House Magic

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"Downsizing?" asked the stylishly dressed shop owner when I said we'd bought a house just outside her town. I winced at the assumption, growing, I assume, from the gray of the roots I'd neglected to touch up in all the hubbub of the move.

Just as it is considered unseemly for a woman like me, in her middle years, to sport a miniskirt, I suppose that buying a house twice the size of the old one and with nearly four times as many bathrooms, though my sons and their meticulous grooming needs have long since vanished, might be viewed by some as excessive, if not ridiculous. Why would two people need all that space?

My friend Barb, roughly my age, enthused about her growing urge to shed things—clothes, shoes, knickknacks, books—at this time in her life. *Uh-huh, uh-huh*, I nodded, but I wasn't there. Maybe in my seventies or eighties I would be. But right then I was craving more, shameful as that might be. More space, more land, more time, more sets of dishes and beautiful tablecloths for the dinner parties and baby showers and book groups and garden parties I wanted to host for the more friends I wanted to welcome to my new home. Was I spinning in some death-denying frenzy of consumerism? Were my husband and I reverting to some latterday yuppiedom with our 3,300-square-foot home on six acres, our 3.5 bathrooms, and the bright open spaces we are filling with new furniture? Possibly. But the feeling was more like the joy the bud on a crabapple tree might feel when, after enduring the snows and subzero temperatures of February and the capricious moods of March and April, the warm sunlight of May makes it swell, and it surprises itself by bursting into flower.

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There was nothing wrong with the old house. Not unless you counted the single, doll-sized bathroom, the eighteen inches of kitchen counter space, the lack of closets, the ancient wiring, the single electrical outlet in each room. Unless you considered its position between a busy bed-and-breakfast and a rental house overflowing with college students and their late-night parties. Not to mention the house's location on the town's

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Main Street, which meant that nearly every conversation inside the house was punctuated by the percussion of traffic and the pounding bass of hip-hop and country and western throbbing through the window glass.

What it lacked in amenities and quiet, however, was somewhat ameliorated by what my mother would call charm. It was a Victorian cottage with bay windows in the living and dining rooms. The two tiny bedrooms on the second floor had dormer ceilings, giving the rooms a cozy attic feel. Bruce and I had done our best to highlight these attributes by mending peeling plaster, painting, and wallpapering. Best of all was the secret garden we had created in the small backyard over the sixteen years we lived there by planting a hedge of arborvitae that now towers over the borders and beds we added summer by summer.

The August we bought that first house, our neighbor Martha proposed a housewarming/gardening party. Late summer being a good time to divide perennials, she invited our friends to bring their surplus plants and gardening tools and help us put in our first garden, something we had never bothered with as renters. We removed a good-sized section of sod from the area in back of the house and from one large corner and planted white lion daffodil bulbs from Kath, rhizomes of the frilly purple and peach iris that Ellen's aunt had passed on to her, orange and yellow day lilies, and Shasta daisies whose exuberant blooms gave our new border the look of a real garden with instant flowers.

The next summer we dug up a round island section in the middle of the yard where I put in an herb garden. That winter I had been building a compost pile behind the detached garage, and I felt like quite the garden goddess shoveling the gorgeous black soil our garbage and lawn clippings had become onto the new plot. I wasn't in the habit of using fresh herbs, except parsley, in my cooking, but I liked the idea of an herb garden—less utilitarian than a vegetable garden and more sensually pleasing, but still potentially useful. I admit that that first year I didn't use much—some sage, a pinch of parsley or oregano here and there. I was more enamored of rubbing a lemongrass leaf between my fingers for a heavenly sniff or waving my hand through the mint so it would breathe its cool, fresh scent into a sticky summer night. Eventually, though, I learned the delights of going out in my bare feet, glass of wine in hand, to snip a bit from this or that to add to a salad, and after I began making pesto, I knew I could never again live without my own pots of basil and would fight the Japanese beetles tooth and nail for them.

Another summer, mourning the death of my friend Sandra, who had transformed many country acres into an Eden of riotously blooming beds, I decided to dig up more yard at the back of the house to put in a Sandra garden in her favorite colors—pink and purple—bleeding heart dangling its fuchsia lockets, frothy violet wands of the butterfly bush, the ruby-spotted throats of foxgloves, and stargazer lilies whose faces always seemed to be watching for her to descend and admire them.

Even our backyard refuge, however, was invaded by the noisy distractions of Main Street and our neighbors. If weeding needed doing, and it always did, I wanted it to be a meditative experience—just me and the warm green scent of growing things and the chickadees' *hi, sweetie!* and a honeybee's low hum the only sounds. If I were a truly meditative type, I probably would have been able to ignore the slamming of car doors at the B&B or the loud yacking on cell phones and music of the young women and their guy friends next door. I would have breathed in the exhaust fumes from the cars zooming by out front and breathed them out and focused again on the exotic perfume of the hyacinth nearer my nose. But that level of meditative acumen was beyond me.

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When my parents were not much younger than I am now, my father quit his job to start his own lamp business, supplying lamps wholesale to small furniture dealerships in towns within a one-hundred-mile radius of Omaha. He installed a CB in his van and gave himself the handle Lamp Man. Managers and sales staff liked to see Bill Mickel coming because he always had a story or two to offer along with the new lines in lamp merchandise. They would invariably buy at least a few lamps even if they hadn't sold the last ones he'd brought and business wasn't so hot. Nobody wanted to miss a future visit from the Lamp Man.

Dad's business thrived, and at fifty, he loved being his own boss for the first time. Now, Mom figured, it was time to pursue her dream. Ever since her daughters were tots, my mother's favorite family outing had been driving around Omaha looking at houses for sale and, if she could get my father to stop, visiting the open houses. Generally, these houses were not much larger or opulent than ours, but their differences from ours fueled her imagination. Once inside, my sisters and I would pick out "our" rooms, imagine ourselves in them, and picture the very different girls we would become in these new spaces. Dreaming of canopy beds in one, of rustic, cowgirl bunkbeds in another. Mom would walk slowly through the house with a dreamy expression on her face, no doubt scheming where wallpaper and a splash of color might wake up a dead-looking back room or how Dad could finish the basement to add a rec room.

We had owned a series of houses whose rooms she had transformed to suit her, whose basements Dad had Sheetrocked and carpeted, whose windows she had framed with drapes and cafe curtains she sewed at her old Singer. Rooms were Mom's canvasses, and all decisions concerning decor were her domain.

She had always coveted a brick cottage in the Country Club area of town. Despite its exalted-sounding name, most of the houses in the neighborhood were modest-sized, older brick and stone homes. Mature oaks and maples grew in the front yards, branches arching over the street to form canopies. All our parents' previous houses had been either brand new or built within my lifetime. Suburban living had been Mom's concession to making sure we went to excellent schools and lived in the safest neighborhoods. Once we had all moved out, though, and Dad was doing well in his new endeavor, she decided to find the house she had always dreamed of. And she did. Smaller but more expensive than their present home, the brick cottage on Country Club Drive was big on old-fashioned personality. Nevertheless, there were plenty of opportunities for adding her own touches: lavender-sprigged wallpaper for the long dormer bedroom in the former attic, new carpet and paint in the living and dining rooms, fresh linoleum for the kitchen.

The backyard was tiered and already blossoming on every level when they moved in. Outside the kitchen door at the side of the house was a brick patio backed by a redwood privacy fence and flanked by lilac bushes and tall pines. She and Dad retreated there every evening after dinner that first summer to smoke cigarettes, laugh at the squirrels' antics, and talk about their days. I wonder if it was there that Dad told Mom two years later that he had been diagnosed with cardiomyopathy, that the doctor had told him he would have to quit working years before he had saved enough to retire. Was it there they made the devastating decision to sell his business and the house and move into a double-wide trailer?

If only, my sisters and I said to each other over and over on the phone during the next few years. If only Mom and Dad had been content to stay in the house with the low mortgage payments, the house that was almost paid off. *If only* they had started to save money more seriously sooner. *If only* Dad hadn't gotten sick before they could afford to retire.

The move from Country Club Drive to Peaceful Valley Mobile Home Court was a real comedown for my mother. Peaceful Valley was the nicest court of its kind in Omaha, featuring spacious lawns and trees as tall as the ones she'd left behind. Their double-wide was brand new, and they had a large hexagonal deck built onto the front that Mom adorned with pots of pink geraniums. It wasn't a bad place to live. The neighbors were friendly and nothing like the stereotypes. No unshaven men slumped on their front steps, drinking beer in wifebeater undershirts. No Jerry Springer-style altercations going on in front yards. And the trailer (a word we weren't allowed to use in Mom's presence) was cute and cozy. But she never even considered wallpapering or painting. That's how I knew that this place would never be her home.

No one said *if only* to Mom, though. And she never said it, either.

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When Bruce and I landed academic jobs at the same small state university in northcentral Pennsylvania, two of our new colleagues found us a house to rent, and we rented it sight unseen. We drove into town on a scorching day in early August and found our new home on Main Street. It was clean and freshly whitewashed inside, and it included one of the features my mother considered essential in any home—a kitchen with eating space. It had no fireplace, it was tiny, and although we had moved from a metropolitan area of over three million people to a town of three thousand, it was the noisiest house we ever lived in.

But in those early years we were too busy settling into our new careers and raising teenage sons to consider another move. Our third summer there, however, when our landlords put the house up for sale, Bruce and I both had mono. Neither of us could fathom finding a house and moving, so with mixed feelings, we bought the house. But this house, the first we bought rather than rented, never felt like our true home.

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Bruce had lived his first nine years with his parents and younger brother in a small "apartment" in the house his grandparents rented in Fargo. His family's space consisted of a living room/kitchenette and a small bedroom. Bruce and his brother slept on the fold-out sofa in the living room. The family shared one bathroom with Bruce's grandparents, an aunt, and an uncle. Eight people to one poor, overworked toilet.

The two-bedroom bungalow his parents later bought must have seemed palatial. Now he and his brother shared a real bedroom, even if it was only large enough for bunkbeds and one bureau apiece. At least there were only four people sharing the closet-sized bathroom jammed between the bedrooms. And his mom now had a full-sized kitchen for whipping up new exotic versions of "hot dish"—including a daring one made with chow mein noodles—and jello salads.

Unlike my parents, Bruce's were content to stay in that home until they died, about a year apart from one another. They could have afforded to move to a larger, more attractive house at some point, but that wasn't a priority, despite the fact that they were both homebodies. It was hard for me to understand. The cavelike living room received almost no sunlight, and the flooring was a threadbare avocado carpet from the sixties. The only piece of furniture that had been purchased more recently was Bruce's father's monster-sized recliner. The walls were white, as they had always been. There were no attempts at decor. Decorative items received as gifts simply accumulated on end tables, and new photos were added to walls with what appeared to be little thought about arrangement. But they were comfortable. And who was I, whose parents had to move into a trailer, to criticize—even in my mind—their lack of interest in creating a lovely home?

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I knew what it was like to live in an unlovely home. When my sons were four, I divorced their father and moved with the boys out of the comfortable, old, two-story house we'd bought just two years before and into a rented duplex. I don't remember too much about it except that it had white walls and a dark brown carpet. I had taken some of the furniture from our house—the taxi cab-yellow table and benches from the breakfast nook that had been cute there but was sadly out of place in the dining area, a threadbare couch and chair, and the boys' beds and dresser. Someone gave me a mattress and box spring that I put on the floor in my bedroom. Between my clerical job and minuscule child support, we lived slightly below the poverty level, but I still craved pretty things surrounding us. By the time I'd bought some lace curtains at a flea market and a peach-colored satin comforter for my bed and tacked up some Gauguin posters, though, I had pretty much exhausted my decorating "budget."

When the boys were babies and I was a stay-at-home mom, I had become interested in growing houseplants. It was a hobby that didn't require that

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I go anywhere or get a babysitter, and my green friends required little from me besides regular watering and small doses of admiration. I had left the surviving plants from those days in the house with my ex-husband. I hadn't even considered taking them and couldn't have said why not. Nothing grew in our duplex unless you counted the shoots sprouting from some rotting potatoes in a cupboard. But that Christmas my sister gave me a hanging philodendron, a plant that even the brownest thumb could keep alive. I took it home and hung it from a hook already screwed into the living room ceiling but never watered it. Not once. I just had no desire to keep it alive. It was all I could do during that long Nebraska winter—with a car that wouldn't start and high heat bills and first the boys being sick and then me and then the boys again—to keep us alive.

I kept the house relatively clean and all of us in clean clothes, even though we had no dryer so I had to hang the clothes on lines in the basement. Some mornings I would take down my sons' damp underwear and iron it dry. I didn't have the energy—physical or psychic—for nesting. My home was not a place I relished living in. Nor did I spare another thought toward making it a lovely space. It had become a space for enduring.

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Once when I was helping a friend pack for a move, she remarked that everyone is either a farmer or a hunter-gatherer. A farmer puts down roots, accumulates things, finds bliss in creating a home. A hunter-gatherer, on the other hand, carries home with him or herself; home is more an interior space that can be recreated in the outer world in a variety of places. Hunter-gatherers travel light through life and relish that lightness. Sometimes I have been certain that I am a hunter-gatherer at heart who, because of the circumstances of marriage and motherhood, was living the life of a farmer. Sometimes I have believed that I am my mother's daughter—a born and bred farmer. Then I have shuddered to think how sadly her farmer aspirations ended.

Was that why I had been so reluctant, even with a permanent job, to buy a house that I would love rather than one that would do? Did I fear that my parents' fate would be ours? We lived in one of the world's best-kept secrets of a gorgeous area. Wooded hills and streams abounded. Yet we didn't see them out our window. Not a single vista—north, south, east, or west. Our area offered us few of the amenities we were used to in city living—bookstores, ethnic restaurants, shopping, art films. Given that, I knew that the sensible thing would be to live in a house embraced by trees, to revel in the wild spaces. But moving would involve a sizable investment in time and money—time to find such a place and money to buy it. And what if something went wrong? What if one of us got sick and couldn't work anymore?

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In the last three years of Dad's life, I visited them as often as time and my budget would allow—three or four times a year—earning the nickname "the homing pigeon." After Dad's death Mom's emphysema got worse, and she moved from apartment to apartment, always seeking a place with fewer stairs, less mold to exacerbate her condition, and a way to get outside without walking down long corridors, which grew harder and harder as her breath grew shorter. Her quest to find the right apartment reminded me of her earlier searches for the perfect house, except now the amenities had less to do with aesthetics than with the requirements of her declining body. More than once Bruce and I flew across the country to help in these moves, and it was easy to begin feeling that life in general was on the decline.

Especially because his parents, too, were now grappling with serious illnesses—his father with lung cancer, his mother with leukemia. All three of our surviving parents died within a little over a year. Also, within that year, my sister's husband died in a car accident. Grief was the key in which the song of our life seemed written. Grief was the verse and grief the chorus. The only consolation was that once everyone was buried, we could stop flying across the country every time the phone rang. Still, the world beyond our four walls felt threatening. Our tiny home was our one refuge, even if it was an imperfect one. I lit a candle when I cooked soups for us that cold, wet spring, and we lit tapers at the table each evening. On those evenings we often raised a wine glass to our deceased parents, reminiscing about Dad spending his last Christmas at our house, snoozing in an easy chair after dinner with their Boston terrier Julie and our shih tzu Brigit sharing his lap. And about the Christmas Bruce's visiting parents had shocked Bruce and delighted me by requesting my beef stroganoff for dinner rather than the traditional turkey.

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The morning after we moved into the new house, and for many mornings afterward, I felt the giggly anticipation of a little girl on Christmas morning descending the open staircase. The beautiful kitchen with hardwood floors and a view of the woods—and, occasionally, a view of a very tall black bear guzzling seed from our birdfeeder—awaited me. I felt like I was playing house, pretending to be a grown-up as I measured decaf into the coffee maker and sat for a few moments while it brewed to see which birds would visit the feeder.

For there were new birds here—tufted titmice and nuthatches and even a rose-breasted grosbeak whose crimson splotch against its snowy breast made me gasp each time the bird swooped into view. I don't know if the bird would have startled me that much if we hadn't had so much blood and death so recently. We also had a pair of cardinals—Mom's favorite birds. I liked to think of them as her minions, here to keep an eye on me.

My love for our new place didn't dissipate, even after several years and even as I felt less and less like Goldilocks trespassing in an enchanted space, although I did sometimes feel that living in this house was trespassing in the bear's territory. Part of the excitement in the first year was that these rooms were still evolving as we added art to their walls or as I sewed toss pillows for the wicker furniture in the sunroom. Part of it was that each day there was some new surprise: pussy willows at the far edge of the property; a chipmunk sipping from the tiny rectangular birdbath I'd set on the deck railing; a bobcat slinking through the back yard one noon, no doubt hunting for chipmunks, while I was fixing my lunch. But another part of it was the sense of hope I was feeling, that lifting of the heart that comes when I sing Christmas carols.

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An artist friend, famous for the fanciful birds that appear in her paintings and the fabrics she designs, suggested that I may be neither hunter-gatherer nor farmer. *Maybe you're really a bird.* I had been relating how my love of travel and adventure now was at least equally balanced by my attachment to home. "You go away—you migrate—and then," she said, "you return to your nest. It doesn't have to be either/or."

She was right, of course. What could be simpler? My forays into the world—whether near or far—became at least partly focused on the return, on what I could bring back to weave into our nest. On a day trip to an antique shop in upstate New York, I fell in love with an old wooden basket with a heart more or less gouged out of the handle. Such was our love of the woods at our new place that Bruce and I found our hearts widening to harbor a greater regard for the environment in general. We vowed to use only cloth napkins, a tiny resolution, to be sure, but as poets we believe in the power of small acts. The wooden basket would hold our collection of cloth napkins on the kitchen counter, making beauty of necessity.

Even trips to the quaint main street of our new town—one town away from our university jobs—yielded opportunities for weaving myself more intimately into the fabric of our home. The local quilt shop carried an assortment of flannels in muted winter hues, soft as the nightgowns our grandmother sewed for my sisters and me when we still huddled beneath our mother's wings. After discovering them I practically flew home to begin piecing the cardinals, chickadees, pine cones, winterberries, and pine boughs into quilted Christmas stockings to hang on the mantle our first Christmas.

Returning home with such purchases, I felt like a suitor bestowing gifts on my beloved. Bruce was as besotted with the house as I was and was at least as enthusiastic in discovering items to make our home comfortably and beautifully ours.

One day he came home, supposedly from running errands, and couldn't wait to take me down to a shop where he'd found an enormous old brass kettle, exquisitely dented, that would make the perfect holder for fireplace wood.

Before buying the house, I considered most decisions about decor to be my provenance. Bruce and I had made joint decisions about wall color and carpeting, but I appropriated most of the other decisions, including window treatments and what went on the walls. And the dolls from my collection infiltrated the living room and dining room even when poor Bruce protested. Bruce and I each had a study whose decor was no one's business but our own, but the rest of the house looked more like a collaboration between my mother and me than between Bruce and me. Once Bruce commented that the house was really mine, not his. When I protested, he said, "Look around. Which room is mine? All the pictures on the walls are yours. Every knickknack on every table and shelf is yours." I could have pointed out that he didn't own any decorative chotchkes, but I had to admit that, in spirit, he was right.

When I looked around our new house, however, every room—except our studies and my doll room—held meaningful items for both of us. Our walls exhibited photographs from our trip to Ireland as well as artwork bought on other trips taken together. It wasn't so much that I suddenly became a fairer person as that we had so much fun creating this home together. Maybe it took me till midlife to be ready to share the making of a home. Or maybe it was the house's magic that turned us into partners in a brand-new way.

Although larger in scale, our house felt like a honeymoon cottage, a place where we wove our lives together in new ways. In midlife our life was rich again in firsts—first snowfall viewed through the living room window, first red-bellied sapsucker either of us had ever seen, first fire in our fireplace, first time we had ever planted roses, first time we had truly lived together. However, a certain trepidation haunted us. I had eschewed Bruce's "whammy theory" all the years I'd known him. It went like this: if you said, "It looks like it's going to be a beautiful day for our hike," you'd just whammied the hike and the day. By the time you'd gotten a mile out on the trail, rain would come pouring from the heavens that frown on the hubris of humans. I knew that things couldn't stay as juicy and exciting as they felt at that moment—either with the house or in our lives. Bad things would happen again, even in this house. Nevertheless, it would have been an affront to whatever grace had found us here together not to celebrate. So I shouted my joy and, like the Little Prince, said, "Let the tigers come with their claws."

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One morning just a few days after we had moved into our new home, I had a strong sense of déjà vu as I sat in the kitchen, eating breakfast and watching the chickadees, titmice, and cardinals weave themselves like streamers back and forth between the bird feeders in the woods behind the house and nearby, snow-lined branches. I ran upstairs to find the reproduction of a painting I remembered staring at in a book of postcards from the National Museum of Women in the Arts. *Breakfast of the Birds*, by Gabriele Munter, shows a woman from the back, sitting at her breakfast table, watching the birds. The black branches, patches of blue sky, and the gold and red and gray birds outlined in black create a stained-glass window. Indeed, her kitchen is a chapel, and the white-clothed table before her, with its half loaf of bread on one side and its coffee pot, milk pitcher, and white plate on the other, is her altar. Because the woman's chin-length auburn hair echoes my mother's and because she is wearing a black turtleneck sweater—always my mother's garment of choice—I had thought I was drawn to the painting because it made me feel close to her. And it did. But now I realized that I was also the woman in this painting, and those birds were the ones I was watching. And that through the years that I had been meditating on this painting, I had been imagining this home and this moment.

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Ironically, we hadn't truly realized what we were doing by buying this house until we had gone through with it, hadn't realized that we had taken a vow to live here long-term—as in for the rest of our days, among the hills and trees of northern Pennsylvania—and to make this place our home—not just continue to live in the area where we'd gotten jobs, as we had been for seventeen years. One night after taking out the garbage, which involved a long trek down the steep driveway, Bruce came back inside, shaking the snow from his parka, and said, "God has never spoken to me anyplace except northern Minnesota as he does to me here." This from a man who long ago turned away from his Lutheran upbringing and rarely referred to a higher being. I knew what he meant. Perhaps for both of us there was an ancient memory of home calling more deeply to us than the land of our nativities.

A Swede and a Norwegian, our inner geographies must have been populated by trees like the upstanding citizens on the hill our living room looked out on. The first time the realtor brought us to tour the house, I felt I was coming home as we drove beside the birches I have always associated with the northlands, even though I have never visited my ancestral home. I especially loved the lithe birches that stood like shy, long-legged ballerinas at the edge of the woods, about to pirouette into the cover of the other trees, or perhaps like ancestors bidding us to enter. Birches' black-etched white bark peeled back to expose the deeper, older layers—layers like the ones that called me home, here in northern Pennsylvania, a place no one else in my family had ever lived. No one but the birches and the birds.

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The previous January when Bruce had suggested looking at houses to shake off the post-Christmas blues, I'd been ready. He'd seen a house advertised that looked interesting, and we called the realtor who'd listed it. She took us to see the empty house that day, showed us around, and registered our mild disappointment. Despite the house's generous size, most of the rooms seemed cramped and dark. The realtor wanted to show us another house she was certain we'd like better. And she brought us to this house. The welcoming foyer with its hardwood floors and the way the house opened out in all directions from it drew us in immediately. The fireplace in the family room was surrounded by white parquet and dentil molding. The walls were a neutral eggshell, except for the family and dining rooms that were papered, something we could redo or remove later. Yes, before even seeing the second floor, we were planning how to make this house our home. Bruce pointed out that the long family room was large enough to be both a sitting room and a display area for my doll collection. A doll room—what a notion! It seemed extremely decadent and, therefore, utterly delicious. Then there was the homey kitchen whose glass-doored cupboards and tiled counter connected it to the breakfast nook. But the pièce de résistance was the sunroom—a tiled room that ran the width of the house on one end with floor to ceiling windows on two sides and a view of the woods. Think of the plants we could have! I could grow orchids. Maybe in such a room I could nurture a whole menagerie of them. What a leap from the divorced mother who couldn't bring herself to care for a single plant.

The house tour went on like this, with Bruce and me whispering gleefully as the realtor discretely left us behind in each room. I wanted it now, today. I didn't want to leave at all, even if the present owners were still occupying the premises. Bruce was able to summon a bit more restraint, asking our realtor if she had other houses she could show us, but as far as I was concerned, there were no other houses.

Once in our own car, I burst with joy over The House as I would call it from then on. Bruce said that we couldn't just see two homes, but I could tell his mind, too, was racing with possibilities. After several minutes of silence on the drive home, he asked, "If we bought that house, do you think I could have that main floor bedroom for my study?" He was a goner. But we dutifully looked at a few more houses that week, admitting to their many fine points, knowing that none compared with The House and hoping it wouldn't be snatched up before we could reach a decision.

Even as we signed the papers to make our offer, though, I could not believe that the house could be ours. Waves of anxiety washed over me as I wondered what madness had made us think we could live there. Even though we had done the math and knew we could afford it, I couldn't imagine that we could own this house and its wooded acres. I mean, if we could, why had we lived for so long in such an unsatisfying situation?

I suppose there are lots of possible explanations. We were busy. We thought if we lived cheaply enough, we could take more time off work to write. For years we were consumed by the need to visit ailing and then dying parents. Our focus was on holding on, making do, not on living well. But I think the real reason was fear. This house would have been beyond the reach of either set of our parents. What made us think we could have it? And we were used to thinking of ourselves as poor. For me, it had begun during my years as a single parent. For us, it had been a fact of life through the years when we took turns earning graduate degrees while raising two children. Then, once we were both employed, we spent years digging out of the debt accrued during those years. Going through with this house purchase was more than buying a house. It was realizing that we had entered a new stage of life that was equal parts scary and exciting. We were no longer crouching in a corner, hoping fate would pass us by and there would be no more major losses for awhile. As though the house and the surrounding woods had cast a spell on us, we were allowing ourselves to hope and dream and—for the first time in a long time—truly live.

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Bruce called the nearly wall-sized picture window in our living room The Magic Window. On weekend mornings we'd sip our coffee before it and watch whatever was going on outside. For, as Bruce once proclaimed in ungrammatical glee, "there is never not a good time to look out this window." In spring the tulip tree in our front yard was a magenta and pink cloud in a cerulean sky. Autumn turned the mountains we looked upon into a harlequin's garment of garnet, gold, and green. And then there were always the parades and dramas of clouds—mares' tails, feather trails, and cumulus pillows. On late winter afternoons, we sipped our martinis before the fire, watching it snow, as though the doily-sized flakes' slow descent was an exquisite ballet performed for us alone.

In the next five years, I added supposedly deer-resistant perennials to the already established borders and flower beds, yet when I saw them bending to nibble the leaves and buds, like graceful shadows in the twilight, I couldn't resent their intrusion. I was as delighted to have the deer as the flowers. Bruce grew a pumpkin patch at the base of the yard just for fun. The morning glory seeds he planted in memory of his grandfather, who had grown the Heavenly Blues each year of Bruce's childhood, sent vines up the hokey, rusty windmill at the top of the driveway that I considered an eyesore and had suggested we dump. But Bruce had been so generous about the doll room, I didn't press the issue. Despite warnings against keeping up our bird and suet feeders after winter, we couldn't bear to lose the birds and the way they created patterns more stunning than stained glass in our kitchen window. When a bear kept tearing down the feeders, Bruce rigged up a wire between two tall beech trees for the feeder and attached a hook to a long pole for taking it down to refill, hoping the trees were too skinny for the enormous black bear to climb. The next morning during breakfast, the bear appeared on our deck, gazing imploringly through the window as if to say, "Excuse me, did someone forget to feed the bear?" We would have fed the bears too if we'd been allowed to. But we'd been warned that a bear who is too comfortable around humans could become a "nuisance bear" and end up being shot if it endangered pets or people. Our cat Billy Bob—named partly after my father and partly after the dead bobcat whose body we'd found lounging in a tree—came to us as a stray at the end of our first year in the house. A butterscotch tiger, he was the most affectionate cat we'd ever known, but when a bear ambled through the bushes toward our deck one afternoon, Billy Bob chased him off, following him into the woods for good measure. I was certain that was the end of Billy Bob, but he returned, his tail twitching in triumph, and we marveled at his amazing survival.

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But magic is a temporary thing. After five years in The House, Bruce was diagnosed with bladder cancer. Neither chemotherapy nor surgery to remove the bladder stopped the cancer's spread, and after six months and several hospitalizations, we decided on Hospice Care. More than anything, Bruce wanted to come home, and more than anything—except a miracle in which the cancer suddenly disappeared—I wanted him home, even if he lived only a few more days, as seemed likely.

The late November day I drove him home, it began snowing outside. Our friend Tom met us at home to help me get Bruce inside since he was wobbly on his feet. Our friend Lilace had arrived before we did to put her son's Spiderman sheets on the hospital bed I'd had installed in the living room. Once we were alone, Bruce asked me to climb up into the narrow bed with him. We lay there, watching the snow fall through The Magic Window—the first snow of the season, the last snow of his life. Bruce soon drifted into sleep, but I stayed awake, feeling enormously grateful to be there with him in the home we loved, even though home had shrunk now to the reach of one another's arms.

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In the weeks following Bruce's death, well-meaning friends and relatives asked if I might move to a smaller place, perhaps an apartment—*not right now, of course*, they'd rush to add, *but in a year or so*. If this house had seemed roomy for two people, I suppose it seemed ridiculous for just one. *No!* my heart screamed. Losing the house would be another death. One friend made me promise to sleep with a phone beside my bed, *just in case*, but I kept forgetting to put one on the bedside table. Although Bruce's arms no longer held me through the night, I felt safe and warm there. On the worst nights, when I wandered the rooms howling like a grieving ghost, I'd eventually succumb to the bed's familiar comfort where Brigit and Billy Bob joined me as they always had—their nightly presence the reason we'd bought a king-sized bed—grateful for the walls that embraced my sleep.

One February morning while talking to my friend Alison on the phone, I spotted a lone deer lying in the snow on the wooded hill a few yards from my kitchen window, hooves tucked into its body, for warmth, I supposed. When I described its brown eyes, gazing into mine, Alison whispered, "Oh Judith, do you think it's Bruce?" A woman who's recently lost her beloved of many years will believe almost anything that seems to call him closer, especially when her husband's gentle, nut-brown eyes had always reminded her of a deer's. And I'll admit that the same fanciful thought had occurred to me. Yet I responded, "But the deer doesn't have any antlers; it's a doe"—as if gender would be an issue, if such a thing were possible. Alison reminded me that bucks lose their antlers in winter, after mating season. I carried that idea with me throughout the day, sipping on it like tea from my mug, letting it warm me.

Later that afternoon, I took Brigit outside for a walk in the snowy yard. As she sniffed at the remains of the perennial border along the house's east side, my eye caught on a forked object gleaming on the snow—pale brown, but too curved to be a stick. An antler, of course, with three points. I picked it up, drying it on my jeans, rubbing my thumb along the raw, sandpapery place where it had broken off the buck's head. I couldn't resist the notion that the antler had been left there for me, but by whom? Bruce? The buck? God? Pure chance? I supposed I could make of it what I would, as we do with so many things. I brought the antler into the house, laid it on the mantle, allowing myself to believe that our beloved house and land had performed one more feat of magic. ✿

image info