



A Place to Call Home

PATTY SOMLO

image info

THE STREET WAS SHADED BY ANCIENT trees, with cars parked on either side. I didn't know then that in April trees up and down the block would burst into bloom, followed by pink snow piling up on the sidewalk. We had eaten a late lunch in a cafe around the corner. Colorful abstract canvases, all for sale, decorated the walls. Standing on the main commercial street where the cafe sat, two doors down from the intersection, I tried to imagine living in the neighborhood, but at that point, I just couldn't.

As we got in the car, Richard agreed to drive around the neighborhood so we could check out the houses. From the video I'd received from the Chamber of Commerce, the area looked like one where we might want to live. That is, if Richard was offered the job.

My husband and I were in Portland because we could no longer afford the rent in San Francisco. I had lived in San Francisco off and on for a total of twenty years. Richard was a native. He'd lived outside the Bay Area only once, during a three-year stint in the military.

Southeast 33rd, the street we turned onto, was narrow, forcing Richard to pull over when an oncoming car needed to pass. The houses were old and mostly large—Victorians, bungalows, and a tall plain style I would later learn was a Four-Square, or old PDX, an acronym for Portland. Some houses were boldly colored and bright, boasting recent-looking paint jobs. Others had faded and peeling siding, which made them look morose. I'd always loved old houses and hoped, if Richard got the job and we moved to Oregon, that we could live in one. But buying a vintage home seemed a long way off.

Just past the corner, in front of a cute, blue-green house, I spotted a sign.

“There’s one for sale,” I shouted to Richard. He looked to where I was pointing, then stopped, backed up, and turned right onto a street even narrower than the one we’d turned off.

Teal in the body, with yellow fish-scale shingles running down the front, the place was more of a cottage than a house. Rounded windows on both sides with gingerbread molding framing the top gave the place a pudgy aspect—a perfect dwelling for a children’s book, I thought.

“There’s a flyer in the box,” I said. “Let’s see how much they’re asking.”

I opened the car door and got out.

Instead of a photo, the flyer, printed on pale-green textured paper, had a drawing of the house. BELMONT VICTORIAN ran across the top, and under that, Picture Yourself Here. I read that the house had original Douglas Fir floors but skipped the rest. I only cared about the price. As soon as I found it, I rushed back to the car.

“Wow,” Richard said, when I shoved the flyer in front of his face and told him to check out the price at the bottom.

We knew a house like this would sell for a million or more in San Francisco. Yet here sat this adorable Queen Anne Victorian in a price range Richard and I could afford.



I was fifty years old that summer, about to turn fifty-one in the fall. I had never owned a house before. Throughout my childhood and adolescence, I lived in nondescript apartments and duplexes on military bases dotted with tan and gray buildings that all looked alike. Sometimes my mother had to roll up the sides of the living room rug to fit in our latest home. Other times, the rug was too small. From place to place, we moved the Japanese and Hawaiian furniture my parents bought when we lived on the Island of Oahu, including the low, round table with Mt. Fujiyama carved in the center

and the large bamboo queen’s chair with its fan-like back. But in Germany, the apartment came furnished, including plain, uncomfortable chairs and beds in standard military shades of olive-green and funereal-gray.

After I left home, I considered every place I lived as temporary. I was devoted to moving on, ready to go at a moment’s notice. Settling down never occurred to me. Neither did owning a house.

The July afternoon we were looking at old houses in southeast Portland was a few weeks away from Richard’s and my second wedding anniversary. Until several years before Richard and I tied the knot in a simple civil ceremony at San Francisco City Hall, I had never wanted to be married. Neither had I yearned to have children, an opinion that never changed. Even on that summer afternoon, I wasn’t sure I wanted to buy a house.

Even so, I got out of the car and grabbed a few more flyers. I told myself I needed to show friends back home how impossibly inexpensive houses were in Portland.



Two days later, Richard accepted the job offer and was asked to start as soon as possible. I arranged for a moving company, ordered boxes, and started to pack. I also made flight reservations to Portland so we could search for an apartment.

“My husband and I are realtors,” the woman I’d called about a rental said, after letting me know the apartment was no longer available. “If we can help you in any way, give me a call.”

I thanked her but didn’t expect she could help, since we needed a place to rent, not to buy, in a few weeks’ time. She asked where we were staying while in Portland, and I gave her the name of the hotel.

A little after nine o’clock the following Saturday night, I was sitting on the king-sized bed in the Doubletree Hotel, reading want ads.

We’d found a place to rent that day, but I wasn’t thrilled about it. Until we’d finished filling out the rental application and driven to a restaurant for dinner, I hadn’t realized that I’d set my heart on living in an older place, the sort of charming flat I’d been able to rent in San Francisco before everything became too expensive.

Unfortunately, nothing in the rental listings sounded any better than the plain, modern townhouse we’d started the process to rent. To cheer myself up, I decided to look over the listings of houses for sale. Halfway down the first column, I was brought to a stop.

“Oh, my God,” I said.

“What?” Richard asked.

“That little Victorian. It’s still for sale. And guess who the realtor is?”

“Who?”

“Marianne Williamson. The woman who said I should call her if we needed anything.”

As if on cue, the phone rang then. I jogged across the room to the glass-topped desk and answered.

“This is Marianne Williamson,” the woman on the other end said.



Even as Richard and I walked to Starbucks from where we’d parked on Hawthorne Boulevard, I wasn’t sure why I had agreed to meet Marianne Williamson and her husband for coffee. It was a beautiful sunny morning, nothing like the unending rain everyone had warned us about whenever we said we were moving to Portland.

I spotted her across the cafe the moment we stepped in the door. She had short, bobbed champagne-colored hair and was wearing a navy-and-white-striped knit dress that ended at her ankles. Her appearance was as cheerful and friendly as she’d sounded on the phone. With a salt-and-pepper beard and dressed in a red plaid shirt, her husband, Ron, looked like he fit better

on a remote hiking trail than in Starbucks, waiting to meet potential real estate clients.

Richard brought me a house coffee, which I didn’t want since I’d already had several cups at breakfast in a funky restaurant nearby. I barely picked up my cup as Richard filled Marianne in on his new job and why we were moving to Portland. An awkward moment of silence followed, lasting several minutes too long. I was thinking about what to say when Richard asked, “Is that little Victorian still for sale?”



Richard and I were the only diners left in the restaurant on a busy corner, a block from the cottage. I kept worrying the server wanted us to leave so she could clean up and go enjoy the rest of her day. Richard had ordered a BLT with fries and was still eating. I had no appetite, so only asked for a drink. I foolishly sat sipping my Coke, adding more caffeine to my already buzzed brain.

“I don’t know,” I said, for maybe the fourth time. “It needs so much work.”

“We can fix it up,” Richard assured me, between bites. “It’ll eventually be nice.”

After learning that the Victorian was still for sale, Richard told Marianne and Ron that we wanted to take a look. As we walked around the house, up and down the narrow wooden stairs to the finished attic, then into the bathroom on the main floor, two guys who appeared to be a couple showed up. I overheard one mention to Ron that he worked for a high-tech company. Hearing this, I assumed they would buy the house and might even bid over the asking price, as tech workers with their inflated salaries were doing in San Francisco. I was not at all sure I wanted to buy a house, let alone this one, but the possibility of losing it brought urgency to my mind.

And there was that window nook. Up the narrow stairs was a small space underneath the sloping eave. *A perfect space to write*, ran

through my mind. The nook faced a window with a view out over old houses and tall trees. If I hadn't known I was in the middle of a city, not far from downtown, I would have assumed the view was in the countryside. The room was paneled in cream-colored beadboard, reminding me of charming bed and breakfasts where Richard and I had stayed in the California coastal towns of Mendocino and Pacific Grove. It was the easiest thing to picture myself sitting in that nook at a white wicker desk I didn't yet own early in the morning when I liked to write.

The house needed work—I could see that right off—though Ron assured us that the furnace and water heater were new and the ancient plumbing had been replaced with copper pipes. I couldn't begin to wrap my mind around taking on such a project, replacing funky, poorly-constructed kitchen cabinets, old stained sinks, crusted faucets, and a blue-and-yellow linoleum kitchen floor, or doing something with the rusted clawfoot tub. But I desperately wanted to start my day writing and gazing out the window at a view that would let me fantasize that I could be anywhere in the world.



Was it a mistake to have sold the house, I asked myself now, grief making my stomach ache. Twelve years had flown by while we embarked on one renovation project after another.

Movers were hauling the last boxes out to the van when I made my third trip around the house. The rooms were empty, the Douglas Fir floors with their golden patina dusty where the sofa and chairs had sat. Once the movers were done, we would be gone.

Steve and David, the contractors we initially hired to add a half-bath to the second floor, had long ago become friends. I'd grown accustomed to David's calls to me at work, when he would ask, "Do you want the good news or the bad news first?" I always opted for the bad.

Like every old house, the cottage contained unpleasant secrets. At one point, David delivered the news that while replacing a light fixture in the living room, part of the ceiling collapsed. It was, David explained to me over the phone, horsehair, the material originally used in the century-old house for insulation. Another time I learned that there was evidence of a previous fire that had charred an area above the attic and under the roof. Much later, we discovered that rats had invaded the walls, coming through a hole left behind when a no longer useful brick chimney had been removed.

Over the years, we remodeled the kitchen, retaining the Victorian charm with a reproduction stove that a guy—who looked right out of the hollows in Appalachia—delivered and installed. Hideous tan carpeting was ripped from the living room and the original Douglas Fir floor refinished. The main bathroom off the kitchen, with its reglazed and painted clawfoot tub, was so charming; I liked to stand at the door looking in and admiring it, reminding myself this lovely place was my home.

Steve and David even refinished the basement, a formerly dark, creepy space with a too-low ceiling. Steve constructed beautiful new steps to the dining room, then created an entire living space below, with a cozy den containing built-in bookshelves and a Victorian-style, white porcelain gas stove, a bathroom, and a laundry room. Except for the months and months when major work was being done, living in the house had been fun.

During the years we lived in the cottage that we dubbed the Little Yamhill House—Yamhill being the street where the house was located—I had changed. For decades, in one haphazard, temporary space after another, my life mostly took place away from home. San Francisco was such an alluring city, all I needed to do was walk up and down the steep streets

where views of the Pacific, San Francisco Bay, and wildly colored Victorians awaited me. I planned getaways to Yosemite National Park and the Island of Kauai, fantasizing about the fun I would have. Home was a place to sleep, shower, and dress, but not much more. Home was the place I yearned to escape.

As I prepared to leave the Little Yamhill House for the last time, I wondered if I would miss the place. I had been a writer for decades and now had gotten the chance to live in a perfect writer's house. Walking into each of the three bathrooms, two of which we'd added, I felt like a person standing outside herself. The house was so adorable, and I had helped bring out its original charm hidden beneath cheap, tasteless remodeling. I felt as I guessed a mother might after raising a daughter and watching her leave home—a sense of accomplishment coupled with regret, joy, and sorrow. But had I actually made a home?

Not initially, as others had predicted, but sometime in the latter half of the twelve years we lived in Portland, the novelty wore thin. Weekend after weekend, we sat inside our lovely house, listening to rain pelt the old, small-paned windows. We went out to dinner on Friday nights, our favorite places cozy with fires burning in corner grates. That too got old. I desperately craved sun, long walks, and not having to carry an umbrella.

The recession, bringing house prices down, made it possible for us to return to northern California. We bought a house north of San Francisco in Sonoma County, an area we loved to visit on weekends before moving to Oregon.



As Richard pulled away from the curb, easing down the narrow, tree-shrouded street, I cried. When we reached the corner, I turned back around. Taking a last look at what was no longer our house, I remembered the research I'd done

soon after we arrived. The City of Portland had included our cottage in its survey of historical buildings. The Little Yamhill House had earned a ten, the highest rating for original exterior features.

Along with other houses in the neighborhood and businesses on the main commercial street, Belmont, the cottage was built sometime after Portland's downtown. Trolley cars that could transport workers to their jobs made the neighborhood possible. To lure homeowners east across the Willamette River to what was essentially a suburb, the developer claimed in ads that the neighborhood on the west side was sunnier than downtown. To emphasize the point, the area was named Sunnyside.

Several weeks after we settled into the house, a group of our neighbors and an outside nonprofit decided to reclaim the intersection one house down where Yamhill Street joined S.E. 33rd. The idea behind the reclaiming was that people, not cars, had the right to inhabit their streets. A bright orange and yellow sunflower was painted on the asphalt in the center of the intersection with the name Sunnyside Piazza emblazoned across the top. At some point every summer after, the Piazza and adjoining streets were closed to cars while people gathered in the intersection to repaint the sunflower and party.



The northern California house we bought was also old, and like the Little Yamhill House needed a great deal of work. Clad in soot-darkened white shingles, with moldy metal awnings shading the back and front, the house had been owned by the same woman and her husband since it was new in 1949. The contractor we hired knew that when the ranch-style houses in the neighborhood were built in the late forties and early fifties, they came with beautiful oak floors installed. Ours, we learned once the hideous wall-to-wall carpeting

was removed, were in nearly perfect condition, having been hidden for sixty years.

As with our previous house, we had one remodeling project after the other done, many uninteresting but necessary, such as replacing the furnace and ducts, water heater, washing machine and dishwasher, leaking toilet, and stained and curled vinyl floors, windows, and even the original clay sewer pipe running out to the street. We didn't name this house, and the place failed to inspire romantic feelings, as the Victorian did.

In its own way, each house resembled a love relationship. Being my first, the Little Yamhill House was foolish and passionate. The current house in the beautiful northern California wine country is practical, having an efficient kitchen—a modern triangular design where the

refrigerator, range, and sink are conveniently situated to minimize steps. We have a driveway and spacious two-car garage, keeping us from needing to search for parking on a crowded urban street or double-park in front of the house to unload groceries.

And yet, what my current and former houses share has been my lingering confusion about home.

For years before I met my husband, I barely owned a stick of furniture, dishes, or pots and pans. I shared apartments and houses with friends, drinking from borrowed cups, and cooking from their woks and saucepans. At the time, I didn't consider my lifestyle strange or realize I might be mimicking what I'd learned as a child. It never occurred to me that even

after years on my own, I still expected my mother to walk in the door and announce that my father had gotten orders, and in a few weeks' time, we'd be moving far away. Decades after those moves, as I filled cardboard boxes in the Little Yamhill House kitchen, I still wrapped and stacked plates and bowls exactly as I'd learned to do with my mother's good set of Noritake china.

Even as I have grown to love my house

with its large windows on all sides that let in the cheerful California sunlight, I daydream about moving. From time to time, I click through property listings in places as diverse as St. George, Utah; Albuquerque, New Mexico; Lihue, Kauai; and Savannah, Georgia. I tell myself the exercise is a way to ease boredom and . . . because I love houses. It's also a way to move on even while I keep living in what likely will turn out to be my permanent home. ❀

Houses in the United States that are described as Victorian reflect building styles that rose in popularity in Great Britain during the reign of Queen Victoria in the nineteenth century. In general, Victorian houses bear many intricate details and ornate embellishments, and this is due to increased interest on the part of the British toward Italianate and Greek Revival styles. Victorians can be found in all parts of the US, but they are most highly concentrated in two cities: San Francisco, California, and Louisville, Kentucky.



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