

## YOU THOUGHT

Alison tightened her hand on her husband's arm as they followed their realtor up the stone path to the 1920's craftsman bungalow. They'd waited so long to be shown a decent house within their limited budget. Finally this one had come along and Sheila, clad today in an impossibly bubble-gum pink pantsuit, had reassured them it was a must-see. "Perfect for a young couple," the realtor had promised. "A steal at this price. I don't think you'll be disappointed."

Now they gazed at the house in front of them. "Oh, Charlie," Alison said, a catch in her voice. "Look at the front porch. We could sit outside after dinner. Enjoy the sunsets."

Overhearing, Sheila smiled over her shoulder at them, her look satisfied. "The house *is* charming, isn't it? Did I mention there's a basement?" she asked. "Just look at the yard! What a lovely place for children to play."

Alison glanced up at her husband. Children! Perhaps that could happen now, since they were finally settling down. After seven apartments in as many years, she could barely stomach the thought of another impermanent home. But she didn't want to press him on that dream, at least not yet. "The begonias are beautiful, don't you think?" she said instead, pointing at the pinkish-orange flowers in front of the house. "We could have a garden!"

"Mmm," he murmured, his eyes running over the front windows. His gaze continued upward to the roof. "When were the gutters last cleaned?" he asked Sheila pointedly.

The realtor pursed her lips and glanced down at the materials on a clipboard she was carrying. They'd met Sheila, all sugary and sticky, a few months ago at a barbecue thrown by a mutual friend. They'd gotten to talking about the local housing market, and before they knew it, they'd signed her on as their realtor.

"Gutters done a year ago," Sheila said brightly. She placed her hand on the doorknob. "Imagine if you will, walking into your new home."

She opened the door with a flourish, and stepped aside so they could get the whole effect at once. "Voila!"

Alison gasped as she looked about the living room in pleasure. Snug but cheerful, there were inlaid wooden bookcases and a beautiful carved cabinet. A fireplace with a mantel was the centerpiece of one wall. A sudden image came to her, of the two of them sitting by a warm fire on a winter's night, a dog at Charlie's feet, a baby on her lap.

As they explored, each room seemed more delightful than the last. Hand-carved window seats. All in the Arts & Crafts Style. Warm earth tones, blues, greys, yellow. The final moment came when she opened the door to a small room beside the master bedroom.

"A nursery," Sheila said brightly. "You thought about that, didn't you?"

Alison turned back to her husband. "Charlie," she said. "We must have this house."

#

The next few weeks passed in a whirlwind. Offer. Counter offer. Another offer. Excitedly they had jumped into the bidding. Then another buyer had jumped into the mix. Sheila urged them to stay in, to counter.

Higher, Higher.

They were already reaching the upper edge of what Charlie wanted to pay.

But Sheila had kept urging them to counter.

Higher, higher.

Finally, the good news. They had won the bidding war. The house was theirs. For keeps.

A quick go-around at the bank. A warning about the mortgage they were taking on. But at an acceptable level of risk, the loan officers deemed the sale viable. Alison and Charlie ignored the clucking of tongues and the head-shaking.

At least the house inspection had gone easily. Sheila had known a guy. Lorenzo. Friendly and confident, Lorenzo had assured them there were only a few relatively minor issues with the house. Some windows that could use new frames. The recommendation of a new furnace. Some pipes that might be switched out in time. Nothing urgent. They were both relieved.

At the closing. Charlie had hesitated before signing the contract. Alison could see him staring at the numbers. Numbers they had discussed, but in writing now looked formidable.

Alison leaned down and kissed his stubbly cheek. "I know it's more than what we wanted to pay," she whispered.

"A lot more," he grumbled.

Beside her, Sheila coughed.

The seller's agent began to tap her pencil. She was an older woman with greying hair and spectacles and an awful plaid suit. "I hope we don't have to go to the other bidder," she said in a loud aside to Sheila. "I'd hate to prolong this further for my client."

Sheila shook her head. "Alison and Charlie love this house," she whispered back, loudly. "They know this is a good deal, for a tough market."

The other realtor nodded curtly and everyone stared at Charlie. Alison felt a warm flush spread over her cheeks. Why was he being so difficult?

"Excuse us," Alison said to the others. She drew Charlie to a far corner of the room.

"I know it's a lot more," she whispered. "But we'll manage. And just think! We can get a basketball hoop and—"

"Not right away we can't." His voice was flat.

"Alright Charlie," she said, trying to hide her rising impatience. "I won't buy any new clothes for a year—a year!—and I won't get any more lattes and—"

"And we can't have a baby this year. I know that's what you thought, but there's no way we can afford it. Maybe even for two or three years," he said, searching her face. "Are you sure, Ally? We can still walk away."

Alison thought about the snug living room and the nursery, feeling a funny little twitch. "Well, we'll wait for the baby."

And they signed the papers. Charlie clenched his fingers around the key, staring at it for a long moment while everyone congratulated them. Then he smiled at Alison. "Our own home!"

#

Over the next weeks, they packed and planned. Alison even drew up little floor plans, imagining where their belongings would fit. From years of moving from state to state, they'd already weeded out most of their furniture. When she asked him about getting anything new, Charlie had just stared at her, before turning away. There was nothing more to be said.

Finally, it was moving day. The morning was a bit overcast and the grounds were a bit wet from the night before. Their arms and backs were aching from wrestling their huge old sofa down three flights of stairs at their old apartment, and they were both trying not to snap at each other.

Getting out of the truck they stood looking at the house. The flowers had lost a bit of their bloom and the house looked gray and a bit forlorn.

With a bit of forced gaiety, Alison called out, "Our house is ready for its new family!" She glanced back at Charlie. "What's wrong?"

Charlie was frowning at the second floor. Pointing, he said, "The upstairs windows were all left open. Hopefully these recent rains didn't cause much damage." But his smile was warm as he caught her in his arms. "Who cares about that? Come, my dear."

"You're going to hurt your back," she cried, realizing his intent. "You can't carry me up the stairs."

"I'm fine," he said with gritted teeth. As they walked in, he accidentally banged Alison's head on the door. She tried to bite back the squeal of pain, but he heard it anyway.

“Sorry,” he said, setting her back on her feet. When he thought she wasn’t looking, he rubbed his back.

But he pulled something, she sighed. She reached over to flick on the lights.

They didn’t work. Charlie went over and flicked another switch on the wall. That didn’t work either. “I suppose we should have set up the electricity.” His chuckle was wry. “Never had to take care of that in an apartment.”

“We’ll figure it out tomorrow.” She pulled out her cell phone. “Tonight we order pizza, dig out the flashlights and blankets, and camp out in the bedroom.”

“I like camping in,” he said, moving to embrace her. “We can skip the pizza.”

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The next day was sunny and bright, helping dispel a bit of their initial uneasiness. During the night they had found a few bugs in the upstairs bedrooms and some evidence of mice in the kitchen and basement.

“Poor little critters,” Alison sighed. “I guess we’ll have to call the exterminator.”

After cleaning all morning they went to sit out on the front porch swing. Or at least they tried to. The swing creaked unpleasantly when they sat down, and they discovered the roof was rotting through where the swing was connected. So they sat on the front steps instead, eating apples, the cheapest thing they could get from the grocery store that didn’t require cooking.

“Yoo-hoo!” A familiar voice called. It was Sheila, wearing a pantsuit that was a rather hideous shade of purple. She mounted the steps, extending her hand in greeting. “How are my favorite new home-owners? Everything even more fun than you thought?”

Reluctantly Alison and Charlie stood up, as she continued speaking in her breathless way. “I’m off to show some clients a nearby bungalow and I thought I’d see how you’re settling.”

She ran her hand along the chipped paint of the doorframe. “Those bungalows are a steal. A bit bigger than what you have here, in a little better condition. I think my niece will buy one.”

She continued, oblivious to the outraged glance exchanged between Alison and Charlie. “It’s over on Cedar. You’ll practically be neighbors.” Here, she actually gave a little clap of her hands.

“The bungalows by the school?” Alison felt an unexpected lump in her throat. “I thought you said none of those were available.”

Sheila shifted her feet. “Oh. Right. Well, they weren’t. Not exactly. But I knew someone who knew someone who’d be putting her house on the market.” Her voice trailed off, as Alison stared at her.

“So you thought you’d get your niece a great deal,” Charlie said flatly.

Hearing his tone, Sheila grew flustered. She pulled out a colorfully wrapped package from her expensive looking bag. Prada, no doubt. Or maybe Kate Spade. Alison wouldn’t know. “This is for you. A gift.”

When neither spoke, she laid it on the porch rail. “Welcome to your new home!” she chirped, before backing hastily down the steps and clipping quickly down the front walk.

“It’s not ticking,” Alison said, mustering a half-smile.

“Too bad,” Charlie replied, without smiling at all. “Maybe we could blow this place up and collect the insurance.”

“Very funny.” Her curiosity overtaking her, Alison pulled the string off the package. Inside was a gaudy white alabaster elephant, with a red and gold rhinestone saddle. She rolled her eyes. “Nice. Wherever shall we put it?”

“The trash?” Charlie responded, trying to sound more cheerful.

Alison set the elephant on the seat of the broken swing. “The houses on Cedar are pretty nice,” she said, walking inside.

Charlie followed her in and pulled Alison into his arms with care. “It doesn’t matter, sweetheart. *This* is our home, for better or for worse. Don’t worry. I was just joking about blowing the house up. Mostly.” He smiled down at her, but she could see the strain in his jaw.

Alison nodded, her eyes caught on a small dark stain in a corner of the living room ceiling. She hadn’t seen it before. Looked to be a leak.

“It had better not be worse,” she said, breaking away from his embrace.

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Two weeks passed. Alison and Charlie had begun to settle into their home. “Or is it that the home is settling into us?” Charlie asked once.

Alison wasn’t sure if he was joking. Every day something seemed to break. Or tear. Or crumble.

First it was the doorknob that pulled off in Alison’s hand. “Vintage charm!” she called.



Charlie had dutifully gone to the local hardware store to find a replacement for the rusted doorknob.

Cracks began to show through the newly painted walls. “Vintage charm!” they’d call to each other, although the little joke was already wearing thin. Again, Charlie bought some putty and spackling, and wordlessly began to fix the most troublesome areas.

Soon they stopped even trying to joke, as more things seemed to fall part in their hands.

Crown molding in the living room had become dislodged. “This isn’t even wood,” Charlie commented in disgust upon examining the offending piece. Someone had clearly patched it up with far cheaper plastic designed to look like wood.

To make matters worse, the downstairs toilet stopped up. When the plumber arrived, he threw up his hands in despair. As it turns out, the toilet must have been backed up for years. “Didn’t you ask about this?” Chastened, they’d only shaken their heads. Too excited they’d been, planning out the living room, the bedroom. The nursery.

When the lights flickered, in came the electrician. More shaking of heads. “Major rewiring!” Charlie said when the man handed him the estimate. “This house is a money trap!”

Finally, Charlie just stalked out. From the living room window, she could see him tramping and stamping about in the yard. When he came back in, there was a grim set to his jaw. “We need to deal with this.”

“I’ll call Sheila,” she said. “Now.”

#

“Buyer’s Remorse.” Sheila’s voice bubbled through the speakerphone. “That’s what we call what you’re experiencing.” While still unfailingly perky, there was a tinge of something else there. Annoyance? No. It was condescension, Alison decided. “We often see it with young buyers, who pay more than they should have for a home. You thought—”

“You’re the one who told us to buy! Your friend Lorenzo told us the house was fine! He lied to us!” Alison cried, wishing she could slap the woman across her silly fuchsia mouth. “You lied to us too! You said this house would be a good investment in our future! It’s rotting from the inside!” She could hear the tears rising in her voice. Charlie heard it too, and he swallowed hard when he looked at her.

“Allison. It is certainly not my fault if Lorenzo missed something during the house inspection. I suggest you take up those concerns with him.”

“But you said—”

Sheila cut her off. “Yes, I told you that buying a house would be a good investment in your future.” Here Sheila’s voice took on a distinct chill. “But I never told you to buy that house specifically. I suggest you just make peace with yourselves and your purchase.”

“B-b-but..!” Alison sputtered. She looked over at Charlie. His face was expressionless.

“I’ve got to go, my dears,” Sheila said, her voice regaining its false brightness. “My niece is closing on her new bungalow today. Beautiful place. So lovely to hear from you.”

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Her head throbbing, Alison got in her Ford Escort and drove to the bungalows near the local elementary school. They were lovely and immaculately tended.

Then she saw Sheila, placing a “Sold” sign in front of one of the homes.

Alison pulled over so that she would not be seen. She turned on the radio and “You Thought” by the Go-Go’s came blaring out of the speakers. *‘That song’s about betrayal,’* she remembered Charlie telling her once, and she turned it up. Not that she needed to be reminded. Life’s about betrayal.

She watched as Sheila put her arm around the young woman—presumably her niece—and they both beamed at a man taking a picture with his smart phone.

So happy they all looked! A deep wrenching pain tore at her stomach, and she doubled over, nearly hitting her head on the steering wheel. Watching Sheila prance about, she wanted to get out and punch her. Knock her right to the ground. Trounce her. Fling her about like a rag doll.

She didn't know how long she watch, as they mugged for the camera, oblivious to her mounting rage. Neighbors from the house next door came over, shaking their hands, welcoming them to the neighborhood, congratulating them on their new home.

Finally, they disappeared inside the house.

“I hope their pipes crack too,” she whispered, turning the engine back on. Somehow she doubted that would happen. The street just looked too well tended and the house too well cared for. It wasn’t a dud like theirs.

The throbbing in her head began to grow more incessant.

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As Alison drove back down her own street, she looked at the rows of darkened windows. Who lived here anyway? No one had come by to greet them, she realized. No baskets of muffins. No nice bottles of wine. Hell, not even a six-pack on moving day.

Thinking about beer made her go inside the house and grab one from the fridge. Charlie seemed to have stepped out. Maybe he went to work. She didn't even know.

Despite her now raging headache, she pounded the beer and grabbed another and pounded that one, too. She took a third beer and wandered out into the front yard, propping herself up against their single tree. An oak.

Bits of bark lay all over the ground. Rotted. Great.

Her eyes drifted over to the garden that had so enchanted her on the day of the showing. For the first time, she noticed that all the flowers were dead.

Then she frowned. It wasn't winter yet. Why were the flowers dead already?

Glowing, she set her beer aside and stomped over to the flowerbeds. The flowers were just lying there. She picked up a handful of soil. Not rich. Rocky.

Shit. The flowers had just been part of the show. The staging, as realtors liked to call it. The deception.

In disgust, she dumped the rest of her beer onto the flowers. Then with all her might, she threw the bottle against the side of the house, not caring when the shards flew everywhere.

She went back into the house, just in time to see a little mouse scurry across the floor.

"That's it," she said out loud to the empty room. "That's IT!"

She kicked at the wall, half expecting to make a great hole. But of course the wall was solid, and she only succeeded in hurting her foot. Maybe even broke it. She began to scream. “Shit! Shit! Shit!”

She went upstairs then, hitting things wherever she went, shrieking and crying in frustration.

Finally, she found herself in the little room. The one-day nursery. Tears began to flow harder and more fiercely than she could ever remember. Harder than when her mother had died five years before.

“We gave up a baby for this! We gave up a baby for this!”

#

“Ally?”

Alison woke with a start at the sound of Charlie’s voice. At some point, she must have fallen asleep on the hard wooden floor. How long had she been asleep? She couldn’t tell. The room seemed a little darker, like the sun was starting to go down. Her toes were throbbing terribly and she groaned.

“Ally?” Charlie was kneeling beside her, a concerned look on his face. “What happened?”

“I’ve come to a decision,” she said. She was calm. Miraculously, her headache was gone at least.

“Yes?” he asked cautiously. “What is it?”

“I’m going to kill her. Sheila.”

Did he nod? Later, she wouldn't remember. Not when her lawyer asked her. Not when the prosecuting counsel demanded she answer. She just said she couldn't remember.

Or maybe it was as Charlie claimed. That he'd heard her say, "I'm going to talk to her."

That there had been no premeditation.

For Charlie just shrugged. "Not gonna change anything."

"We'll see." She reached down to cup her bruised and purple toes in her hand. "We'll see."

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The next afternoon, Alison stood in front of a house across town, staring at the "For Sale" sign out front, with its garish picture of Sheila smirking at the viewer. Beneath it, hanging from two chains, a smaller sign proclaimed "Open House, 2-4 pm today."

It had been easy enough to look up Sheila's local listings online and locate the address of this home. This one was on Oak Street. She'd parked her car two blocks away, and limped the rest of the way on foot.

With a quick glance up and down the street, Alison pulled out a pen from her bag and drew whiskers on Sheila's face and blackened her teeth. Childish, but it made her feel better. She then disconnected the smaller sign and laid it face down on the grass.

She checked her watch. 3:55 p.m.

Two cars were parked out front. Sheila's Corvette she recognized, with its "DEAL 4 U" vanity plate. There was another car behind it, suggesting someone was inside looking at the house.

For a long moment she stared at her house. Another Craftsman bungalow, which were common in this neighborhood. Rather like hers, actually. She moved slowly toward the house, pausing to look at the flowers strewn along the front. They were untidily arranged, as though someone had just dug a few holes and indifferently placed the flowers in the ground. She could see that some of the flowers were already bent and wilted. They would not last long.

The front door opened then and a couple stepped out of the house, bidding farewell to someone within. They did not notice Alison in the shadows.

“So wonderful,” the woman gushed. “Andrew, what did you think? It’s not too far from the schools and park and—”

“I didn’t like the smell in there,” he said. “I bet there’s a problem with the sewer.”

“Oh poo,” the woman replied. “Sheila said the house next door had been gardening. Just a manure smell. It’ll go away.” She was about to say more, when she caught sight of Alison.

“Coming to see the house?” she asked. Alison could hear the protective sound in her voice.

“The flowers look fresh dug,” Alison commented. “Soil probably won’t hold a garden.” She pointed to the roof. “Looks like the gutter is broken. Too much run-off here.”

The woman glared at her. “Come on Andrew,” she said, pulling the man away. Still within earshot, she added, “Honestly, what people will say to scare off other buyers.”

As they walked away though, the man—Andrew—turned around and looked back at the flowers, and back up to the gutter. Frowning, he said something to the woman who, after an outraged squawk, began to sputter something in very angry words.

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Turning away from them, Alison stepped through the front door of the bungalow.

“Welcome!” Sheila called out in her sickly sweet voice, opening her arms wide. She was even wearing the same bubble-gum suit that Alison so despised.

Recognizing Alison, she stopped short. “Oh. What are you doing here? Back on the market already? Surely your house isn’t *that* bad.” She tittered nervously, before faltering under Alison’s gaze. She checked her watch. “I’m nearly done for the day. Oh, these open houses kill me.”

“I was just curious about this house.” Alison forced herself to smile, to unclench her jaw. “My sister is interested in buying into this neighborhood.” At the lie, she could feel her heart begin to beat faster.

Sheila’s smile grew brighter, the prospect of a sale bringing back her forced merriment. “Oh certainly! How wonderful. Let me show you around. We’ll start on this floor, and then I’ll show you the upstairs masters, and a room that could serve as a nursery. With a little work, it will be gorgeous. A showplace.”

“Of course,” Alison said, a steady buzzing in her ears. At the word nursery she had clenched her stomach. Now, she sniffed the air delicately. “Do I detect a sewer smell? That’s not good. I’d like to see the basement. My sister will want to know if it’s flooded.”

“Flooded? Certainly not.”



“Still, I’d like to see it.”

Sheila sighed. “As you wish. This way,” she said. “You know, there was a lovely couple here, just a few minutes before. My gut tells me they’re going to put in an offer. So your sister might have some competition, but I’m sure we can get her a good price. Does she have an agent already?”

Ignoring the question, Alison followed Sheila into the kitchen, so that they stood together at the top of the basement stairs.

Sheila turned back towards her, speaking a little too quickly. “It may be a little damp down there, but nothing a sump pump and dehumidifier can’t take care of. I bet that’s what you thought, too.” She turned back. “So dark,” she said. “Let me find the pull-chain for the light.”

“Oh I see it,” Alison said, moving as if to reach past her. “Let me help you.”

Then, with a quick violent shove, the deed was done.

Sheila barely even screamed as she plummeted down the steep stairs.

Alison could just make out her twisted form in the greyness. She wasn’t moving. Or was she?

She had to know. Reaching out, she found the chain and pulled it, hard. The light from a single bare bulb illuminated the stairs and the unmoving figure below.

Carefully she made her way down the rotting stairs and gazed down at Sheila, sprawled out at impossible angles. Her eyes, glazed over by tears, were already fixed. One ridiculous pink pump had fallen into a dirty puddle. Alison had to fight the urge to return it to Sheila’s stockinged foot.

#

Alison walked out of the house, feeling in a bubble-gum fog.

A blue Honda pulled up and a man and a woman got out. “I hope we’re not too late for the open house,” she heard the man say, as he slammed the car door.

Alison began to giggle. “It’s not what you thought,” she said.

“Huh?” the man said, staring down at her. “What’s that?”

“It’s not an open house,” she replied, finding it impossible to contain her laughter.

“I-It’s a closing.”

“What?” the woman said, looking annoyed. “I saw it online.”

Later, her defense attorney would claim Alison was in shock over Sheila’s accident, when trying to explain her next words in court.

“I don’t think you’d want this house,” Alison replied, the giggles still bubbling out of her. “There’s a dead rat in the basement.”

She began to laugh harder and harder, not noticing that the couple was edging away from her. “She thinks she closed the deal!” Alison choked out. A strange realization came over her. “But the deal closed her!”

With that, Alison sat down cross-legged on the dried-out grass, laughing and laughing, until finally the laughter gave way to tears.