



Dennis Miller Bunker, *Roadside Cottage*, 1889

## The One

DEBORAH SALE-BUTLER

**I** BROKE UP WITH MY HOUSE. It was pretty much love at first sight. She wasn't the first house I was attracted to, but after weeks of looking, she was the one I couldn't get out of my mind.

She was an adorable cottage with a large bay window framing a view of the park with magnificent ash trees. Standing on her honey-oak floors and looking out that window, it hit me: this is my house.

She'd been a rental for twenty years and bore the scars of a few bad relationships. It would take time and patience to restore her

luster, but something told me it would be worth it.

After we got together, I realized that she hadn't just been abused but dangerously neglected. Her electrical panel was shot, and her plumbing was iffy—but really, how many women over fifty don't have a leak or two?

I stripped her layers of lazy, landlord-latex-white paint and covered her with a custom paint that felt like leather. She hadn't been loved like this in years, and she started to shine.

A designer landscape of flowering California-native plants and trees and a new coat of steel-

gray house paint transformed her from a cute girl to the best-looking babe on the block.

Now that she was accustomed to finer things, the outdated kitchen had to go. The remodel was painful—right down to the studs—but once she had the work done and outfitted with stainless-steel appliances and oodles of storage in her custom cabinets, she went from fairly functional to downright drool-worthy.

It was about that time that the realtors started paying attention. Full-color glossy postcards with photographs of high-end Los Angeles homes and their insanely high prices appeared in the mailbox at least once a week. I was not tempted by their insistence that buyers were dying to get their hands on my house. We were in it for the long haul. We were good for each other. I couldn't imagine living with anyone else—ever.

But of course, even the most magical relationships lose their sparkle over time. Passion fades and cohabitation is reduced to plain old habit.

I used to travel a lot, and when I felt a relationship turning, I'd take a long trip. It helped break the law of entropy—as an object in motion, I tended to stay in motion, and I could move on. I hadn't really traveled at all since I met her, and as an object at rest, I was staying very much at rest.

Then came the lockdown. For years my house was a great place to come home to, even a great place to work as long as I had some personal space from time to time. She was a cottage, after all, and pretty cozy. When there is no coming home and only being home for months on end, cozy becomes claustrophobic.

Before the COVID lockdown, I had the coffee shop and the grocery store to broaden my social life. During the lockdown, it was just us. All day. Every day.

I busied myself with COVID projects: ordering groceries online, organizing supplies, and half-hearted attempts at working out. Watching TV became binge-watching TV, and an occasional drink became a twice nightly affair.

My house was everything I thought I ever wanted, but the relationship was starting to feel unhealthy.

When restrictions eased, I took the time to step away from my house and really look at what we'd become. She was beautiful, but I realized I didn't want her anymore. It was time to let go.

The next time a real estate agent reached out, I didn't brush him off. I could leave with ten years' worth of equity, and someone new would surely fall for her right away. After all, it wasn't her, it was me.

I dressed her up, listed her, and waited. When three months went by and nobody claimed her, I began to doubt myself. Was I the only one who could love her quirks: the one bathroom, the garage that wasn't quite big enough to fit a car, and the homeless dude who slept in the middle of the park from time to time?

I remembered that she had been on the market for several months when we met. Was it possible that we were doomed to be together forever?

Every week I'd tidy her up for showings and wait. My heart sank as potential buyers passed through her and passed on her.

I was still determined to leave. I considered renting her out. But did I have the heart to return her to the endless parade of strangers treating her as a passing fling?

Then it happened. Someone else walked in and stood on those honey-oak floors, looked out the bay window, and said, "this is my house."

I felt relief but also a pang of remorse. I was a little jealous when he waxed rhapsodic about her lovely paint, stunning kitchen, and captivating landscape.

I shook it off. Our time together made us who we were. Someone else could finally love her the way that I did. She deserved that.

As for me, I did what I usually do after a breakup—moved as far away as possible. No accidental run-ins. No awkward encounters.

With the laws of entropy in play again, I kept rolling all the way to Oregon. I'm just renting now. I want to keep my options open.

I think of her when I see a particularly lovely tree. There are so many trees in Oregon, and the sight of them sends me back to the park across the street, and suddenly, I'm in two places at once. I know that her pull will weaken over time, and someday the memories will only make me smile. ❀