

Safe As Houses

It is entirely possible
That we are islands in the territory of angels.
—“Innocentii” by Mary O’Malley

I thought we were clever, my husband and I, when we committed to a commuter marriage. We were well into middle age when gripped by the coup de foudre that led to our five-day engagement, and our wedding four months after we met. From the start, our union was up against considerable odds: he taught on a campus in Missouri, and I on a campus two time zones away. He had teenage kids I was really fond of, and I very much wanted to add another child to the crew, but early on, I had a miscarriage, and then another. Even before that sadness, I’d been grieving my father’s recent death, while my husband grieved the loss of day-to-day life with his kids. His previous marriage—a long one—had ended in divorce.

We had these troubles, and, in addition, during a year when I quit my job so my husband and I could try living together under one roof (his), we found we didn’t always get along very well. Was it the infertility? Was it my joblessness? Was it us? Did we need to separate or give the marriage more time? We decided to do both.

I found a job on a campus in an adjacent state, and we took turns; each Friday, one of us did the six-and-a-half-hour drive between his home in Missouri and mine in Omaha. When it was my husband’s turn to drive, he’d call from a gas station in Maryville and I’d know he was two hours away. Later, when I’d hear his footsteps cross the wooden floor of my front porch, I’d push my schoolwork aside and rush into the first hug of the weekend.

And yet, after the long drive, and homecoming sex, and dinner, and unloading the luggage—which included the ever-present stack of student papers, along with manuscripts to work on at some point during the weekend—the driver was always tired. There might be tension around that. One or the other of us usually had trouble getting to sleep.

The marriage was still far from perfect, but I hadn't given up on baby. Some weekends, I was still measuring my temperature every morning to chart my ovulation. For a while, I was messing with progesterone treatments. I remember taking an at-home pregnancy test in the restroom of a gas station in Benton, Missouri. It came up negative, and my crying jag added an extra hour to my drive.

Behind the conundrum of infertility lurked the even larger dilemma of how we did—or did not—get along.

And then one Sunday in spring, I was driving back to Omaha through a heavy, boring rainstorm. I don't remember if that weekend's visit had been good or turbulent—usually they were both, which made our good-byes both a heartache and a relief. What I do remember is sitting in slow-moving traffic, and though I had hours in the car ahead of me I was already sick of my CDs and had finished my book-on-tape, and so, in my imagination, I wandered into the rooms of a house for sale I'd recently looked at for the second time.

I'd begun to think about buying a house in Omaha. My job was going well, so it didn't make sense to keep doling out part of my salary for rent. I had the chance to make a long-range investment, settle in. The bungalow I'd found in Omaha was three minutes from campus and just a block from where I was renting, in a neighborhood that was a wonderland for someone from New York, where I'd lived before beginning my itinerant academic life. On the street corners, instead of overflowing trashcans, there were landscaped triangles of rosebushes. Flowerpots hung from streetlamps. This was Omaha's Midtown, an urban residential area that, to people who favored the new suburbs, seemed not only unsafe—occasional car break-ins and other city nuisances—but also inconvenient because the garages were small and the old houses had tiny closets. The Midtown sidewalks were cracked, and heavy limbs of ancient trees hung in arches that surrounded you as you wandered from block to block. I wandered a lot when I wasn't working. I didn't have close friends yet in Omaha, so those streets became my companions, offering up small but reliable solace, continuous pleasure for the eye.

There was that low rock wall at the brick house with persimmon shutters. The Colonial with the worn chimney climbing up against the flat wide sky. Curved cement benches atop berms of intricate greenery. I hadn't fallen for a neighborhood in this way since I'd lived in Rome, doing research for my first novel, and had been hypnotized by the terraces, balconies, and ancient tiled entryways of the neighborhoods of Old Rome. In Omaha, it was blooming window boxes, Art Deco moldings. No two houses were alike. Craftsman, Prairie style, Queen Anne, Spanish stucco, tall houses and squat ones, apartments and mansions. Next door to the cottage I had my eye on was a duplex rental; three blocks away lived zillionaire Warren Buffett. And in this neighborhood—better than in Rome or New York—a house, a whole house, was affordable. I was intimidated by the prospect of taking such a serious step, terrified of the way it would tie me down to the Midwest, so far from home, wherever that was. At the same time, I was weak-kneed with house lust.

Gabled roofs, bay windows, porch swings.

It wasn't just eye candy; it was bread, it was sustenance. I walked those streets in the darkening evenings of my first autumn in Omaha and trudged through snow in late winter afternoons. Here, I thought.

The house of my daydream as I drove from Missouri was a pretty cottage with problems. A few friends had walked through it with me and pointed out that the master bedroom, which the owner had built onto the house himself, had neither heat vents nor closet; nonetheless, I was smitten. Who needed vents and closets when your bedroom had five huge windows, letting in heaps of light and a view of neighborhood treetops?

I loved that the house followed no standard floor plan, for within it I would live no standard life. The central room was over a hundred years old, and various rooms jutted off of it. One was big enough for a piano and not much else, another had space for bookcases and could be a perfect office. The galley kitchen had an old wood-paned window over the sink, a picture window over the breakfast counter, and a sliding glass door, which would be convenient to crack open while I prepared holiday banquets.

Upstairs, the attic had been punched out to create an A-frame loft, where I could set up Gramma's sewing machine. There was room under the skylight for a reading chair. And when my child arrived, however he or she was going to arrive, we'd cuddle as our books piled up all around us.

From my first fantasies of that house, a child lived with me there, enjoying a perfect childhood. I wasn't a mother, so I felt confident I knew exactly how a child should be raised. A small house with good light and books everywhere. Construction paper, clay, yarn, colored pencils. Lots of music. We'd samba through the rooms, each one painted a different color: coral, vermilion, aqua. We'd make a game of vacuuming, and everyone in the household—all two of us!—would pitch in on chores. The floors would always be clean, as would the bathtub, where my child would soak in the bubbles while we sang and played with plastic bottles and jugs.

Most important, in the house where my child would grow up, there would be no dust bunnies of anger in the corners, no cobwebs of words tangling us up, no fine film of sadness as relentless as dust on the woodwork.

My vision of perfect mothering, like a massive spring-cleaning, would establish a new order.

That I might best accomplish this vision as a single mother was an idea I was still trying to squelch; but, clearly, I could find no better staging ground for my child's ideal childhood than that funky Omaha cottage.

At the end of that rainy Sunday drive, when I turned to look into my Honda's backseat, it was a shock, and a disappointment, that there wasn't a child back there strapped into a car seat. Not yet.

What happened next was that in June, I closed on the house. In mid-August, I got divorced. Two years later, I began my application to adopt my child. Now, from a distance of twenty-one years, when I look back, those three events—house purchase, divorce, adoption—line up as naturally as stars in a

constellation. In the center of my universe—the sun itself—is my son, who was four months old when I adopted him in Vietnam and who is now twenty.

I pinpoint the shift of my allegiance—from marriage to single motherhood—to that Sunday drive through Nebraska rain.

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