





It is 9.30am on a clammy New England summer's day. In the sleepy town of Barnstable, Cape Cod, Edie Vonnegut, native resident, artist and daughter of the literary icon Kurt Vonnegut, is hauling giant bags of sand down to the man-made pond at the bottom of her garden. She lives with her husband John Squibb and their teenage sons Willy and Buck, in a renovated 18th-century shingle barn – which just happens to be in the grounds of the house where she grew up.

She throws me a sandbag, which we split open and spill out on to the muddy ground where the water laps. This is to be a 'kooky' kind of beach, she tells me, somewhere her friends and family can sip cocktails, or swim – just as long as they are aware that they will be sharing the waters with some rather cranky snapping turtles.

'Our [childhood] house was one of the funniest houses in the neighbourhood, a bit bonkers, a house where art mattered, where writing mattered,' Vonnegut says, pointing to the traditional 'Saltbox' house that overlooks the pond. This distinctive New England architectural style, with

its timber frame, clapboard siding and long, sloping roof-line dates back to the late 17th century. Its boxy design, modelled on wooden salt containers, was imported from England by the colonists.

It was inside this white saltbox that her father Kurt (85 this year) wrote some of his most celebrated works – *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Cat's Cradle* among others – pausing only for mayonnaise sandwiches and the odd cigarette. Today the house is rented to holiday-makers, but the writer's creative mark is still much in evidence. The oak doors, for example, are covered in dreamy landscapes which he painted.

John, a carpenter/industrial designer by trade, appears with more sand. He is responsible for transforming the barn, and making his wife's ideas tangible. 'John can build just about anything I imagine,' she says. From restoring the original oak beams to installing bedrooms in the hayloft, even adding an adjoining studio for Vonnegut to work in, he is quite the handyman.

'Edie likes to change the layout of the living-room at least five times a day,' he jokes. The sofa,

Back to the old house

After years of worldly adventures, the artist Edie Vonnegut eventually settled down right where she grew up, in Cape Cod.

By Lucy Muir. Photographs by Nat Rea

Left armchairs found at a local yard sale were hand-painted with polka dots by the artist. One of two carved wooden rabbits bought on a trip to Bali sits on the mantelpiece, while antique Chinese lanterns hang from the rafters. **Above** the fireplace is built with hand-picked seashore pebbles. Vonnegut directed the mason as he worked in order to get shape and colour just right

which is covered in Vonnegut's hand-painted polka dots, was on the other side of the room an hour ago, he tells me. 'I know,' Vonnegut says. 'I can't help myself. A friend told me a course of Prozac would soon sort that out.'

Born in Schenectady, New York, 50-odd years ago, Vonnegut's earliest memories stretch back to a summer in Provincetown, where her father became immersed in the thriving creative scene, befriending the likes of Norman Mailer and Tennessee Williams. Having decided that Cape Cod would be just as 'artsy', Kurt Vonnegut quit his job at General Electric and moved to Barnstable when Edie was three. As her father's academic career took off, Edie moved with her family to Iowa, where she spent her junior and senior years at the University High School.



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Clockwise from above the rear view of the barn with its two adjoining studio additions; Vonnegut's husband John made the seven-foot long dining-table from reclaimed wood, and for the light fitting soldered six utility lights into one; the family kitchen, festooned with vintage utensils and ceramics bought at the nearby Salvation Army store and yard sales



From here it gets complicated. At 17 Vonnegut moved to Mexico, where she and her then boyfriend were caught with a small bag of pot, thrown into jail and subsequently deported. They fled to Jamaica and shackled up in a treehouse. In her early twenties Vonnegut headed to New York, where she illustrated shoes for Capezio (the New York footwear label) and went on to assist Giorgio Di Sant Angelo, the late fashion designer, whom she credits for her good work habits today.

Through friends, Vonnegut met and married Geraldo Rivera, an American chat show host, whom she divorced three years later. Eventually, following a nervous breakdown, she crossed paths with her childhood sweetheart, to whom she is now blissfully married. It was Squibb who persuaded her to move back to the Barnstable home- stead and begin a new life with him in 1985.

'When John asked me to move back to the house I grew up in, I said, "I'm an adventurer, I can't do that!"' But she did, buying the property outright from her siblings two years ago.

With the makeshift beach now complete, we

head up to the barn in search of tea. Inside the open-plan living-room, Vonnegut takes shabby chic to new levels. From post-war English enamel painted plates to the 1950s aprons dotted round the kitchen, this is the home of a self-confessed hoarder. Objects of sentimental value, such as the framed drawing of a birthday celebration painted by Edie when she was four, are given pride of place. 'I can remember the day I drew this. When I had finished, my dad took the drawing away, coloured in all the difficult bits and then framed it for me. When I saw the finished piece I thought I was a total genius – he still says it's one of my best works!'

Today, with her flowing Botticelli locks, Vonnegut looks remarkably like the strong, voluptuous women she captures on canvas in her



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Clockwise from above Vonnegut in her studio working on *The Story of My Life*, her self-portrait. The canvas on the left, *Punching the Snake*, is part of her Domestic Goddesses series; Edie and John's upper floor bedroom; Vonnegut customised the white medicine cabinet with Chanel No 5 bottles, broken bracelets, seaweed and pieces of ceramic plates

Domestic Goddesses series – though at a slight size 10 she is half their size. Each scene depicts naked women ironing, taking out the rubbish or swaddling equally robust toddlers. They have gained her a place on some of Hollywood's most famous walls, with patrons including Julia Roberts and Susan Sarandon.

In her latest series, recognisable property developers are being beaten up by naked women. The ugly scenes are part of Vonnegut's environmental battle to protect the beauty of the Cape from more supersize condos and sprawling malls. 'My dad called Bush a twit on national television the other day and I'm kind of hoping that after the developers see this, we're both dragged off to the same Gulag!' Before that happens, the artist intends to branch out into the world of teaching. In March, she heads off to Malawi to set up an arts programme in an African orphanage. 'I'm sick of being stuck in the studio all day and want to try my hand at something else that takes me to faraway places, and to people who have nothing.' ■

