

MARLENE ANNE
BUMGARNER



BACK TO THE LAND IN
SILICON VALLEY

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SAMPLE CHAPTER

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A HIKE AND DINNER WITH THE ADAMSES

SATURDAY MORNING, John and I drove south to Morgan Hill. It took nearly two hours. The freeways that cut across San Jose today hadn't been built yet. The first ten miles, down Mount Hamilton Road to Grant Ranch, had many hair-pin turns, making conversation difficult, but the eastern foothills, with their lush hills, rushing streams, and coyote bush kept my attention. In spring, these hills were covered in wildflowers, yellow buttercups, California poppies, and monkey flowers, orange columbine and lavender larkspur and clarksia. Today the hills wore their autumn colors. Long brown grass, orange leaves and thick stands of shrubby oaks lined the road.

This route had been cleared in 1875 to accommodate horse-drawn wagons transporting material to build Lick Observatory. John enjoyed pointing out where drovers stopped along the way to change horses.

Once we made it to Quimby Road, we began talking about the advantages of moving to an undeveloped piece of land. Getting away from the 70s political turmoil. The chance to build a homestead from scratch. Living simply. Room for a large garden. Animals for Doña to care for. Peace and quiet.

“We have to keep our minds open, John,” I said at last. “Please, let’s not make any decisions today.”

His eyes on the road, John agreed. “You’re right. I’m excited about the possibilities, but I agree. No decisions today.” I squeezed his shoulder.

“Thanks.”

John and I had a history of spontaneous decisions. Five years earlier, while we were sitting on the roof of our Pinto watching a lunar eclipse, John decided to transfer from studying physics at San Jose State to astronomy at San Diego State. I was having trouble getting into classes in my major due to the returning veterans, so I assented. A month later, we sold our house and drove south with three cats: no jobs, no home, and no college acceptance.

Fortunately, because San Diego was booming, we both landed good jobs and found a sweet little house to rent. This time, though, I wanted us to take more time to think before deciding.

We had left Mount Hamilton early that chilly morning. As the sun rose over the foothills, it warmed the air. By the time we reached Highway 101 — just a two-lane road in those days — our car windows were open and the cool breeze buffeted our cheeks. In spite of our best efforts to stay calm, we were both excited as we approached the property. Once again, we reminded ourselves: we didn’t need to decide that day.

We met Dorrie and Quincy on the edge of town, followed them west along a winding wooded road to Chesbro Lake Drive. With a grand name like that I had expected a paved road, but the asphalt ended a few car-lengths in, and we were soon on a sharp uphill slope covered in slippery gravel. By the time we got to Hawkins Lane, we were driving on dirt and swerving to avoid ruts and potholes. Our surefooted VW bus had a low clearance, and we bottomed out a couple of times as John negotiated the bumpy road.

We parked at a gate with a tilted and faded For Sale sign and two large pumpkins marking the rutted dirt road heading up the hill. We walked along the eastern boundary of the parcel as well as we could determine it from the plot map Dorrie's friend had provided. Fortunately, it had been a dry November, and hadn't rained for several weeks. The soil was dry and firm, easy to walk on.

As we walked, Dorrie and I took turns carrying Doña in our well-travelled yellow corduroy Snugli baby carrier. The men carried the rolled-up plans and a clipboard each, and stopped periodically to confer or write on their notepads. It was clear by the easy banter that they had much in common. Even though John was six years older than Quincy, they had a good rapport. The Adams' two dogs, King and Crosby, romped happily beside us. Our spirits were high. To look at us, we might have been out for a day hike in a regional park.

The land was heavily wooded. Several horse paths and fire trails allowed access to most of the ten acres, so we meandered a bit, exploring as much of the land as we could. At first, we walked along a narrow dirt road, but after we reached the top of the hill we went cross-country. The thick blanket of fallen leaves lay rotting and melting into the soil, and we laughed as we slipped and slid down the slope. I noted where we were — the rotting leaves would make great compost. As I sat on a pile of leaves at one point, I breathed in the rich loamy fragrance of mulch all around. It seemed unlikely, but after an hour we ended up, as we intended, back at the gate. We had explored most of the parcel.

Both over six-feet tall and fit, John and Quincy were a matched set that day. Quincy had fastened his medium-length red hair into a kind of bun at the back of his neck; John's long brown locks hung around his face. They had started the day in jeans and plaid Pendleton shirts, but, as the unseasonably warm day progressed, they shed their plaids for t-shirts. John borrowed my hair tie to fasten his locks into a ponytail.

Dorrie wore practical denim pants and a long-sleeved shirt. Her short brown hair looked comfortable, and she walked briskly, confidently. I wore shorts and a tank top. I soon learned that wasn't such a great idea. Between wild berry vines, poison oak and the

always-present possibility of snakes, long pants and long sleeves would have been far more suitable. John had persuaded me to wear hiking boots, so at least I wouldn't sprain an ankle.

Dorrie narrated animatedly as we walked. "Look ... those two trees would be perfect for a hammock," and "This moist spot where the road has been cut into the side of the hill might hide a spring." and "That level area would be a good place to put a milking shed. We could fence in the side of that rise for the goat pen."

Her enthusiasm was contagious. Dorrie seemed smart and warm and friendly. As we talked, I learned she had grown up on a farm in San Luis Obispo. Her parents were both teachers. She had five younger sisters and brothers — all of whom worked on the farm after school and on weekends. She and Quincy had met at the nearby California Polytechnic College (Cal Poly), where they were both members of a Methodist student group. They had been married three years, and were anxious to stop paying rent and buy a house. Although older than Dorrie, I felt far less prepared to embark on a rural life. I had grown up in San Francisco apartments and suburban houses. *Would she believe I could do this?* I felt as if I were interviewing for a job.

With no particular tasks to accomplish on our walk, and actually not being too sure what to look for, I eventually fell behind the others, taking in the beauty of the oaks, manzanitas, sage, and tall grasses. I stopped occasionally and stood still, breathing in the sweet-smelling air and enjoying the silence. This little ten-acre parcel was surrounded by hundreds of acres of undeveloped chaparral. As we walked, we heard no human voices but our own. It took my breath away.

As we came to a wide swale, I remembered a pastime of my childhood. "This would be a great slope to slide down on a sheet of cardboard." I called to the others.

"I was imagining an archery course," answered John, wistfully.

"This grass will need to be mowed at least twice a year to reduce the fire danger," Quincy warned. "The lower clearing looks like the best bet for you guys and, if you decide to build there, you could put your septic tank lines down this hill."

Dorrie turned to John. "The swale would make a great place to put a garden, and you could have an archery course too."

Dorrie and Quincy planned to live in a school bus until they could afford to purchase a house in the valley. Since we wanted to build, and they just wanted to save money, they had quickly waived any claim to the lower half of the parcel, which had a large area already cleared of trees.

Eventually, the seller, William Carter, showed up in a beat-up old Ford pickup truck. He confirmed that shared water rights were indeed part of “the deal,” as well as access to Chesbro Reservoir, the large body of water we had passed on the way up. That was good. Otherwise we would have had to sink our own well. A tall, wiry man of about sixty, with a craggy face and thick grey hair, Carter bragged about his influence with local government officials as we walked. “Just call Sig Sanchez,” he said, naming a county supervisor. “He’ll take care of any problems you have getting planning approval. Tell him you’re a friend of mine, and he’ll fix you up.” He swaggered a little as he said this, his back bent forward, unruly hair falling over his eyes, reminding me of a villain in a children’s story.

Mr. Carter pointed out the well housing and pump on his side of the property line, and the large storage building on the other side. Because of its semi-circular shape and sheet metal construction he called it a Quonset hut and so, forever, did we. He said we could keep tools and equipment there, and access his electricity if we needed to. We then followed him back down Hawkins Lane and Chesbro Lake Drive to a narrow path that led to the beach. On the way he pointed out an empty mobile home on his side of the property line.

“I usually rent that out,” he said, “but I’m thinking of moving in myself.” My heart sank. I wasn’t looking forward to having this rather creepy man as a next-door neighbor.

“This is a great place to cool off after working all day,” Carter remarked when we reached the beach. “And your daughter will love it when she gets older. Just always remember to shut this gate because the beach is not open to the public.” We didn’t know it then, but shutting gates would soon become a regular part of our lives.

Before he left, Bill Carter went over the plans with us again, and verified the boundaries of the parcel. Among other things — such as the names of our nearest neighbors and the location of the communal

garbage dump — he told us that he had “taken care of” the rattlesnake problem several years earlier, by poisoning all the rodents.

“You’ll never see a snake on this piece of land,” he said proudly, I suppose thinking to reassure us.

We exchanged horrified looks. The idea of poisoned rodents did not reassure us. What had that done to the native fauna on the property? What would it do to our cats and dogs? To the owls and the hawks?

But no one said anything.

After Carter left, we ate lunch beneath a large oak tree with low horizontal branches that Doña would soon be able to climb. Meanwhile, she devoured her sandwich and began to explore the outer boundary of the blanket I had laid on the grass. Her light brown hair framed her chubby face, and we laughed as she tasted a piece of clover and made a sour face. As she explored, the four of us discussed the logistics of getting a trailer and other vehicles up the road, and when it might be feasible to do so.

“I’d like to move our school bus up here next month if Carter will let us,” said Dorrie, looking inquiringly at Quincy.

He nodded his head.

I asked if she had any concerns about Carter. “Janet’s dad? No — I’ve known him for years. He’s a bit weird, but he’s ok.”

Thus reassured, I put my concerns aside. Pleasantly tired from the efforts of the morning and sleepy from lunch, we rested in the shade. I pulled Doña into my lap. She settled sleepily into my arms, and I let my thoughts wander.

This wasn’t the first time John and I had considered living in the country. In the 1960s, he had read Robert Heinlein’s serialized blueprint for surviving a nuclear attack and taken it to heart. *Farnham’s Freehold* depicted a group of friends who survived the atomic bomb by retreating to a fallout shelter under Hugh Farnham’s home, then living a pioneer life. John had been heavily influenced by the story, which he read about the time of the Cuban missile crisis, when for a few days we all thought we might die. He talked longingly of building a “freehold” for our little family.

When we were undergraduates, we had almost moved to a commune east of San Diego. John had planned to dig an underground turf-covered bomb shelter there. It didn't work out. Since then he had been following the work of Buckminster Fuller. Inspired by Bucky's ergonomic and efficient designs, John had been developing plans for a two-story geodesic house. His copies of *Handmade Houses*, *The Owner-Built Home*, and *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth* were dog-eared with use. I liked his new direction. I especially liked the idea that our new home would be above ground and not covered with dirt.

While we drove cross-country the previous summer, John and I had visited three communes: *Twin Oaks* in Louisa, Virginia, *The Farm* in Summertown, Tennessee, and a *Lama Foundation* settlement near San Cristobal, New Mexico. A high school friend of John's, Annie, had lived there since 1966. We named our daughter Doña Ana — Lady Anne — after New Mexico and Annie.

Annie introduced us to Helen and Scott Nearing's new manifesto, *Living the Good Life: How to Live Sanely and Simply in a Troubled World*. The Nearings preached the benefits of homesteading communally, and we wanted to see if we could embrace this lifestyle.

We appreciated and enjoyed the bonds that people developed on these communes, and the gentle leisurely pace of life. But we were uncomfortable with the group decision-making that we saw practiced there. We wanted to plan our own destiny. To do that, we needed our own piece of land. Having neighbors nearby seemed important, especially for sharing the work of major projects, such as putting in gardens and building fences and other large structures. But we wanted our independence.

Living on the land seemed as natural to us as any other life choice in the 70s. Young people and old were moving to the land in droves. One issue of *The Whole Earth Catalog*, a fixture on most of our friends' coffee tables, featured Scott and Helen Nearing's book. Their ideas of subsistence farming and healthy living fueled the dreams of thousands of people. Even couples who had recently signed mortgages began selling their homes and moving to the land.

I had also been influenced by the written word, although not of the survivalist variety. Starting with *Little House in the Big Woods*, which I

found at a church rummage sale in junior high, I had read all the books written by Laura Ingalls Wilder. In them, she depicted the travels of her pioneer family as they crossed the prairies in covered wagons and built farms from scratch. I had re-read the books while pregnant with Doña. Autobiographical but fictionalized, Wilder's stories fueled my fantasies of living in the country, raising our family simply, away from the clamor and conflicts of modern life. It was a seductive chimera.

Our spot under the big oak tree was pleasant. While Dorrie and Quincy tramped back up the hill to scout out where they might park their school bus, John and I lounged beside Doña, now asleep. Soon birds began calling to one another, the tall grass rustled in the breeze, and what might have been goats bleated in the distance.

"This could work for us, honey," John said, gently caressing our daughter as she lay between us. I rolled onto my back and looked up at the trees and the sky. I also felt that I could grow to love this land.

Flushed with optimism and bursting with ideas, we drove to the Adams' home in the Santa Cruz Mountains. The sun was setting as we drove up their private road. On the brick entryway sat a dozen terracotta pots filled with herbs, flowers, and winter vegetables. Dorrie explained that this was a portable garden — it could move with her to the property. I suddenly decided to start some seedlings in Bea's kitchen window.

We spread our plans and notes on a large wooden table while I pulled Doña into my lap to nurse. As Dorrie took out wine, and Quincy roasted garlic and toasted French bread, I looked around in admiration. We might have been in a rural European home. Above the large gas stove, a variety of pots and pans hung from hooks on a metal rack. Open rafters were strung with braids of onions and garlic, drying herbs, and large bunches of lavender. Beside the handsome stone fireplace in the adjacent living room stood a pile of freshly split firewood, a basket of kindling, and two large cushions on which the resident dogs relaxed. The Adams' home smelled like a cross between a candle shop and a barn. I wanted to live there.

While Doña, sated, crawled over our feet in pursuit of the Adams' cats, we ate and drank and sketched our ideas onto the plot map. We imagined a water tank feeding a communal vegetable garden, various

animal pens, and a pond. John suggested building a communal barn where we could store animal feed and house animals during the rainy season. He and I could live in it while we obtained a permit to build a dome house.

We discussed renting a bulldozer to smooth the road for our arrival, possible moving dates, and inviting friends for a work party. We hadn't seen any deer, but Dorrie assured us they were there, and would eat anything we planted if we didn't build very high fences. "They're a real menace at my dad's farm," she told us.

One bottle emptied, we opened another, and began to talk about money. John's and my funds were in a Certificate of Deposit, but we would be able to access them at the end of December. Carter was selling an undivided ten-acre parcel and would carry a note.

The Adamsses agreed to front the down payment he required, and we would pay them back when our CD matured. The men both planned to keep their jobs at ESL; Dorrie and I would continue to attend college. Each couple would pay half the monthly payment — less than the cost of an apartment in Sunnyvale — and split the cost of feed for the animals. That left a little money each month to save for the costs of a land division. Dorrie and her family would provide the animals and in exchange for learning to care for them, John and I would help feed them and share in all the other chores around the farm. Once we each had five acres in our own names, John and I could begin construction.

"How long before we can build the barn?" I remember asking, totally forgetting our decision to "take time to think this over." Clearly the Adams' were ready to sign a contract.

"By next year this time we will be breaking ground," John assured me.

Dorrie and Quincy exchanged looks. I wondered what they were thinking, but didn't want to break the spell and ask. It may have been the wine we drank on Saturday night, or perhaps the euphoria of our dreams being fueled by our first exciting visit to the land. The peaceful ambience of Quincy and Dorrie's home didn't hurt either. I imagined our geodesic dome interior looking just like their kitchen. Whatever it was, by Sunday morning we all believed we could make this happen.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After teaching at Gavilan Community College in Gilroy for 30 years, Marlene Anne Bumgarner moved to the California coast when her first grandchild was born. There she volunteers in the Young Writers program in local schools, leads writing workshops, and enjoys walking along the coast with her border collie, Kismet. The author of *The Book of Whole Grains*, *Organic Cooking for (not-so-organic) Mothers*, and *Working with School Age Children*, she is now writing a historical novel set in 19th century industrial England. Find out more about Marlene's family life, cooking, and gardening at marlenebumgarner.com.

"We all worked together. Ate together. Sang together. Learned together. We had a good life. After living close to the natural cycles of the earth year after year, good and not good, we grew stronger and more resilient, learned to manage our occasional conflicts with tolerance and love."

When Marlene Bumgarner and her husband moved to a rural plot of land in 1973, she thought of herself as simply a young mother seeking an affordable and safe place in which to raise her child.

By the time she left the land nearly a decade later, she had written two books and a weekly newspaper column, served as contributing editor to a national magazine, a college instructor, and a sought-after public speaker. Her natural food store, The Morgan Hill Trading Post, was the first one in her community.

Follow Marlene and her friends as they live on the land, coping with the challenges of rural life as Silicon Valley evolves into the high-tech center it is today, and the world in which they live transforms itself culturally, economically, and politically.



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