

Maureen Ellen O'Leary

### Nine Rooms and a View

On the day of our big move from a public housing unit in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to a large, lovely flat in a nearby town, we returned to Cambridge in the late afternoon for any remaining odds and ends. My mother's favorite brother, Uncle Jack, a man equal parts clown and genius, came along. He marched energetically through our front door and, in no more than three long strides, marched with equal energy straight out the back. "Oops," he exclaimed as he bounced back in with an enormous grin, "I seem to have missed the house entirely!" Our goal since we reached the age of self-consciousness was to give ourselves --and my uncle--more marching space, something more between doors. And, of course, to put acres of space between us and what became "the place that shall not be named." Thus it was that, in the early 1960's, our family embarked on the thrilling, spirited, somewhat desperate search for a better place to be.

We had slunk into "the projects" when I was very young, exchanging a roomy one-family house on a shady street a few blocks from Harvard Yard for

a tiny unit in a row-house crammed between other row-houses in a housing development on the other side of Cambridge. Too many kids, too many bills, and too many days of work missed by my perpetually ailing father had left us broke. We had never been a prosperous family but, inch by inch, year by year, we had slid down in the world, falling into a situation that shamed those of us old enough to register our environment and that stunned my once happy mother into unsmiling silence.

My impractical father was in large part responsible for the slinking in. He was a daydreamer, not a doer; a ponderer, not a planner. He quoted Shakespeare and Shelley with ease and frequency and found whole universes in single words. But his imagination stopped short of envisioning ways to improve our lot in the world we lived in.

My mother, on the other hand, approached the circumstances of her life in a no-nonsense way, working within a possible rather than an ideal universe. Sometimes her particular qualities made her a difficult mother for children who resembled too much their father. But her unromantic pragmatism and her steady determination were responsible for springing us out of public housing –though perhaps “springing” isn’t the best word to describe an event that took place only after many uncomfortable years.

She bided her time, waiting for the moment when we could move on, up, and out, thus reversing the process that had landed us where we were. Her moment came when my father, under pressure –an ultimatum, in fact--

from my mother, had finally capitulated and had the operation he desperately needed not only to save his life but to save ours emotionally, psychologically, and economically. We had all suffered from the bleeding ulcer that so often kept him home. There was a palpable lightening in the house after my father's surgery. Once he returned to work, our money troubles diminished; mere survival was no longer the bottom line.

My mother lifted her head, sniffed the air, and caught the scent of a world beyond the claustrophobic projects. It was time to find a place where we could breathe, a place with real streets and some beauty, a place where we did not have to shrink ourselves down physically and emotionally. Our mission was clear and we kids embraced the challenge eagerly.

Pre-internet, we relied on the newspaper to bring us our dream house. My older brother would arrive home from the corner store with the impossibly fat Sunday Boston Globe. After swapping in mostly amicable silence the more frivolous sections (Parade Magazine, Confidential Chat), we children devoted ourselves en masse to The Section, the residential listings in the real estate pages. We brought to this communal activity profound excitement and deadly seriousness. We were, after all, not only figuring out where we would live but, in doing so, who we would be.

We became adept at scanning the listings and weeding out obvious and not-so-obvious lemons. Euphemistic phrasing didn't fool us: "ready access to public transportation" meant a bus stop in front of the house; "snug" meant

tiny; “modern” meant boring and charmless. Our price range was rather narrow and only houses with eight or more rooms got serious consideration. “Rambling,” “airy,” and “unique” were some favorite adjectives. “Needs work, great potential” also tempted us. We weren’t afraid of putting some elbow grease into our new home, our new start.

We circled in red listings that met our strict criteria before presenting them to our mother. During her twenty-minute breather between the last breakfast sitting and the preparations for our mid-afternoon dinner, she would carefully scrutinize our choices, selecting three or four that seemed worth viewing. Once the roast was in the oven (to be cooked almost beyond recognition for 3-4 hours), we would pile into the family car we were so humiliated by that whole rows of us ducked simultaneously to tighten shoelaces when we passed anyone we knew or might want to know. My father never joined us. Only long walks tempted him away from his books and newspapers.

Looking with my mother and my siblings for potential houses (initially to buy and then to rent when my father became terrified by the idea of ownership), I absorbed early the idea that setting was destiny. If that were true, then we needed to claim the right one. Each new house offered the possibility of a new family lurking behind the one that had charaded as the O’Learys for so long. We children would shed all our fears and anxieties.

Our father would be even-tempered, competent, maybe even successful. Our mother would be open, attentive, and affectionate.

I consciously tried on every place we visited, standing on the street and imagining turning the corner, approaching the house, climbing the steps, opening the door to our new home. Who would I be as I did all that? Often something told me that I would be the wrong me. Other times, I grew almost feverish with excitement, sniffing out an exotic persona just waiting to be called into being the minute we assumed ownership. When my mother, for any of a variety of reasons, rejected a house I was drawn to, I felt as if I was abandoning a potential me.

One rejection was unanimous: we all gave the thumbs down to a house on Brattle Street in Cambridge. Such a rejection by such as we was both astounding and ludicrous. It takes a lot of chutzpah or a weak head to turn down a chance to reside (“reside” is really the only appropriate term for such a lofty setting) on this illustrious street, the former and current home of so many literary, political, intellectual, and commercial giants of our country. I like to think of us showing up on a gray November Sunday afternoon in our turn-of-the-century looking automobile with its wooden panels and ridiculously high roof, disgorging ourselves from cramped front, middle, and back seats, tumbling into the show house with missing buttons, worn out shoes, too big or too small overcoats, looking around and saying emphatically, “Sorry, but this simply won’t do.”

It was a rambling, well-kept Victorian with a wide berth between it and the lovely tree-lined avenue. Each of us could have had our own room and there were two full bathrooms. The place was profligate with storage space and, well, you really could not have asked for more enlightened neighbors since the descendants of Emerson himself lived nearby. But we simply had no choice. While untreed grounds repelled us, those stately towering elms on all sides shrouded the house in an untenable way. We craved light, one of our many *sine qua nons*. “Thanks but no thanks,” we said apologetically, climbing back up into our pumpkin coach, retreating like so many Cinderellas to our humble but well-lit hearth. I do not know if the Brattle Street house was ever a real option. Perhaps it was an occasion when my mother, following her own inscrutable ways, opted to indulge us, visiting a house she knew was wildly out of our range. But I like to think that we could have if we would have --and we didn't.

After a search of a year or more, our tireless mother found the place in which I would spend my last years at home. Undoubtedly a little battered, unquestionably drafty, it was, in all important respects, ideal. Our new home was a quarter of an enormous, sprawling edifice, not so different from the Brattle Street house we had rejected months earlier. Our flat was on the second and third stories which secured us lovely vistas. Leafy trees stood before and behind the house. The long driveway was lined with tall lilac and forsythia bushes; each spring first the scent-heavy lilac and then the pushy

bright yellow forsythia would have their day. For months the house was luxuriously full of flowers.

We were wild with the contrast between this house and the cramped, breathless house we had left behind. I roamed through the nine rooms, feeling pores I didn't know I possessed open and breathe deeply. The ridiculously, exuberantly long hallway (almost 80 feet!) promised to lead us to the brightest of futures. In those first weeks, the space made us generous with each other and with our mother in terms of helping her unpack and impose order upon the many years' accumulation of earthly goods. I had never seen her so happy.

My family's real estate adventures left me with a lifelong interest in houses and in the ways in which they fit and do not fit those who inhabit them. Almost every morning, I walk up and down the streets in the neighborhood I have lived in for three decades admiring the houses as if for the first time. I drive to nearby neighborhoods and lose myself in rich imaginings about the interiors and about the residents based entirely on the exteriors of houses. And I imagine what it would be like, what I would be like if I lived there.

A house, a place, isn't everything, of course. After our big move in the 1960's, my family learned the hard lesson that, wherever you go, you'll be there. We were, in most respects, the mother, the father, the children we had

been. But I have no doubt that our glorious new flat allowed all of us to be more of what we wanted to be than if we had stayed put.

As I floated, drunk with delight, from room to lovely room, I echoed in a whisper words uttered by my father who, despite initial resistance to the move, was as emotionally transported as the rest of us. Almost daily, gazing out at gracious trees through tall bay windows, he rather histrionically exclaimed, “We live, my dears, in the midst of a veritable forest! Oh, we are so blessed!” His words would appear on no real estate prospectus; they would never clinch a deal. But that didn’t matter to us. We were sold. My mother had brought us home.