

# A WHOLE NEW WORLD

Life Experiences

Janet Meuwissen

## A WHOLE NEW WORLD

For the first time in my life, I was managing everything by myself. But I was not alone. As a single widow with two pre-adolescent children, I found myself, my family, and my daughter's half-Arab stallion, Akbar, moving three hundred miles east. We would need a place to call home for all of us. I was on the hunt for just such a residence in the quaint Southern Adirondack town of Northville New York.

As I made my solo journey into the charming little village of Northville in the spring of 1984, a "Holmes Realty" sign in front of a homey-looking log cabin drew my attention. I parked in front of the building, just as a middle-aged man with horned-rimmed glasses and a salt-n-pepper crew cut was leaving. When I opened my window to talk to him, he reached out to shake my hand as he exclaimed, "Hi! My name is Bill Holmes. I own this business. How can I help you?"

"Well, I'm looking for a three to four bedroom, with at least two baths, home on about three or so acres for my family and our horse. We would like to move in this summer. My name is Claire Wagner and I've accepted the position as Northville's high school principal. Have you got any properties like that?"

"I think I know just the place. It isn't on the market yet, but I know it will be soon. If you would like to take a look at it, you can follow me there now."

"That's great. I'll be right behind you."

As we drove up the dusty 6720 Olaf Johnson Road driveway, another car serendipitously followed us to the cedar board-and-batten A-frame. The driver of the third car, a friendly brown-haired middle-aged man wearing sunglasses was John Olson, the owner of

the house. An attractive younger woman accompanied him. I later came to know her as Kim. She would soon become John's second wife.

John hopped out of his flashy blue Mitsubishi convertible to greet us; Kim stayed in the car. With his cream-colored Ralph Lauren windbreaker, khakis, and broad smile, I immediately knew that I would like this man as he strode across the driveway. We shook hands and began a tour of the property. John took over the conversation as Bill stayed in the background.

"I built this house myself on four acres of land. There's a big storage shed on the back of the property. I own the Adirondack Furniture Factory on the other side of town. We make laminated furniture that we sell on Long Island, so I thought I could use the laminate throughout the interior to make this A-frame easier to maintain. "Would you like to go inside?" he motioned.

We entered through the kitchen of the open concept house. I noticed satin knotty-pine wall laminate in the kitchen, great room, living room, and stairway to the second floor. Through a doorway from the coral-carpeted living room was the master suite.

Creamy wall veneer showcased the shiny candy-apple red laminate of the king-sized bed frame, and seven-foot-tall side-cabinet towers framing a four-foot by five-foot mirror as the headboard. Immediately, I was wondering what I was getting myself into. There was also a matching triple dresser on the opposite side of the room. Then John explained that the bedroom suite was all too big to move out of the room. A glossy black sheened bathroom was part of the ensuite.

Upstairs were 2 bedrooms, just right for my son and daughter. From the great room, a sliding glass door provided a restful view of the wooded valley.

“Well, what do you think?” John queried as we walked back to our cars.

It didn't take me long to make the decision to buy the first property that I saw. “I'll take it!”.

“And I can hold the mortgage, if you wish.” John added. That was the beginning of our family friendship and the end of my misgivings about the master suite.

After we moved in, Akbar would be arriving in a couple of weeks so we needed a barn, not just a shed, for him. John connected me with a local handyman, Jim Johnson, who retrofitted our barn and put up an electric fence for Akbar's pasture.

As John and I became friends, I got to know more about who he was. John was a self-made person. He was impressed by my intelligence and I with his many unique talents, including his wry sense of humor. He was proud to tell me that his first wife was valedictorian of his 1963 high school graduating class; he was at the bottom. I was intrigued to know a man who had started inventing things, like a snowblower, when he was a kid. He continued to improve his life with his own hard work and thirst for knowledge.

When it became evident that we needed to expand our house, John connected me with contractor Brian Person. John provided the building materials, including the laminate. We enlarged the kitchen and added a necessary mudroom on the back. Along with enlarging the upstairs bedrooms, an upstairs bathroom was added.

At John's suggestion, I added a hot tub room and back porch. He and Kim took me shopping for a hot tub, because he thought I needed to relax. I bought a black one that matched the shiny black hot tub room walls. John also oversaw the building project. He was always looking out for us. He had become our guardian angel.

John also helped my kids. Kim's daughter, Stacey, and my daughter, Lennie, became friends. They had many adventures, including a cruise to the Bahamas organized by John. I had gotten my son, Jason, a motorbike for his April 19th birthday which was 10 days after his father died. It was a present his father had promised him.

After we had moved to Northville, John and Jason built a motorbike track around the perimeter of our four-acre property; the track provided many hours of enjoyment for Jason. At his graduation, Jason received a \$5000 scholarship from John. Perhaps John's reason for helping Jason was that he had not seen his own son in several years. Possibly Jason filled that void.

John was, and still is I think, the kind of man who liked to stay in the background. He was a smart and funny guy. He worked his way up to becoming the owner of the Adirondack Furniture Factory, which made him the money he needed to build five houses, pretty much by himself. He moved into each new house as he began planning for the next one. His intuition and innovation helped with creating a more efficient business as well as some pretty amazing homes—especially one with an atrium filled with live flowers, bushes, and trees.

As the years passed, the kids grew, and things changed, we continued our friendship—whether we needed his help, or not. We often went out to dinner, even after I married my second husband.

Jeff Bartholomew, an affable Renaissance man with a winning smile, unexpectedly came into my life. His deceased wife, a beloved teacher at the school where I was the principal, had died in an auto accident. He was left with a three-year-old daughter and an eight-year-old son to raise. Jeff was well acquainted with the school staff who continued to invite him to school parties.

One such gathering was a surprise 40<sup>th</sup> Birthday Party for me at my house. Jeff had made a camouflaged '40' birthday cake. He also inadvertently left his beer mug. About a year later, my washing machine malfunctioned. Friends suggested I ask Jeff to fix it. He did; he also retrieved his mug, and the rest is history. In 1987, we blended our families of three into our new family of six—Dad, Mom, Jason, Lennie, Kevin, and Karin. John, Kim, and Stacey attended the wedding.

We continued our friendship with John and Kim but spent less time together. All our children, one by one, left to attend college and start a new chapter in each of their lives. Eventually, even the moms and dads headed for the warmer and sunnier South—North Carolina and Florida. John, like the guardian angel that he was, gradually faded out of my and our lives. I guess he might have felt that his job was done, and it was time to move on.

But he is not forgotten. In the middle of our living room is a glass-topped coffee table that he designed and created for 6720 Olaf Johnson Road, which I bought from him in 1984. Following John's design, Jeff created matching side tables. Serendipity—it gave me a Whole New World, not once but twice.