

Brownsville (1974)

By Amy Mercer

In the spring of 1974, when I was three-years-old, Dad began looking at houses in small towns across the Green Mountain State. Everything he saw was more than they could afford, until he came across the house at the end of Kimball Farm Road in Brownsville, Vermont. Brownsville is a village of rolling hills, fields of black and white cows, red barns and green trees that stretch into the distance. The house Dad discovered at the end of Kimball Farm Road was built in the 1700's, and hadn't been occupied in fifteen years except for a hippie couple who'd lived there for free and painted the walls with what Dad described as, "hallucinogenic images." If we hadn't bought it, the house was going to be used by the local fire department for practice. Our house sat at the end of the long dirt road and I lived there until I was fourteen-years-old.

"But you and Mom were hippies too," I said and Dad just nodded. Most of the doors and anything worth saving was gone, he explained, taken by people from town. Dad jumped up and down on the floors to see how solid they were. There were 10 acres of woods surrounded by land owned by the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies called, *Cross Woods*, so it seemed like our land stretched on forever. I try to remember what it looked like back then. I have photographs, and remember certain things about the house and the land, but I see it all through a thick haze of longing.

Thirty-five-years later, I want to imagine what it looked like that first time Dad brought Mom and me to Kimball Farm Road.

This is what I imagine of that day: Dad driving to Brownsville with Mom and me on a day late in the spring; a day when the snow had melted and the mud on Kimball Farm Road had

hardened so that the grooves made from the few cars traveling home during the spring thaws were not too deep. Dad parking in the driveway in front of the house, and too tall for the van, unfolding his long legs from the driver's seat of the VW bus, shoving his hands deep in the pockets of his well worn jeans, and smelling the air in appreciation. Mom, in her faded brown cords and sweater, sliding open the side door for me to climb out of the van. Dad scanning the house, squinting in the sun because of his faded blue eyes, staring at the rolling hills, the thick woods, the mountain in the distance, taking his hands out of his pockets, spreading his arms wide, and saying, "This is it."

After living in crummy houses in eclectic neighborhoods outside of Boston, I imagine that Mom and Dad were quieted by the beauty of the land. Standing together, they must have looked across the dirt road beyond the rolling hills toward the Mountain in the distance, and imagined the leaves changing come fall. I imagine Dad lifting me up on his shoulders to see the mountain where I would one day learn to ski. I'm sure that my parents thought of my younger sister then, swimming in Mom's belly, joining us in this house at the end of the dirt road.

I imagine that scene now, thirty-five-years later, and wonder if my parent's dream started to unravel when my sister and I got sick. I recognize the limits of their idealism and innocence of (Mom was twenty-six and Dad a year older), and want to understand what happened so that I can steer my own family in a different direction. When my sister became sick in the spring of 1985, and I followed six months later, I wonder if something snagged in the fabric of my parent's marriage, pulling at the seams until we stood in a pile of scraps.

After Dad graduated from UMASS with a degree in landscape design that June, we made the move from Boston to Brownsville. As they drove from the city, Mom and Dad made plans for our new life in the country. They would take out a construction loan to work on the house for the first year, and then Dad would start his own landscaping business. They planned to become a part of a community-Dad volunteering with the fire department, the PTO and Cub Scouts while Mom baked pies for the Brownsville Baked Bean Suppers. They would live a life that *mattered*. The rest, they thought, would fall into place.

Brownsville, “an unincorporated village,” is located between the slightly larger towns of Windsor and Woodstock. In 1974, it had a population of about 700. If you drive into the village from Windsor on Route 44, the first landmark you pass is Mt. Ascutney, a ski area with a restaurant where Mom sometimes worked as a waitress in those early years. The mountain is called a “monadnock,” which means a small mountain rising abruptly from a gently sloping, surrounding plain. Mt. Ascutney is very steep and famous for its granite outcroppings which serve as a launching point for hang-gliders in the summer. I used to watch the hang gliders from our deck, so small and bright they looked like butterflies.

A map of Mt. Ascutney today shows new trails that have been cut with names like, *Touch-and-go*, *Freefall*, and *Cloudspin*. There are now 67 trails and 6 chair lifts, but there were far fewer during the years my family lived there. I remember years of skiing down the *Catwalk* and being scared of *Screaming Eagle*. In the warmer months, the view of the mountain is soft, the curves slide and swell like waves in a range of colors; reds, yellows, oranges and greens. Mt. Ascutney fit between the trees in the front yard, and seemed to stand there just for us.

We slept in a tent that first week while Dad built an 8x12 cabin where we lived while they worked on the house. The cabin had just enough room for a double bed, a small wood burning stove, rocking chair and a long, wooden shelf. Underneath the shelf we kept a cooler for our food. There was a big sliding glass door at the foot of their bed so when they woke up the first thing they saw was the view of Mt. Ascutney. Above my parent's bed Dad built a loft where I slept, and every morning, I climbed down the ladder and jumped on top of them to wake them up. As I climbed down, Dad would call out,

“I see feet, I see fanny, I see Amy!” When we needed to get clean, we took sponge baths with the water from the open well. While my parents worked, I explored the woods, climbed on rocks and picked wild flowers. Below the cabin was a big, rotting barn filled with two old sleighs and piles of hay. Behind the barn was a patch of squishy, green moss where I liked to take my Barbie dolls to play. The dolls would camp on the moss-their small, peach colored, pointy toes prancing carefully toward the stream for a swim.

Dad told me that he never had the house inspected; he'd trusted that his schooling and experience in Boston would be enough to see the house through objective eyes. Listening to him I could feel myself become irritated. Who doesn't have their house inspected, a falling down house, a house where you're going to live with your pregnant wife and young child? But I didn't say anything because it didn't matter anymore. When Dad jumped up and down on the floors to determine their solidity, he didn't know that the crawl space was packed with dirt. The last owner, fifteen years before, banked the foundation with soil every fall for insulation but every spring, when the snow melted, it ran down the hill, turned the soil into mud until it became

packed under the house, making the floors seem solid. When they discovered this, it was too late, because they'd already bought the house from our neighbors, the Steinbergs. Freddy Steinberg's father, Rodger Maher, was a real estate agent and brokered the deal. Dad tells the story of walking into Rodger's office and making him an offer of \$9,000. Dad laughed at this point in the story, describing how Rodger stood up and walked out the door.

The Mahers lived in a big white house at the halfway point of Kimball Farm Road. Freddy's Mother, Helen Maher came from a very wealthy family who had sold their cookie company to Nabisco, and the house was filled with fancy things like a long dining room table with tall candle holders and large portraits hanging on the wall. Helen, she told me to call her "Grannie" had long white hair that she always wore in a braid, twisted and clipped at her neck. She had a cookie jar in the shape of a rooster that was always filled with Nabisco cookies and offered me one whenever we stopped by. They had a little white dog named "Buttons" who barked like crazy when we visited, and Grannie would say, *Buttons, Buttie!* And hold him in her arms to make him quiet down. Rodger scared me, he dressed in a suit and bow-tie and his cheeks were pink from drinking. Alex Steinberg was my age and when we played at his grandparent's house, sometimes we hid when Rodger was around.

Mom and Dad's first job was to hand dig the mud out of the crawl space. Dad told me that they spent the early fall demolishing the crumbling walls with a wrecking bar in one hand and a can of wasp spray in the other. There was a porcupine living in the crawl space and a family of woodchucks in the basement. All summer, as Mom's belly expanded, she worked next to Dad to make the house livable. At night we ate dinner on a blanket spread across the grass in front of the cabin, and admired the view. There is a picture of me sitting with Mom on a blanket

in front of the cabin shelling peas. Dad would have been standing with the mountain at his back as he took the picture.

Erin was born in November and the house wasn't ready, so we temporarily moved to the Steinberg's guest house where there was heat and plumbing. Freddy and Arthur Steinberg lived in Cambridge during the year but spent the summers in Brownsville. They had two boys, Daniel and Alex, Alex was my age and Daniel was a few years older. I loved their house; they had a pool and a rec room for the boys with a ping pong table and indoor basketball net. The guest house was just past the main house and I remember that when it was time to move home, I was sad to leave.

In December, Mom and Dad's bedroom and the kitchen were complete, and we were finally able to move into the house. The floor wasn't done, and I remember walking across the beams to the kitchen where Erin rocked in the baby swing to crank it back up again so she wouldn't cry. I liked to walk on the beams and pretended that I was a tight rope walker in a circus. During the long, cold, snowy winter, I remember the three of us, sometimes four when my Uncle Craig came to help, working together. My job was cranking Erin's swing and Mom says I took it very seriously. Craig is Dad's youngest brother and my favorite. He is tall like Dad with the same blue eyes but his hair is curly and he was an artist and had a tattoo with a rose on his arm that I liked to touch. Craig was a glass blower and made a stained glass window for our new home. I'd wake to the steady pounding of nails and knew the day was over when I heard the swish, swish of the broom, sweeping the dust away.

For Dad, every time they completed a room, it was like opening a window and light pouring into a dark space. But the work was never over. Mom says that Dad installed the downstairs shower incorrectly so that whenever she took a shower, the water overflowed and

spilled onto the floor. There was always another room that needed fixing. Finally, after a year, Dad started his landscaping company, *Stockwell Landscaping*. The house wasn't finished, it was never really finished, but it was livable.

During those years at home with my sister and me, Mom baked bread, tended the garden, and embroidered flowers on our jeans. In the winters we kept the fires burning because we had no central heat. There was snow to be shoveled, ice to be scraped and we hibernated, reading books by the fire. When the spring finally arrived we ventured out with enthusiasm, squinting in the bright sun, our skin pasty and dry. In the summer the sound of the lawnmower woke me every morning, and the grinding sound of the chainsaw as Dad trimmed back the trees to open up our view. In the fall we raked leaves and cut wood to store in the shed. Work on the house was a constant, with the promise of completion a reward that seemed always too far away to grab hold of.

I returned to the house at the top of Kimball Farm Road with Dad and my own children, Will and Miles, last summer, twenty years after I left home. My husband was home in South Carolina. Dad was living in New Hampshire with his second wife Susie, in a small village called South Sutton where Susie grew up. After my parent's divorce, Dad held onto our house for as long as he could, even waiting tables at night for a while to make ends meet, but eventually he had to sell. He moved around for several years, renting and finally buying a terrible small house by a raging river in a town in New Hampshire. I was stunned that he moved to New Hampshire borders Vermont, but is a very different-rocky and crowded with pine trees-much less beautiful than Vermont. Dad worked as a guidance school counselor in New Hampshire so it made sense

to be closer to work, but I hated visiting him in that small house by the river. He lived there while I was in college and I visited him during vacations, mostly at Christmas.

Christmas was a very important tradition in our family. It was magical. Every year when we were young on the first weekend after Thanksgiving, we hiked with Mom and Dad up the logging trail behind our house into the woods to cut down a tree. Dad let me and Erin pick out small trees of our own that we put in our bedrooms. Back at the house Dad placed the tree, securing it with wire to the walls and then put our small trees into a stand. While Dad was downstairs decorating the mantle above the fireplace with garlands he'd cut in the woods, and the Christmas carols playing loud enough so I could hear them upstairs in my room, I decorated my tree. I carefully wrapped the tree with white lights and hung my favorite ornaments, the one of the little blonde angel with *Amy* written at her feet. When I stepped back to admire my work and squinted my eyes, the decorations and the lights were lovely. Erin always finished her tree before me and was already downstairs; I could hear her voice above the carols, talking to Mom and Dad. On my way back downstairs to help decorate the big tree, I stopped at my sister's doorway to peek at her tree. She'd chosen the flashing colored lights and tinsel hung heavily from the small branches. The flashing lights cast a strange glow around her room and the ornaments were hung haphazardly, heavy in some spots and bare in others. I turned and walked downstairs to join Mom and Erin in stringing popcorn and cranberry.

Dad flew me and my family up every summer for a few weeks to visit. We spent most of the time at the Stockwell family compound at Keoka Lake in Waterford, Maine. And we always spent a few days in South Sutton. Last summer, at the end of our visit, I asked Dad if we could

drive to Brownsville to see our old house. The drive from Dad's house in New Hampshire to Kimball Farm Road took over an hour and we entertained the boys, who were 7 and 4-years-old, with "I Spy" games. We came in on Route 44, passing the mountain and the general store. Dad offered to swing by my old school, but I urged him on, anxious to get there. The Spackman's black and white cows were still there and I called out to the boys to, *look at the cows!* as Dad turned onto the dirt road.

We drove slowly up the hill and I rolled my window down so I could feel the air and smell the smell-that country smell of grass and hay that was fresh, rich and wet and reminded me of walking home from school and plugging my nose. At the top of the hill, Dad pulled his car to the side of the road and parked. I got out, walked up the driveway, turned around, and couldn't see the mountain through the overgrowth of trees.

"What a shame," Dad answered as Will and Miles ran up the road toward the old barn.

The blue spruce Dad planted on the day I was born and transplanted to Brownsville from Belchertown was now huge. It was a tree dad always pointed out; reminding me that it was as old as me, and standing in the driveway next to my tree, I understood what made Mom and Dad say yes all those years ago.

"Mom, look, a barn!" Will shouted. Someone else's lawn-chair sat at the edge of our pond. I walked closer and peeked in the window of what we always called "the addition." It was the last room Dad completed while we lived there and it was my favorite. It was a sun room with a lot of windows so it was the warmest spot in the house and there were all kinds of plants hanging in the windows and filling up corners. It was the only part of the house that was new and the floors weren't warped, and every night we sat at our small, maple dining room table where there was just enough room for the four of us to eat dinner. We didn't sit down for family dinners

like the rib-roasts and apple pies my husband had as a child growing up in Ohio, but I remember the table and we must have occasionally sat there together.

I heard my boys calling out to each other behind me as I pressed my face to the window and peered into our addition. It was dark and deserted. There was a long table directly under the window where I stood that was covered with papers. I hoped Dad wouldn't come next to me and look in; I didn't want him to see the mess. The year before, when my husband and I were renovating our kitchen and bathroom in South Carolina, Mom gave me three tiles that were from our kitchen in Brownsville. They are beautiful Mexican tiles with a chicken....she said there was a fourth but she hadn't been able to find it, maybe Dad had it? I called Dad to ask and he looked around but couldn't find the tile and I was disappointed. I searched online for several days until I found a fourth that kind of matched the others and my contractor placed the tiles above the sink in my kitchen. I stare at them every day when I wash the dishes. As I stood staring in the window at the mess that had become our home, on the table, sitting on top of all the papers, was the fourth tile.

I was overwhelmed with the urge to ask Dad to buy the house back. I wanted to start over here with my own family in the house I longed to escape for so many years, It was 2007, but it was as if I was standing in my mother's shoes that summer in 1974, seeing everything for the first time, and I wanted to live at the top of Kimball Farm Road with my young family. I knew it was a ridiculous, irrational thought because I had always been the one who called Brownsville, "Cow-Town" and couldn't wait to escape, but still. Still, I could see why they did it, why they fell in love with that spot.

On our drive back to New Hampshire, I asked Dad about that first summer.

“You and Mom were ahead of your time,” I said. “You lived off the land, grew your own vegetables, composted your food, and gave back to the earth.” I’d finally come to appreciate his vision, his hard work and saying this to him was my way of saying that I was glad we’d lived there, that even though I rejected it all and ran as far away as I could, I saw it all in a new light.

“We didn’t know what we were doing,” Dad said of my story, laughing. “We were posers, we were rich kids from the city who didn’t know anything about living in the country. We raised you and your sister out in the middle of the woods with no one around, we were young.” His explanation stung. In my mind, Dad had always been the keeper of the Brownsville fantasy. The fantasy that I feed to my boys about snow-forts and big wheels, hikes through the woods, tree houses and wild animals-our dog’s face full of porcupine quills. I leave out the rest-the loneliness, the claustrophobia, the sickness, the divorce-and choose to remember what was good. Until that day, I always believed that was how Dad remembered it too.

Mom’s story of our life on Kimball Farm Road is that she was unformed, shapeless, like a polyp who latched onto my dad because of his large, warm, welcoming family.

“I was a blob,” she said laughing. “I was eighteen when we got married. I loved your dad’s family and wanted to get away from mine. I had no time to figure out who I was. We were so young.” But if Mom was a blob, then what was I?

All of my questions must have forced Dad to think about things he hadn’t thought about for a long time because later that week, when we traveled to an island off the coast of Maine called, Monhegan, Dad had a dream about our house on Kimball Farm Road. It was raining lightly and gray clouds moved slowly across the sky as Dad and I sat under the awning of the porch at the *Trailing Yew B&B* drinking coffee and watching the boys run under the trees to hide from the rain. In the dream, Dad said he was working on the barn and the harder he worked, the

more beautiful the space became, opening up brilliant light, and he felt his heart rise with pride and pleasure in a satisfying job. Then he heard something and ran outside and saw that our house was engulfed in flames. He found Erin and me sitting huddled together outside in the snow.

“You two were okay, you were comforting each other and you were fine,” Dad said.

“Then I asked someone, a fireman or a neighbor-where’s Teddy? And they said, she’s okay but she’s gone.” Tears welled up in my eyes and my throat seized with pain. I had to look away from Dad, it was too much, and this wasn’t the time or the place to cry. I didn’t know what to say.

She’s okay but she’s gone.