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### **Bless This House**

My house celebrates its one-hundredth birthday this year. Originally a farmhouse surrounded by the rich soil of Terra Nova on the flatlands of Lulu Island, this three-storied house gazes over the dyke at the Fraser River and the North Shore mountains.

I love my house. I first stood on the veranda eight years ago. "This is my house," I said to my realtor with a grin. I had not yet viewed inside, but I instinctively knew that this was where my two daughters and I would start our post-divorce life. The night before I set out with the realtor in quest of a home, I had dreamt that the house I bought had a claw-foot bathtub, and sure enough, there it was, six feet long, white, begging for new hardware, but otherwise ready for a long hot soak.

I saw beyond the worn out kitchen and bathrooms, beyond the scruffy carpet and fading paint. I envisioned the masterpiece it is today, a melody of muted green and soft yellow walls, azure tiled countertops, sage green wool carpets, and restored antique light fixtures. I say that I envisioned the look and style, but it was the house that inhaled me, guided me, and said, "Make me a home again and I will give you sanctuary."

I have lived in many houses. My parents were builders, and we moved every year or two. Then I married a builder, managed our construction/design company, and we too moved every year. "How could you leave that house?" friends would ask. "Easy," I'd answer, "It's just a piece of wood." I've always lived in new houses. I've hammered the first nail to hang a picture. I've cooked the first meal. I've wiped away the first dust. But this is the first old house I've lived in. This house is different. This house has an

established soul. This house seems to be designed for intimacy, a contrast from the stark coldness of contemporary tract “mansions”. As Jerome K. Jerome, an English writer, said, “I wanted a house that has got over all its troubles; I don’t want to spend the rest of my life bringing up a young and inexperienced house.” I wanted to be just one in a series of inhabitants who shared a place where their lives unfolded, for better or for worse.

Having been neglected and unloved for a number of years, my house needed an overhaul. The renovation took only eight weeks to complete, a relatively short time for the amount of work involved. Everything flowed effortlessly. The tradesmen were available, even though the work fell over the Christmas holidays; the materials were all in stock, and there were none of the hidden surprises that renovations can unearth. When we moved in on a sunny, cold day in February, my eldest daughter sat cross-legged in the middle of her bed in her freshly painted and carpeted room and grinned, “I’m home.”

All three of us felt like that. We felt safe. We no longer listened for the garage door to open, holding our breath, waiting to see what kind of mood my husband, my kids’ father, would be in. Here, in my bastion, I could complete divorce proceedings and the complicated undoing of a lifetime together with another person.

For houses are more than floors and ceilings, walls and doors, brick and glass. Houses protect us from the elements, provide a place to store our earthly “stuff”, offer a place to sleep and dream and eat and love and argue and create and grow. Along with our chest of drawers and kitchen table, we share our home with our hopes, successes and failures, joys and sorrows, our taste in colour, space, fabrics and furnishings, and a whole lot of invisible spirit and energy. Might we not be sharing our homes with the spirit and energy of past lives and possibly the spirit and energy from generations past in our

family's heritage? The psychologist Jung said we internalize "the whisper" of our parents', grandparents' and great grandparents' experiences. And who is to say that when the prior tenants moved out, they didn't leave some of their spirit and energy behind? Houses are more than just sticks and stones. They hold, like fingerprints, a bit of everyone who has passed through the doors.

People often claim that they "fell in love" with their house at first sight. It's as if we marry our houses and then transform them into homes. We make mortgage commitments that are intended to last longer than most marriages, but it's a rare phenomenon today for a family home to remain in the family for more than a generation. Too often the family sells the home to developers who bulldoze it down to make way for a larger home or mountains of condominiums. Such obsolete family homes die an early death, though sometimes, bits and pieces are salvaged, recycled, and transplanted into new or renovated homes. This is not unlike the way inhabitants transplant themselves to new locales, taking a piece or two, perhaps an Echinacea plant or clump of irises, to root themselves again. To put these plants in the ground knowing they'll bloom faithfully every summer is a form of ritual, a blessing given to celebrate a new address, a way of saying this house will be more than just shelter.

Most cultures and religions around the world bless their houses through rituals. Blessings by priests, rabbis, and other religious leaders have always been popular, but lately some homeowners have created a patchwork of secular rituals. In the way couples personalize their wedding vows homeowners personalize house blessings. They may borrow from religious symbolism, elements of Chinese *feng shui*, or traditional housewarming customs to create a special baptism for a new dwelling. Many customs

spring directly from the literal meaning of housewarming. Ann Wall Frank, an authority on house blessing rituals, says that in prehistoric times, when the eldest son left his family, he took a piece of the ancestral fire with him to keep the family spirit alive. Several house-blessing traditions involve a ceremony around the first fire in a hearth, keystone tiles installed around a hearth, or special woods or herbs added to a fire.

When Jews move to a new house, they attach a mezuzah, a small holder for a parchment scroll carrying two quotes from Deuteronomy, outside the front door on the top right door frame. This is not a good-luck charm, but a reminder to those entering of the presence of the Lord.

Other rituals passed down for centuries do revolve around lucky charms. Horseshoes over the door were originally used to repel witches (who were thought to be afraid of horses). Ritual cleaning, aromatherapy, a celebratory meal, burning sage or cedar – these are not New Age practices. They’ve been around for centuries. They speak to our need to make our houses sacred places. Symbolic gifts of dried corn or bread act as a wish for abundance, coins for prosperity, candles for a fresh start, and small bags of sugar placed in kitchen cupboards for sweetness of life.

Home-warming ceremonies often take place in conjunction with tacking up house numbers or installing a new mailbox. The previous owners of my house called it “The Blue Heron”. I christened it “Heritage House” and burned incense after I set an old corrugated metal mailbox on the ledge at the foot of the front stairs. Over the front door I nailed a tiny silver milagro of the female torso – the Mexican symbol for good health. These small rituals were a welcome antidote to the upheaval of moving and they aided in a return to an orderly existence. They brought a sense of completion to the move,

imparting a sense of clearing out the old and making a place for the new. They bonded me to my new surroundings.

I nurtured my relationship with the house when I bought a dog, fenced the yard, and hung an old red metal gate found in an urban antique store. I continually cleaned the windows of sea spray and cleared the gutters. I planted tulips, daffodils, snowdrops, wisteria, honeysuckle, climbing roses and winter jasmine. I planned the garden to give year-round colour and bloom. I worked the soil, fertilized, watered, and found a rusty rouge pot, an old coin, a key without a lock, marbles, and a red truck dinky toy. The earth pushed upwards, delivering reminders of past lives lived right here on this land. Don't Forget Us, they seemed to say.

This house has touched many of the people who lived here. I know that because some of them have knocked on the door. "I used to live here and was wondering if I could take a look, show the wife and kids." I never say no. I invite them in, show them around and listen as their memories return. "The basement was a dirt floor, where we stored potatoes and apples." They'd point out the window, "That's Swishwash Island, we'd swim there." I learned about how it was once safe to swim in the river, how eagles once nested in the tree in my front yard, and how someone slipped in the bathtub and drowned. But even before the house was built and inhabited, the land was used as a summer camp by the Musqueam Indians, "protectors of the river", who fished at the mouth of the river for thousands of years. Then, in 1868, the land where my house now sits was one of the first two parcels of land sold on the island. Corporal William McColl, a Royal Engineer surveyor whose job also included maintaining law and order in the area, purchased it for ten shillings an acre. Slowly, over the years, the rich fertile soil

became the ground for a multitude of houses, so that today my house no longer stands alone.

When friends and guests visit, I think they must feel the essence of those who lived on the land so many years ago as they often comment on how they feel hugged by the house as they walk through the door. Those experiencing a crisis - troubled marriage or a job loss – climb onto a stool at the island in the kitchen and burst into tears. I listen and serve tea with honey. They take their leave rejuvenated, but puzzled as to why, in this particular house, they feel safe enough to be vulnerable.

The house understands vulnerable. Like my daughters and I, when we moved in, it too was worn down. Together, we helped protect and heal each other. We got stronger. We were able to open to others, let them in and continue to nurture. I thought I would never move. This was the house to which my children would bring their children. So I lovingly cared for it, repaired it, kept the yard lush and colourful. I stayed home, worked from home, fed and hugged my daughters, nursed my soul on the veranda, watched seals play in the river, eagles dive for their dinner, float planes churn the water. This house was a relationship, like a safe friend, a place of refuge while life sorted itself out.

But now I'm ready to move on. My mind, body, and soul are restored and want to continue their journey. My wanderlust has returned. I'm no longer content to stay in one home indefinitely. I want to explore other parts of the city, maybe the country. Now that one daughter is away at college, the house seems too big. The size, lots of room to find cozy corners to curl up in, was what I loved when I bought the house. The yard as well, expansive grass bordered by trees and bushes, was a selling point for me. But now I've come to dislike the size of the house and the yard. Keeping up with the cleaning,

trimming the laurel bushes, topping the cedar hedge, clearing winter debris, pulling away the ivy from under the roof is hard work. Work that once was therapeutic – scrubbing sinks, washing floors and walls, raking fallen cherries and autumn leaves – I just don't want to do anymore. Isn't that the way with relationships? What first attracted us later repels us.

A friend accuses me of not being sentimental. She's bought a condominium and will be moving in a few months but she already mourns the loss of her rental apartment. Just the thought of leaving her living space causes her lower lip to tremble. I may not be sentimental when it comes to a construct of 2x4s and brick, but I have saved my daughters' favourite toys and outfits, and I compiled a scrapbook of their artwork. Perhaps it is ingrained in my genes – this lack of rootedness, this ease of moving on, not attaching to houses. My ancestors, for hundreds of years, have moved between continents, countries, provinces, cities and streets. They took the essence of "home" with them. They knew that home lay in the heart. They knew about sticks and stones and big bad wolves. They knew how to find protection when needed and how to move on when ready.

And so I have decided to sell my beloved house, but like some human relationships, when one person is ready much earlier for the separation than the other, and usually long before the other has any idea something is wrong, my house appears not to be ready for the change. The pounding of the For Sale sign into the front lawn surprised my house. And even though the sign was securely installed, the land rejected it, pushed until it tilted at a forty-five degree angle. Do Not Leave.

I listed with my realtor nine months ago. The day I listed the house, three pipes burst – in the guest bathroom, dining room, and furnace room. Was the house crying? Since then, the concrete driveway has buckled and divided, separating the house from the road. Do Not Enter; Do Not Leave, the house seems to be saying. The perimeter drains clogged and with a heavy rainfall and a high tide, the house was surrounded by a moat. Do Not Enter. Do Not Leave. The oven, the heart of the home, no longer heats up. A broken heart? Three lamps fell over, the glass shades shattered. Four other light fixtures refused to work, even when I replaced the bulbs. The electrical wires, like veins, twisting and turning unseen behind the walls, short circuit in despair. Do Not Leave. The hot water tank started leaking, drip-by-drip, life slowly draining away. The fridge's cooling system failed. Am I getting the cold shoulder?

My realtor receives more calls on my house than any listing she's ever had. Potential buyers stay in the house for hours; they wander from room to room, run their hands over the banister, sit in the window seats and stare out the window. They ask the realtor why I'm selling such a beautiful home and she tells them that I'm downsizing. My house though, is uncooperative and seems unwilling to let me go. How else can I explain why it hasn't sold? The price is right, so is the location, and so are the original pine floors and the claw foot bathtub with its new brushed chrome fittings. With everyone loving the house, with people knocking on the door to enquire about it, but with no sale yet, I can only assume that the house is somehow spitting these potential owners back onto the street, shooing them away. Not worthy replacements? Not suitable? Nothing to offer an old house?

I don't know how to detach from the bond I established with the house. I don't know how to divorce my house. The roots of the house have withstood the past one hundred years. They hold fast. The walls whisper like a lover, seducing, coaxing, Do Not Leave. This house is not about to let me go without a fight. I do not know any counter-rituals to release me from the commitment I originally made. Jonathan Swift wrote about a man who, when he had a mind to sell his house, carried one of its bricks in his pocket. He would use it to entice potential buyers. I've even heard of a couple who consulted a psychic when their house wouldn't sell. She told them to buy a new salad bowl, make a salad, and offer it to the house. Apparently, their house accepted that simple act and released them. It sold within days, and the couple moved on. A realtor friend phoned to offer me *feng shui* sales advice. "Take a utensil from the kitchen, put it in an envelope and throw it in the river." A salad bowl? A brick? A fork or knife?

Do I really want to sell the house? Am I totally healed? Perhaps I am sending out confusing messages, wanting to sell the house, but not acknowledging the sadness about leaving it. Possibly I haven't put the house up for sale in my heart. How do my children really feel about selling the house? Even though they get excited when the realtor calls and say, "I hope she has an offer," have I just tried to convince them that they will be happy after the move? Maybe sad energy hangs around, sulking and pouting, paralysing the energy needed to transfer the house to somebody else. Maybe I hoard old hurts, humiliation, failures, losses, and pains. Do these fill up not only my life, but also my house? The only reason I see for not really wanting to move is the thought of the work involved - sorting, packing, distributing, garage sales, the dump, moving, boxes, boxes,

boxes. Other than that, I look forward to parting with dozens of shoes, hundreds of old magazines and greeting cards.

Thinking that a good sage smudging might release any stuck energy, I made an appointment with the psychic I'd heard about. I asked her, "Why won't my house sell?"

She didn't hesitate. "Your house has been your protection, a place to be safe, but it's not ready to release you." She tells me that the house has never been acknowledged for its power. "You have to write about it. When you share the story of the land and house, then the house will let you go. Until then, take down the For Sale sign. Honour the house through ceremony and don't forget to take the energy of the house with you when you leave. And," she added, "Paint your bedroom."

When I got home from the reading, I lit candles in the bathroom, filled the tub with hot water and poured in some lavender salts. I said out loud, "I am ready to leave this house where my body, spirit, and energy have lived and to move on my path to the next stage of health, prosperity, serenity, and growth. Thank you house for the protection and happy memories provided." I stepped into the tub, submerged my body, and exhaled. Later, dried and cleansed, I picked up a pen and began to write about the house I loved.