

*Alison Townsend*

## BEYOND WILD RUN FARM: A TRAVEL GUIDE TO AN EASTERN PENNSYLVANIA CHILDHOOD

Begin here, with Pennsburg, the township where Wild Run Farm, the Eden of your childhood, lies. Start with its five acres of gentle woods and fields, silvery barn, and little white colonial house, with wide window sills and a brass floor register. Here is the maple tree, between whose roots you build miniature houses. Here are the tall pines bordering the driveway, prickly and hard to climb, but with smooth, cylindrical cones you love to collect. Here is the arbor of rosy grapes, from which your father makes pink wine. Here is the laundry—white smelling of Ivory Snow and fluttering on the line, while you and your little brother and sister run, laughing, between the tents of sheets. Here is the sandbox your father built, triangular seats in each corner. Here is the garden, where you each get a patch, planting whatever you want—popping corn, watermelons, and green beans your guinea pigs squeal for when they see you coming. Here is the red mailbox with your family's name—Townsend, which makes you imagine the end of town, a place where paved roads turn to dirt like yours—painted on it in your father's precise, scientist's hand. It is the mid-1950s, and the nation is optimistic, everyone beginning again after the war. This is the only world you know. You believe Pennsburg was settled by William Penn, though in fact it wasn't, just purchased by him from the Indians—for "two watch coats, four pairs of stockings, and four bottles of cider"—and then named in his honor, like so much else. Penn is a kindly great-grandfather in your mind, floating over the entire state like a cumulus cloud.

Drive with your mother into town, crossing a causeway over one branch of the deep blue reservoir, the land around it wild, pheasant chicks chattering away from the road into the tall grass behind their mothers in balls of tawny fluff. Here is the Five and Ten, with its black and white swinging doors, where you and your siblings purchase a nested set of pastel mixing bowls for your mother's birthday. Here is the Farmer's National Bank, where you learn to save money

in a little green passbook. Here is the feed mill, where your mother picks up grain for her chickens and ducks in flowered muslin bags she later makes into pillowcases. Here is the orchard, where she buys baskets of Elberta peaches she slices into a blue bowl and sprinkles with mint. You eye a small pine doll's cradle with scalloped edges, but know not to ask for it. On the way home there is a tavern at the top of the hill that (oddly) sells icy cylinders of orange sherbet, shot through with a vanilla star in the middle, a combination of flavors you will search for the rest of your life.

Visit the two closest towns, Red Hill and Green Lane, with their names that sound like Christmas. Stretched along Route 29 with Pennsburg, they are sometimes called Upper Perk, after the Perkioman River, which winds through your childhood like a silver voice you still sometimes hear in your dreams. In Red Hill, you look in vain for a brick-colored summit and wait while your father gets gas at the station. A scarlet horse with wings like the one in *Fantasia* carries you away on her back into the sky, while the numbers flip past, their sound clicking like Chiclets above the steady *kachunk* of the pump. Sometimes you are permitted a bottle of Coke Cola from the red bin. The bottle sweats, the color of sea glass in your hand, as you sip the fizzing sweetness.

In Green Lane, you imagine grassy boulevards instead of roads, never the Green Lane Reservoir that flooded The Old House (where you lived before Wild Run Farm) by right of eminent domain. Nothing's left there but foundations, rising ghostly one summer in a drought, though the reservoir becomes a county park where you go swimming. Each afternoon you and your brother and sister watch your mother swim out into deep water for some solitude. You feel the tug to follow as you stand, forbidden to go past waist-deep, her going-away even for a short while unbearable, what you will remember when she dies two years later, the mineral scent of the water rising around you in invisible clouds.

*Pennsburg, Red Hill, Green Lane. Say their names out loud, the holy trinity of your childhood. String them through your mind like prayer beads that smell of pine and spring water, dirt roads and Creeping Charlie in the grass, beginnings and ends.*

Go further afield, to Quakertown where you believe Quaker Oats are made (though they are not), the smiling man on the box with his broad-brimmed

black hat another William Penn look-alike, but with a catchy adage: “Nothing is better for thee than me.” Attend the auction in Kutztown, where your mother bids shyly, raising her hand again and again through the clotted, incomprehensible gabble of the Pennsylvania-Dutch auctioneer for an antique dough tray on legs she strips and refinishes. It stands behind your sofa today, its wood satiny and worn. Drive to Phoenixville, where your Uncle Chic and Aunt Sally live with their three kids, where you once go swimming in an old quarry, afraid you will drown, no bottom anywhere, the water dark green and still as breath in midsummer.

Follow the Conestoga Turnpike that Daniel Boone took west, to Chester Springs, where your maternal grandmother’s country house, a fieldstone colonial known in the family simply as “The Farm,” waits, a hill rising steeply behind the barn. Fields full of black-faced sheep stretch out around the yard like it’s Scotland or Wales. You believe these sheep supply wool for the family mill in Philadelphia, but they don’t and you are wrong again, as you are about many things. Your parents married here in 1947, walking up through the formal rose garden. Later there are photos of you taking your first steps here, tottering through the sunlight toward your mother’s outstretched hands, her love so palpable you almost remember how it felt. In summer, you lie on the cool marble slab of the farm springhouse for hours, watching clear silver bubbles ripple up and holding wriggling black commas of tadpoles in your hands before letting them go. You learn to put your face in the water of the small pond nearby, love the sweetness inside the skin of Concord grapes that grow along the driveway, see your Aunt Betty kiss her Hungarian lover, Eugene, in the brick-walled patio you kids call The Secret Place. Across the road, the minister Gilbert and his wife, Sylvia, let you pick out puppies, wiggly black and white Welsh Corgi-Beagle mutts you name Megan and Tina. At night you sleep in a two-hundred-year-old spool bed, in a room with a tall armoire that should scare you but doesn’t, the window screened by a curtain of ivy that tints everything green as if breathed on by a spirit. You have never felt so safe.

*Say Conshohocken, King of Prussia, Bird in Hand, Brandywine, the names of places alive in your mouth, a spell that weaves around you, an incantation that lifts what you were and what began you into who you are now.*

Drive to Pottstown with your mother, twelve miles from Pennsburg, in the old

Plymouth wagon you kids call “Grey Car,” past the Ringing Rocks to Wyndcroft, the small independent school you attend because your Quaker-educated mom doesn’t think the local schools are good enough. God knows how they pay for it, everything you have for the first day either homemade—from your red calico-print dress to the purple bloomers your mother stitched up on her Singer Featherlight—or secondhand—your plaid, messenger-style school bag with the brass clasps from Goodwill perfect, until you see how worn it looks beside the other kids’ new ones. Wyndcroft, with its peculiar spelling, where you are too shy to speak, but where you win ribbons on Field Day for running and hoop-racing, plus a patch for your jacket, the embroidered school insignia like a genie’s lamp. Wyndcroft, where your second-grade teacher gives you a pass to the fifth-grade library when you run out of books to read in her room. The words are like a paisley shawl from *Little Women* that you wrap warm and tight around you. In the winter, your mother kneels down on the cold white to put clanking chains on the car before she drives you to school.

There is more wonder in Pottstown, where your mother grocery shops at the A&P after picking you up from school. She purchases *The Golden Encyclopedia* there, volume by volume, which you read from A-Z, the set divided evenly between you and your siblings one Christmas. She buys records too, one a week, placing them in the red, leatherette-bound *Standard Treasury of Classical Music*. You listen to it all, one disc at a time, on your father’s Victrola, dancing up and down the braided rug in his study to Chopin, Ravel, Mozart, Beethoven, and Stravinsky and more, the collection your first introduction to classical music, the notes burned into your brain. You do not realize your parents struggle to make ends meet. Every night she plays the piano, an old upright Cunningham, the refrain from a song called “I Love Little Kitty” alive in memory forever, so clear you sometimes still hear it at night.

On the way home from Pottstown, stop in Birdsboro, site of Daniel Boone’s farm, and also where your first crush, Rick Gosh, lives. Rick, with his liquid brown eyes and buzz cut, plushy hair sleek and dark as an otter’s. Shy like you, he stutters slightly and stands—hands jammed in his chino pockets—in a way that seems manly, even then. You recognize something in one another, while your mother and his chatter, laughing over what they remember about Smith College, surprising you. Did they know one another before you and Rick were born? On the wall is a calendar with the days crossed out, one by one, with a giant X, just like yours at home. Is this how time passes everywhere?

*Say Paradise, Intercourse, Bluebell, Ambler, Sellersville, New Hope—all of them uttered in the nasal, eastern Pennsylvania accent with its softened consonants and rounded vowels—woder for water, sewda for soda, hay-ouse for house. No matter where you are when you hear it, you can pick it out in an instant, the voice of home, as if the earth itself could speak.*

Find Media, where your father was born, on the map. And the paradise of Montcalm, the farm where his father worked, the little white house by the Pickering Creek (where they moved after living in a tent during the Depression) vanished when your father tried to find it years later, paved over into a parking lot. Late in his life, he writes an essay about it that makes you weep.

In nearby Newton Square, your paternal grandfather is the gardener at the Ellis School for Fatherless Girls. When your family visits in summer, too many for their tiny house, he and your grandmother put everyone up in a screen-walled camp cabin across a creek from the house. It's a wonderful adventure, even your parents tucked into bunks. But late that night, the sky explodes with rain. You wake wrapped in a blanket, carried in your grandfather's strong arms across the raging stream. He brushes your hair back gently with his big, work-roughened hand, and you remember watching him help plant the vegetable garden at Wild Run Farm—how he raked the coffee-colored loam fine, then scooped some up in his hand, crumbling grains of dirt between his fingers in a gesture you understood was love. You are told you have his eyes, blue as sky reflected in water.

*Say Radnor, Berwyn, Malvern, and Devon, where you are given riding lessons one summer on a bay gelding named Chestnut Hill you'll never forget, the warmth of his body and scent of leather and sweat a comfort, though you do not know your mother is sick, this her last birthday gift to you ever.*

Allentown, with the closest hospital, is where you and your siblings were born—you a difficult labor that ends in a high forceps delivery, your brother easier, your sister a slick fish, nearly loosed in a taxi. Allentown, where the Liberty Bell was hidden from the Redcoats during the Revolutionary War. Allentown, which Billy Joel later immortalizes in a song. Allentown, where your

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mother shares a maternity room with another woman, whose daughter Ellen, born a few hours before you, is your almost-twin. The two families gather every year on your birthdays at Wild Run Farm, or in Gettysburg, where her father teaches at the college. Gettysburg with its hallowed, bloody ground, turning point in the Civil War, but which at first you associate only with joy—Ellen, with her deep brown eyes and brown pixie haircut. Ellen, your first friend, your lost twin. Where is she now?

*Say New Jerusalem, Bally, Lehigh, Skippack, and Doe Run. Say Bala Cynwood, which feels beautiful in your mouth, the map of childhood frayed soft around the edges from folding and refolding.*

There are other places too, big because they are seen and remembered through the small lens of *then*. Hershey, where the candy is made and the air smells like warm cocoa, where even the streetlamps are shaped like chocolate kisses, every other one opened, the rest still wrapped. Once a week your mother tapes a nickel in your lunch box, and you buy a whole Hershey's bar at the school store, doling its squares out slowly, letting them melt in your mouth.

There are also darker places where you never go, like Bethlehem, with its famous steel, where I-beams are invented and made, or Scranton, up in coal country. Each of these cities is a different kind of hell—the first filled with blast furnaces, the other's anthracite clawed from the ground, its "black diamonds" and bright blue flame seemingly eternal, until they go out. Wilkes-Barre, with its funny name, home of Vulcan Iron Works, the town where there's also a terrible mine disaster, the Susquehanna River flooding the pits, King Coal going down. Boring Harrisburg, memorized because it is the state capital and you need to know it for tests, is as far west as you have ever been. Pittsburgh is a foreign land, impossibly distant, hard to even imagine.

*Slide your finger east on the map, then loop west from Philly out along the snooty Main Line, where rich people talk like they have pebbles in their mouth. Say Overbrook, Merion, Narbeth, Wynnewood, Ardmore, Haverford, Bryn Mawr, and Paoli—the phrase "Old Maids Never Wed and Never Have Children, Period" a mnemonic to remember the names of the train station stops.*

Go to Lansdowne, where your grandmother and her sister grew up, the name of the town like a long, blue hallway back to their Edwardian past, when they were Bessie and Floss, not Elizabeth and Aunt Florence, the elderly maiden hovering around the edges of parties, a lace hankie tucked up the sleeve of her pink cashmere cardigan. She gives your family a subscription to *National Geographic* each year, tucks a five-dollar bill in a paper wallet at Christmas. When she dies, you inherit her sterling silver hair pick, a tea strainer shaped like a miniature kettle engraved with her initials, and a lapis-inlaid marble mantel clock that plays Westminster chimes on the hour, just like one your grandmother has in her house. The chimes seem the music of time itself, each note so familiar and lovely it catches in your throat.

*Say Honeybrook, Coatesville, Yellow House, Spinnerstown. Say Reading, the "Pretzel City," with its many bakeries and Japanese Pagoda, the heavy industry that once fueled the place silent and impoverished now, a railroad named after it in Monopoly the only memory of better times. Say gone.*

Visit Lancaster where the Amish live, their black, horse-drawn buggies moving slowly along the roads beside lush, green fields where men walk behind the plow and oxen as if it were another century. They make beautiful furniture, wear black, collarless shirts and long dresses, use oil lamps at night, and seem serious people. They are not to be confused with either the Mennonites in their lawn caps, or the Pennsylvania Dutch (who are not Dutch but German) and their strange food—scrapple, chow-chow, apple schnitzel, Shoofly pie—all of which seems normal, even delicious, because you live here. Hex signs float on the side of their well-kept barns to ensure good luck and a bountiful harvest—stars in circles, pairs of birds, trees of life. They seem a beautiful voodoo, mysterious as the guttural, Pennsylvania Dutch language.

*Say Sugartown. Avondale, Downingtown, Kimberton. Say West Chester and Newton Square again, where your father came home to his parents after the war, miraculously alive, and sent special delivery letters to your mother every day after they met, following Arthur Murray's famous magic footsteps in a dance class at the Statler Hotel in downtown Philly.*

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Go to Valley Forge with its woods and fields, its reproduction log huts and cannons. You have picnics with your cousins where Washington's Continental Army camped in the winter of 1777–78. The soldiers froze and ate firecake. Only one in three had shoes. They left bloody footprints where you play Hide and Seek, Statues, Snap the Whip.

*Say Kennett Square, Ambler, Red Lion, Longmont Gardens, and Chadd's Ford, where Andrew Wyeth paints his precise and moody pastorals that look so familiar when you study them in college you want to lie down inside them.*

An hour away from Wild Run Farm, Philadelphia waits, City of Brotherly Love. You ask, "What about sisters? Why isn't it Sisterly Love, too?" But no one can give you a satisfactory answer. Here are Philadelphia's many neighborhoods, history evident on every block. Mt. Airy, with its big houses. Chestnut Hill, where you go to Doctor Lee for checkups and vaccinations, once climbing a lab ladder to escape the hypodermic. He saves your life when you are hospitalized with a mysterious fever, writes your father every Christmas to ask how you are. And finally, Germantown, star in the heart of the mandala of the known world, where your mother grew up. A Quaker neighborhood, with mossy brick sidewalks and cobblestone streets, it is leafy, quiet, comfortably off. Here your grandmother raised her ten children, so many they seem mythic, like a clan of giants, the great stone-faced house at 134 West Coulter Street floating like a lit ship that shelters all, a refuge for everyone till she dies at 96. "Well, hello, hello, hello!" she cries, as she rushes down the steps to greet you, elegant in her nipped-waist floral dress and choker of chunky, fake pearls, waving a handkerchief. When she hugs you, you feel like the only grandchild in the world, her favorite, though you have thirty first cousins.

Philadelphia, home of the Art Museum (where you like best the scary armor in which you swear you see eyes move and the costumed ladies in the basement, almost breathing in their long silk dresses); the Academy of Natural Sciences (where the Tyrannosaurus Rex skeleton rears up, and life-sized dioramas of bioregions and their animals loom, like rooms you could step into and vanish); and the Philadelphia Zoo (where you pity the giraffe, reaching high for a hank of hay). You drive into the city along the Schuylkill River, where rowers skim like swallows over the water in their sculls, each one a scene from a Thomas Ea-

kins painting. Your parents take you many times to Independence Hall, where the Liberty Bell is still displayed. You place your hand on its crack and feel the weight of time and history, cool and heavy beneath your fingers. Your father lifts you up to trace its inscription: “Proclaim Liberty Throughout All the Land Unto All the Inhabitants Thereof.” You picture Ben Franklin, Betsy Ross stitching her mythical flag, the noble Continental Army and the dangerous Redcoats, Quaker girls who are secretly spies (their messages cleverly hidden beneath cloth-covered buttons), who blur into runaway slaves and the Underground Railroad. It all makes you feel tiny, a fleck of tea steeped in time. Your grandmother buys you reproductions of the Declaration of Independence on fake parchment and a miniature replica of the bell that you’ll move from place to place until you misplace it years later in California.

Philadelphia, home to The Free Library, where your father stops after work to check out books he brings back to the country and reads aloud at night—*Little House on the Prairie*, *The Children of New Forest*, *The Incredible Journey*, *Ring of Bright Water*, *Kira the Golden Eagle*, *Kidnapped*, *The Incredible Journey*. Philadelphia, where your grandmother takes you to Gilbert and Sullivan operettas and to see *Babes in Toyland*, bolstered by chocolate milkshakes at Schraft’s. At Christmas, you go to see the holiday light show at John Wanamaker’s, sit terrified in Santa’s lap, watch the famous monorail zip around the top of the store, sip milky Earl Grey and eat sugary petit fours in the Crystal Tea Room. On New Year’s Day, the Mummer’s Parade dances up Broad Street, all sequins and feathers, glitter and strut.

Philadelphia, where your father works as a biochemist for Merck on Spring Garden Street, at least until someone reads the elegant narrative of his lab notes, and he moves from bench science to copy writing to advertising and accounts, leaving behind his white mice, two of whom he brings home as pets. He works on ST-37, an antiseptic “hexoresorcinol” solution your family swears by that comes in a beautiful cobalt blue bottle, and also Sucrets sore throat lozenges, which are mint green, taste almost like candy, and come in a cunning metal tin you get to play with when it’s empty. Before they marry, your mother works for the Red Cross, then for the American Friends Service Committee, the Quakers so ever-present you’re surprised to learn her family’s really Presbyterian.

Philadelphia is where your mother went to Germantown Friends School and both parents graduated from Penn, he because the G.I. Bill saved him from pipe-fitting in the shipyards, she because the money for Smith ran out (although she claims the girls were too snobby). You are given a special library card at Germantown Friends the summer she is in the hospital so long your whole family moves in at your grandmother's, the world as you know it swaying and precarious, delicately balanced as the teeter-totters you play on at Penn Charter School, wondering if your uncles did so when they went there as boys. Philadelphia holds the wonder, solace, and mystery of your grandmother's house—Thanksgiving dinners with the candlelight and silver, many family faces shining around the long white table; the nursery on the third floor with its Victorian dollhouse and toys; the book-lined library where you find all your mother's Louisa May Alcott books lined up, as if waiting for you.

Philadelphia, where the city lights wink out behind you and your family, as you drive home to Wild Run Farm in the alfalfa-scented dark. You drowse, lying half asleep on the front seat beside your father. Your mother sits in back, with your brother and sister on either side, their heads pillowed on her lap. You listen to your parents' voices weaving back and forth in the dark, your eyes blinking shut, the air through the window green and fresh. The creek glimmers, spangling the dark beneath the echoing WPA-era bridge with its mossy cement railing. The whispery, shushing sound of the dirt roads—first Bower's Mill, then Wild Run—with their grassy spines that brush the bottom of the car is soft and familiar, as is the slight rise when the vehicle turns and lumbers into the driveway, and the porch light that has been left on, guiding you up the golden pathway into the house of everything that matters, where all it seems you'll ever need to know awaits you.

In the distance, Blue Mountain, that misty ridge that forms the eastern Appalachians, floats, invisible now on the indigo horizon, like something sensed in a dream. Myriad creeks and rivers twist and twine through the land, their names mostly Indian, words that summon the sound of running water—Perkioman, Wissahickon, Schuylkill, Susquehanna, and the massive Delaware that flows to the sea. The collective memory of the land sighs and stirs, scarred and storied, alive with ghosts of all who ever walked here, from coonskin-capped explorers to Continental soldiers to Quaker women in their plain bonnets to

German farmers, and most of all the spirits of Lenni-Lenapes or “true people,” who gave it up for almost nothing. Beneath everything, under the rolling hills of the Piedmont, lie the Precambrian and Paleozoic bones of the earth, broken many times by glaciers into granite, quartzite, schist, rocks that hold this world together, though they can be collected and labeled, their eons cupped warm in the palm of your hand.

And over everything lies the rich, brown dirt. Surprisingly sweet when you taste it once, while making pine needle upside-down cake for your dolls; it is cool and soothing when you strip down on a hot summer afternoon and paint your body with a paste of mud, a girl dressing herself in the skin of the place, dancing herself ecstatic. Until you are its and it is yours, one with everything that made you, the sound of the little quail you love calling from the fields around the farm—*Bob-WHITE, Bob-WHITE, Bob-WHITE*—their clear whistle back and forth an anthem that etches the scroll of time, though you are, of course, too young to know that.

*Say Red Hill, say Green Lane, say Pennsburg. Say Wild Run Farm and begin and remember. Say earth, say heart, say hearth, say home.*