The Messenger

Volume 2005
Issue 1 *The Messenger, 2005*

Article 37

2005

My House

Roasanna Nunan

Rosanna Numan

My House

Ah, yes, I remember the sawdust well. I would scoop it from the feathery pile with my bare hands and shove it into the beige plastic tub. Sawdust was my territory. I carried it from shed to site, head held high, proud of being a part of...umm...whatever it was we were doing. Building? A house? I looked tentatively at the cement slab that would one day be my kitchen floor, the outside perimeter that was slowly climbing upward, like Legos, to form walls. How could we ever live in this thing? Houses are just supposed to—be there. You are not supposed to build them. I waited patiently for my parents' disturbing game to end; but after a month or two, it was with growing consternation and perplexity that I read *Little House in the Big Woods* under the sunlight streaming in from the unfinished first floor ceiling of my brand new log cabin. Something is amiss when a ten year-old girl, her skinny legs swung over the arms of prosaic chair that she has lugged in from a mountain of furniture packed haphazardly after a hasty move, begins, in 1996, to commiserate with Laura Ingalls Wilder.

Initially, my mother wanted to build it underground. I don't quite recall why this plan didn't work out, something about a lack of a suitable incline on the property. Let me offer my thanks, once more, munificent deity, for this miracle. I have also forgotten many of the early details: the breaking of the foundation, the tons of gravel carted in and spilled across the landscape, the tapping of the well. The result of one of these preliminary activities was a massive mound of earth—I do not remember the hole from whence it came, which also must have been rather large—no, it was just the mound that made an impression. There were fun times to be had atop it: the knocking off of little brothers, etc. It became a staple of our daily lives, eventually dubbed "Big Pile Dirt," the "of" lost somewhere in one of the dark corners of Cotter's curious speech impediment, an attribute that in itself would make a good story.

How, you ask, did we know how to construct a house? Was my father an architect? A carpenter? Did my mother have any experience before undertaking such a daunting task? I remember reams of graph paper, the little squares gridded in various shapes and sizes. "Should the bathroom go here or there?" "Darling, why don't we put a little sunroom in this corner?" Sunroom? There was no method to their madness. No, like so many other things that require a bit of study before execution, my parents read a book. This one hap-

pened to be called Building Log Homes. Nothing fancy or glamorous there. Hey, we can pull this off. And they did, I suppose. We have, after all, lived in it for nearly a decade now. It's not finished yet. I insist that it will never be finished finished. I, for one, won't let them touch my room, which has white plaster splattered all over the bare sheetrock, and naked plywood floors that still occasionally give me splinters when I'm least expecting it. Once or twice a month, I'll walk into a random room and feel something has altered. A new flowery spray of wallpaper will have sprung and pasted itself up whilst I slept, or a nice looking carpet will have unfurled inexplicably beneath the easy chair and second-hand sofa. Piece by piece, nail by nail, it is coming together. But I dread the day when there will be nothing more to do. Surely it can't happen in my lifetime.

June, July and August made their modest exit; eventually we were able to move in with a modicum of comfort. Up until this point, nature seemed to be on our side, the birds would sing in the morning, the crickets at night; autumn leaves fell in a brilliant fiery mix. Somehow, we forgot about winter. Winter entered with a vengeance. Winter always enters with a vengeance. We heat with a mixture of coal and wood. I will tell you what this means. No heat comes out of strategically placed vents in the walls; no heat sounds at regular intervals throughout the day; no heat—period. If you want to be warm, you stay in the kitchen, where the coal stove dwells. If you want to be warm in the TV room, you must be willing to inhale slightly noxious fumes from the tiny kerosene box we keep for those who desire it. You will never be warm in the living room, no matter what. My parents' room is quite cozy when they bother lighting a fire, which is usually when they're going to bed, and thus useless to you. If you want to take a shower, be sure to turn on another poisonous box heater at least thirty minutes prior to show time, or, believe me, you'll regret it. Your room will be cold, but you will get used to it. Remember a few simple rules: never take off your jacket, guard your thermal slippers like they are your children, and never use less than two comforters and, I'd say, one or two fleece blankets. It is best to ignore the whistling draughts that pour in from all sides, the logs having shrunk long ago in their cement cradles. We're working on that one.

Needless to say, I've complained about this state of affairs for most of my existence, but now that I'm gone, dare I admit that there is a sort of nostalgia associated with seeing the foggy mist of one's breath when one wakes up; trying in vain to wrinkle one's nose when one dresses; whooping for joy when the mercury thermometer situated behind the kitchen sink inches above fifty degrees?

We used to heat solely with wood, which was far more problematic. Many were the nights that Cotter and I would be forced to trudge out into the biting winds and gather eight or nine pieces of wood, and, once having stacked them to the base of our chins, to struggle like drunkards, slipping over ice and various yard obstacles, to gain the safety of the porch. One's fingers tend to curl like an arthritic octogenarian's after two or three trips, which is, oddly enough, the same effect I achieve from playing piano in my living room from December through February.

But it wasn't all so difficult to bear. After the basic framework of the house was complete (i.e. four outer walls, a stable roof), there were still no interior walls, especially on the second floor. I never recall the bathroom not being enclosed (although I do remember sliding a large piece of insulation back and forth in place of a door, which hadn't yet been built), but the upstairs was basically just one big room. After the Big Pile Dirt was vanquished, Cotter and I had to find some other means of occupying the empty hours. How it began, I can't presume to guess, but one day we started roller-skating from one end of the house to the other. We'd relay up and down, up and down, for hours on end, slamming into the wall or collapsing onto my parents' bed upon hitting terminal velocity. How long did this go on? Months? The whole of fifth grade? Long enough, I think, long enough.

For some reason, my dad got it into his head to put a door on the second floor facing the outside. You would have seen this door, had you entered my driveway, a looming, obnoxious red thing, leading to absolutely nowhere. And, this, somehow, became its official name: "The Door to Nowhere." We often kept it open in summer for ventilation reasons. Every once and a while, this would spring into conversations with other, non-Nunan people. If, while at some social function, we heard thunderclaps, my dad would look at me and say, "Rosanna, did you shut The Door to Nowhere?" Inevitably I would reply, "No...Mom, did you shut The Door to Nowhere?" And so on. It would be several minutes before we would notice the questioning aspects of our interlocutors' gazes. We would try to explain, as best we could, our anomalous abode with its peculiar portal, all the while masking the alarm we felt at the flood and possible electrical fire that were sure to greet us upon our return. Thanks to the incongruous log-ends that protrude from the outer walls, Cotter and I would sometimes pretend we were rock climbers, scaling the house and collapsing breathless into my parents' room (although this sort of physical exertion lost its thrill swiftly, in my case), by way of The Door to Nowhere. Many a beloved pet has catapulted

gracefully through the air onto the grassy yard below. However, no one, neither man nor beast, has been hurt beyond repair. Now my dad is building a deck off of it. Perhaps this was his plan all along, but, no matter what it leads to, I'm afraid it can never be The Door to Somewhere. But while I'm on the subject of doors...

The door to my room is a bookshelf. One of the advantages of building your own house is you can make whatever the hell you want, and so, after watching some hokey British movie when I was ten or eleven, complete with, I seem to recall, a blond prince and secret passageways, I implored my father to create one for me (a passageway, that is). So he did. My ideal Bookshelf-Door, of course, would have been lined with gilt classics, and one of them, when pulled halfway, would initiate the mechanism to slide the door open to the tune of violinish mystery. The finished product is far more primitive; I push it, it opens. It's actually very practical. In fact, my mom is considering making all of our doors bookshelves, to accommodate, ahem, a certain inhabitant's growing obsession with Barnes & Noble.

The few social calls I was privileged to receive during my interesting adolescence were quite impressed by my door. Invariably, their initial response would go something like this: "Whoa, man, that is *so cool*. If an axe murderer came to your house, you could hide out in your room while he killed the rest of your family and he'd *never even* know you were there!" I'd muster up a bit of nervous laughter. Serial killers, in my opinion, are nothing to joke about in Danville RR1, where, after the sun goes down, the darkness takes no prisoners. But I take it in stride. "Yeah," I'd reply, copying their lighthearted tone, "*or*, we could all hide out in my room *together* and *nobody* would get murdered!"

I could go on; I could, indeed, go on a great deal. I've told you very little about the nighttime...the specters and carnivorous animals that haunt the dusky recesses of rural Pennsylvania. I haven't explained the precise circumstances surrounding my intense horror of Daddy-long-leg spiders or the time my mother, after searching in vain for a flashlight, sent me to the Back Field (the furthest extreme of our property, reached by way of the Holly-Woods) with nothing but a candle to seek out my runaway sibling. I haven't told you about the winds on the top of our hill or about the lightning rod activists who once, after knocking for ten minutes on our impenetrable door, growled portentously, "I guess we're not too late."

All of it leads back to my house. My parents find something amusing about living in the pseudo-nineteenth century. And although I act like a martyr whenever an opportunity presents itself, in some deep, hidden part of me,

I think finally get the joke. There are many things I love about my house as well. Consider my metal roof and the pleasure of a thunderstorm in spring-time, the rain beating like a locomotive o'er top my head.

I admit I did very little that summer. I was too young, and surly besides. My highfalutin ideas about the sawdust soon wore off, and I stomped angrily around the edifice I was quickly learning to loathe. My mother would not stand for it. One afternoon she stuck me in front of the cement mixer, gave me the formula I was to follow, looked at me with perfect gravity and said, "Rosanna, this may be the most important job of all. If you don't get the ingredients right, the entire house could be ruined. So you'd better shape up and do your share." I laughed devilishly to myself when she turned her back. Sabotage. One too many scoops of lime and this whole wretched enterprise would come tumbling down. It wasn't a bad idea, I thought, as I watched the thick, pebbly, mess go round and round. I held our future in my hands.

But, in the end (probably more out of fear of my mother's wrath if the house should, in fact, be affected by my recipe-flouting than any sort of filial obligation), I didn't do it.