

## *Great House Therapy*

By Susan Harlan

### **1. Jane and Edward's Fire-Ravaged Gothic Ruin**

**Name:** Jane, former long-suffering governess; Edward, ill-tempered member of the aristocracy

**Location:** Yorkshire, England

**Size:** Enormous enough to effectively represent inherited privilege

**Years lived in:** Probably since William the Conqueror; Owned

Jane and Edward's charming ruin Thornfield Hall may no longer be their primary residence, but it persists as a reminder of the extraordinary beauty of the Great Houses of the English countryside. Jane recalls languid days spent tutoring Edward's neglected and isolated ward Adele in one of the castle's many sitting rooms. Edward remembers evenings next to the fire, wallowing in misery. Their housekeeper Mrs. Fairfax remembers a lot of dusting.

When Thornfield burned to the ground, its style was already rather outdated. Edward had made few changes to the house, and in time it took on an old-fashioned vibe some might describe as "creepy," but which Jane characterizes as "retro" and "in need of a woman's touch." Before their interrupted wedding, Edward had planned to refresh the dining room with a regal shade of red, but Jane asked him to please reconsider the color palette as she'd spent much of her childhood locked in a red room by an evil aunt. Edward's taste tends to run to jewel-encrusted goblets, mahogany armchairs, and tapestries of King Harold being gouged in the eye.

Even with a castle, Edward said that he had still faced some “small space” decorating challenges – particularly in setting up the room in which he secretly confined his hysterical and excessively sexual wife Bertha, far off at the top of the house. Loyal servant Grace Poole took it on herself to design this studio apartment. In consultation with Edward, she decided to line the walls with dirty mattresses and to cover the floor in rags. Thick damask curtains in a calming shade of green muffled the sound of Bertha’s sobs and cut her off from the outside world.

### **A chat with Jane:**

**Their style:** Edward and I think of our style as sort of “medieval suit of armor meets oppressive and claustrophobic wealth.” Edward traveled a lot when he was younger, and although he doesn’t like to talk about it much, he brought back some souvenirs – quirky vases and that sort of thing – that I try to display with some of our more traditional items, like mounts, large brass candlesticks, and paintings of dead kings. I like a lot of light, probably because it helps me to think of God and to try to forgive him for taking my friend Helen Burns from me when we were young. She died of consumption, which was strange as there was an outbreak of typhus at the time. But she was unique, much like my evolving decorating style. Our new place has much better light than Thornfield, and it has a roof.

**Inspiration:** Edward wanted to model Thornfield on a place called Otranto, but he was also inspired by moldering crypts. He loves skulls, old leather-bound books, and his dog, but I try to find inspiration everywhere. I love color and pattern because I’ve always worn drab gray dresses. And I find big fireplaces inspiring as I was cold as a child. Systematic child abuse really makes you re-evaluate how you think about space and décor. For example, I’m inspired by the things I remember

about Lowood School. They had a minimalist style: hard beds for all us girls, no hot water, little food, unwarranted corporeal punishment, and rampant deadly illnesses. But I guess those last things don't have to do with design!

**Favorite Element:** I used to really like to read in the library. We were planning to breathe life into the space with a few new design elements, but we never got the chance since we had to cancel our wedding, and I had to flee into the night. There never seems to be enough time for home improvements! I wanted the library to be the perfect retreat: a man cave where Edward could brood about the past and reflect on how the world has wronged him.

**What Friends Say:** We didn't really have a lot of friends over per se. As I may have mentioned, my friend Helen was the only person who ever loved me, and no one else could ever be quite so fabulous. And Edward has never been much of a host. He has been described as "Byronic," which is to say that he's borderline sociopathic and inclined to anger and violence, but in a way that naïve young women hundreds of years from now will probably still find sexy. Hey, I get it, ladies – I was there.

**Biggest Embarrassment:** Well, it was embarrassing when Thornfield burned down. That crazy Bertha – or Antoinetta, or whatever – she really bought the farm.

**Proudest DIY:** Edward and I are not big "DIY people." He's generally too busy drinking claret and riding about the countryside, and I have my sketching. We did try to fix a tree on the property that had been struck by lightning, but it was no use. The lightning really did a number on it. It might have been a symbol of what was to come, but I'm probably reading too much into it.

**Biggest Indulgence:** A few antiques we have bought with my unexpected inheritance. The money came completely out of the blue! One moment I was working as a schoolmistress in the middle of nowhere, resisting the pressure to marry a good Christian man with no personality whatsoever, and the next thing I knew, I was an heiress! And of course, then I returned to Edward, and he has boatloads of cash, so we've been able to spend my money on gorgeous things to accessorize our new house. We lost most of his stuff in the fire, but far from a melodramatic tragedy that effectively disposed of an unvalued life, it was a great opportunity to reimagine what we want our home to really say about us. We're using the money to expand our collection of antique Roman coins and pottery shards, as well as to acquire some Egyptian rarities. Edward has a friend who's a tomb raider, and he brings us back the loveliest things.

**Best advice:** Seek out advice about what works (and what doesn't) in a really large house. Some people won't understand this predicament because they live in houses with only several rooms, but the landed aristocracy can be a great resource for ideas. I've learned a lot in transitioning from Thornfield to our new place. It's always a challenge to make forty-five rooms feel homey and warm, and I worry sometimes that I haven't gotten it quite right. And Edward wasn't much help to me initially because he was blind. Didn't have much of an eye, you might say! No opinions at all about whether we should go with fabric headboards or more traditional four-poster beds in the guest rooms. Decorative terrariums or no decorative terrariums? But really, my advice is: don't be afraid to shape your house into the kind of home you've always wanted. And if you hear maniacal laughter in the middle of the night, don't ignore it.

## 2. Elizabeth and Darcy's Neither Formal Nor Falsely Adorned Pad of Privilege

**Name:** Elizabeth, feisty heroine who nonetheless fully conforms to patriarchal expectations; Darcy, reformed grouch and scantily clad swimmer in lakes

**Location:** Derbyshire, England

**Size:** Bigger and better than all other houses in the county (ask anyone)

**Years lived in:** Since Darcy was the sweetest-tempered, most generous-hearted boy in the world; owned

One year ago, after their lavish boho-chic wedding to which all of the county was invited, Elizabeth moved into Darcy's family seat of Pemberley. Their home, which is located in one of the hippest and most desired neighborhoods in England, dates so far back that no one would dare question its authenticity and awesomeness.

Their shared love of fountains and ease with their social position shines through in many details of this extraordinary home. Darcy and Elizabeth live with Darcy's sister Georgiana and their staff, which includes the devoted housekeeper Mrs. Reynolds, whom Darcy warmly describes as "sort of like my mother, but not, of course, because she's a servant." Although the house is perfect, they hope to make some improvements. They anticipate converting several of the bedrooms into nurseries in the coming years, where servants will strive to keep the little ones out of sight until they are sent to school. Both are hoping for a boy, as girls are utterly useless in a system of primogeniture.

It was important to Elizabeth to put her stamp on Pemberley when she took up residence, so she visited some other lovely, but duly inferior, estates like Chatsworth for inspiration. With its 126 rooms and extensive gardens, Chatsworth is “not at all bad,” she says, but Darcy insists that it is “utter garbage” compared to Pemberley, which has a much better point of view, situated as it is on the opposite side of a valley, into which the road with some abruptness winds.

The Darcys like large, well-proportioned rooms that are handsomely fitted up, and Darcy himself likes to take baths. Elizabeth enjoys long walks in the woods, from which she returns with flushed cheeks that are obviously totally sexual.

All in all, they have created a home of seven thousand rooms, where they can welcome Elizabeth’s family, although they desperately hope that those fools will not visit too often. Elizabeth allowed us a peek into the beauties of Pemberley.

### **A chat with Elizabeth:**

#### **Their style:**

I would describe our style as neither gaudy nor uselessly fine, by which I mean it’s not disgusting like Rosings, which looks like somebody vomited up chintz and then covered everything that didn’t move in gold. Lady Catherine de Bourgh showed up right after I moved in and wanted to tell me how to decorate, but I told her I’d rather be stuck on a desert island with my idiot sisters than listen to her nonsense. She backed off after that, and I haven’t seen her beady little judgmental eyes in some time. Truth be told, I don’t think Darcy would want me interfering too much in the material manifestation of his masculine, masterly virtue, but I do make the occasional tweak: a new Ming

vase here, an embalmed pygmy person there. We have a lot of Greek statues, and of course the portraits of Darcy in the picture-gallery. I know it may sound narcissistic to have a lot of paintings of oneself, but it's just something you do if you're important. My favorite is the one where he's standing over the bleeding body of a defenseless fox.

**Inspiration:**

In making a few changes to some of the parlors, I was influenced by design elements of my former home Longbourn, where I always had to listen to my idiot sisters fighting over bonnets. I really loved my father's library. I was enamored of the mahogany bookshelves, his beautiful desk set, and his charmingly worn leather club chair. He really made a gorgeous room into which he could retreat from all of us. It's funny that I should think of this, because now I'm seeing a psychoanalyst and working through some issues I have about how he talked down to my mother, and his total disregard for all of our welfare, and well – a few things. My analyst Prunella says that one's relationship to one's father is very important. I'm going to start going five times a week.

**Favorite Element:**

The situation of the house and the extensive gardens. This was what made me first fall in love with the place – I mean with Darcy! Sorry. My, oh my. Seeing the house really put my spirits in a high flutter, and my mind was too full for conversation, but I saw and admired every remarkable spot and point of view. It was a large, handsome stone building, standing well on rising ground, and backed by a ridge of high woody hills; and in front, a stream of some natural importance was swelled into greater, but without any artificial appearance. I was delighted. But you know the deal – this is all detailed at the beginning of chapter 43. Now that I'm recalling this moment, it's almost as if this description has larger implications for understanding the social position and values of the landed

aristocracy in England. I'll have to think about that later, when I'm filling the endless hours of my day.

**What Friends Say:**

Jane and Bingley like Pemberley a lot, probably because it's bigger than their place. I mean, Netherfield Park is great, if you're into smaller, cozier rooms. They come to hang out and to remind us how much nicer they are than us. But Darcy and I are also homebodies, and we just like to enjoy the space. He still finds country society somewhat confined and unvarying for his taste, so he often stays in and cleans his guns while I go out to dance mechanically in rows. And we throw parties regularly, although my idiot sisters aren't allows to drink or play the piano.

**What the Servants Say:**

There have been some growing pains. Sometimes our housekeeper Mrs. Reynolds forgets to dust certain parlors or to change the flowers in the bedrooms on the eighth floor, but that's probably because we never told her those rooms were there. Darcy is the best landlord and the best master – not to mention the handsomest. Just the other day, he gave our groom a half-day off because his father is dying in another county, so that was nice. All our servants are thrilled to work at Pemberley. Sometimes I wonder if they might have wanted to do something different with their lives, but then I think: crazy lady, they love it!

**Biggest Embarrassment:**

A lack of closet space, definitely! We have a lot of clothes, and of course there are Darcy's guns, and it's hard to know where to put everything. I've purchased a few lovely wardrobes from Paris, and that has made a difference. But honestly, the lack of closet space is a real downside of a Great House

that no one tells you about when you're a young heroine looking for an eligible bachelor of property. I'm hoping to install some California Closets when things calm down after hunting season.

**Proudest DIY:**

Well, Caroline Bingley came to visit a few days ago, and I needlepointed her head to a pillow. HA! Just kidding. It's a truth universally acknowledged that an armchair in possession of a large bottom must be in want of a throw pillow, so I have made a few new pillows for the south drawing room, although I haven't been over to that part of the house in several weeks. I also burned the portrait of George Wickham. Does that count as a DIY project? – I did make the fire. I think he might have noticed its absence the last time they were here, but maybe not since he was drunk the whole time.

**Biggest Indulgence:**

We like to buy books for our library, and I have a lot of time to read as I lack an active and useful profession. At first, I was a bit uncomfortable in the space as it brings to mind my issues with my father's library, but I'm coming to like it. I also bought myself a nice writing desk. It's from China, where the opium comes from. I fill my days by writing letters, making sure Mrs. Reynolds has her orders, and helping Darcy's younger sister Georgiana learn how to speak words out loud. I have bought a few lovely things and sent them to my best friend Charlotte, but she doesn't really visit anymore. I suppose I could bring that up with my analyst next week.

**Best Advice:**

Give a lot of balls, but don't invite officers! Sketchy guys, the lot. As I said, Wickham and Lydia came to visit recently, and of course they didn't even bring a bottle of wine. Wickham mostly played billiards with himself and kept requesting that servant girls come to his room to fix some issue with

the fire. But yes, the balls have been fun, and they have given me something to do. Being mistress of Pemberley really is something, but it's not all claret and roses. Let's see. What else? – I also suggest that you design yourself a work-life balance studio. I did, and I can't tell you how great it's been. I redecorated one of our seven thousand rooms in a lovely shade of green that reminds me of my long walks in the countryside, and until that decorating moment, I never knew myself.

### 3. Jay Gatsby's Desperately Sad McMansion of Unfulfilled Dreams

**Name:** Jay Gatsby (not his real name), former bootlegger turned fantasist turned dead man floating in a pool

**Location:** West Egg, New York; less fashionable than East Egg, though this is a mostly superficial tag to express the bizarre and not a little sinister contrast between them

**Size:** Perfect for huge parties on summer nights

**Years lived in:** Not long enough to really matter; owned but mortgaged to the hilt

When Jay Gatsby was house hunting, he tried to imagine the area as an old island that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes, but he didn't really know much about the Dutch. A recent New York transplant from God-knows-where, he needed the perfect house to approach a new phase in his life.

What he found was a one-billion-square-foot man cave with Marie Antoinette music-rooms, Restoration salons, gold bathrooms, and a charming coastal location. This not insignificant real estate investment was motivated by his desire to be close to Daisy, the love interest of his youth and wife of sadistic Yale graduate and racist Tom Buchanan. It was important for him to have an excellent vantage point on the Buchanans' cheerful red-and-white Georgian Colonial on the other side of the bay.

He also wanted a house where he could entertain – just in case Daisy decided to leave her gilded cage and show up at one of his lavish and emotionally bankrupt events. The mansion's cavernous marble foyer proved an excellent space for welcoming anonymous revelers, and the open-plan kitchen was ideal for a catering staff charged with preparing two dinners per guest. Sometimes his

guests got into fights with one another and drove drunk, but that was all just part of the fun of the Roaring Twenties.

Gatsby's friend and neighbor Nick Carraway, who comes from a family of prominent, well-to-do people in a Middle Western city, was kind enough to give us a sense of the doomed protagonist's domestic world.

### **A chat with Nick (otherwise known as "old sport"):**

#### **Gatsby's style:**

I'd say that his style was *nouveau riche* crossed with a sense of futility in an increasingly alienated and materialistic world. Like a bottle of champagne left open in the sun for several days. He liked having at least one chandelier in every room, and he was fond of marble lions. He was also a big fan of lawns, like Tom and Daisy's, which started at the beach and ran towards the front door for a quarter of a mile, jumping over sun-dials and brick walls and burning gardens and drifting up the side of the house in bright vines as though from the momentum of its run, but I was always like: Christ, you guys are wasting so much water with your stupid lawn.

#### **His Inspiration:**

First and foremost, the Bellagio in Las Vegas. He thought that place was super-classy. But he was also inspired by an abiding and fruitless nostalgia for something that never really existed. The house was his way of being near Daisy, my selfish and vain cousin and cipher extraordinaire. She laughs a lot because she's horribly sad. And she got pissed at me for missing her wedding because I wasn't back from the war. I mean, honestly. At any rate, it's hard to say what kind of color palette results

from the disappointment of youthful love. He did try to incorporate silver wherever he could. Maybe it reminded him of money, which is very important in this book.

**Important Influences:**

In my younger and more vulnerable years, my father gave me some advice: decorate your home to reflect your personality. This was hard with Gatsby, as he didn't really know what his personality was, but he read *Town & Country* to get a sense of what a proper society house looks like. He also flipped through *Kinfolk* once and insisted that his bartenders serve cocktails in mason jars for a little while after that. And he was influenced by the death-bound stare of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg, which you'll remember as one of the ways that you learned about symbols in eighth grade.

**Favorite Element:**

His blue lawn. He liked to stand out there and look at Daisy's dock. He was obsessed with that dock. He went on and on about how he believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us, and how it eluded us then, but that's no matter – to-morrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms further...And one fine morning...but I was just like, was green the best color choice for the light? I would have gone in another direction. Maybe a nice, bright yellow.

**What Friends Say:**

What, the people at his gleaming, dazzling parties? Please. They just came to drink his booze and vomit in the shrubs trimmed in the shape of dollar signs and swans. We all know that Gatsby had no friends, except maybe me, and I'm just an ambivalent mediating figure between the reader and the narrative. I don't even get drunk all that often.

**Biggest Embarrassment:**

The location. You have to travel through a place called the Valley of Ashes to get to the house. I mean, come on. You'd have thought that such a heavy-handed metaphor would have turned him off to the whole enterprise, but no.

**Proudest DIY:**

I would say himself: he was kind of a DIY project. He had a Pinterest board that helped him to figure out what to wear and how to act and how to throw a party and everything. Otherwise, I really did encourage him to take up a hobby to fill the empty hours of his existence: maybe spend some time working on the house, beefing up the sparse ivy or putting in a raised flower bed and planting some leafy greens – but that proved unsuccessful. I thought we might reclaim some lumber from a barn and build a new frame for his waterbed, but he just wanted to stand out on his lawn and stare off across the water.

**Biggest Indulgence:**

His narcissism. Oh, you mean in terms of décor? – He liked French doors. He thought they seemed very French. And the pool, although he might not have liked it so much had he known it would be the site of a melodramatic murder-suicide.

**Biggest Challenge:**

He struggled with clutter. Had his life not been cut tragically short, I would have told him to read *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing*, which you may have heard of if you're alive on the planet. His issue with clutter manifested itself in several ways, but he had a particular issue with clothes. He had all these shirts of sheer linen and thick silk and fine

flannel – shirts with stripes and scrolls and plaids in coral and apple-green and lavender and faint orange, and monograms of Indian blue and, well – you get the idea. They represented the gaping void at the heart of consumer culture, as you’ll also remember from eighth grade.

**Best Advice:**

I don’t really have any advice. I’m kind of a mess myself.

#### 4. Lady Macbeth’s Murderous Mansion of Blood and Death

**Name:** Lady Macbeth, witchlike queen of undaunted mettle known for her strong opinions on masculinity and a fondness for multiple homicide

**Location:** Scotland, near a heath and not far from a forest

**Size:** Kingly

**Years lived in:** Since the Macbeths’ recent regicide; owned (at least for now)

It has been a nonstop year for Lady Macbeth, whose husband’s recent promotions to Thane of Cawdor and then to king of Scotland meant a new home for them both. After grueling negotiations with their movers and the weird sisters out on the heath, they said goodbye to their only-okay castle in Inverness and moved into the royal domicile that was recently vacated by Duncan, whom they killed while he was visiting them.

“I know what you’re going to say: it’s a total violation of codes of hospitality to murder your guest,” she said. “But it’s a rat race out there, and I wasn’t about to just wait around for my husband to become king. We wanted to be proactive and really blue sky it. In the end, bloody murder seemed like the best option.”

Lady Macbeth “leans in” not only in the professional world, but also in her approach to decorating the new castle.

“There are challenges with inheriting a property that belonged to someone you plotted to stab repeatedly while he slept,” she says. “You want to put your own stamp on it and make it personal, but you also want to respect the memory of the former king to keep the rabble happy.”

Macbeth is also a big fan of the property, which boasts a large dining room, dark and foreboding chambers, drippy candles, and lots of thunder and lightning. Lady Macbeth hopes to use the dining room do more hostessing in the future. When it comes to tablescapes, she favors a rustic vibe and is always on the lookout for pinecones, bark, pilot’s fingers, and other things one can generally find in cauldrons.

“The good news is that we don’t have to have Malcolm over anymore because he’s raising an army against us,” she said. “God, he’s *so* boring. Good luck with your boring army, Malcolm.”

### **A chat with Lady Macbeth:**

#### **Her Style:**

I like bearskin rugs from very large bears, red velvet drapes, knives with bone handles, and gargoyles that are extra-menacing. When it comes to floral arrangements, my taste tends towards snapdragons, burrs, and those flowers that are green and spiky and don’t look like flowers at all.

**Important Influences:**

I'm inspired by the aesthetic of shrieking owls and crying crickets, but that can be challenging to translate into a scheme for an antechamber. I love an industrial vibe – lots of metal, high ceilings, exposed pipes, brick walls, a concrete floor, and maybe a sputnik chandelier. What we have here is more classic, but that's Duncan! I once saw an abattoir that I thought was just lovely.

**Interesting Features:**

Our old castle featured a drunken porter who mostly just talked about erectile dysfunction, but I kind of miss his high jinks. Here, we have some nice Disney-esque turrets, where I hope to hide some bodies one day.

**Important Pieces:**

Last week, I went to an estate sale for yet another guy killed in battle and picked up some fluffy Mongolian lamb pillow covers. We also have a collection of gorgeous severed heads. Severed heads aren't just for sticking on pikes anymore – you can bring them into the home as memorable embellishments. For example, if you're thinking about styling a bookshelf, I suggest a neat stack of coffee table books with the partially desiccated cranium of someone you murdered on top.

**What Friends Say:**

That they're sorry, but something came up and they can't come over after all.

**Key Features:**

I love our plush sofa by the hearth, but Macbeth's taste is a bit, well, *soldierly*, and he wanted to reupholster it in camo. I told him absolutely not. We also have some gorgeous family crests, although they're not exactly ours because of the whole usurpation thing.

**Biggest Splurge:**

After the spirits unsexed me and filled me from the crown to the toe top-full with direst cruelty, I decided that I needed a man cave for myself. I have a proper bar in there and a lot of taxidermy, including a wildebeest and a squirrel paddling a canoe.

**Proudest DIY:**

I adore my decorative raven, which I actually shot and stuffed myself. Macbeth doesn't really like taxidermy, but he always says: "Happy wife, happy life!"

**Biggest Embarrassment:**

Banquo's ghost, no question. The absolute worst thing about killing people is that they *always* turn into ghosts and show up at your dinner parties. Macbeth really lost it, which was mortifying for me, particularly as I wasn't feeling super-confident about my soufflé that evening.

**Biggest Challenge:**

Finding a comfortable bed for the master suite. We don't sleep well. Apparently, I have been walking around at night, folding pieces of paper and trying to wash imaginary blood off my hands. I just finished Arianna Huffington's latest book, which has some great tips about how to get the best sleep for maximum rich white person success, but my husband is all, "SLEEP NO MORE!"

MACBETH DOES MURDER SLEEP.” He thinks that the problem is reckoning with our heinous crimes, but I think we’re dealing with a mattress issue. It’s time to go Tempur-Pedic.

**Plans for the Future:**

I’d like a red SMEG toaster. And maybe central heating; it’s cold as balls here. I don’t know if this is our forever dream home, but it’s great for now – and much better than Macduff’s castle, although we haven’t been over there recently.

**Best Advice:**

Just because it’s Scotland doesn’t mean that you have to incorporate a lot of tartan. You don’t need your home looking like a university club filled with asshole bankers. Hey, when it comes to decorating, fair is foul, and foul is fair, if you know what I mean, and I think you do.

## 5. Marilla and Matthew’s God-Fearing Avonlea Orphan Sanctuar

**Name:** Marilla and Matthew Cuthbert, bickering but affectionate siblings *d’un certain age*

**Location:** Prince Edward Island, Canada, past Barry’s Pond (or the Lake of Shining Waters) and down the Avenue (or the White Way of Delight)

**Size:** Appropriate and sensible

**Years lived in:** Since their youth, which was spent nursing their dying father rather than courting

When Matthew and Marilla decided to adopt a little orphan boy from the asylum in Nova Scotia, they had no idea what was in store, nor did the word “asylum” strike them as a problem. Although Mrs. Rachel Lynde was certain that the child would murder them in their beds and burn the place to the ground, the alternative was to hire a local French boy, and French boys are incredibly stupid.

Due to a queer mistake, the Cuthberts received a girl, Anne, who was next door to a perfect heathen but really pretty great. Sometimes home improvements go hand-in-hand with Providence, and the adoption of this skinny and homely girl led to a total reimagining of the bachelor and old maid's farmhouse.

Green Gables has a hollow, a brook, white birches, horizon mists of pearl and purple, and other things of that manner. It is one of the finest properties in Avonlea, a peaceful and God-fearing place where people have names like "Mrs. Alexandria Spencer" and the most anticipated social event of the year is a teetotaling afternoon party at the manse. The farm is surrounded by cherry- and apple-tree orchards that shower the landscape with blossoms, and the grass is all sprinkled with dandelions. Rose bushes give way to green, low-sloping fields that offer a sparkling blue glimpse of the sea beyond balsamy fir woods and wild plums that hang in their filmy bloom. So imagine a commercial for Hidden Valley Ranch salad dressing.

With vintage elements that add to its rustic charm, the house is perfectly suited to the daily rhythms and hobbies of this "modern family." Matthew spends long days in the barn, milking the cows, baling hay, and writing a blog about how to adapt his farming practices to Brooklyn rooftops. If women come to the house, he hides in a small room off the parlour. When she is not in the depths of despair, Anne enjoys reading poetry about fairies, being rageful about Gilbert Blythe, and gallivanting about the forest with her bosom friend Diana, who is dull but sweet and pretty.

It is a warm, if regimented, home, and Marilla is in charge. Because she is very into cleanliness, she scrubs the floor five times a day. When she is not doing this, she makes thousands of baking-powder biscuits, updates her recipe cards, and occasionally has a tippie of currant wine (the minister said it's

fine). Sometimes Anne does the dishes, if she's not pretending to be a dead woman floating in a stream. Matthew doesn't do any housework because he is a man, which also means that he has a meal of jellied chicken and cold tongue served promptly when he returns from the fields.

“We try to keep things at Green Gables very farm-to-table,” Marilla ejaculated. “Sustainability is everything around here, especially in the long winters, because without it, you will literally die.”

Marilla was kind enough to sit down with us over crab-apple preserves and tea to discourse about the Cuthberts' decorating journey, although she did say that she was missing her Aid Society meeting.

She used the special dishes.

**A chat with Marilla (a handsome woman, stern but nonetheless affectionate, who was perfectly embodied by Colleen Dewhurst in the film version of the book):**

**Their Style:**

My style is minimalist, and it doesn't matter what Matthew's style is because he has no say. I like bare country churches, clean Scandinavian lines, and furniture that embodies self-denial. My favorite chair is duly plain, but it's perfect for shelling peas or reading Revelations. My taste runs to quilts that contain no more than three colors and samplers embroidered with religious wisdom. I always say: You can never have too many samplers with the Word of Our Lord on them – anything that says to your guests, *We are not heathens, we swear*. Gosh, I wonder if they make a sampler with that on it.

**Important Influences:**

Well, first and foremost, I would say God. I see Our Lord as the original Property Brother, but of course there's only one of him, and he doesn't live in Las Vegas. And then Anne has been a big influence, although she likes to imagine her room as a kind of organdy and silk palace. She's very into imagining things, like that she has an alabaster brow and nut-brown hair, or that she's a princess or the Lady of the Lake. She carries around this book by Alfred, Lord Tennismatch or something like that.

**Favorite Element:**

For me, definitely my kitchen, but Matthew's favorite design element is the barn, which is decorated with bats and old rusty nails. Once, someone told him he should hang up these big signs that said *JOY* and *FAMILY*, and he just looked at him like he was insane. I also like our front porch. Sometimes Rachel will come over to sit in the out-of-doors with me and speculate wildly as to where people are headed in their buggies. She likes to make sure that respectable young ladies do not go driving with men. *Sluts*, she always says. But she prides herself on speaking her mind.

**Potential Improvements:**

Anne wishes that we had another spare room. She's totally obsessed with spare rooms. I don't get it – I mean, we have one. She also likes to re-name rooms in the house, so the porch is now the Verandah of Vision, and the toilet is the Privee of the Blooming Bowels. And she'd like to get rid of her bed and sleep in a wild cheery tree, but she had an imaginary friend who lived in an enchanted bookcase when she was a kid, so you know: crazy sauce. The only kind of bookcase I will tolerate is a simple, economical model from a reliable supplier like West Elm.

**What Friends Say:**

Sometimes Rachel will tell me how she would have done something differently, like that we shouldn't have put a desk in Anne's room because now she'll start reading books and thinking about things and not get married.

**Biggest Embarrassment:**

The time that Anne served Diana currant wine and got the girl completely blasted. That was a pretty kettle of fish. And in my parlour. Diana is a lush.

**Proudest DIY:**

Setting up Anne's room. When I thought we were getting a boy, I figured he could sleep on the couch in the kitchen chamber, but that didn't seem right for a girl, even if she was a red-headed stray waif. So I set her up in the east gable room, which was decorated with bare whitewashed walls, plain window sashes, and a braided mat in the middle of the bare floor. She said that the room had a rigidity not to be described in words that sent a chill to the very marrow of her bones, but she would do the place up like *Liberace* if I left it to her. A less-is-more approach is better – nothing featherbrained. Just last week, I was reading in *Real Simple* that I should throw away everything I own and then buy other things that the magazine helpfully suggests, and I was like: But I only own a pincushion and an amethyst brooch bequeathed to my mother by a seafaring uncle.

**Biggest Indulgence:**

I sprang for a Viking range and marble countertops in the kitchen, but I passed on the seafoam green SMEG fridge as it was too small to hold all my jars of jam. I see these purchases as adding

value to Green Gables in the long run – everyone on *House Hunters* wants a chef's kitchen, even though none of those deadbeats can even make a grilled cheese. We also put in some stylish open shelving to store my muffins, raspberry cordial, and medicine for grippe.

**Biggest Challenge:**

Trying to bleach the muslin curtains for the third time in a week while Anne is going on and on about how she wishes that roses could talk because they would say such lovely things. And making the house “green.” If you have a farmhouse, it has to be green. We put in SIP panels, an ICF foundation, and blown-in cellulose insulation in the attic. Overall, we tried to use materials that were locally sourced or salvaged. But listen to me! – Boy, do I sound smug. God would not like that.

**Best Advice:**

Only listen to the decorating advice of kindred spirits because everyone, and I mean everyone, is fixing up old farmhouses these days. People keep telling me to make a chalkboard wall in my kitchen, and I'm like: Why the hell would I do that? Really, the thing is not to be afraid to sit down with a notebook full of Sears catalogue cutouts and mix elements that don't necessarily go together, like a painting of “Christ Blessing the Little Children” and a Barcelona chair. But don't go overboard. You can always enliven a room with a throw pillow covered in burlap or a single flower in a vase. And as Anne says, without the right paint scheme for a historic home, your life will be a perfect graveyard of buried hopes.