



My New (Ugly) House

BY THEA MARIE ROOD

Who knows why—after looking at dozens of houses—you suddenly settle on one? Something reminds you subconsciously of the house you grew up in, rented in college, saw in a movie once. Hopefully, you're not drunk or desperate.

In our case, it wasn't desperation that made us buy the new (ugly) house. We already owned a pretty place with a wrap-around porch, we had neighborhood playmates for our 2-year-old son and 5-year-old daughter, we'd just replaced the worn-out carpet with a Berber that vroom-vrooms zoomed across. And we hadn't been drinking (although, frankly, now that we live here, a couple of glasses of wine makes this place a lot more attractive).

But we were restless. For instance, I was tired of having a desk on the stairway landing. The kids' playing didn't bug me, but whining or crying made me develop a heavy Irish brogue. "God almighty, how in God's green Earth can I be expected to work in this God-awful racket?" And although we were constantly throwing parties—birthdays, New Year's Eve, Fourth of July—it wasn't a roomy place. In fact, we joked about the "jungle seat" in our dining room—that hapless diner who had to squeeze past the ficus to sit down, silk leaves tickling his forehead with every bite.

The yard was even tinier than the house—a slice of green that would be advertised (more appropriately) as "a garden" in someplace like England. We had hints of this, of course, that we basically chose to ignore. The kennel lady—who actually is British—putting our golden retriever on a diet the week he was there. "He has a remarkable appetite, but is a bit—if you don't mind my saying—on the hefty

side, now isn't he?" And honestly, it wasn't like he could run around out there. Two gallops and he was back where he started. Forget, too, playing ball—for the dog or the kids. Every time someone actually threw one, it flew instantly onto the roof or over the fence.

So we resorted instead to playing out front—a sandbox and a basketball hoop on the porch, chalk on the sidewalk, balls kicked parallel to the street down a row of front lawns. An added benefit? We saw a lot of our neighbors. But there was a downside. Uh, we saw a lot of our neighbors. There we were, this public spectacle, that sort of invited participation. Or at least comment. Sometimes I loved it. Like after I had my daughter and stopped working. I'd wait on the front stoop at 5:30, starved for adult company.

But as the years passed—and the neighborhood grew—I didn't always want to talk to everyone who happened to be out for a stroll, washing the car, going for their mail. Sometimes I just wanted to be with my kids. Hopscotch with my daughter, sand cupcakes with my son.

Lastly, to be honest, we were a little bored. We'd painted and planted and fussed and fixed and the darling little house we'd moved into seven years ago was done.

So we looked. Just a little. Just once in a while. Something would catch our eye—usually 100-year-old rambling houses with loads of curb appeal. But something also usually stopped us—like (I swear this is true) a master bedroom light that you turned on (and off) by the front door. Or (this one's true, too) a ghost that walked around upstairs and reportedly improved the current owner's baking skills. Bad wiring, bad plumbing or just bad vibes.

Then I was browsing realestate.com one night on that damned stairway landing. The kids were asleep,



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and my husband had just come in from a late meeting. "You know what we need is something like this," I said off-handedly, and showed him a fairly unattractive tri-level on the other side of the river, built in 1981, with a third of an acre, a pool, a three-car garage and four bedrooms. "It's not terribly old, it's not fancy, it's by a great school. And it'd give us some space." My husband nodded in that endearing "Oh, we're off to look at a house with a ghost" way, and went to bed. But the next morning, he called me

on his cell phone. "We need to buy this house," he says. "Can you come over here with the kids—now?"

And in our defense, the first thing we saw was the house's best feature: the yard. It seemed like a park, with endless green grass, overgrown ivy fences, a hidden pool and spa that worked, towering trees. It didn't hurt that the majority were olive trees: I was right in the middle of *Under the Tuscan Sun*, the story of two college professors who buy—and then spend school breaks restoring—an old villa. With of course its own olive orchard. When we learned people come by here every year—mostly elderly now, mostly with Italian heritages—to pick the olives, cure them and present you with a jar, I was almost sold. We're moving to Italy, I thought.

Unfortunately, I was clearly back in America—circa 1980—when I got inside the place. Cottage cheese ceilings, dark drapes on every window, wallpaper that had seen better days and would take me an eternity to scrape away. "I don't know," I started muttering. On subsequent visits, more disturbing details: a yellow plastic window into the garage, junk opaquely visible, right at the entryway of the house. A shake roof with "a life expectancy of zero to three months," according to a home inspector. At least eight dead pine trees. Light fixtures that couldn't have been attractive even 20 years ago. Two dark wood bannisters that rocked precariously when touched lightly by a finger. Kitchen flooring that came to about an inch of the baseboards and abruptly stopped. A very goofy wet bar in the den with some sort of brown Formica top. "This is a very ugly house," I announced suddenly one day when we were standing out front, still debating the decision, still torturing the pretty-and-blond real estate agent. If you looked—and I was looking hard by this point—every inch of the huge place seemed to need fixing and fussing and planting and paint.

But there was hope. For example, that remote fourth bedroom with a view of the parklike back yard could, I knew, become an unbelievable office. The master bedroom had a fireplace, a skylight and a whirlpool tub. There was a huge window in the living room that looked at the olive trees—gorgeous things that are always green, with gray-brown trunks and interesting branches. A dining room window framed a group of old rose bushes. The mailbox—way down the driveway—was painted to look like the one from "Blue's Clues". Oh, what the hell, we thought, maybe the dog would get in shape.

So in a matter of days, we were running out the door of our existing (attractive) house—with that over-

weight dog and a garbage bag full of toys—showing it to prospective buyers. And in less than two weeks, signing piles of papers with black pens. We've won the booby prize, I said to friends, we're the dubious owners of this very ugly new house.

The actual move was excruciating and I will include here only one telling detail. The movers attempted to bring in our refrigerator—not, I'd say, an unusual belonging. Most professional movers probably move—what?—a dozen in a week. But these guys were completely bamboozled. Couldn't get it off the truck, couldn't get it up the (three) stairs to our front door. Finally, they tried heaving it, and one guy fell to the ground, clutching a leg, screaming. I expected to see a compound fracture, a bloody tibia sticking through his pants, so I whisked the kids away. When I went back out, I was informed "he's bad hurt, ma'am" and he was writhing in pain in the truck, but refused medical attention. Meanwhile, the other two rocket scientists had managed to get the appliance to the doorway of the kitchen. "Don't fit," one announced.

"Yes," I said slowly, "but it needs to go in there." "Don't fit," he said again, and walked away.

For the first few weeks, the new (ugly) house felt—often—like a gigantic mistake. For one thing, we were inundated by crews of workmen: painters, cable installers, roofers, landscapers, chimney sweeps, plumbers. One day I counted eight tool-ridden trucks in my driveway. Manual laborer party at our house.

But more disturbing than the noise and the lack of privacy and the enormous-check-writing, it didn't feel like home. "This is starting to be a nice house," my daughter said one day, "but I don't know whose it is." And honestly, would I ever reach for the right light switch, open the kitchen drawer that actually housed the silverware? We drove into our old neighborhood—to visit friends—and determinedly looked the other way when we passed our old (lovely) wrap-around porch. No one could bear to look.

Gradually, however, that's changing. With every paint stroke, every planted tulip bulb, the new house is becoming ours.

There are things we knew we'd like: We sit in the spa outside under the stars, we climb in the whirlpool tub and froth up the bubble bath until we feel like we're in whipped cream, we curl up in our bedroom with a roaring fire and watch "ScoobyDoo," "Rugrats," the kids' favorite shows. And there are unexpected delights: that wet bar with the indestructible Formica top? It's an art center now, the crayons and markers and beads and color books put away in carefully labeled drawers and cupboards, handpainted wooden letters spelling "ART" hung crookedly across the top. We've met three horses we feed carrots to on a daily basis, we leave nuts out for two gray squirrels, we've found a 3-year-old boy and a 6-year-old girl two houses (and two acres) away.

So our new (ugly) house may never appear on the cover of *Sunset* magazine, or win an award from *Architectural Digest*. But we believe, after a few more months of intense wrestling, it will make us a very lovely home. And what about our hefty dog, you ask? Looking svelter by the day. •

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