

Finding Dolly Freed

In 1978, at age eighteen, she wrote *Possum Living*, a frugal-living book that made her briefly famous amid an infamous economy. Then she went off the grid in the most unexpected of ways—she went mainstream. Now Dolly—and her book—are back.

By Paige Williams

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Cooking is just as big a part of Dolly's life as it was during possum-living days. They eat mostly vegetables and buy little meat because it's expensive.



By noon, Dolly Freed has composted peppers, studied a tadpole under an old Russian field microscope, sniffed and tasted a new supply of homegrown garlic, discussed Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, demonstrated how to turn an ordinary pressure cooker into a moonshine still, looked up "rose-breasted grosbeak" in *Peterson Field Guides*, and harvested cherry tomatoes from her garden. Now, as she slices green peppers and onions for lunch, dropping the scraps into a ceramic compost jar on her kitchen counter, she says, "We should go dewberry picking. Dewberries are the Texas version of blackberries. They're wild. They grow just behind the fence out there."

Her daughter, Maria, who is fourteen, takes a container of leftover berries from the fridge and points out which ones are ripe enough to eat. "Maria's my little nature girl," Dolly says. "David never seemed to be into it until he went to college," she adds,

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Photographs by Audra Melton

referring to her son. “He called me and said, ‘Mom, I miss naturing.’ I said, ‘What’s ‘naturing?’ He said, ‘Just going out and doing nature-type stuff.’ The first day he was home from college, we went naturing. First we tried to catch a big leopard frog—we chased that thing all over the yard, but it got away. Then we went dewberry collecting—he’s picking dewberries up and down the road and I’m pulling out invasive species.”

David attends Lamar University, which is in Beaumont, Texas, and across the road from an oil refinery. “There’s no naturing there,” Dolly says.

Her neighbors might assume there’s no naturing amid the strip malls and cul-de-sacs and fast-food pit stops of suburban Houston, either, but Dolly knows otherwise. She long ago made a wildlife sanctuary out of her once-barren backyard. She commandeered a neighbor’s mosquito-magnet swimming pool and turned it into a home for goldfish and minnows. After summer rains, she nets out the minnows and transfers them to stagnant puddles, where the minnows eat mosquito larvae. The swimming pool’s owner didn’t love the idea of the minnows being deployed as a link in the food chain only to die when the puddles dried up, but he allowed it; he said no, though, when Dolly wanted to raise catfish, for eating.

Dolly gardens on a patch of lawn at the end of her paved driveway, and on half of the driveway itself, where she built raised beds. There she tends eggplant, arugula, soybeans, Swiss chard, snap peas, asparagus, green beans, cauliflower, peppers, and, this time of year, winter greens. The summertime driveway is a forest of gangly tomato stalks, which stand in enormous plastic pots that Dolly hauled from neighbors’ landscaping projects and re-used.

Friends and neighbors who have seen Dolly coax food from concrete ask her to teach them how to do the same, and Dolly does. She volunteers in nature and environmental education programs throughout Texas and is known for her work. “She has volunteered thousands of hours working with students, parents, teachers, and community volunteers,” the awards committee wrote when Dolly won third place in a 2003 EPA contest for creating an elementary school wetlands program. “The wetland habitat—two ponds—that she designed and installed with volunteers was described as ‘awesome’ by one of her many fans.”

Fans—that’s another subject Dolly knows something about, or used to. Most of the Texans who seek Dolly out for nature training or advice have no idea whom they’re talking to. They know her by her real name, not as “Dolly Freed,” author of *Possum Living: How to Live Well Without a Job and with (Almost) No Money*, a book that in the late 1970s made Dolly one of the most famous teenagers in America.

She wrote the book at age eighteen, drawing her ideas about self-sustenance and thrift



Dolly's garden, and seedlings in a birdbath (photograph by Audra Melton)

from the semirural life she and her father, Frank, lived outside of Philadelphia. The economy was as dismal as the one we're in now, but Dolly and Frank were quite happy to have no jobs—they rejected the “money economy,” choosing instead to make their own way and avoid the “gracious living” and acquisition-based one-upmanship that seemed to make so many other Americans miserable. “We have and get the good things of life so easily it seems silly to go to some boring, meaningless, frustrating job to get the money to buy them,” Dolly wrote, “yet almost everyone does. ‘Earning their way in life,’ they call it. ‘Slavery,’ I call it.” She and Frank referred to their existence as “possum living” because “possums can live anywhere.”

Possum Living contains twenty chapters with titles such as “We Quit the Rat Race,” “Health and Medicine,” and “Meat.” It includes instructions for mending clothes, pickling vegetables, and buying bargain homes in what Dolly called “sheriff sales” and everyone now calls foreclosure, plus recipes for the kind of food she and her father cooked and ate, like creamed catfish, rocket pickle, and dandelion wine. “We aren’t living this way for ideological reasons, as people sometimes suppose,” she wrote of the home she called Snug Harbor. “We aren’t a couple of Thoreaus mooning about on Walden Pond here. ... We live this way for a very simple reason: It’s easier to learn to do without some of the things that money can buy than to earn the money to buy them.”

The lessons aren’t for everyone, since most people aren’t planning to shoot a turtle in the head and turn it into soup. The larger charm of *Possum Living* is its timeless sensibility and voice—on the page (and in person, for that matter) Dolly Freed is like a cross between E.B. White and Dorothy Parker, but bearing rabbit sausage and homemade gin. “There’s an abandoned orchard in our neighborhood and we get peaches, pears, cherries, and apples there, free,” she wrote. “None of the neighbors bother with them—they apparently don’t consider food to be food unless it’s bought and paid for in a licensed grocery store.”¹

It isn’t often that readers encounter a recipe for fishballs in the same book that mentions Diogenes, Napoleon, Darwin, Wagner, Demosthenes, sixth-century Constantinople, and Ecclesiastes, but Dolly wrote as economically as she dressed rabbits for braising, wasting nothing. She dropped in the occasional Dollyism: “Quality candles practically sell themselves,” and “Math is a pretty good opiate to dull the pain of a Northeast winter.”

Possum Living sales figures are long gone, yet we know the book was compelling enough for Random House to reissue less than a year after the original debuted, and for the *New York Times* and *Seventeen* magazine, and others, to run stories, and for Merv Griffin to invite Dolly out to L.A. and put her on *The Merv Griffin Show*, and for a young filmmaker named Nancy Schreiber to make an award-winning short **documentary** about her. Tin House, a publisher in Portland, Oregon, has just reissued *Possum Living* as a \$12.95 paperback. The new edition includes a foreword by the novelist David Gates, who in 1985 came across a copy of *Possum* in the attic of a farmhouse he’d bought in upstate New York. His first novel, the Pulitzer Prize finalist *Jernigan*, features a bunny-slaughtering suburban survivalist character partly based on Dolly, and in his acknowledgments he credited her book for inspiring his own. “Whatever Freed or her publishers thought *Possum Living* was, I see it as both a classic of American cantankerousness ... and a cryptic autobiography,” he wrote in the

new *Possum Living*. “... Here and there [Dolly Freed] gives glimpses of a rancorous, downwardly mobile, borderline-violent milieu, something like the world of her contemporary Raymond Carver.”

The Tin House edition also includes an afterword—the first word from Dolly Freed to her fans in three decades. You might think she’d want to take full credit for the book after all these years, especially considering the scrappy resourcefulness required to create it. But while she’s proud of her work she’s not especially keen to find strangers at her door. Fame interests her not in the least. Money doesn’t interest her much, either. Dolly rather prefers to spend her time planning the spring planting from the Burpee Seeds catalog or talking to her children and husband or studying the birds that flock to their backyard, where this time of year so many male cardinals line up on pine boughs to wait their turn at the feeders, they look like a tree full of Christmas ornaments.

“If there’s one thing possum living taught me, it’s that you need very few physical things to be happy,” she says. “Water, food, shelter, good heath, security, and liberty—that’s it. Everything else is mental.”

1978: Snug Harbor

Naturally, this started with a boy and a girl. Marie at sixteen liked the sandy-haired looks and smarts and smooth talk of the gangly guy in the Air Force uniform. This was in suburban Philadelphia and the boy’s name was Frank. And as for Marie, Frank always said she was “built like a brick shithouse,” which apparently was a compliment.

Frank and Marie got married and moved to Titusville, Florida, so Frank, a military-trained electronics technician, could work on rockets for Martin Marietta, a NASA subcontractor. Dolly was born nine months and four days after the honeymoon.

Whenever the rockets fired, Marie took Dolly to watch from the beach. Dolly spent her formative years near the manifestation of the most ambitious dreams of modern man. On the other hand, she was grounded: tenderfooting with her father through mudflats in search of clams.

When Frank got tired of Florida, he moved Marie and Dolly and, by then, baby Carl back to Pennsylvania. Frank and Marie had split up before, and though Marie would fall in and out of love with him for more or less seventeen years, they were on the verge of divorce. They had moved around a lot, chasing cheap rent, even living for a while in a barn, and this time they took up residence in Pennsburg, in a renovated gas station: a narrow, three-story, wood-frame fixer-upper that Frank bought “free and clear” for \$6,100 at a sheriff’s sale.

Frank increasingly wanted to fish and read and grow his own food and not be bothered by more material things; Marie, a candle maker², liked brightly painted walls, and knickknacks, and sofa pillows. She had no interest in a life of itinerancy or a big garden or turtle soup. This world was too drab for her, too iffy. Dolly was fourteen when Marie moved out for good, taking Carl with her. Carl was fine with that—he hated the simple life.

Dolly, on the other hand, couldn’t get enough of it. She and Frank understood each

other perfectly. No one had ever related to Frank as well as Dolly did—Frank respected his daughter’s mind and common sense so much he gave her equal say, a full vote, which was more than Marie and Carl ever felt they got.

Once Marie and Carl were gone (not far; they took an apartment nearby) Dolly and Frank carried on. They lived on a half acre and had land all around: orchards and wooded hills and deep streams and, a short walk away, Green Lane Reservoir. Frank had always kept a garden and favored fallen fruit over store-bought food, and now he pursued this life almost to the exclusion of all else. He showed Dolly how to plant and tend vegetables and harvest and fish. They grew beans and corn and dried their own herbs. They cooked bass and sunfish on an outdoor fire. In the cellar and in backyard pens they raised rabbits, which they named and then fattened, killed, and ate. Other times they sold rabbits, these being New Zealand whites and this being customary in the land of German immigrants and *hossenfeffer*, a dish with braised rabbit.



courtesy dolly freed

In school, Dolly made it to halfway through the seventh grade. She hated the place and often came home crying.³ She wanted to be outdoors, exploring, not inside doing homework, and Frank did not disagree. He believed compulsory education to be pointless and full of idiots.⁴ When Dolly brought home a form to be filled out—asking for family income and Social Security numbers—Frank went to Dolly’s school and told the principal they were moving to California, which of course they weren’t. Dolly never went back to school another day.

During school hours she stayed indoors, a truant. It was the mid-1970s and home schooling wouldn’t be legal for years yet. Frank educated⁵ her by assigning her to read (and discuss) *Mathematics for the Million: How to Master the Magic of Numbers*, by Lancelot Hogben, and many more of his hundreds of books, on history, physics, politics, philosophy. When they weren’t gardening or fishing or swimming, Dolly and Frank read, or listened to radio, or ran to the cow pasture and back, or argued about calculi. They woke up early and went to bed late. They cooked—fish pesto, creamed onions and peas, string beans, fried snapper, spaghetti, peach preserves, carp eggrolls, orange marmalade cookies, homemade candy, nasturtium salad, wheat cakes. They picked peas by flashlight and ate them with bunny liver in tomato sauce.

They had no television and, for the longest time, no car. For luxuries there was indoor plumbing, and electricity, though often they ate by candlelight. Among their few store-bought groceries were grains and the aforementioned tomato sauce. In winter they dragged their mattresses downstairs, closed off the upstairs, and stayed warm by a woodstove crafted from a junked oil drum, which smoked. They shopped for their clothes in thrift stores.

When they needed money, Frank temped or landscaped or fixed computers and other electronics. Other times, they grudgingly made candles. Marie⁶ had taught them how.⁷

Dolly kept a journal in composition notebooks. On the cover she scrawled “DO NOT USE!” and drew skulls and crossbones in green magic marker. She wrote details of her and Frank’s life in adolescent print, recording everything: birds⁸ she spotted, flowers she was researching, how she felt (she tended to feel “metaphysical” after naps), how far

and fast she ran, what time she went to bed, what she and Frank ate, whether they argued, the weather report. She documented her attempts to learn shorthand and the “universal” language Esperanto. On her sixteenth birthday, in June 1975, she made scrapple for breakfast, counted the number of roses blooming in her yard, bartered with a neighbor for ten pounds of sugar, read in her bedroom, ate garlic sandwiches and watermelon for lunch, adopted a three-inch-long baby snapping turtle, and went swimming in the creek, where she watched her father net eight minnows. “On the way home, daddy was joking about how the rain would save the crop and we could pay the mortgager for the place we had wrested from the prairie and Indians,” she wrote. “[He was] calling me Mary Lou and I was telling him I was going to kick him in the ass. We didn’t know there was a fisherman nearby listening—[he] left in a hurry with nary a backward glance. Me and Daddy laughed and laughed.”

A couple of weeks later, on the Fourth of July, she wrote, “For lunch we had fried fish and creamed peas and onions that I made—very good. In the afternoon, I ... cleaned the kitchen. Then went out and killed a million asparagus beetles, eggs, and worms. Weeded lily bed, a few seeds are coming up: the nasturtiums were looking nice and I killed aphids on the columbine. Daddy killed Brindle and we dressed her.” On September 14: “Weather—sunny, a few clouds, cool, breezy [sic]—nice! Comments—cleaned the kitchen, then killed a bunny and washed my hair. Got a job babysitting 4 days this week for \$2 an hour. Felt—good but occasionaly [sic] irritable.”

Between August 1, 1975, and August 1, 1976, Dolly and her father, a.k.a. “the Old Fool,” spent \$1,498.75. “When I totaled up the figures and handed them to Daddy, his face went all white,” she wrote. “Then he sat down and checked that his heart was still working okay. ‘Impossible!’ he shouted. ‘Where did it all go?’”

Frank and Dolly had never planned to drop out of society—they just sort of woke up one day and were doing it, or at least the money part of it. They weren’t socially isolated—Dolly would have boyfriends and go out with friends—they simply needed far less than other people did, especially when it came to possessions and status.

And good thing. It was the mid-1970s (Ford was president), and the American economy was caught in the worst crisis since the Great Depression. The postwar industrial boom seemed to be over as formerly war-crippled nations like West Germany and Japan regained their balance and began to grow in power. The U.S. was losing its place in the international market. Inflation and unemployment were rising and energy supplies were shrinking. Americans were buying foreign, but other countries weren’t buying American. As manufacturing jobs disappeared, the service industry became the fastest-growing economic sector, yet those jobs paid less than industrial jobs and came with fewer benefits. All along Dolly and Frank’s mountain ridge, neighbors were out of work.

Dolly got the idea that writing about her and Frank’s lifestyle would help mankind. She wanted others to know they didn’t have to panic if they lost their jobs, that it’s possible to live on very little money. “In this book you will find much practical information for saving money, but telling you how to do so isn’t my only goal,” she wrote in the introduction. “Frankly, I hope to inspire you to do some independent thinking about economics as it affects the course of your individual life now and in the coming ‘age of shortages.’”

She wrote longhand in notebooks over the course of a few months, consulting with Frank on important points such as whether armadillo does or does not make a tasty supper. She typed the manuscript on a secondhand typewriter that her mother gave her in a deal: one secondhand typewriter for one GED. To find an agent, she looked up names at the public library.

Universe, on Park Avenue, bought the manuscript for \$10,000 and published *Possum Living* in October 1978. Seven months later, Bantam (now Random House) reissued the book as a mass-market paperback that sold for \$3.95 in bookstores and in the *Whole Earth Catalog*.

After the book came out Dolly and Frank banked the ten thousand and she went on her publicity tour: TV, radio, newspapers, magazines. Dolly visited Schreiber in New York and stayed in her downtown loft—they went to parties and to dinners, and Dolly learned to hail taxis by watching how New Yorkers did it. She missed home and her garden yet thought, “I can get around in the world. I can do this.”

She was a tall, slim, pretty young woman with bright blue eyes, a clean-scrubbed complexion, and curly brown hair. She transfixed readers and viewers with her maturity and personality: no nonsense but warm, and apparently unfazed by all the attention. In the makeup chair for *Merv Griffin*, she explained to the makeup artist how he, too, could drop out.

“The techniques of it are easy,” she said, “they’re very simple to learn.”

“And where do you live?” the makeup artist asked.

“Outside of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.”

“So now that you’re here in California, are you ready to switch?”

“What? No,” Dolly said. “Are you kidding? I’m gonna go home, back to my rabbits and chickens.”

“Was it something I said?”

“No, it’s not you. It’s—I don’t know, all the hustle and bustle. Man oh man, where do people find the time to do anything?”

“Yeah but after being on the *Merv* show, show business will be your life,” he said.

“Ah, wanna make a bet?”

At the time she wrote *Possum Living*, Dolly had one life plan: to build a boat with her father and sail down the eastern seaboard. When interviewers asked if she intended to marry and have a family, Dolly said no. College was also out of the question, not because she had dropped out of school but rather because the thought of it agitated Frank. He didn’t want Dolly to leave.

Dolly did go back to her rabbits and chickens after *Merv*, yet remembered how interesting she had found the outer world. Possum living had led to *Possum Living*, which led her to think about new challenges, and away from Frank.

1980: Rocket Science

Frank was pretty sure a college education would ruin Dolly's life. They argued about her plans to go.

His fears went deeper than concerns about poor teachers, though. Marie remembered a moment that she thought perfectly described the emotions that drove some of her ex-husband's erratic behavior: They were once out driving, the two of them, and came upon a country funeral in a hilltop cemetery. No one was there at the coffin but the preacher and a couple of gravediggers. Frank started crying. He told Marie he couldn't imagine anything worse than dying alone.

Literally and figuratively he had created ⁹ Dolly. And Dolly loved and respected her father. At his best ¹⁰ he was charming and fun, but at his worst he was cranky, controlling, frightening. Early in his marriage to Marie he wouldn't let her wear makeup or stay close with her family; she came home once to find her crystal in the garbage—Frank didn't like how much time she spent dusting it. Get a little homemade wine in him and he could act even worse. ¹¹

Dolly was the only person who'd been able to put up with his moodiness, his manipulateness. She accepted and even endorsed his crazy behavior, his moral code. ¹² “Once, when we were still in the money economy, a cutey-pie of a realtor got hold of several thousands of [our dollars] by sheer fraud and wouldn't give it back,” Dolly wrote. “He spouted fountains of legal technicalities. Daddy assured us that a man—any man—is a reasoning creature and can be reasoned with. ‘He knows he's being dishonest and so I'll just reason with him,’ said Daddy. ‘First, though, I may have to catch his attention.’ So Daddy looked up his address in the county Recorder of Deeds office, then visited his house late one night and caught his attention. Sure enough, once the realtor's attention was caught he realized his rotten ways were wrong and returned the money. Even paid interest on it.” ¹³

Dolly left home not for fear of becoming an outlaw like her father; she left mostly because she was young and bored with possum living and because she couldn't help thinking about the possibilities of a future beyond Pennsburg. She and Frank had spent part of the book money on a second-hand Opel car and a real woodstove; the rest they split. Dolly now used hers for school and supplemented it by working in a machine shop that made customized vacuum furnaces. ¹⁴

She followed a boyfriend to Rutgers ¹⁵, then transferred to Temple, and ended up at Drexel University, in Philadelphia. All the while she worked: as a self-employed housemaid, office cleaner, tutor, ditch digger, and night manager of a kennel. ¹⁶

The longer Dolly stayed away, the clearer it became that she intended never to come home. Frank's alcoholism and aggression got worse. He scared the family, scared the neighbors; he wrote nasty letters to Dolly. “He threatened me, my boyfriends, my brother, my brother's wife, my mother, my friends; he even threatened to hurt himself,” she wrote in the afterword of the new *Possum Living*. “We tried hard to get him help and thought of having him committed, but he adamantly refused to accept help.”

Meanwhile, Dolly excelled at school. Her grades were exemplary for any student, much

less one with a seventh-grade formal education: A's in Aerodynamics, Fluid Mechanics, Fluid Dynamics, Physics III, Physics IV, and the highest levels of calculus, as well as in English comp, Technical Writing, Economics, and Psychology.

Drexel had appealed to her because it had a NASA co-op study program—which accepted her into its ranks of would-be rocket scientists and trained her at the Langley Research Center in Hampton, Virginia, from June to December 1983, and throughout the summer of '84. While working in the Configuration Aeroelasticity Branch of the Loads and Elasticity Division, for example, she designed a flutter-suppression support system for model wings used in wind-tunnel tests. She described her NASA projects with the same break-it-down simplicity of *Possum Living*: “[Flutter] is caused by the interaction between aerodynamic forces, elastic reactions of the plane, and inertial forces,” she wrote in July 1983, in one of her regular progress reports. “A wing can vibrate so violently it breaks into pieces. In the tunnel we need to test the model wings to the point of flutter, but we want to stop the flutter quickly to preserve the model.” Dolly’s supervisors consistently evaluated her as outstanding. Dolly enjoyed her assignments because they reminded her of her old job in the machine shop.¹⁷

And her social life? “By then I had learned not to say too much about my possum living days,” she says. “Starting a conversation with things like ‘Have you ever watched a flock of geese sleep at night?’ or ‘You know how when you go spearfishing for spawning suckers ...’ or ‘Even though I’ve had road-killed dog and it was very good, I wouldn’t kill a dog just to eat it’ just makes people stare at you,” she says. “Don’t try these openers yourself—trust me it’s a mistake.”

Yet at NASA she met Pete, another young scientist. And, well, what can she say? Dolly Freed fell in love.

1985: Texas

Dolly graduated from Drexel in June 1985, seven years after the publication of *Possum Living*. Her next life began.

She and Pete got full-time jobs with NASA as aerospace engineers at the Johnson Space Center outside Houston. Dolly worked in the Structures and Mechanics Division for about \$24,000 a year. They got married.

They lived in cheap rentals until they paid off their school loans. When they decided to buy, they waited for a downturn and bought a house. “Piles of dead roaches were on the counter, the owners have smoked inside for ten years, they had never cleaned, the dog wasn’t housebroken, the carpet was a hideous bright green shag, and the gold-colored wallpaper was rotting and falling off in chunks,” she says. “Talk about perfect!”

NASA had hired Dolly for her “knowledge in the use of finite element technology to solve for deflections, internal loads, stresses, natural frequencies, etc., of complicated structures,” these being spacecraft and space station components. In other words, she tested things. And after the space shuttle Challenger exploded, in January 1986, Dolly and a small group of colleagues traveled to Cape Canaveral for a Challenger Debris Seminar. They toured the launch pad, the vertical-assembly building, and the orbiter processing facility (where both the space shuttles Columbia and Discovery were being

refurbished), and spent more than an hour walking on their own amid the vast and sobering Challenger debris. Two decades after watching spaceships fire in flight, she was back in the same place, trying to understand why one had come apart, costing seven human lives.

Later that year, NASA promoted Dolly and raised her salary by more than 13 percent, but Dolly had started volunteering at a nature center and was already thinking about getting back to her outdoorsy life. While Pete stayed on at NASA¹⁸, Dolly left to earn a master's degree in science education. She then began her work as a naturalist¹⁹ and has been passing along lessons about gardens and wetlands and wildlife for more than two decades.

Possum Living, meanwhile, all but disappeared. The book went out of print and became a collector's item—first-edition copies sell on Amazon.com for \$95 or more. Between 2002 and last year, an obscure Australian soil-and-health library alone distributed 9,000 free, downloadable copies of *Possum* via its website, until Tin House asked the library to stop.

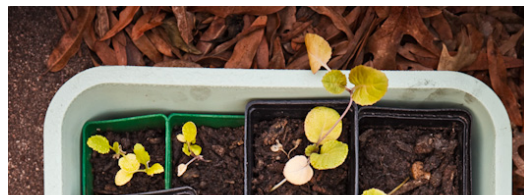
All along, Dolly's elusiveness seemed to drive her popularity. "I found this book in the 'free' box outside a used bookstore and I have read it so many times it is falling apart," a Californian wrote nine years ago on Amazon.com. "It is wise, inspirational, and very entertaining. Like her other fans, I would like to know what has become of the author in the 20+ years since the book was written." In 2008, a Maine woman wrote, "Dolly is my inspiration. It was finding her book that made me realize how shallow my life of 'stuff' was." Some speculated that Dolly had died or dropped out of society. One reader said, "I wish we knew more about her."

2010: "Half-Possuming"

The girl of eighteen is still visible there, of course: in the eyes, in the spirit, in the tilt of her chin. Dolly is still Dolly.

She no longer keeps rabbits in the basement or makes moonshine but has never stopped living frugally, sensibly, and in support of nature, whether as a teacher of field biology or as a homemaker. She has led numerous nature programs for schools and libraries not just on wetlands but also on snakes, bugs, and indigenous Texas animals, and for a while she ran a particularly popular one about bats.²⁰ She and Pete and the children have, at times, shared their home with pet snakes, lizards, beetles, spiders, fish, dogs, cats, you name it. "For me, interest in nature will never stop because every time you look you see something new," she says. "I would need fifty lifetimes just to learn what I would like to learn. And teaching about nature contributes to the greater good of humanity. Without nature, we are not. It is absolutely vital that we understand, value, and work with what supports life on earth, or we are doomed."

Her luxuries today include good olive oil and cookbooks. She and Pete and the kids have a television but use it only to watch Netflix movies. Internet? Yes, but until only just a



few months ago they were still on dial-up. They've never bought a new car and try not to buy new clothes, and Dolly still grows most of what they eat. On the day she wants to go pick dewberries, this is what she makes for lunch, and it is delicious:

Salad

Fresh mozzarella

Garden garlic

Garden basil

Olive oil

Bit of Romano cheese

Splash of red wine vinegar

Cherry tomatoes, also from the garden²¹

*Toss ingredients in salad bowl and serve.

Sandwiches

Peppers: Italian, banana, green, red

Garlic

Sliced onion

Olive oil²²

Sprinkle of Italian seasoning

*Sauté ingredients and serve hot on ciabatta rolls.

The family is, Dolly says, “half-possuming.” Allowing a few items from the money economy is a compromise she made long ago with Pete, who otherwise wouldn't be able to have his music studio and \$400 (*each*, Dolly points out) speakers. “He's an engineer, so he likes his gadgets,” she says during our lunch. “He's got a professional music studio in there. I don't know how many keyboards we have, okay? I've just told him not to tell me.”

“Yeah but what about all those stones you bought?” David says, referring to stones she used for a garden path. “Weren't those like a thousand dollars?”

“No, no, no—I don't think stones are in the same category as a music studio,” Dolly says. They are teasing each other—they enjoy each other.

David thinks he might follow his parents' path, to NASA, and is putting himself through college; Maria saved allowance and chore money for years and paid her own way on a school trip to China. They read a lot. At birthdays and Christmas, they buy each other reasonable gifts: stones from mineral shows for Pete, for instance; rings of turquoise or malachite for Dolly.

Dolly is thinking about writing a cookbook²³ for beginners, under her real name. She got the idea after her mother got sick with breast cancer and moved in with them for a



A new beginning

couple of years; Maria had to do most of the family's cooking, so Dolly wrote out easy-to-follow instructions. It isn't hard to imagine such a cookbook being a *Possum Living*-like hybrid: recipes and tips for frugal living.

"The best way to save money is not to spend it," she e-mailed the other day. "We might see something in a magazine or at the store, but just because we like it doesn't mean we have to buy it. Think of it as going to a museum and seeing pictures—you can admire them, but you don't have to own them. It also helps to stay out of places of temptation. Bookstores and kitchen stores, for me, and electronics stores, for Pete, are dangerous places. Except for the used-books store, we never, ever use shopping as entertainment."

For vacations they stay close to home, or camp, to save money. State parks make a super-nice getaway. When Dolly first moved to Texas she missed Pennsylvania, but the last time she went back, two years ago, she realized she missed the Texas sky even more. "That's the first time I'd ever felt that way."

Carl and Marie still live there, in Pennsylvania, just down the road from one another, near Gettysburg.²⁴ Marie is teaching Carl's kids how to make candles.

And Frank? His drinking worsened. He developed diabetes. The government took the house when he failed to pay taxes. He wound up in and out of halfway houses (at one, he routinely presented the cook with the quite legal gift of roadkill deer). Even as he deteriorated, he found a way to get by. When he had no money to pay for electricity, he knew how to get locked up for the entirety of the coldest months, to guarantee three hots and a cot. That was the last Dolly knew of him.

A few years ago, she got a call that some part of her had expected all her adult life. Frank had crashed his car into a tree while not wearing a seatbelt and was dead at sixty-one. He and Dolly hadn't spoken in fourteen years.

Frank had never met Pete, or his grandchildren. He knew Dolly had followed him into the space program but never got to discuss the work with her. As far as anyone could tell, he never knew she followed him yet again, by leaving NASA for nature.

When Dolly heard of his death she flew back to Pennsylvania. She drove by Snug Harbor, though even Frank hadn't lived there in ages. The fruit trees were gone, and there didn't seem to be a garden, but the nature area that they once knew so well had been turned into a birding park. Dolly liked that.

Frank was living in a studio apartment when he died, and he was alone. The landlords had cleaned it out by the time Dolly arrived. His few remaining possessions included books, most of which Carl kept, and his birding manual and binoculars, which now belong to Dolly.

"This is actually a birding book I had in Pennsburg," she said the other day, at home in Houston. She pulled out a manual dated "1973–1978" and said, "It's falling apart." She turned to a page. "I use this map when I'm starting to teach people how to use binoculars. When you're looking at a bird, to identify it you're looking at the shape, the bill, the wing pattern. My dad taught me this."

Outside, the garden benches and herbs lay drenched in Texas sun; the hammock lay

empty.

“Instead of me going to see nature, nature comes to see me,” she wrote in an e-mail a few days later. “We have gangs of cardinals, packs of lizards, and squads of frogs. Rare birds migrate through our yard every year. In the summer, hummingbirds and butterflies duke it out over the wildflowers. In the winter, you have to practically kick goldfinches out of the way. Every fall and spring, rare birds migrate through our yard. When the mosquitoes aren’t carrying you off or the heat melting you into the ground, it’s really great.”

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1. Dolly and Frank found a use for everything. When a neighbor gave them a wood-slatted hot tub, they put it on the porch and kept fish in it, which they then ate. ↩
 2. “I am, to my knowledge, the second-oldest continuous candlemaker in the country,” Marie says. “I am good friends with the oldest, and if she ever gets in front of me going down a flight of steps, I can’t guarantee my behavior.” ↩
 3. “It wasn’t the learning I minded, it was the schooling,” she likes to say. ↩
 4. Most of society’s conventions bored and infuriated Frank. Carl says when his father finally bought a vehicle, he didn’t register it, and instead drew such a realistic facsimile of a Pennsylvania registration sticker he almost got away with it. In court, Frank found some obscure loop in the law and, representing himself, talked his way out of the charge. ↩
 5. Marie remembers the Air Force testing Frank’s IQ at 165 when accepting him into the Air Force Academy, an appointment she says he declined. ↩
 6. A couple of years after divorcing Frank, she remarried. His name was Bob. He owned a lot of appliances. After divorcing Bob, she married Jim. After Jim died, she married Jim’s friend Abe. Marie and Bob are still friends. ↩
 7. Marie still not only makes candles, she has made two-dozen DVDs about making candles. Carl, a Citigroup vice president, still makes candles after twenty-five years and has a shop with his wife, Noreen. Marie and Abe live nearby and Marie helps with the business. Dolly, on the other hand, won’t allow a candle near her house. ↩
 8. Broad-winged hawks, Indio buntings, Nashville warblers, winter wrens, red-eyed Vireos ... ↩
 9. He and Marie, of course. Marie was a sharp businesswoman who knew when to gun for her goals and when to back off. Her daughter was the kind of kid who needed space—who loathed rules, who wasn’t kidlike at all, who could talk to adults better than some adults could talk to adults. Marie just had to sigh when Dolly rejected both Barbie and Nancy Drew, preferring instead to pack a lunch and disappear off into the woods. Frank couldn’t stand television so they rarely kept one in the house, which forced the family to read, and talk, or study the stars through Frank’s telescope. Continuing to live that way made sense, so yes, when Dolly at fourteen said she wanted to possum-live with Frank, Marie didn’t like it but she had to let her daughter do it. ↩
 10. The guy seemed to know everything. He was golden when someone asked him to explain something or gave him a problem to solve. Carl, as a small child, fantasized about being able to fly—literally grow



wings and achieve liftoff. He was devastated to find out he was only a human and wouldn't be growing wings at all. Their back yard at the time had a tall fence, a creek beyond. Frank put together a pole and harness and pulleys and helped his boy to fly over that fence. ↩

11. "The only thing I have from Frank is my divorce certificate, which I treasure," says Marie. ↩
12. When developers started building houses nearby, those houses mysteriously burned. Barking dogs disappeared. When the derelict hotel across the road burned to the ground, everyone (wrongly) assumed vagrants. "If someone's playing loud music at the creek behind the house, you or I would go ask them to turn it down," says Marie. "Frank would go cut their tires. It was just Frank's nature." ↩
13. The new edition contains a footnote from Dolly: "Older and wiser, I no longer agree with what I wrote in this chapter." ↩
14. She started in jigs and fixtures and ran a drill press, a hydraulic brake, hydraulic shears, a band saw, and punch press. "It's very calming work, very precise. You go from the blueprint and you put it on the metal and you make something. I really liked that, a lot. I found it very almost soothing work." ↩
15. "The night before I started college, I had a dream that the admissions office realized that I had dropped out of school. They said, 'You have to go back and start all over.' They sent me to a kindergarten class and I tried to sit in one of the tiny desks, my knees scrunched up to my ears, copying the alphabet with crayons. I was so scared about college, I hit the ground running." ↩
16. "It never occurred to me to ask for a scholarship," she writes in the new edition of *Possum*. Dad had beaten into my head that it was not honorable to take money you hadn't earned or weren't going to repay. I'm not so stuck on that now. Feel free to send me any money anytime." ↩
17. "Only at NASA, you have cooler tools." ↩
18. And remains there still. ↩
19. "Now, you might envision a naturalist as one of those eccentric individuals who are always running around with butterfly nets, by I assure you that modern-day naturalists do that rarely. Nowadays, a naturalist is someone who studies nature and teaches other about it. No, it is not some kind of religious cult. An environmental educator, is, I think, a self-explanatory term." ↩
20. Marie once lived with Dolly and Pete and the kids for a while. She brought her knickknacks and sofa pillows; Dolly retaliated by putting bats in her bedroom. ↩
21. She likes Burpee's Napa variety. ↩
22. Borges Family Reserve ↩
23. Her kitchen pantry is like a cookbook library. "I read 'em like novels," she says. ↩
24. In winter, Dolly calls Carl from temperate Texas and teases him about the weather. In summer, Carl returns the favor. ↩

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