

House Proud

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KERRY ST. OURS

The house is the repository of our unmet needs, our unfulfilled dreams, or our nostalgic longings. It cannot really satisfy any of them, but perhaps that is why we have so much satisfaction in making the attempt.

— Marjorie Garber

I first noticed the house early one spring afternoon as I was driving through Capaha Park

in Cape Girardeau, Missouri, where I'd taken a job teaching English at Southeast Missouri State. I was new in town and unfamiliar with the neighborhoods west of campus. Lost, I happened to drive by the house at the very moment a woman came out a side door, stood on the stoop, and began shaking a rug. I thought, *That house needs a privacy fence.*

Years passed before I saw the house again, in a listing of available properties. I didn't recognize it; I simply noted that it was in my price range (under a hundred thousand) and I liked the style: bastard Tudor, erroneously identified as Cape Cod. In the black-and-white photo I could see a steep roof with two gables in front — a small one above the entrance, and a larger

one above a double window with decorative shutters. Typical of the style, the tall chimney was in front, by the entrance, rather than on the side of the house. The brick was painted white, and the rest of the exterior was clapboard (aluminum siding, I would eventually learn). Two and a half bedrooms. (*What's half a bedroom?*) Two baths. Central air. Full basement. Detached one-car garage.

I wrote down the address and went to look at the place. It was a terrible disappointment. The house didn't have any backyard to speak of, only a concrete driveway and a narrow strip of grass between it and the property behind. The siding was mustard yellow (a color called "Georgian gold," I now know). What's more, the house was directly across the street from a sandlot baseball field, with chain-link backstop and rickety bleachers. Beyond that was Capaha Field, home of the university team, the SEMO Indians.

I wouldn't take that house if you gave it to me, I thought, and I forgot about house hunting for another year or two.

The next time I saw it was with a realtor — a friend of a friend who said she had *just* the house for me. She didn't mean the house by the park. She meant a brick ranch in a quiet, older neighborhood near the hospital. Finished basement. Large backyard. But I didn't like the wrought-iron columns on the front porch. And the owners hadn't moved out yet, so I felt like an intruder when we went inside to look around. The bed was unmade, and a rowing machine sat in the middle of the bedroom floor. The kitchen cabinets looked greasy. I stuck my head into the small bathrooms only to please the realtor. I'd seen enough.

We looked at two more houses before we drove to see the mustard-and-white "Cape Cod." As we approached the house on the snaking, narrow street, the agent said, "There is *this*," as though she didn't much care for it herself. She parked at the bottom of the concrete steps in front. From this perspective — the steps, the ivy billowing from each side, the mossy brick walk leading to the front stoop — the house was charming. Inside, it was mercifully empty of furniture; the elderly owners had already moved because the stairs were too much for them, the realtor said.

Since I had first considered and dismissed it, the house had been bought and sold at least once. It had been on the market for a year now. There were only two bedrooms: a small one downstairs and a larger one up. The "half bedroom" was an area on the second floor divided from the whole bedroom by a wall of bookshelves and a sliding pocket door. There was also a bathroom upstairs, and a walk-in cedar closet. The downstairs had quaint archways and elegant crown moldings.

There was plenty wrong with the house, however, starting with the thick beige wall-to-wall carpeting. Even the sun porch was carpeted. (The owners had used it as a bedroom.) The fireplace in the living room had a cast-iron "stove" insert. The kitchen had been remodeled with impressive oak cabinetry, but I didn't care for the fake-wood formica countertops or the long bar (with bar stools) that divided the space in half. The downstairs bathroom had been decorated in a feminine style, with fluted, frosted-glass lampshades, pink tile, and a lily-

patterned wallpaper. The sink was imitation marble, scratched and streaked brown — from hair coloring, I assumed. The upstairs bathroom looked jerry-built; the shower was an odd shape, and the walls were laminated fiberboard.

Yet the house had hardwood floors throughout (beneath the carpets). And the plaster walls downstairs were treated with a finish resembling rough-hewn slate. It was near the university; I could walk to work in ten minutes.

I knew exactly what I would do with this house: I'd rip up the carpet, refinish the floors, remove the fireplace insert, replace the flimsy bi-fold doors between the living room and the sun porch with French doors, redecorate the downstairs bathroom and renovate the up, replace the formica in the kitchen and reduce the length of the bar, opening up a space for a den. Outside, I'd replace the mustard yellow siding, build a privacy fence around the side yard, and install a brick patio (with pergola) off the kitchen entrance.

But did I really want to live so close to the park? I knew the couple who lived in the house behind, and I phoned them. "Does it bother you living so close to the park?" I asked the wife.

"Not after the trees leaf out in the spring," she said.

And on the basis of that brief and shaky endorsement, I was sold. I had convinced myself that, for the price (\$70,000), the house was a wise investment. I would never find the perfect house. I was tired of living in apartments. So I made an offer. The sellers countered, and I accepted.

After I'd signed the papers, my realtor gave me a copy of the *Better Homes and Gardens New Cookbook* and a warm hug. It was at that moment, as she released me from her embrace, that I felt the first pangs of buyer's remorse.

I had always dreamed of owning a house with a large backyard where I could grow vegetables. This house had hardly any backyard at all. What's more, I am a shy, private person, and here I was, buying a house across the street from a well-used baseball field. I don't even like sports. (I once saw a cartoon in the *New Yorker* showing a baseball field with a house at home plate. That's exactly how I felt.) Most disturbing of all, I began to worry that I would have trouble selling the house when the time came. Buying this house was a mistake I'd have to live with for the rest of my life, a monument to my ignorance and incompetence.

Someone would later tell me that there are three crucial considerations when buying a house: location, location, and location. Moreover, I would learn that this house is what realtors call "obsolete," meaning that people now want larger rooms, open floor plans, and *at least* three bedrooms. Why hadn't anyone told me this before?

Perhaps because she felt some responsibility for my having bought the house — or maybe because she just felt sorry for me — my realtor attempted to boost my spirits. After I'd moved in, she had her blond, perky associate drop by. "Wouldn't you rather live across the street from a *park* than across the street from more houses?" she asked, her voice rising with enthusiasm. "*You* bought the house. So somebody else is *bound* to!" (Read: There's a sucker born every minute.) The final word from my realtor was that *all* houses sell . . . eventually.

That was fourteen years ago. In between, I've acquired a fine collection of baseballs from my lawn and along the curb in front of my house — eleven of them, to be exact, not including the ones I threw back or the dozen or so I put in a plastic bag and left on top of an equipment chest. One of the baseballs I have kept is neon green. Another bears the name of its owner, printed neatly in block letters: MATTHEWS. I haven't picked up a baseball on my lawn, though, since the Parks and Recreation Department replaced the battered backstop with a taller, wider one years ago. Soon after that, the city planted a maple tree between the backstop and the street. This tree now hides most of the chain-link and turns a beautiful red in the fall.

At first the crowds at the games made me uneasy. The Little Leaguers would assemble at about five o'clock in the afternoon, and their coaches and parents would park cars, pickups, and minivans in front of my house. But the crowds are familiar now, the games as much a summer ritual for me as for the players. The crack of the bat and the roar of the crowd are not unpleasant sounds in the late afternoon. Anyway, the field is in use only from May to July.

Capaha Field, home of the SEMO Indians, is another story. When there's a night game, the whole neighborhood is illuminated. The public-address system is loud, and during practices the team plays rock music through it. But since a neighbor complained to the police, they have kept it down.

I have become used to living across from the park. What I have not become used to is the way my lot is situated at the corner of Park View and Missouri. I should have known something was up when I saw the row of sawed-off telephone poles at the corner. A corner lot is typically considered an asset, but this corner is on a hill at a fork in the road. Making a left from Park View onto Missouri involves a difficult banking maneuver, and the turn is even more treacherous in bad weather.

Once or twice a year, a car would graze one of the telephone-pole stumps, lifting it like a loose tooth out of a child's gum. I eventually had a landscaper replace the sawed-off poles with a row of square cedar posts, behind which he planted ten Eskimo viburnums. Seven have survived.

I have nailed red reflectors to the posts, but every year, sometimes twice a year, a driver rams a post or two and injures a bush. In winter, after a snowfall, I rush out and shovel the street, hoping to prevent cars from sliding. One morning last January, I was shoveling the driveway and thinking that I should have shoveled the street first when I heard the sound of impact, then tires spinning, and a motor racing. Snow shovel in hand, I went to help the driver extricate his car. When the young man saw me coming, he floored it and managed to drive away, leveling the shrub on that end of the row and dragging a post (cement base attached) for several feet. I wanted to shout, *Stop, you idiot!* I wouldn't have reported him.

One Thursday last spring, on my afternoon off, I heard the doorbell. Had somebody hit a post again? I opened the door and saw a late-middle-aged, white-haired man holding a piece of paper. "I'm sorry to disturb you," he said gently. "My name

is Mullen, and I grew up in this house. I live in Oregon now. I'm in town visiting friends, and I wanted to bring you something. It's a picture of your house." He handed me a photocopy. "A tornado came through here in 1949," he said.

I had heard about that tornado; it's part of local lore, involving the parents of Cape Girardeau's most famous native, conservative talk-radio host Rush Limbaugh. The tornado struck on the very day that Limbaugh's parents were married. (An omen of the evil to come, perhaps.) The wedding was out of town, near the Arkansas border, but in Cape Girardeau, the tornado killed 23 people and destroyed 203 homes — Limbaugh's grandparents' house among them.

The picture the man gave me had been taken from the park across the street. In the foreground was a fallen tree, and the house was in the distance. The brick had not been painted yet, and the sun porch was still open. I noticed an odd shadow over the roof — then I realized that the top half of the chimney was gone and that the "shadow" was in fact an enormous hole in the roof, through which the chimney had collapsed!

"Won't you come in?" I asked Mr. Mullen.

"My family is in the car," he said. I saw a late-model Volvo station wagon and the smiling face of someone who might have been his grown daughter in the passenger-side window.

"Please, come in, just for a minute," I said. I wanted to ask him more about the house. He must have been the "Jay" whose name was carved on a doorjamb in the basement and whose initials were painted inside the garage. The fence builders had unearthed some artifacts in the side yard: a toy soldier, a toy airplane, twenty-two marbles, and a Gerber baby spoon. Perhaps they had belonged to him.

I held open the storm door. He approached the threshold, stepped inside, then stopped and blinked as though adjusting to the sudden change in light. His eyes filled with tears. "I'm sorry," he said. "I get a little emotional." He repeated that his family was waiting in the car, but said that he might come back on the weekend. I gave him my name and phone number, but he never called.

(end of excerpt)