

Amazon Trail: My Dream House

My brother and I got to talking one day about what felt like home and learned that we both had the same idea of a perfect house. It had been my grandmother's, in Massachusetts, in the 1950's, a Cape Cod painted white, with green shutters. The upstairs bedrooms were small, with sloped eaves and gables. Grandma had converted the side porch to a sun-room. The floors were hardwood and there was a fireplace with andirons in the shape of owls.

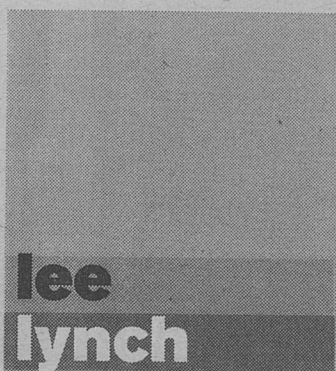
Thirty-odd years ago, my brother bought his Cape Cod. My best friend has had a sister Cape in Connecticut at least 20 years. I, the rootless dyke, have spent my life moving, even inhabiting an aged Cape Cod in the country once, for a few challenging years.

Yet that Cape, for all its homey appeal, didn't settle me down as it did my best friend and my brother. It also took two-and-a-half years to sell, a Yankee anomaly on the west coast – but that's another story. So if the Cape by the river wasn't, after all, my dream house, what would be?

As a kid, I remember thinking that split-levels were very cool. A sunken living room sounded like great fun and the steps seemed to beckon to adventure, not bedrooms and kitchen. The first house I moved into after college was nothing so grand. It had surely been built around the turn of the 20th century, and since then divided into railroad flats. The outside was painted a loud pink; the inside was furnished in what other tenants left behind.

Once when I was bewailing our accumulated lack of funds, my Marcia explained to me that it was all the breaking up and moving that left us heading toward age sixty without much set aside for a rainy day. If the cancer hadn't got her, we'd planned to stay put for a long, prosperous time.

Instead, I closed on our home yesterday. A red ranch house on a property filled with



every kind of old cedar tree and a creek, it was Marcia's dream house. I don't know if the neighbors were truly the greatest in the world, or if their warmth was a response to Marcia, who brought that out in just about everyone. I total-

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ly hate that I had to give up the home she loved so much, but I have learned that, widowed, I either get to be a home owner or I get to write. I simply don't make enough money to be able to keep up a house on my own. Marcia called herself a butchy femme – she could build a room, repair a roof, wield a chain saw on a fallen tree. I'm the wimpy city kid, the artsy type who, even if I had the aptitude to hammer a nail without putting a 45 degree angle into it, doesn't have the time to devote to cleaning out gutters and applying Tide to mossy shingles. Besides, I'm ascairt of heights.

So I'm a renter again, for the first time in almost 30 years. What I like about it is that I have learned that's what I need to do for the writing and therefore for myself. The other thing I like about it is my landlords, or patrons, as we

jokingly call them. They own a small ranch house overlooking the water, while I am in their "Gatehouse," a smaller Saltbox, related to a Cape Cod by its New England pedigree. From its huge, bright second-floor room I, too, can see the water and watch the seagulls hang-glide on the blustery winter winds. While every house I've lived in has had its charms, including the loud pink house, the tenement with the bathroom in the hall, the house next to the ravine with rats in its walls, and the house where the river rose right through the floor of the basement, I now can be a writer instead of an exterminator, contractor, inept carpenter, trembling roofer or even gardener and all those other things homeowners have to be.

Of course, with friends for landlords, roles do get a bit fuzzy. Like the night last week when I found a baby possum on my back patio. The pianist and the handydyke came right over. Most landlords would call out the exterminator or do something equally rash. Furry little Pogo was terribly cute and probably orphaned. Instead of freaking out at the possibility of infestation, they advised me to put some food out for her. I guess Pogo liked their food better than mine, though, as she is now living in their garage.

And I am living in their Saltbox rental, having learned, much to my surprise, that a dream house, for me, has nothing to do with architectural style or ownership, and everything to do with knowing what I need and accepting that what worked for Grandma, my brother and my best friend, though very appealing, doesn't work for someone whose roots are not in houses, but in queer, searching words. ▼

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