

Prologue

The house stood at the top of a hill, ensnared in vegetation, looking out over the Victorian roofs of Port Townsend and beyond, to water and islands and clouds. It seemed to lean toward the view as if enchanted, although we later learned that had a lot more to do with neglect than magic. The once-elegant slopes of its hipped roof rolled and curled, green with moss. The tall, straight walls of its Foursquare design were camouflaged in salmon-pink asbestos shingles, the windows covered in grimy curtains or cardboard. Three discarded furnaces, four neon-yellow oil drums, an ancient camper shell, and a pair of rusted wheelbarrows lay scattered at odd angles across the overgrown grass, as if caught in a game of large-appliance freeze tag.

The yard was Darwinian in its landscaping—an agglomeration of plants and trees, stuck in the ground and left to survive. Below the house, I could just see the tips of a possible orchard poking up through a roiling sea of ivy. In front, two weather-stunted palm trees flanked the walkway like a pair of tropical lawn jockeys gone lost, while a feral camellia bush had covered the porch and was heading for the second story. Someone had hacked away a rough opening for the front stairs, down which an assortment of rusted rakes and car mufflers and bags of fertilizer sprawled in lazy abandon. In their midst, seemingly oblivious to its setting, sat a rotting fruit basket, gift card still attached.

“That one,” my husband, Ben, said as he pointed to the house.

“It’s not for sale,” I noted.

“I know. But it should be, don’t you think?”

Our son and daughter, ten and thirteen, stared out the car windows slack-jawed.

“You’re kidding, right?” they asked. But I think they already knew the question was rhetorical.

Chapter One: Falling in Love

Buyers are liars.

—Every real estate agent ever

When I was young, my mother used to take all five of her kids on an annual quest for the family Christmas tree. We would travel around Los Angeles in our wood-paneled station wagon, from one lot of precut evergreens to another, searching for the perfect tree. As the trip dragged on, there were times I questioned my mother’s sanity, and yet when my mother found her tree it created a satisfaction within her that I could see even if I didn’t always understand. Maybe a particular height reminded her of being a child herself, perhaps a certain shade of green reached into her soul. I never really knew, and perhaps knowing was never the point. When I would ask what she was looking for, my mother would just smile and say: “It has to talk to me.”

Any honest real estate agent will tell you that most home buyers’ decisions are no more

rational than my mother's with her tree. There was a time in my life, years after I first encountered that ramshackle house in Port Townsend, when I was an agent myself, walking buyers through the process and dutifully helping them draw up their lists of requirements. I would listen to a couple emphatically assert that they needed four bedrooms, two baths, and a no-maintenance yard--and then watch as they fell in love with a tiny garden-becalmed cottage that they spotted on the way to the house that met every one of their specifications. It happened over and over and over. While we might like to believe that our house needs are pragmatic line items, our true needs, the ones that drive our decisions, come far more often from some deep and unacknowledged wellspring of memories and desires.

Because here's the thing—we aren't looking for a house; we're looking for a home. A house can supply you with a place to sleep, to cook, to store your car. A home fits your soul. In ancient Rome, the term *domus*, from which we get the word *domicile*, meant both “people” and “place,” an unspoken relationship that we feel like a heartbeat. A home fulfills needs you didn't know you had, so it is no wonder that when pressed for an explanation for our choices we give reasons that make no sense, pointing to a bunch of dried lavender hanging in the kitchen, a porch swing, the blue of a front door—almost always things that could be re-created in a house that fit the list. But sense is not the point. These small details are simply visual indicators of an architectural personality that fits our own, that reminds us of a childhood home, or a house, filled with color and the laughter of children, that we visited on a vacation in Mexico.

And yet a choice of a home is not just about where we've been or what we remember; it's also about who we want to be. As Winston Churchill famously said: “We shape our buildings and afterwards they shape us.” When we choose a house, we are making a decision about how we will live. I don't mean in the obvious way of how long your commute to work will be, or whether there are schools or stores or friends nearby—although all of those things are important and will impact your life. What I am talking about is something far more subliminal. The designs of our homes quite literally change us. An eating nook for two invites a busy couple to slow down every morning for coffee. A courtyard in an apartment building helps create community. A south-facing window encourages optimism, while alcoves foster book lovers. Perhaps one of the strongest blows for feminism came from the first sledgehammer that opened a kitchen to a family room and changed the view of the cook, from both sides of the wall.

It is the rare buyer who sees these things for what they are. We are understandably distracted by the stress of what is for many of us the biggest financial decision of our lives. Our minds are busy. But we feel those subtle calls. We see that bunch of lavender. And as often as not, we leap.

And the chapter continues.....