

# HOUSE

BY JOHANNA ULLRICH

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## INTRODUCTION:

Dairy farming was once widespread in Upstate New York, with small communities depending on each other for support. Now, as more small family farms fold every year, those that have survived have needed to find new ways to stay alive. With milk prices at an all-time low, some farmers are turning to alternative methods of farming, such as going organic to qualify for higher prices. Many more farmers are selling out to large corporation farms or to developers, leaving the farmers who are left to stand alone or face the same decision.

Pressures felt by family farmers do not stop with the adults; the entire family is acutely aware of the importance of maintaining the balance between the independence of a small farm and making ends meet. Farm children end up fighting their parents' fight in school and among their friends because there are fewer and fewer children who understand the complete family effort required to keep a farm alive.

The old farmhouses epitomize the tensions constantly present on small family farms today. Once prevalent, old farmhouses are slowly becoming more run-down and sparse on the landscape, while a few survive as beautifully renovated estate houses, no longer connected to any semblance of farming activity. The old farmhouses still attached to small family farms are rapidly being replaced by trailers and other modern homes because the small-time farming families that have owned them for hundreds of years rarely found the time or the money for repairs. Sometimes these houses are seen merely as inconveniences. But occasionally they are loved for what they truly are and for holding the collective history of the families they've sheltered.

SCENE I: WINTER. INSIDE THE FAMILY'S DAIRY BARN

*(Barn door opens. Sounds of chickens and cows, sounds of girls doing chores.)*

SCRIPT: On Cheningo Road, just outside of Truxton, New York, when the day gets stormy the late-afternoon light is deep gray and pale yellow. The slats of the barn barely keep the wind out as the snow tears through the narrow valley. Up in the haymow the sheep, chickens, cats and dogs have free run of the place. Downstairs nearly fifty cows wait to be milked. My cousins are busy with their before-dinner chores. This is Anna, the oldest at 14. *(Scraping sounds.)*

ANNA: I'm pushing the hay with a silage fork. They're not long, they're rather short, and they got usually around seven little fork things. And right now I am feeding almost the very end of my side. Me and Rose do one side of the barn and we kind of split it in half. So that's what we usually do. *(Voice trails off.)*  
*(Girls continue their chores.)*

SCRIPT: At the dinner table with my family, conversation routinely hinges on who worked the hardest or accomplished the most that day. Anna is no exception. She values a good day's work above the latest gadgets and newest fads. She shares this view with her classmates from neighboring farms. But now in a new school, Anna finds herself in the minority.

ANNA: In my old school, when I went to K through 6 at Hartnett Elementary here in Truxton, pretty much everybody lived out in the country and there were actually more kids who lived on farms. But then when I got to the junior high school in Homer, it was like nobody ever lived on a farm. Kids who don't live on a farm, they kind of pick on the kids who live on one. They call them Amish and they say we are really old fashioned and that we're poor. These kids are so different than us, I think, because these kids, they

bring cell phones to school, they'll bring their CD players, they'll bring their iPods and a whole bunch of stuff like that. And they'll come in every single day with, like, new shoes, or the girls'll have high heel shoes. I just wear sneakers. But I don't think that's true that we're poor.

*(Chore sounds close out scene while music fades up.)*

## SCENE II: EARLY SPRING. CLEANING OUT THE OLD FARMHOUSE

*(Voices of family members sorting through stuff left in the old house)*

SCRIPT: The ground is thawing, and my cousins have to clear out what they want to keep from the old farmhouse. One of the first in the area at over two hundred years old it started as a single room before a succession of owners tacked on clapboard bedrooms and teetering additions. One of those, a back bedroom, is where my cousins were born. Only ten feet away is the modular home the family recently bought. For the first six months after delivery it sat in two pieces in the alfalfa field across the road. The house was ready for assembly, from the microwave in the cupboard to the pop-up dormers on the roof, waiting for the foundation to dry. Now that the family has moved in, the old house has to go.

*(Family makes one final walkthrough of the farmhouse.)*

SCRIPT: Anna believes this means the end of everything that matters to her.

*(Music fades up.)*

ANNA: I used to think it was haunted maybe when I was little because the stairs always creaked, but that was just like the wind howling and everything. It was really scary sometimes. But on the porch we had a really old-fashioned stove, we had a washing machine. We had a little freezer that we did use in the summertime when my mom made pickles or jellies or jams. She'd usually use that refrigerator to keep the bees out. There's two

Christmas trees there, there's an old line where you used to hang your wash. We have a rocking horse that our grandfather made from my dad's side, that stayed back there. A little tractor is back there, and there's an old black rocker. It was really just a mess back there, you really couldn't walk without stepping on something, you couldn't even go on one side of the porch.

*(Music fades up briefly.)*

ANNA: I remember sometimes the sink wouldn't work, especially in the wintertime. One time we lost all our water, it was really terrible, it froze. But what mainly didn't work was the doors. They usually never stayed closed because of the dogs. They would always come in and leave the doors open because they didn't usually have springs on them. But the ceiling also was really, really bad. Because one time we were going to go to our grandmother's, and before we left there was a really bad rainstorm, and it leaked all over the roof. We had to move couches and everything. We had to put one couch on its side because it was that bad, and there were cans, pots, and pans all over it. It was terrible.

The living room wasn't that bad afterwards, but the roof was so poorly done at times, like when it needed to be fixed, it was never fixed, so we always kept the tarp over it, which for some odd reason usually never worked. It seemed that the tarp was never on it.

*(Music fades up.)*

Well, I like one story. I was probably three. I think there was just, like, a chair and a couch in the living room, and the TV that was on the floor when I was younger, and Mom says it was filled with mice. It was terrible! Oh, it was terrible, filled with mice and rats and bats and everything. And it was a cold winter and I was sitting on the floor with a cracker and a mouse came out and took the cracker, and I was just looking at the mouse like, What are you doing?

Oh yeah, we had baby lambs. We used to have to feed them with beer bottles; we'd put nipples on them. They were usually kept in a box by the stove. Every time one was born we'd usually just have to bring it in the house if it wasn't doing well. In the middle of the night we usually had to sleep on Nora's couch because Nora's couch was the one closest to the fire, and ones closest to the lambs. And we had to watch them all the time. So we usually had to fight who's going to watch the baby lambs because we all wanted to. But what was really cute about them was that they had to wear diapers when they were in the house. But now we can't do that. So guess I won't see that for a while.

*(Music crescendos, then fades into sound of bulldozer.)*

### SCENE III: SPRING. TEARING DOWN THE FARMHOUSE

*(Bulldozer chugs and strains, takes down mailbox.)*

SCRIPT: In early march the lambing started. The sheep are free roaming, so the lambs are born in the haymow or the field, wherever their mothers happen to be. The weaker ones are brought into shelter. For the past two years while the house stood empty, they were sheltered there, in the old kitchen bedded with straw. But this year the lambs are in the machine shed because the house is coming down.

*(Revvng bulldozer, chimney coming down.)*

ANNA: The old house is where a lot of things happened, where, like, so far most of our lives have took place. And in the new house it just seems like nothing fits anymore. Like, for Thanksgiving and Christmas, usually everybody came to our house. But it was like where everything took place, it was so warm. And my sisters are really attached to it because they've been there their whole life. I've been there pretty much my whole life too, except for like probably a month when I was born I wasn't there. But it's just where everything ties in because it goes perfectly with the

barn and I can't really think about tearing it down. And Rose, my sister, she's really having a hard time 'cause she says when we tear it down she's not gonna. . . she's not gonna be here. She really doesn't want the house to go.

*(Music fades to bulldozer again.)*

SCRIPT: After one final walkthrough, my mom, my aunt, and my three cousins retreat upstairs to the new house to watch. Below, my dad encircles the house with a cable and hitches the other end to his bulldozer. For the first twenty minutes the only thing that falls is the chimney. But then clouds of dust slowly rise as the cable slices through the hand-hewn oak beams. Suddenly the cable pulls taut and rusty bed frames, outgrown Wellingtons, and the moth-eaten dress my aunt wore to her father's funeral tumble from the collapsing attic.

*(Bulldozer engine, collapsing house.)*

ANNA: The new house I think is trying to force us to be more modern, more in the time period we are in.

*(Music fades up.)*

But I don't want to be modern, I don't think my sisters want to be modern, and I really wish that we could have kept the old house up forever because it would have made us feel much better.

*(Music closes out the scene and signals the end.)*

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