitcase during my interview the week before.

I knew nothing specific about the geography of the place — only the address of the office — and I was hoping to stake my claim somewhere within a twenty-minute drive. An ad in my crumpled cross-continental *Manchester Journal* had a listing that caught my attention. I read it with raised eyebrows, my dogs curled at my feet under the kitchen counter. A cabin was available in a town called Sandgate. It came with six acres of pasture and woods, two streams, running water, electricity, a fireplace, and an oil furnace. It had a bedroom, kitchen, living room, and half bath. I did a little homework and discovered it was only eleven miles from my new desk. This was too good to be true.

I called the landlord right away. Either out of desperation to fill the rental or apathy

about her property's lawn, she agreed to rent me the six-hundred-square-foot cabin and surrounding land. She approved the dogs, seemed fine with the idea of a garden (there was even a gated garden on site), and didn't scream at the notion of chickens. I sent her a check and made arrangements to meet a neighbor to hand me the key on move-in day. My whole body relaxed when that lease was signed. I had no fears about driving cross-country or starting a new job, but the idea of moving to a brand-new place without my own bedroom waiting for me was terrifying. Now, not only did I have a destination, I had a home as well. I was off to find a cabin in the woods twenty-eight hundred miles away.



The drive east was surreal and miserable. I made my way through a blizzard on a Montana mountain pass, stayed in the worst hotel in recorded history, and fought a serious case of the flu, which caused me to pull over and heave an impolite offering along the battlefield trail at Little Big Horn. Jazz and Annie watched me from the back windows of the car. It was a cold, clear day in Montana, and the view was stunning. I panted from the flu. My dogs panted inside the wagon from wanting to chase down the wild ponies foraging among the dead trees. I was suspicious of my condition. The nerves about moving to a new place were likely responsible for my stomach. Spending a year in a small town, making close friends, discovering a whole new way of life — these things don't make for an easy transition, especially when I'd never intended any transition in the first place.

I hadn't left Sandpoint by choice; I'd been forced out by fate and circumstance. I lost my job in a company-wide fire-storm of layoffs, and with the way the economy was taking a nosedive, I was just grateful to have found new work. But gratitude is not the remedy for anxiety. I shrugged off whatever doubt I had left and got back in the car. I had days of travel ahead of me, and I wanted to go home. The sad part was that I had no idea what "home" meant anymore.

I would be building a whole new life in Vermont. I wanted it to somehow resemble my previous one in Idaho. Out there I had dedicated myself to learning basic country skills and starting a small homestead. My rented farm was home not only to me, but also to my first-ever organic vegetable garden, hive of honeybees, flock of prize-winning chickens, and much more. It was in Idaho that I learned to sew, knit my own wool hats, and bake my first loaf of homemade bread. I'd fallen in love with homesteading and wanted to continue falling in Vermont. Hell, maybe even do more than I did out West? I now had six acres to work with. A secret part of me dreamed of adding to my guest list. I desperately wanted sheep, goats, a border collie, and a pickup truck. I wanted to double my gardens, sew my own cowboy shirt, and wear my beat-up old hat into a Vermont feed store and have people know me by my first name. Gary Snyder, one of my heroes, famously said, "Find your place in the world and dig in." I thought, "I'm ready, Gary. Just hand me a friggin' shovel."



It's good to want things. Or at least that was my optimistic motto. I had no concrete

idea what the property would be like or what opportunities the new address would grant me. I knew about the garden, but in photos it was covered in snow; who knew what lay under the crust of ice? I could make do with gardening in containers, but the idea of renting six acres and not putting a hoe to them felt horribly wrong. I also wanted to get chickens in the spring and was secretly terrified my landlord would limit the livestock to my two dogs, which she graciously allowed in a house smaller than my parents' living room. Of course, I dared not raise the idea of bees or rabbits. I was focused on just getting there and starting a new job in a new state, a state I knew nothing about, except for Burton snowboards and Ben & Jerry's ice cream. I knew it was a farm-friendly, green-leaning, open-minded place, so that was working in my favor. The idea of an absentee landlord who would allow me to grow heirloom tomatoes and raise a few chickens seemed totally plausible. With that hope in mind, I kept driving east.

After what felt like an eternity of days run on raw nerves and DayQuil, I arrived in the land of Green Mountains and black-and-white cows. It was mid-February when we crossed the final state line from New York into Vermont. Bennington County was coated in ice. There were no picturesque snow-covered barns or white-tipped branches. Just ice. Angry, tenacious, road-skidding ice. As we rolled away from the town of Arlington, up into the Taconic Mountains, we passed a sign that read SANDGATE EST. 1761.

Sandgate wasn't so much a town as it was a village. And even calling it a village was a bold overassessment — there was one whitewashed town hall and a Methodist church. A collection of farmhouses and livestock scattered around eleven square miles. All the houses we passed in the afternoon sunset had smoke coming out of their chimneys, lights on inside, and a few horses by yard fences. But aside from this scattered evidence of human life, the place seemed empty. No one was outside. I wasn't expecting a welcoming parade or anything, but it did come across a little colder than this new kid in town preferred. I guess the locals had no need to run to their windows and see the ten billionth Subaru roll past their houses.

I turned the last right at the end of a series of dirt roads, and there she was: tucked under a pair of giant pine trees and squarely situated on top of a hillside was my new cabin. I parked the car and nearly ran up onto the porch, loving the high, red roof and thinking, as I turned the corner to the screen door, "My God ... this is all mine! For at least a year, this is all mine. ..." I grinned like an idiot.

Then I heard a voice calling my name. It was the neighbor. She seemed to be in her early sixties, with long gray hair, a pair of heavy carpenter pants, and a wool sweater. After handshakes and a brief chat about the poor road conditions, she showed me around. We walked around the perimeter of the small home that already felt like the HQ of my future homesteading empire. She talked about important things like septic tanks and oil deliveries, but I could only think about where the chickens' brooder box should go. Finally, she handed over the key. I waved to her as she walked down the hill to her property, just a hundred yards away. I liked that someone was close. As she disappeared through the pines to her own cabin, I turned to the big green door in front of me. An old-fashioned doorbell that you turn like a key jangle-rang as I cranked it. I laughed at the simple design; the sound was friendly. After a good look up and down, I



unlocked the door and went inside.

Inside was a perfect little kitchen with a cork floor and a few conventional appliances that seemed fairly new. It was the biggest room in the cabin, and I could walk across it in six steps. Off to its right was a small living room with a fire-place and a wooden futon. My inner design student tends to snub futons, but this one seemed to have some substance. On top of it were some blankets and a quilt. The room shone with some sparse furnishings of lamps, end tables, and an entertainment center, which I would turn into my bookcase (I don't have a TV). On the kitchen table was a stack of local maps, menus, and contact information. Off to the left was a bedroom without a bed. The movers wouldn't be here for a few days, so I was silently grateful for the futon. I'd eat some interior-decorating crow. It beat sleeping like one.

That first night in our new home, it was just the dogs and me. Whoever had prepped the cabin had left us some dry wood, so I started a roaring fire. While it heated up the small house, I made a warm bed out of the blankets and unpacked my Sherpa of a station wagon. Inside the packed car were all sorts of things I just didn't trust a moving van to deliver intact. I'd brought along with me my most prized possessions, mostly musical instruments. My fiddle, dulcimer, and banjo were along for the ride, and so were my favorite antiques — a ceramic dinosaur, a music box with a mechanical dancing President Nixon, and an ancient Lassie stuffed animal with a plastic face. I unpacked a Fire King jadeite mug and a stove-top percolator. (Coffee is something I don't go four hours without unless I'm unconscious.) I set up my computer on a coffee table against the cabin wall, so I could watch a movie before bedtime.

Between the fire, the warm dogs on both sides of me, and the fiddle propped up on one of the cabin's wooden chairs, I relaxed completely. I had made it. Through a blizzard, the flu, and miles of icy roads, I had made it to this cabin at the end of the world. I didn't know a single person. Hell, I didn't even know where to buy breakfast cereal, but for tonight I was all set. It didn't feel like home yet, but it did feel like the beginning of one.



The next morning I woke up a Vermonter. (I know locals around here cringe when transplants call themselves that, but as far as my income-tax files were concerned, I was now a resident of the Green Mountain State.) I made coffee, took the dogs out for a walk, and got my first real look at the place. To my surprise, the garden looked fantastic — a large twenty-by-fifty-foot plot with a wire fence, gate, the works! It wasn't exactly in great shape, though. It looked like no one had tended it in years, but the possibilities were enough to cause a big smile to slide across my face. The ground that wasn't covered in patches of ice showed dead grass, even and untilled. The gate was apparently being held together by spite and tetanus. The fence posts were falling down. It had been easily a decade since this soil had hosted a pumpkin on a vine or a row of sweet corn. But the potential was like a shot of adrenaline. The first real sign of homestead life was beyond that garden gate. There would be food.

Behind the old garden was a metal shed. It was a small structure, the kind of place where people park a riding mower and some rakes. I sneaked inside, past the broken

door, and discovered nothing but old flowerpots and cookie tins inside. The walls seemed solid, though, and the roof just as sound. It had a dirt floor and some old pieces of a long-ago-orphaned carpentry project. The place obviously hadn't been used since the garden was in production. All I could think about was chickens.

This old shed would be a veritable hen mansion. In Idaho I had ten birds living in two tiny coops; this shed could easily host twenty layers and a proud rooster. Maybe even a pair of geese or a few ducks. My eyes scanned the property, my mind gathering ideas. The open area around the cabin seemed to be about an acre, maybe slightly more. The clearing was surrounded by a windbreak of trees. I could hear the rushing of the cold creek that circled the property line. There was a rat's nest of field fencing behind the shed, possibly used to hold leaves for composting at the edge of the woods. A few cinder blocks were stacked by an old woodpile. I could already imagine a hive of bees swarming there, happily buzzing, their legs heavy with yellow pollen.

I sharply inhaled a lungful of cold air, and Jazz looked up at me as if something were wrong. "Good Christ ..." I realized aloud, "this place is going to change everything."

This was hope, folks. This was exactly the place I needed to continue my homesteading aspirations. I could build and expand on everything I had learned in Idaho, maybe even start setting down roots. This place was primed and ready for someone who wanted to really use it. I already had the collateral of a year's experience and the will to work as hard as I needed to. It felt like fate herself had landed me at this little cabin with a garden, a coop, and even some pasture waiting for me. Beyond the garden was a clearing about half an acre in size. I looked out into the dead tall grass and let myself close my eyes, seeing it in my mind as high summer with sheep munching away. The likelihood of sheep on a rented parcel was about as realistic as the landlord's letting me turn her garage into a high-stakes casino. But a girl can dream. In a New England winter, dreams keep you warm.

My heart was pounding. My eyes were tearing up. I knelt on the ground to hug Jazz and Annie, who were sitting alongside me. "Guys," I whispered to them, "this is going to be wonderful. Just wait and see." Jazz and Annie didn't comment. Siberian huskies are known for being professionally stoic as they age, but they got it. Both looked up at me with wagging tails and panting behind wolfish smiles. They didn't know it yet, but the small dirt roads of Sandgate were perfect for their small kick-sled. We would be able to mush for miles here and not worry about running into highways or herds of livestock like we did in Idaho. Or maybe they did know? They smelled something good in the air, their black noses lifting to the rush of pine needles and smoke from the neighbor's woodstove. I wouldn't put it past Jazz. He understands everything.



If luck could cripple, I was limping. The property seemed to have endless possibilities. It could host a garden three times the size of my raised beds in Idaho and produce enough vegetables, eggs, honey, and angora wool to keep me stocked and occupied all through the next winter. I had no idea how long the cabin could be mine, but I was certain of the next twelve months. As long as I kept paying rent, this place would in turn earn its keep for me by providing me with most of my food and

entertainment. I'd have a full growing season ahead of me. By the time the last of my Cherokee Purple tomatoes were dropping off the vines, I would be welcoming my first Vermont autumn. It is staggering how much I looked forward to October. November 1 is my least favorite day of the year.

This year the high harvest would include more than just pretty leaves and red-covered bridges — to me it would be a round of applause. Even though the place was a barren tundra at the moment, there would be blood pumping in its veins in a few short months. Young pullets would scatter themselves through the green grass. Peas and squash would swirl around that old dead fence and make it come alive again. Visions of gray geese on that green-painted porch, next to a hutch of Angora rabbits began to inhabit my already overstimulated mind. This property was going to take all the lessons I'd learned in Idaho and turn them into advanced courses. Now I just had to get to work. There was a lot of planning, a slew of phone calls, and some amount of begging for permission still ahead of me. But in my gut I already knew that this year was going to be okay. It had to be.

## A VERY LONG WINTER



**IT FELT LIKE WINTER WOULD NEVER LEAVE.** All of southern Vermont was filled with grimy snow, turned gray from mud and exhaust. Driving to work was like driving through a war zone of sludge, naked trees, icy turns, and barren fields. This was Mud Season. Part of me was happy I'd moved here in the most climatically desperate (not to mention least touristy) time of the year, because I'd really appreciate spring when it finally did arrive. But the other part of me just thought the place looked beat, dead, and unlivable. I had all these big plans for poultry and a garden, and right now the place reminded me more of Chernobyl than the scenes from *The Sound of Music* that the Vermont board of tourism brochures had promised me.

Weekends of exploring grocery stores, movie theaters, and Laundromats took over the borrowed time I now had in my schedule. All my homesteading plans were on hold until the thaw came. I couldn't slam a hoe into the ground or bring home chicks until late April or early May. Northern New England is a place that takes winter just as seriously as the Pacific Northwest does, and that year the cold season seemed to last lifetimes longer than the winters of my past. It had started before I'd left Idaho, with the first snow in October. The succeeding weeks pounded Sandpoint with so much powder that by the time I left in February, the driveway had plow piles close to ten feet high, and even the flattest, driftless areas were topped with four and a half solid feet of snow. (You know you're dealing with a different kind of winter when the clothesline sticks up only eight inches above the snow.)

Then there was the big journey east, followed by a cold snap and more snow. It was mid-March, and Vermont was still flaking away fresh inches in the morning. I forgot I owned sandals. I'd look at photos of Tennessee on my computer and want to cry. My new neighbors told me there was no spring like a Vermont spring, so lush and dramatic after the barren deciduous trees came back to life. But apple blossoms and maple buds seemed like something from another planet. I had been wearing my snow boots since the other side of a continent was home. It had been a very long winter.

Those following months in the cabin were physically inactive yet emotionally exhausting. I was snowbound for a stretch of weeks without a farm to keep my body, mind, and soul busy; it was starting to wear me down. Now that I no longer had a small homestead depending on me, I realized how much I missed the routines and responsibility my last place had offered. Life as a new Vermonter felt helpless and boring compared to being in Idaho. My life revolved around my desk at work and my two dogs, who had become so adapted to my world that I no longer thought about their care as any sort of effort. Feeding and walking the dogs were as routine as brushing my teeth and starting up the car. I had never longed to haul a water bucket to livestock as much as I did that February.

You can understand my need for deliberate activity. I wanted to grow again, and I mean that in every sense of the word. Adding sled dogs, chickens, gardens, bees, and rabbits to your life is about more than just rolling out of bed and shaking some food into a bowl. Your home turns into a breathing being: something that needs tending, weeding, and the occasional yeast packet. I longed to get up early and feed the rabbits and chickens before heading to the office. I even missed trudging through the waist-deep snow to refill frozen water fonts. The harmony and hardships of homesteading had completely melded into one song for me. And it was a song I couldn't get out of my head.

Maybe it was just my disgust with those still-unmelted snowdrifts, but I really missed the garden. I never set out to become a Gardener; it was on my list of skills to learn because growing my own food was important to me. A garden is a way to plant your own insurance, a way to depend on yourself for dinner even if you're cash-broke and the car's out of gas. I loved eating my own salads and stewed tomatoes, but what I really yearned for were those hot days out in the yard with a hoe, breaking sod, getting that sunburn, feeling my arms ache, knowing that a few hours of sweaty effort mixed into a heavy layer of compost and manure would produce amazing, beautiful, clean food.

I also missed the feeling of responsibility the garden gave me. Like the animals, it was another thing that needed me. Gardening is just as much of a mutual agreement of effort as raising animals is; you need to feed, and tend, and water, and weed, and do anything else to keep those plants healthy, and they'll produce for you.

I would sit in my car after work, staring out at the dark winter sky, and pull a crumpled Seed Saver's Exchange catalog from the sun visor and read through it, like garden pornography. You mean to tell me I could be growing Dragon's Tongue beans and Green Zebra tomatoes in a few months? Really? I was skeptical that the sun would ever show up again. My Idaho garden seemed like a lifetime ago. I was jonesing for some topsoil between my toes.

Come March, gardeners are all pacing like caged wild dogs. We have sacks of sprouted, mutant potatoes; packets of snap peas; and six-packs of lettuce to put in the ground. We're scratching around in our pots of houseplants to remember the feeling of working soil. During dinnertime conversation we bring up rabbit manure and blood meal, nonchalantly asking our tablemates if they think the horse owners next door would let us pick up a truckload of manure. We're awful, but we also can't help it. It's a labor so addicting, so complicated, and so dear to our hearts, we're barking for turnips by April.

To break the fever that winter, I'd grab my fiddle and work on a few songs. It was the only way to get my head out of the compost pile. But then I'd come across an old tune about shelling peas, or Jimmy Dickens would holler, "Take an old cold tater and wait!" and I'd be back to despondent thoughts of my comatose garden. That rusty fenced-in area outside just needed some swirling pea blossoms to bring her back to life. I could make out where a compost pile once was, in a crust of ice. It was sectioned off like a small wooden wheelbarrow without wheels. In a few weeks, when everything melted, I would have a better idea of what I was dealing with. My hope was that the last renters used the place to grow food, too. If they did, I might spend



less time breaking sod and building raised beds and start right in shopping for heirloom sweet corn. To temper the desire to plant, I tried to think about sunburn and mosquitoes. But we all know they're just collateral damage in a life lived outside. Now in my fifth month of snow, I'd have handed the mosquitoes a damn syringe if it could have gotten me another twenty degrees and a couple of extra hours of daylight. I'm not above bargaining here.

I was overcome with this empty feeling that people get when they know what they want but can't have it just yet. Maybe you've felt that same hollowness yourself and can understand how vulnerable it makes you feel? It's no different from pining for a lover you can't hold quite yet or reading the menu of a restaurant you can't afford until your next paycheck. My recourse was simple: I put my mind someplace else.



To try to meet some like-minded locals, I posted flyers advertising beginner fiddle lessons. I'm not a professional musician by any means, but I did teach myself the basics. I also figured that because I'm far from talented and still manage to make music, I could understand the foggy beginner's mind. With my previous year of self-education fresh in my head, I thought I could help some other wannabe fiddlers out there start sawing away, too.

The flyers were a huge success. Within weeks I had met a slew of locals, all of whom were entrenched in the music scene. Some had friends in bluegrass bands, others wanted to learn to fiddle while their children took classical violin lessons at school. Some of them were even homesteading on their own small farms. A woman named Shellie from just over the border, in Hebron, New York, had forty acres with a flock of sheep, laying hens, ducks, and an old farmhouse that had been ordered from the Sears, Roebuck catalog around a century before she started farming there.

The lessons weren't professional by any means, but they did get some people playing. A few of them kept coming back through the spring and summer to sit on the porch and play. I realize now how bold it was to move into a new place and start posting flyers for music lessons. But my brashness paid off. Those sheets of copier paper were enough to get me a few familiar faces around town and some good tunes to boot. We weren't going to give anyone in Nashville a run for their money, but we were having fun, and I was feeling less like a stranger in southern Vermont.

At the office my coworkers were getting to know me. Some were slowly warming up, but in the traditional New England fashion, most cut me a wide berth. The company I work for is small, and the people who chose to live and work in a rural setting were pretty content with their lives. No one asked for a bubbly, audiophile, wannabe farmer to move into the cubicle next to them and start asking questions about local feed stores. To their credit, everyone was angelically patient. Slowly, I could see the sparks of friendship igniting with a few people.

One slow afternoon in the office while I was zoned out staring at a spreadsheet, I was awakened into consciousness by the friendly voice of someone leaning over the cubicle wall. On the opposite side of my little barrier was a young, tall, shaggy-haired blond guy who looked more like the models in our spring catalog than the men in the rod-and-tackle division upstairs. Most of them sported a two-month-old beard and had

about twenty years and thirty pounds on this kid. He was another transplant, who had moved here a few years before me. He had walked down a few flights of stairs to shake my hand and introduce himself.

His name was Steve, he was around my age, and he played guitar. He told me a friend of his saw my fiddle-lesson flyers in Sandgate and wanted to know, would I like to get together and play music with them sometime? Both he and his friend, Phil, played guitar and thought that adding a violin to the mix would be interesting. I told him I'd be thrilled. The idea of making some musical friends at the office was appealing. Bridging some of my personal life and my professional life with guitar strings seemed like a grand idea.

Steve and Phil invited me into their band and their homes. Over the next few weeks, we'd spend Saturday mornings or Thursday nights in each other's living rooms, playing everything from modern covers to the occasional old-time tune. We weren't really interested in perfecting our work or renting a recording studio; we just liked to play. Phil had a young family with two children. Steve had a high-stakes job developing new products for the company. I was new to the state. All of us used the band to relax and laugh and drink a few beers, enjoying the time we set aside in our busy lives to put some acoustic instruments in our hands.

Through Steve and Phil I got to know their families and friends as well, once again amazing me at the web of connections a shared interest can deliver. Since Steve had made a lot of friends at the office, I was folded into his group and started to warm up to others as well.

Proximity breeds a wonderful level of comfort, and before long the big, tough guys who worked in the pod next to me became friends. Their names were Phil and James, both native Vermonters; they took me under their wing and became my big brothers in the Green Mountain State.

After a few practice sessions, Phil and Steve were certain we were ready to play a local open-mic night. I wasn't so sure. They had both been playing their guitars forever and were good at it. I had been playing my fifty-dollar fiddle for a few years and wasn't comfortable with their music yet. I had learned to wail on "In the Pines," not pop music. But the guys were fans of some scrappy alt country songs like "Wagon Wheel," by Old Crow Medicine Show (one of my favorites) and a few from Ryan Adams, too. They knew more about this music than I did and opened my ears to a lot of new bands. Slobberbone, Uncle Tupelo, and the Mountain Goats were the bands our nameless trio covered. We felt we had a good set of songs ready for the North Bennington music scene, so one Thursday night we packed up the guitar and fiddle cases in the back of Phil's station wagon and drove off to play at a sports bar.

I sat in the backseat on the drive to the bar and contemplated the situation. Neither of the guys seemed nervous. They had gotten their first-time performance anxiety over with the weekend before, at an open-mic night in Pawlet, Vermont. I had never performed in a band, in front of people, ever. I was as tense and nervous as a person with a fiddle case could be. I just hoped we'd get to drink first.

We walked into the bar with our instrument cases in hand. It seemed like a light and friendly place — an Irish-inspired brass pub with heavy athletic overtones: green and brown walls with tennis rackets nailed to them (you get the picture). A very loud band