



The House on Justamere Drive

CATHY FIORELLO

— THEN —

I SAW 19 JUSTAMERE DRIVE IN OSSINING, New York, for the first time at the peak of a glorious New York fall foliage season, its gambrel roof under towering maples whose leaves had turned a joyous yellow. A flaming Japanese red maple stood on each side of the walk to the front door. Pink leaves had started falling; they covered the walk like rose petals strewn in the path of a bride. I knew even before stepping inside that this was it, the search was over, if only we could afford it.

We met the owners, signed the contract and lived there for the next forty years. The former owners moved across the street and we became friends. They told me later that I was the only prospective buyer who had not gone through the rooms with a tape measure. You can't measure love, and I loved that house from the first minute I saw it.

My husband and I had one child and were expecting another when we took the risk of buying a house we couldn't afford but had to have. Our apartment was filled to capacity with one toddler living in spacious luxury in the only bedroom and two adults sleeping on a convertible couch in the living room. The ad we answered described a white Dutch Colonial with "a high hedge and a private walk." After living six years in a garden apartment complex overflowing with young families with children, I wanted that hedge, I needed that private walk.

We moved in and eagerly tackled the changes that were needed to make this house our home. We set up a big-sister bedroom for the child we had, a nursery for the child we were expecting, and a playroom for both. Everything was in place. We were ready to raise a family.

Was it happily-ever-after for us in our dream house with our perfect family? Of course not. We raised our kids in the turmoil of the sixties and seventies. The outbursts of social revolution and the availability of drugs on streets and in schools presented us with problems we weren't prepared for. Over the years we had marital rifts and financial setbacks. But we had a foundation to fall back on; the house held us up and kept us together. And it was there whenever someone needed to come home.

Coming home is one of the happiest things grown children do. Home from college with friends in tow. Home for the holidays, flying their young children across the country and watching them decorate the Christmas tree with ornaments they'd made themselves when they were young. Having your children want to come home is the purest form of validation for parents.

My husband and I remained in the house after our two children had moved on and well into our retirement. Our son, who had moved to San Francisco, wanted us to join him there, and finally, we agreed. Trying not to be emotional about leaving, we told ourselves that this was the right thing to do at this time in our lives. Packing up a house with forty years of memories cluttering every corner from attic to basement was traumatic. Once over the shock of my announcement, my friends helped me with the moving sale. Watching me as I let go of things I had clung to for so long, they marveled at my courage. How could I give up a life in such a cavalier manner? They didn't understand. I wasn't giving up a life; I was adding to it. And how could I let go of a house I had loved for so long? Yes, I was leaving a house, but I was taking my memories with me. Courage? It wasn't part

of the equation. I wasn't brave; I was scared. But taking that risk gave me a future at a time when I thought my life was all about the past.

We decided not to ship our furniture to San Francisco. We were off to a new life, so we would make a fresh start. Our daughter blended the things she loved best from our old house into her new house. The Hitchcock rocker we had bought for her 2:00 a.m. feedings and set beside our fireplace now sits beside hers. My husband's easy chair, his contours permanently molded into the leather upholstery, eased the pain of separation for her young son when his grandfather moved away. Her daughter sits at my desk, my collection of Eiffel Towers on its shelf. Everywhere I look when I visit, I see reminders of my mothering years.

There were things I could never part with, and they made the move to California with me: my antique ceramic chicken that sat on my stove and watched over me as I learned to cook, so dear to me that my daughter-in-law flew across the country with the chicken on her lap to keep it safe; the hand-painted canisters, weary and bruised after so many years of service, still hold our flour, sugar, and tea; my mother's cut-glass fruit bowl that always said "Thanksgiving"—inanimate objects bursting with life.

It didn't take long for us to sell the house. We showed it in spring when my husband's gardens were at their loveliest. We'd done some painting and priming as we prepared the house for viewing, even gave the laundry room in the basement the cheerful makeover I'd always wanted for myself. We had all but closed on a sale when our agent called and said, "One more. Can we come now?"

I saw something familiar on the face of the young woman coming down the walk. I knew that look. It was the look on my face the first time I saw the house. The agent told me later that she cried as she made her way through the rooms as they reminded her so much of her grandmother's house. Within hours, they made a bid that knocked out all the other prospective buyers. I think we would have sold to them even if they hadn't been the highest bidder. I cried when I heard her story, picturing my grandchildren having a similar experience one day. They loved that house so.

NOW

It's been fifteen years since we left the house on Justamere Drive, but it is still very much a part of the fabric of my family's life and that of the family who moved in when we moved out. Like us, the couple who bought it were expecting a child when they were house hunting.

We keep in touch—the young mother who now lives in my old house and the grandmother who moved on to a new life. I used to imagine her children in "our" playroom and wonder which had Amy's room and which had Bobby's. In the beginning our notes were about the practical aspects of the move.

DURING OUR TEMPORARY STAY IN OUR SON'S HOME, WHERE WE LIVED UNTIL OUR APARTMENT WAS READY:

Hi Ann,

Please don't bother to continue forwarding our mail and go through the expense of mailing the children's books that still come to the house though I notified all publishers that I would no longer be reviewing their works. I would love for your children to have them.

Dearest Cathy,

We are no longer getting your mail and now I'm REALLY starting to miss you guys! We have adored the garden and thank you beyond words for leaving all the furniture, the window treatments, the products! I still smile when I go to grab a paper towel from the linen closet and realize how wise your placement was in all ways big and small, and we LOVE, LOVE, LOVE the house. It's a treasure and we still feel your great energy all the time.

AFTER OUR MOVE TO SAN FRANCISCO:

Dear Ann,

We are finally at home in San Francisco! We moved two weeks ago and life has been hectic. But I suspect the same is going on in your life—endless

shopping, waiting for deliveries, etc. The light at the end of this tunnel is that we love being here. The Embarcadero area is an exciting place to live and more than makes up for having to take an elevator eight floors down to do laundry. You can't have everything!

Thanks so much for that touching email you sent just before we moved. It means a lot to us to know that you love the house that we loved for so long. What a lucky house!

TWO YEARS LATER:

Hello Ann!

It's been a while for both of us. I hope you're still enjoying the house and your children are happy there. After much ambivalence, I know that I'm in the right place at the right time. It has truly been a new life—new friends, new endeavors, new goals. Can you believe it? At this age!

I've written a book—and you're in it. I thought you would like to see that chapter.

Dear Cathy,

I'm sorry it has taken me so long to respond to this lovely email. I was so touched to read what you wrote in that chapter and to know that you and I were absolutely meant to meet at that moment and to know that we share a similar sense of the warmth of home. Before my father died that December, he came over a few times and he, too, had to catch his breath over the similarities between 19 Justamere and 10 Sunnyside, the home he grew up in and where the only grandparent I got to meet, my grandmother, lived until she was ninety-five. We went there almost every weekend of my childhood, and I can still smell it and see the entire layout. It was a magical place for me and so, when we pulled up to 19 Justamere that day, I was instantly "home." And the vortex of my father's impending death, and my impending pregnancy, and that walkway,

and those gardens, and that breakfast nook—I was just gone and knew everything I needed to know. You're right, you can't make measurements for this sort of thing.

I am so touched, and so honored that you would share this time capsule with me. I admit, I was pretty emotional after reading it! I still love the house, more and more for both the memories it initially invoked and the many new ones taking hold that make it ours. It is well loved, I promise.



And the love lives on. My grandchildren are now at an age when they, too, look back nostalgically at their grandmother's house. They all have vivid memories of pulling into its driveway as toddlers, their grandfather and I and our poodle Danny rushing out to greet them, Danny yelping, tail wagging at top speed.

But it's my grandson Aaron's sentiments for the house that touch me most. For all of his twenty-three years, Aaron has been trying to make peace with the world he lives in. I never stopped believing during those years of wrong turns and discarded opportunities that someday the Aaron I knew and loved would emerge.

I received a phone call from him recently. "Nana," he said, "I've been thinking a lot about the house on Justamere Drive, and I want you to know that I will always think of that as home, the place where I was happiest."

He continued, "I remember every detail—the rocker beside the fireplace, the round table in the front hall that held a candle that was never lit, the dinner bell at holidays that the older kids never let me ring. When I have children, I want to raise them in a house just like that."

We have all waited so long for Aaron to come back to us. Dare I hope that his memories of the house on Justamere Drive are bringing him home?

For his last birthday, I sent Aaron the dinner bell he never got to ring as a child. Someday, when he rings it to call his family to table, wherever I am, I will hear it. ❀