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HUMAN NATURE

A Hayloft for the Heart

By ANNE RAVER

FINKSBURG, Md.

HAVE wandered like some kind of lost farmer on the outskirts of cities most of my life. When my job was based in Boston, I lived on a salt marsh in Ipswich, in an open studio over an old garage. When I worked on Long Island, I lived in a ramshackle cottage on the Nissequogue River and gardened in the barnyard of an old horse stable.

Then I rambled around Brooklyn for about 10 years, farming on a rooftop, and then in a backyard in Red Hook, where my street led straight to the sea.

But all those years, I would gather up my friends and retreat to the old family farm in Maryland, to wade in the stream and pick sweet corn and peas, and Brandywine tomatoes.

When it came to thinking about real estate of my own, I found myself obsessed with barns. I almost bought one in Shelter Island, N.Y., about five years ago, to turn it into a house, but it was too close to the property line to get a building permit. Then I hired a New York City architect to design a barn for me, complete with greenhouse, for a scant acre I had found next to the railroad out east in Sagaponack. The land was full of cedars and wild butterfly weed, and a bike ride from the ocean.

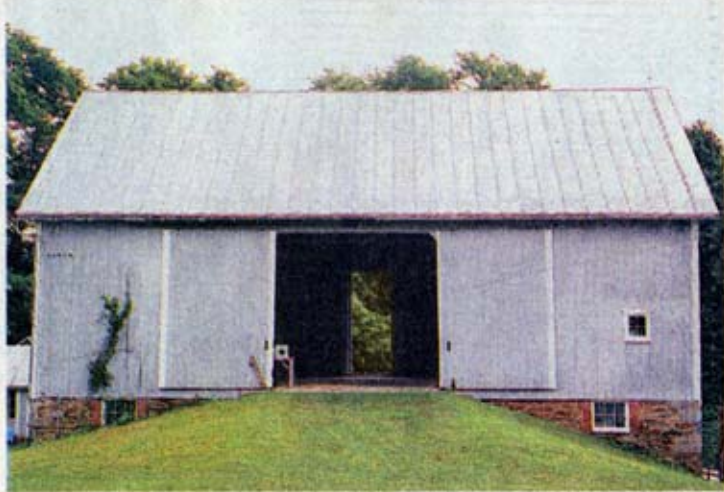
I told myself that the sound of the train, and shaking earth at regular intervals, was romantic. But the barn design was too grand. So when the bank decided the price of the land was inflated (and denied my loan application) I took my losses and canceled the plan.

It's not surprising that I never bought anything. Maybe I was waiting for my next husband to show up. Building a house — even buying one — always seemed like something you did with someone else. But I've been divorced now for 20 years, so maybe I should look at it this way: Build the house and he will come. Or not. It's my life.

Then one day, about two years ago, I adopted a stray

dog far too furry and wild to keep in a city apartment. I felt this little click when I did it, like a green light flicking on in a subway tunnel. And it was only a matter of months until I got out at this stop, back in the country, sketching out plans for the home that has been part of my mental landscape for so many years.

In March, I moved back to the old family farm in Maryland, a place drenched in memory. My great-grandfather built the house and an early barn in 1890, out of white oak, the front porch and barnyard walls out of stone,



Linda Day Clark for The New York Times

HOMECOMING DEFERRED The writer left New York for the family farm, where she will turn a barn into an apartment.

pulled by his horse and mule, from the red clay fields. And we grew up on this place, though my father, who knew the drudgery of farm work, got an education and a job in the city. He rented the land to his cousin, so we had all the joys of smoking hams in the old smokehouse and picking peas right out of the field, without having to get up before dawn

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to milk the cows.

I left at 17 and thought I'd never look back. But there it sat, slumbering in my heart. When my father died of a heart attack in 1991, I would come home to visit my mother. With my friends from New York City, it was easy to build fantasies: organically grown soybeans to feed the voracious tofu market, a farm camp where kids would gather eggs, milk the pet cow and find out where hamburgers and milk and plastic-wrapped sugar snaps come from. But come Sunday, we always went back to the city.

Like many New Yorkers, I managed to keep those visions intact while riding the subway and working in a community garden with other transplants from the country. It was a kind of convenient fantasy that required no commitment or risk. And the thought of returning home, "to Mother," seemed, despite her infinite zest for life, all too much like some Barbara Pym novel. I pictured us in the evenings, supping on hard-

stood in that dusty old barn with the architect and builder, explaining what I wanted in my simple loft, I had a similar swooping sensation, of letting ideas finally turn into something as real as wood and glass: a wall of windows on the south, where the fields curve like rounded hips down to the woods and stream; a bank of windows over the east-facing kitchen, with a little deck that could overlook the old barnyard that will be my walled garden.

"This is going to lose an awful lot of heat," said Mr. Herman, the builder. He stood on the wide-plank floor, craning his neck up at the roof, which is 29 feet at its ridge. "What if we put in a second story?"

Mr. Booz, the architect, sized up the proportions. "You'd still have a 15-foot ceiling."

Turning a farm
fantasy into wood
and glass.

boiled eggs.

Now I am 52. I feel like that cartoon woman staring out of the birthday card: I wanted to have children, but I forgot.

So I have come home again, if for no other reason than this place has been sitting on my chest, like some brooding dog, for too many years.

With the help of an architect, Miche Booz, and a builder, Jonathan Herman — local people I found through friends — I am creating a sunny big loft space here in my grandfather's bank barn.

A bank barn has a little hill, or bank, that runs up to great sliding doors, 18 feet high and 9 feet wide, which roll open to allow a wagon piled with hay bales to pull up onto the wide-planked second floor. The animals live in the stables below, which are kept cool by their thick stone walls.

When my grandfather died, we kept his old work team, Kit and Maud, as pets, and their stalls are worn from their heavy necks leaning over the wooden troughs. Upstairs, my sister Martha and I built tunnels in the hay with my oldest brother, Carroll, who engineered intricate mazes through the bales that led to golden rooms, where dusty shafts of light fell through the cracks between the boards of the walls. We would jump off those cliffs of hay, on a trapeze rigged from a wagon tree and a rope, and swing joyfully past the haze of green trees and fields framed by the great open doors.

So one day last February, when I

We laughed at the vastness of the space. My country retreat will take up only one of the hay mows, about 700 square feet. Adding another floor would make it 1,100 square feet. The rest of the barn will remain untouched, with light still falling through the chinks between the boards. I will sand the floor, eventually, because I want nieces and nephews and neighbors dancing on it. And not just square dancing, but African dancing, salsa, swing, the tango. I want to show films like "Harold and Maude" or foreign films like "Children of Paradise," which never made it to Carroll County.

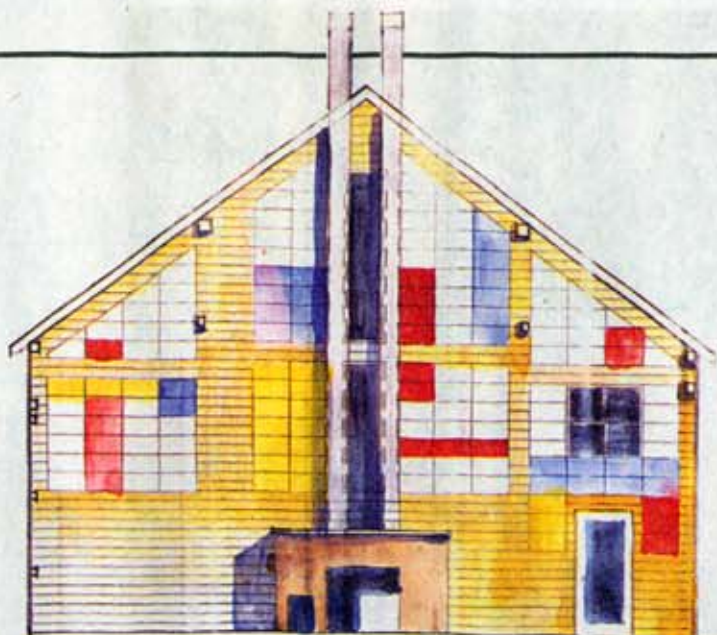
"Movies?" my neighbor, Randy Wineke, said. "I'll run the popcorn machine."

I want to dry herbs, carve pumpkins in the fall in front of a big fireplace that I don't think I can afford.

"Of course you can!" exclaimed my mother, Kathleen, who loves seeing more life at the old farm. "You have to have the fireplace!"

The little deck Mr. Booz drew outside my kitchen has the airy liftoff of a high dive. "Where's my lap pool?" I joked. "Can't you just see a long narrow pool at the bottom of my little deck?"

A week later, the sketch arrived in



Miche Booz Architect



Color photographs by Linda Day Clark for The New York Times

YOU CAN GO BACK In photos from the family album, the writer's grandparents, Carroll and Grace Raver, inset left; above left, the farm in 1967; and the barn being framed in 1915, middle left, after the original burned down. The barn today, below. Design for an interior wall with fireplace and fiberglass windows, top left. The barn's white oak beams and chestnut siding, top right. The smokehouse, above right.

the mail: a wash of blue running along the old concrete terrace, once occupied by cows bellowing to be milked. The pig house, now a ruin covered with Virginia creeper and honeysuckle, had become a whimsical greenhouse. I could picture water gardens in the old troughs. Fruit trees within the stone walls.

We pondered the interior wall for weeks. Something like Japanese rice paper, Mr. Herman said, to let in the light. Then we discovered a material called Kalwall, a sturdy translucent fiberglass. It comes in colors, too, which inspired my idea for a Mondrian-like wall.

A few days later, that watercolor sketch came in the mail: "Anne's



Finksburg Boogie-Woogie."

This design dances, gracefully, I hope, between old and new. We are salvaging old treasures tucked away in the dusty lofts of other farm buildings: wide chestnut boards perfect for a stairway, an old oak door with

an iron latch for the front entrance, a deep tub, with all four claw feet, excavated from the top of my grandfather's workshop.

Architects are dangerous people. They can give you what you want, for a price. It's a little scary when I see the cost of my little country place rising so high. "Could I build a loft house for \$50,000?" I had asked Mr. Herman last winter. "Not for this," he said. "This will cost about \$150,000."

I could forget about the deck, of course, and the radiant heat, and the big fireplace, and definitely the Boogie-Woogie wall. But the time has

come to build my dream house.

Sometimes, when I look around at the neighborhood subdivisions, the golf courses and malls covering the farms I grew up with, I want to run right back to New York. I'm a stranger in this changed landscape. It's too far from the city for friends to casually drop by, and it takes planning to fill the old farmhouse with their laughter.

But I'm digging my heels in this time: poking about the bookstores and bars of my old new land, exploring the waterfront in Baltimore. I've found a few kindred souls who like to eat fresh corn, crab cakes and tomatoes. By winter, maybe we'll be roasting chestnuts in the barn.