

---

 SEAN PRENTISS
 

---

*BUYING A HOUSE*

As Chad the Realtor slows his car onto quiet Lockwood Avenue, he says, *This is 626 Lockwood. Tell me what you think.*

Chad and I are searching for my first home to buy. I've just got a new job as tenure-track professor in western Michigan. I guess I'm ready to settle down. I guess after a life moving town to town, fifteen states in the last twenty years, it's time to plant roots.

We're on the fifth house today. The first house we checked had a huge front porch and sat in an upscale neighborhood. *You can make fifty grand off this house*, Chad said. Inside, the house had a gutted kitchen, sagging floors, ruined sheetrock. *A fixer-upper, for sure*, Chad said. I thought of the time needed to put the house back together, how I'd rather write or travel than drywall and spackle. We moved on.

The second and third houses had moldy basements and cracked foundations. Chad just nodded back toward the front door. We left without seeing the upstairs. The fourth house had such a cute kitchen that it felt like I'd need a trophy wife and a cooing baby before I moved into the house to live happily ever after...

As we stop at this Lockwood house, the first thing (the very first thing) I notice is the front porch. Chad must know what I'm thinking because he says, *Look at that screened-in porch.* I'm a sucker for sitting outside. For watching the world go by.

I walk onto the porch, turn around, listen to the screen door slap shut, and stare back at the quiet street. A basketball net on rollers. A beat-up pickup. A tricycle tipped over on the sidewalk. Chalk drawings in front of a neighbor's house.

I imagine early autumn, my feet up on a table, a Pabst. Maybe grading student essays in the afternoon sun or reading a book of poetry. (Hugo. No, no, Wright! *Suddenly I realize / that if I stepped out of my body I would break / into blossom.*) I think, *This could be my street. My porch. Mine.*

Then the scene changes and I am no longer reading James Wright. Instead, my next lover (a girl I have yet to meet—but I can see her perfectly—rounded cheeks, face in a grin, thin lips, long brown hair, curly) is standing on this porch. It is our first date (a date we laughed through, at a restaurant, later the long walk home) and it is latest dusk—nearing dark. Lockwood is quiet. The air cold (nearly freezing). The air still. Standing on my porch, I lean toward her.

\*\*\*

Chad unlocks the front door and holds it open. I walk into a tiny foyer as Chad says, *Nineteen hundred square feet. A house to grow into.*

I barely hear Chad. Instead I see my father visiting from three states away. As he walks in the front door, I reach for his leather coat. As I see my dad's future visit, I think about how most of my adult years, I've felt like I wasn't living up to what my father expected. I felt that I wasn't being successful (though he's always been supportive of every one of my harebrained ideas). But I have always felt that, sure, I was skiing and traveling and even earning my terminal degree, but I wasn't successful in the ways that I thought he'd care about. But now I'm tenure-track. A real job. A real life.

Standing in the foyer, I almost mumble those words, *A real job. A real life.*

I imagine my father talking to his friends over glasses of merlot, saying, *My youngest son, Sean—remember him?—just got a tenure track job in Michigan. Teaching creative writing. He's buying a house in Michigan. An old Craftsman.*

\*\*\*

As Chad leads me into an older kitchen, he says, *This kitchen needs work, but it's an easy redo.*

I think about how I'll never redo the kitchen. No stainless steel appliances. No tile floors. No fresh paint on the walls. I'll just put a wooden table—old and worn and scratched and found in a house I rented in Idaho—in the corner. I'll buy two thrift store chairs.

As Chad points out the dishwasher, the gas stove, the cabinets, I find myself in the future—god, this house has a way of transporting me—to nights eating alone, crockpots made during long weekends, the smell of stew blanketing the house. I'll read a magazine while eating a quick meal. The second chair at the table unmoved for weeks (months?)—waiting.

Waiting for that next lover (Or has she already left?). I'll wash the few dishes, leaving the kitchen as clean as I find it today.

\*\*\*

In the master bedroom (whenever I hear *master bedroom* I imagine a canopied bed, pink walls, doilies on the bureaus), Chad pulls up the blinds. The afternoon sun blinds me with its dazzling light, illuminating the dust in the air. I twist from the sun as Chad moves to the living room—giving me time. Time. I need time.

With the bedroom empty of furniture, I turn a slow circle, arms outstretched—touching empty space. Empty space. *Empty space.*

I imagine this bedroom after I move in. A single bed with poorly fitted sheets (They come undone every night I toss and turn.), a nightstand for my book of the week (a mediocre collection of essays, later a novel by Abbey), a dresser full of wrinkled clothes. What else? What else? My cell phone. What else? House keys. What else? Sneakers and dress shirts in the closet. What else? Nothing. What else? Nothing. A room to fill with nothing.

But maybe in a year (or in two, or three), my next lover—the one I kissed on the

porch—will move in. In another year, she'll become my wife. And I question (alone in this bedroom) how is it possible that after twenty years of not getting married (dodging three marriage proposals) that now I can no longer stop thinking about marriage. It's not that I want to get married. It's just friends married. Friends and family expecting me married. My mother asking, *Have you met any nice girls in Michigan.*

*Not yet, Mom, not yet.*

I think to my future lover and how once she becomes my wife, the small bed will be replaced with a queen. She will hang new blinds on these windows (though we'll never shut them—let the sun flood us). The old furniture moved out, donated. And my keys, they'll end up in a clay dish that my wife will buy at a flea market (just for my keys). When I toss my keys in the dish, the clanging will remind me of something—though I'll never figure out exactly what.

\*\*\*

In the living room, I run my hands along hardwood floors. Chad says, *Oak. I have the same wood in my house.*

In five years (Or ten, fifteen?) if I buy this house (this very house) will these floors only feel the slow steps of my feet quietly moving room to room? The lonely steps of me coming home day after day from work at the university? Or will—some distant year—there be the patter of a child (A daughter? A little girl in pigtails?) running over these slick floors (her giggles bouncing off the walls)?

I've never wanted kids (or a wife, or even in these last few years a serious girlfriend). But now I'm studying the creaking of these floors (like an Indian in a 1960s Western with his ear pressed to the tracks listening for the sound of a coming train) for the pattering of a child's steps. I don't want 4 a.m. wakeups. I don't want to change diapers. I don't want to have her burp on my shoulder. I don't want to teach her to throw (Okay, okay, maybe I want to teach her to throw—first an awkward sidearm throw, later a laser. *Good job, girl!*).

But in this living room—warm with its yellow walls—it feels that if I buy this house (this very house, this Lockwood house), I'll need a child. Not just because I'll own the house, but because if I own the house, this house will need a child (Is this just me telling lies? Trying to pretend it's not my wants?)—her voice bouncing off walls, her cries from her bedroom calling to me—to me (only me) during middle of her nights (she has such cute nightmares). *Monsters in the closet. A dream where she couldn't find me.*

As I envision all of this, I cannot find her mother. I cannot find her at all. I grow desperate. Where is she? The yellow walls blind me, it seems.

\*\*\*

Chad asks, *Do you need more time?*

I want to say, *Just a minute. One minute* (though I mean a lifetime or two).

I want to say, *I can see all the world.*

I want to say, *Hold me. Someone. Please?*

I want to say, *Every story is true and every story is a lie.*

Instead I nod. Chad moves to the front porch. I hear the clicking of the door.

In the living room, I stare at the ceiling until it is forty years into the future (the mortgage paid off, the water heater and furnace twice replaced). I am seventy-seven with a beard of gray. I lie in the queen bed as a chest-rattling cough runs through my body. Then another. In a hallucination, I call to that future wife, wanting her by my side (holding my hand through this)—never realizing (this is for the best, the best) that she's been gone years and years (maybe exactly a thousand years). The divorce papers in a filing cabinet in the basement (mildewed, brittle). Or did she die young, cancer? *Such a sad story*, the neighbors will whisper as they watch my daughter play on the sidewalk.

When the coughing subsides, a live-in nurse (or is it my daughter, home for her father) feeds me ice chips, takes my pulse. When the days (now the minutes) are done and it is latest dusk (the same time of day as when I first kissed that girl), I use my last energy to lift my arm. The nurse, the girl?, hurriedly stands from her seat. She rests her hand on my forehead, but she struggles to understand this final moment. Am I calling to her? Am I pointing to a western sun?

This house echoes, *Stay down, champion, stay down.*

\*\*\*

As Chad locks the front door tight—

—as the sun sets over 626 Lockwood, as the trees stand bare (still earliest spring), as the grass lays down (from long winter), as a grandfather wheels in his grandson's basketball net, as three children play army (*Bang, bang, bang, you're dead.*)—

—I stand on the front porch and think, *I can own this house. I can own it all.*