

# THE LUXURY OF LESS

Jessica Kerwin Jenkins leaves the thrills of the big city behind to forge a new life—on a new budget—in rural Maine.



**T**hese are some of the things I don't have: a cell phone, a television, a sofa, or a lock on the front door of my house. And the landline doesn't connect to call waiting. "Something's wrong with your phone," a friend recently posted on my Facebook page. "I keep trying but I can't get through." Doesn't anyone remember the old busy signal?

After years spent in New York and in Paris, my move to the wild, rural coast of Maine has been an experiment in living with less—which, as I'm learning, isn't a depraved martyrdom, cold, dark, and pious, but can be instead a true luxury. There's only one restaurant in town, open four months of the year, and the nearest movie theater is a good 45 minutes away. But as plenty of other urban transplants have discovered lately, setting up a home in the deep countryside is a chance to reimagine what the good life looks like. And here among the pointy firs, gigantic snow drifts, and blue-gray waves, my husband and I have found the space to spread out, and the freedom to shape our days and to pare down, getting rid of the clutter to make room for what we love.

Though we met when we were both living in Manhattan years ago, my husband, Nico, moved north after his antique wooden yawl started "to take on water" in the Chesapeake, or "to sink," though he won't say those words. He had planned to sail all the way around the world. Instead, he enrolled in a Maine boat-building school and embarked on a seven-year restoration process, with time off to earn a master's degree. Last spring, when we bought a pretty, decrepit mid-nineteenth century

wooden farmhouse on the Blue Hill Peninsula three months before our wedding, his resourcefulness led the charge.

The house was lean on amenities and big on charm, without a modern kitchen, a heating system, or much of a roof. The electrical sockets were few and far between. But the emptiness of its fourteen rooms seemed to glimmer with possibility, the starkness inviting something new. We made a rule not to bring home anything that we didn't love. That meant eating from three chipped dinner plates for several months, as I scoured the antiques shops hunting for perfection and waited for my boxes and furniture to arrive from France. But shopping that way felt right, not like a one-night stand: seeing, possessing, and forgetting. It was a slow seduction I'd lost my hold on in the city—the thrill of the search, the flirtation and romance of shopping. Like anyone else, I still buy in a frenzy at Christmastime, but for birthdays we instituted a homemade-gifts-only policy. It's corny but true. Last year Nico made me a painting of the constellations as they were configured on our first date, when we went stargazing; and once, embarrassingly, I sang an old sea chantey a cappella in the kitchen as part of his gift.

The road to less wasn't all paved and posted, however. My trip began with a badly executed purge several years ago, when, going through a divorce and leaving my job at a fashion magazine in Paris, I tore through my closet yanking out anything that smacked of overt frivolity. I can hardly look back at the inventory of beautiful things I let fly on eBay: a Balenciaga Lariat bag from the first season they were made; a

WILD AND FREE ON A BLUSTERY BEACH. J.CREW TRENCH. ROBERTO CAVALLI DRESS.

KEVIN STURMAN. Styling Editor: Kathryn Neale; hair and makeup, Sheri Darlyn Terry for M.A.C. Cosmetics at Artists by Next. Details, see In This Issue.

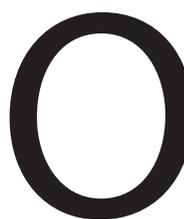
crazy Dior evening jacket with sleeves like a pair of box kites; tweed Chanel boots; a Lanvin netted pearl necklace; and so much more. I sold it all at no-reserve and made next to nothing. And what did I keep to clothe the new me? A mannish black Helmut Lang suit that I imagined suitable for job interviews—applying for an undertaker position, maybe?—and a droopy black Lang dress, which I actually did set aside for funerals. The post-purge catharsis I had counted on never came, probably because the begrudging spirit of my approach was all wrong, one of self-punishment, an angry response to a tense situation.

When I lived out of a backpack while traveling in Asia for some months afterward, the utterly impractical became just as important to me as the practical items within the zippered confines of my new nylon home. Space was at a premium, and my worldly possessions were carefully curated. I gave away T-shirts, prudent sneakers, and thick socks, and made room for a big jar of Marmite, a bottle of rose water, a clutch of printed scarves that I used to decorate my hotel rooms, and a trio of juggling balls (I'd just learned). I can't describe the pleasure I wrung from these relatively useless baubles in my spartan pack. Every spiritual path advocates renunciation, but to experiment with it while keeping your sense of humor, letting go happily, and exploring the borders of comfort and discomfort seems to be where the fruit of those efforts are most plentiful.

Knowing what you can live without is not a mental exercise, like imagining which book you'd take to a desert island. You have to try it. When I stopped eating sugar for a week, I tasted the sweetest strawberry I've ever had in my life, and it delivered a deliciousness I couldn't have known otherwise. Sometimes it just doesn't work, like when I gave up Kiehl's shampoo, which doesn't exist in Maine, for a health-food-store brand that fried my hair into a knotted frizz.

After repeated calls to the consulate, the embassy, and the French equivalent of the Better Business Bureau, the crooked moving company I hired last spring simply refused to deliver, though I had paid them in advance. In desperation, I turned to my friend Jean François, who used to work on the Marseille docks and has the tough accent to prove it. For a French person, taking his angry call is like having a Tony Soprano on the line. He gave the movers a talking-to, and they shipped my

things immediately—four months late—though they omitted my sofa from the haul, presumably because it was cheaper for them that way. I was furious. But when I got over it, I realized that actually a built-in window seat, rather than a sofa, would better fit the new living room. If they'd delivered as planned, I doubt I would see things that way.



Of course, the transition to rural America hasn't been all roses, and every day I'm aware of the things I've given up by choosing this place over Manhattan. At first, we were exhilarated by the thought of all the money we'd save, but sticking to a severely reduced budget wasn't as easy as it looked on paper, and facing my new economic circumstances wasn't as giddy as it sounded when it was hypothetical. I remember hearing once that the famously trim socialite C. Z. Guest gave this advice to someone who asked how she kept her figure: "Just eat less." There's a big difference between simple and easy. Spending less, giving up expensive indulgences, is a simple solution to financial imperatives; it's not an easy one.

I shifted from writing for magazines to writing books. Nico assumed he could parlay his boat-building skills into a job at the local yard while finishing his Ph.D. As it happened, the yard laid off a large percentage of its staff just as we arrived. Unlike so many urban refugees who have lately been pushed out of the city by unemployment and the need for a more affordable life, I had jumped at the change. But like them, I imagine, I am finding that the adjustments can hit you in unanticipated ways, and the boundaries between where I'm from and where I am become blurry and confusing.

The romance of country life soon gave way to a more nuanced reality. I live in a small bohemian enclave where you can buy the Sunday New York Times and find a nice piece of French cheese. But a few miles away, without the benefit of the city's slick veneer, the topless diner serving coffee, not alcohol (the owner doesn't have a liquor license), seems infinitely sadder and more desperate than a strip club in Times Square, though they're really the same thing. And the scenes of weather-beaten farmhouses and crumbling barns on the back roads that I initially found so picturesque lost their charm when I got to know our neighbors and why they couldn't afford the upkeep on their land. By midwinter the monotonous cold famously makes any residents who can't get away start to lose their minds. Diversions are scant; the slim phone book is more like a glorified pamphlet, listing two dentists and a couple of yoga teachers. Once, on a visit to the States from Paris, I had a bona fide panic attack in Whole Foods. There were so many choices on the shelves that I was overwhelmed and felt I couldn't breathe. Maine is at the other extreme.

As a city person vacationing in the country, you think you're alone, anonymous, but that's not the case when you're full-time. My New York neighbors and I would nod a discreet hello in the stairwell, like good urbanites, maintaining our distance. In Maine, everyone knew everything about us even

before we arrived, piecing together information gleaned from the real estate agent and their own Google searches. New friends innocently echoed our movements that first summer, via



AMERICAN GOTHIC  
THE AUTHOR AND  
HER HUSBAND, NICO  
JENKINS, PLANT A  
SUGAR-MAPLE TREE  
ON THEIR WEDDING DAY.

PETER FLEISSIG/Courtesy of Jessica Kerwin Jenkins

E-mail, phone calls, and posts on Facebook, triggering my urban paranoia. "Saw you sitting on your porch sipping tea this morning," one reported. "I heard you tried the new restaurant," announced another. Strangers were just as informal. The UPS man walked right in without more than a perfunctory knock. Once, when we weren't home, a neighbor we hadn't met yet left us some cookies in the kitchen. "Look!" I gasped as we came through the door, eyes wide, pointing at the foil-covered plate. "Someone's broken into the house!"

The distances are vast, and the chores are many. Living in the country meant conforming to a new pace. To avoid frustration, I never go to the nearby country store unless I have all the time in the world, a rule to keep my heart rate down while the cashier rings everything up in slow motion. Rushing around in the city may not be much fun; rushing in the country isn't only a drag, it's nearly impossible. Everything takes time, and judging a day's accomplishments by city standards is begging for disappointment. Storms knock out the Internet connection—and the electricity, heat, and hot water, too. Cutting the day short, friends invite us for dinner at six o'clock, whereas in the city we never used to eat until nine.

Given all the effort this old house demands, more hours in the day are exactly what's needed. I run around stacking firewood, making yogurt, baking bread, pruning roses in the dark. Honestly, I wasn't looking for new hobbies. The homesteading urge is, in part, an attempt to economize. I made a first stab at growing vegetables, and we do most of the work on the house ourselves, painting, scraping, patching, and reroofing.

Still, while I'm off playing Little House on the Prairie, I wonder what is happening to my career. Some days it feels like my hours unravel from under me, that I'll never get anything written and that it's all a mistake. On other days, I luxuriate in the quiet of my new office, where from my big oak table I have a sprawling view of the sky, the trees, and the little dirt lane that runs down to the beach. Then I realize that space and slowness are what I need and that my ideas flow more easily that way. I thought I knew what creativity looked like: neurotic, kinetic, overflowing. There's another side to the story, and it comes with patience.

Yet these worries reveal the crux of what I've really given up. I could get used to almost any of it, living at a different speed, with different friends, earning in a lower tax bracket—even the snow. But the fear of becoming a bumpkin, or a has-been, runs deep. Before a trip to New York, a solid nine-hour drive away, I asked a Maine friend if she needed anything from the city. "Yeah," she said, "take me to a movie and get my hair cut." I haven't ventured into Hairplanes, the local salon, but the last

time I saw my Manhattan hairdresser he was much less interested in my upcoming wedding than his blog and his diet. It didn't used to be that way when I had a glamorous job.

Leaving behind the security of my New Yorker identity has been more difficult than I'd imagined. (And I was never more of a New Yorker than I was in Paris.) For months, I became slightly embarrassed every time I gave my new out-of-state phone number to someone in the city. Making it sound vague, I'd say, "Right now, that number is the best way to reach me," as

if I might not be here tomorrow, as if it might all be temporary. Like other local arrivals, from Boston or San Francisco, I'm too quick to remind everyone where I'm from—and just how many years I lived in the West Village. Traveling back there, I'm uneasy to find that I use a different currency now. You can't trade insider information about which breed of chicken lays the best eggs for fashion gossip. I've lost several friends along the way. And I worry that I'll become out-of-touch myself, as sluggish as the woman behind the counter at the country store. Or, equally horrifying, remain a New Yorker, forever tapping my foot in the checkout line and reminiscing about my glory days in the big city. As for the people born here, they'll never accept me as a Mainer, either. I'll always be "from away," as they say.

In my past life, I'd go for sushi on a Saturday afternoon, visit the Met or the Louvre, or meet friends in a café. Sometimes I replicate what I miss, say, whipping up a batch of hot chocolate à la Ladurée. But there are trade-offs in

being here beyond the obvious inconveniences and strange new forms of entertainment—axe-throwing contests, apple-pressing parties, snowshoeing with friends. I doubt I could appreciate the subtleties of this simple life without having experienced the excess, exhilaration, and exhaustion of the city. Even if it's impossible not to imagine what I'm missing, life demands you give something up in order to make space for something new, whether it's a sofa or a fresh way of thinking. I've come to see that my urban persona wasn't a perfect fit. It was constricting in its way. And when you believe that only one thing can make you happy, you limit your capacity to find happiness anywhere else. I like the undefined freedom of being "from away."

I question now how often my attempts at urban cool damped down my fun. Thinking of my first wedding, years ago in a friend's giant Williamsburg loft, what I often remember is that I never danced. I was too worried about whether there was enough wine or whether my guests were bored. This past July, in a vintage cotton dress and my favorite red Marc Jacobs heels, I twirled across the dance floor in our neighbors' barn, laughing, and crying a little, too. The band played folksy forties-era swing tunes. The cake was frosted with buttercream. My legs were covered with mosquito bites. It was all deeply uncool, and it felt just right. @



RUSTIC BLISS  
KERWIN JENKINS IN THE DINING ROOM OF  
HER MAINE FIXER-UPPER. ARAKS DRESS.