

Model Home

LiAnn Yim

They wanted to take the boy away from their current place of residence, a long and skinny two-bedroom house. It had been white-washed too many times. Also, there was a smell. A smell they could not get away from. It wasn't the stink of something spoiled, but it was a little sour. A staleness they noticed every time they returned from outside.

But it was the boy they worried about. They couldn't stop him from playing by the train tracks. The house was near a station, which was good for the father, who was a commuter. Twice an hour, trains hammered the railroad. It was impossible to speak on the phone when a train bawled by.

After the boy turned eleven, they started letting him stay home by himself. He walked home after school, let himself in, and got a snack for himself. Always sour worms, which he gulped down in ways that disgusted his sister. One day his mother returned early. The boy was not inside, nor was he in their small yard. She did not panic. As she stood outside in the yard between clotheslines, she saw him slip through the thin trees. The boy was walking along the steel rail, his fingers grasping the air for balance. When he wobbled off it, she was upon him. She clutched his arms, yelling at him the whole time, and shook him hard in her paroxysm of fear.

It kept happening, though the father even spanked him until both of them were red in the face, their breaths sobbing. But the next day he was back there again, crawling on his belly across the tracks, like he was without an endoskeleton, like he was a four-legged, lobe-finned fish seeking a coal forest.

Another time he built, with the rocks and dirt, some kind of fort, or perhaps a shelter. The mother found it after she had sent him sullenly inside. She brushed the leaves off the mound, wanted to dig into what he had been hiding from her. Inside he had placed two

tiny frogs. They were unmoving but alive inside their stony fortress, jeweled toes splayed on browning leaves.

His parents had a psychologist come see the boy. The psychologist asked him many questions and at the end of the two hours was only able to recommend, very gravely, that they remove the boy from “this situation.” The father was annoyed. “This situation” seemed to imply this was an unhealthy home. An abusive family. That was certainly not the case.

Then the father heard about a new townhouse development that was closer to the city. The company was in the process of parceling out homes. Each lot was reasonably priced, and it was sure to be a good investment. The family went to tour the model homes at the end of the month.

The development was built beside the wetlands. When they climbed out of their minivan, they could see the white plumes of sailboats passing through the bay. A flock of waterfowl scattered like so much confetti. The family smelled loam and salt marsh air, bit down hard on it and tucked it beneath their tongues. It was good to be away from the smell.

They walked into the first home, which the realtors were using for an office. The mother tethered the boy to her by his wrist, but she let him go once they were inside to shake hands with the woman who greeted them at the door. The foyer was curved, with a high ceiling and a circular porthole window near the top. How lovely. Like they were standing inside a mossy tower.

The woman led them to a room with a view of the empty street. Brokers and agents looked up briefly and smiled. Everyone seemed very busy, like they were selling units with every phone call. The urgency in the room was exciting. The woman said their realtor would be right with them. In the meantime, what would they like to drink? Just water for everyone, thank you. While they waited, they looked at the materials stacked on a table: contracts, disclosure statements, inspection reports. The mother and father browsed this literature.

Their realtor was a man named Peter who wore a gold band on his ring finger. He wore a silk blue shirt and gray slacks and a diver's watch braceleted his wrist. He showed them blueprints of each type of home—there were four of them, A, B, C, and D. They were currently in model A. Each home had three floors, a garage, and a small attic space. Other than that, they were quite different and would service different needs.

Peter showed them a model of the community under a glass casing. The father noted which houses were positioned with the best view of the bay. The mother saw where the school was located and that there were no railroads nearby. Just to be sure, she checked with Peter. He assured her that it was very quiet. He promised her that she would wake to only the sound of birds that lived in the wetlands.

“Why don't I let the homes speak for themselves,” said Peter. “We have just enough time before lunch to look at one.”

Since they were already in model A, the smallest unit, they went upstairs to take a look. All of the models followed the same structure. There were two smaller bedrooms and a master, two bathrooms and a half bath. The living room, kitchen, and dining area were one open space. The dining room table in Model A was a wooden tablet mounted on two blocks made from the same material. The father asked what kind of wood it was. Peter said it was am-boyna, with a natural semi-gloss finish. The father remarked that he hadn't heard of this kind of timber. It was an import, Peter told him, the lumber was carried out of a Cambodian jungle on the backs of men and elephants. They looked at it with fresh eyes, like it had been handcrafted and sanded down by Peter himself, after he had supervised its transport. Travel magazines were left open on a coffee table, glossily illustrating all the places they could go, if they, too, owned a home with this table.

Then it was time for lunch. Model A was nice, but much too small, the father said. Just wait, said Peter. He was sure they would

be very pleased with model C. He had a good feeling about model C. In fact, they were headed there right now because that was where lunch was being served.

The developers had hired a catering company for lunch. The hostess was a very pretty woman, but not unattainably so. Not pretty enough to intimidate anyone. Her name was Sandra, and she introduced the lunch menu to them. A handsome young man made a vegetarian pizza, white, with the option of throwing on olives. The family had two slices each. The young man tossed together a salad in front of them. The girl hovered nearby and smiled shyly when he asked her if she wanted cheese or pepper. She wanted to say yes to him, so she took both. The father praised the pizza and said to his family, "Now, it won't be like this every day if we move in." Everyone laughed. Peter laughed the loudest.

They ate at a square onyx table that could seat eight people. Other brokers came and left with other couples, other families. Everyone said hello to Peter and the family. They preened under the attention.

After lunch, they walked around the rest of the house. Model C was much larger than model A. The bedrooms were expanded and had cushioned bay windows, "leisure nooks," Peter called them; the closets were wider and deeper. There was also a fireplace. This, too, could be added into any of the models, Peter informed them. If they wanted one, they only had to ask.

"We've skipped model B," Peter reminded them. "The square footage is smaller, but there are some neat designs the architects have installed so you can really make the most out of all the space. But if you can't imagine going down in size, we still have the last model. We have five units of Model D available, and you will have no complaints about its space, I'm sure."

Model D sat on the corner of the townhouse row; it had more windows and a balcony on the second floor. Out on the balcony, a portable grill. The father thought: catfish and corn could be cooked

on it and while he waited, he would wave to his neighbors and invite them over.

There was a cushioned bench seat lining the windows of the dining space, and Peter raised the seat to show them the built-in compartments underneath. While the rest of his family went to explore the other parts of the open floor, the boy crept to the bench seat, lifted it, saw the space beneath was just large enough to conceal him. It would be like being tucked away inside a rock.

The dining table was set with porcelain plates that had dainty, scalloped edges, unfurling in bloom like giant lotuses, the center of which would house some tasty, precious morsel. If eaten, it would be transcendent. They would live forever after dining on food served on these plates.

Upstairs, the room the girl took for her own was lushly green. Three door hooks were affixed to the inside of the closet, shaped in flat discs stamped with the fossilized imprint of an ancient fungus. Standing inside the open closet, the girl felt she was in an overgrown wood, it was damp and dark here, a place buried at the foot of a hill that grew weeds and wildflowers that were heavy and impenetrable. The window was open; she smelled soil and perpetual nighttime, could hear a red-breasted bird's song. She felt her way out of the closet, rejoined her family in the hallway. It seemed to her that everyone now was speaking a little too loudly.

The bedroom that fell to the boy was done in cool earth tones. The walls were blue, but the ceiling was painted midnight. Planet decals, luminescent white orbs, stuck to the ceiling. The boy imagined himself traversing the surface of a planet or diving into a deep pool at night, a pool with no bottom, and once he had swum as deep as he could, he would no longer know which way lay the surface.

The master bedroom had a his-and-hers walk-in closet. The father opened one drawer and saw it was a place for him to put his cufflinks. He thought to himself that this was why a man had cufflinks, so that he could have a place for all of them and pick and choose the perfect pair for each new day. His wife slid open one drawer after

another, counting them, realized she could have a drawer just for her socks, just for her panties, just for her bras. Right now, they were all thrown into a single drawer. To have all the delicate underthings laid out was unspeakably delightful.

“We are not done building all the homes,” Peter told them as they traipsed downstairs to look at the two-car garage. “Not many people have moved in just yet, though we have sold nearly all the units. You’ll really have to act fast.”

“We like what we have seen,” admitted the father.

“We want our families to be happy here. In fact, we give higher consideration to people such as yourselves, people with families. We want you to grow into these homes,” said Peter.

The family felt good about what Peter was saying. People like them.

“We can also install a small stoop for the front door. You only have to ask,” Peter said. “You look like you enjoy spending time outside, taking in sunsets, geese headed south.”

The family agreed they were those kinds of people. It would be a small space, but they could all fit.

“Are there a lot of geese here?” the mother inquired.

“Nearly all year round. A lot of birdwatchers come out here. Black-bellied plover, kingfisher, avocet. Some pelicans, too. They love it here. But you don’t have to worry about hunters. This is protected marshland.” Peter chuckled. “They drive the golfers crazy. They like to land on the green a lot. You must have driven by it on your way in. Many families sign up for a club membership when they purchase a home here, at a resident’s rate, of course. Are you a golfer?”

“I play,” the father said modestly. He had gone out to a driving range twice. His wife had won a raffle ticket from their son’s elementary school fundraising event for six hours at the range. The driving range was over an hour’s drive away from their house, and it had been crowded with people who knew what they were doing. He spent

a long time adjusting his posture, the bend of his knees. He never ran through the basket of golf balls they provided for him.

“Then you’ll love the course,” Peter was saying. “It’s a fifteen minute walk, but we’ll take the golf cart. Some of our residents have purchased their own. We can set up a charging station for you in your garage. Part of the community amenities; we like to encourage energy-saving efforts here. It doesn’t take up any room in the two-car garage. You only have to ask.”

The family piled onto the electric golf cart. The boy and girl sat facing the back and watched the salt ponds and mud flats. Ducks speckled the brackish shoreline, their emerald heads gleaming.

Peter drove them right up the circular driveway to the lobby of the Clubhouse. Inside, pink-faced men smoked fat cigars and drank beer. The ladies curled their fingers around cups of iced tea and coffee, bobbing their heads, owl-like behind dark round frames. Plump, dripping slices of cold watermelon were served, the red wedges soaking in pools of ice water.

From the Clubhouse they had a panoramic view of the golf course. Here and there the lawn dipped into white sand shaped like beans. The water hazards were still as tin plates. And the birds, clustered on the narrow strips of green, taking flight only when a golfer whipped the club back and fired a shot from the tee-off point.

They were introduced to a woman named Jean, who told them about the other amenities the club had to offer. “We also have an excellent chef in residence,” Jean said to the mother. “Whenever you don’t feel like cooking, you can bring your family here.”

The husband and wife linked fingers as they walked back to the golf cart where Peter was waiting to drive them back to their minivan.

He shook hands with everyone, including the boy and girl. Made sure the family had the take-home materials. Peter said, “It was great meeting all of you. I’ll touch base later tonight.”

They drove home. When they turned, at last, onto the road by

their house, they raced a passing train to their doorstep. No one was hungry that night. They wanted to savor the taste of the white pizza, which had been so perfectly kneaded.

Sitting at the kitchen table, the husband and wife talked about the development. They remarked on how much they liked Peter, how glad and lucky they were that he was their realtor.

Peter called later in the evening.

“Hello,” said the husband. “Thanks for calling, Peter. Yes. We were just discussing it. Yes. Really wonderful...you answered everything, sure, really appreciate that. You know, exactly so. Yes. Well, thank you for calling. Good speaking with you.”

He hung up the phone, turned to his wife, told her, “He will have contracts ready for us to sign whenever we want. Now we just have to pick one.” He looked at her expectantly.

Pick one. Pick a house! Just like that. Like picking the right loaf of bread or stalk of asparagus that wouldn't wilt as soon as she brought it home. The mother looked outside. Just in time—the boy was walking out to the tracks. They retrieved him from the railroad. Made sure he went down the hall to his room. Made sure he was inside it. As the father locked the front door, a train clamored down the line. Their empty glasses shivered on the tabletop. Enough of this.

In the morning, they called Peter. They had decided to go with D. It was the balcony that did it for them. Model D was the only model that came with a balcony.

In one day they moved their things in. They had not visited the house after their purchase, and even though it was the same size and structure as the home they had toured, it seemed like they had never been inside it at all. It smelled like turpentine. They looked for the things Peter had talked about: the fireplace, yes, it was there, and so was the little room beside the pantry. The front stoop had been added. The concealed storage space—it was there, too.

The movers carried in the pieces of their furniture, and for a

little extra pay, they assembled it. The boy crouched on the floor with his frogs in a tin breathmint box, watching tables and bookshelves take shape out of the bones.

That night they were too tired to enjoy the house. They went to sleep in the same, familiar beds, between the same starched cotton sheets and covers, which had all been laundered in the same detergent and softener the mother had always used.

The mother had worked herself to the bone putting things into place. Her dreams were dark and unfathomable. She dreamed of an ocean of warm, sour milk. Smelled ozone on the breeze. Dreamed she washed up on the shore. She woke up in her dream, listening to the steady trickle of coffee. She was not in their new home, not even in the home they had just left, but the house she grew up in. She went to pour herself some coffee, but her cup was heavy, filled to the brim. She turned it over on the floor, and the earth tumbled out of the cup. It bore a fruit. Star-shaped, yellow, the corners of the edges curled up. It looked like the fruit she had tasted in Malaysia so many years ago. The texture was slick, and there was an oily tang. She woke up. She and her husband were sleeping back to back, and his weight trapped all the covers beneath him. She got up and stood next to the bed, realized she was lost in the new dark. She climbed back into bed, tried to sleep, slept.

The next day, they continued unpacking their belongings, putting things away in the built-in compartments and shelves. They looked out the windows at the water and saw empty townhouses, models A, B, C and D, looking back. Their neighbors, who hadn't yet moved in, were much closer than they had realized. There were no boats on the water. Heavy drifts of fog brooded across the bay.

The cufflinks drawer could not be filled.

They walked over to the country club to sign up for a family membership. Jean wasn't there; another young woman, Debra, took down their information.

The club restaurant served a buffet lunch. A young man, not

as handsome as the one from the catering service, stood at one end of a long table, wielding a foot-long knife, ready to prepare custom order sandwiches. The boy watched the man slice sweet-smelling prosciutto so thin, he could see through it. When the man asked him if he wanted a sandwich, he said no. There were too many choices. In the end he let his mother fill his plate with pasta. His mother tried a salad with California abalone and shredded lobster. It slid slippery and too quickly down her throat.

The boy and his sister stuffed themselves on slabs of chocolate cake that was not crumbly or spongy, but cut like cold butter. Their father told them this was the kind of cake they had in Europe, in the chocolate capitals of the world, and he himself had two large slices. The cake stuck thickly to their teeth, and when they smiled, it looked like there were broken gaps.

They were not the only members there for lunch. There was a group of women drinking beverages, choked at the neck by the skinny arms of colorful sweaters knotted about their slimly rounded shoulders. An older couple came over to introduce themselves as George and Dana Hendelman. They always ate lunch at the club; the distance from their home—one of the unseen model Bs—to the club was the perfect exercise for them. The mother invited the Hendelmans to dinner.

“Just call us anytime,” she said. They exchanged phone numbers.

Dinnertime. The Hendelmans did not call, or come over. Just as well—the mother thought about making lamb chops but realized she did not have any seasoning. All they had were packaged hot dogs, and no grill. The Weber grill, of course, did not come with the house, they should have realized. The mother laid the hot dogs out on a tray, covered it with a damp paper towel, and put it in the microwave. No one felt like sitting down at their old dining table, so they stood clustered around the kitchen island, holding themselves up by

their elbows, which was usually not allowed at the mother's dinner table.

Even though it was only the end of summer, the father started a fire in the new fireplace. They sat beside it in the living room, sweating into the sofa. The daughter poked a finger at the pea-soup stain she had left on it when she was seven and her finger went right through.

After the fire died and the embers of it were crumbling, they went outside and sank onto the stoop. Far off in the distance, several rows away, they saw a light on in one of the houses. Maybe that was the Hendelmans' home. They weren't sure.

The birds began to sound human. The boy listened to their conversations; their chattering voices were plaintive and peckish. He got up, stroking a frog inside his pocket. Ribbit, ribbit, the frog protested. It did not like the way the boy's thumb prodded its throat, but it was too hot in the boy's pocket to do much about it.

The daughter swore she could hear people talking when she was in the bathroom, like hearing a movie playing from the next room, but their neighbors hadn't moved in yet so that couldn't be true. Still, the low murmur persisted, leaked from the bathroom and invaded her bedroom like the low drone of a machine that had been accidentally left on.

They all thought the smell had followed them from their old home by the tracks. They had an exterminator come in to see if some pest was walled up and nesting, but the man found nothing. It wasn't a bug smell or a rodent smell, he said.

The mother worried about the attic—they hadn't put anything up there, in fact had not been shown the space that Peter had promised them was there. What was in the attic? She imagined a hive of wasps descending through the ceiling, swarming into her children's rooms, into their beds. She called a fumigator. He did not charge her for his time, even though it was a wasted trip, because nothing was there. The house was too new, he said, for wasps to have made

their home there; the conditions weren't right for a hive like she was imagining. The mother began to fill it with empty suitcases and boxes of winter clothes. Every day she went upstairs to check that everything was undisturbed, that wasps had not built a hive there and were secretly trying to funnel through the floorboards.

The father dreamed he turned into a bird, red-and-gold-plumed, and a man whose face he couldn't see broke his wing.

The boy's frogs got lost inside the house, and he was desolate. They went into the fireplace, jumped through the holes of the iron gate, so now the family couldn't use the fireplace, in case the frogs were still trapped in there somewhere. The boy began disappearing into the hidden compartments of the bench seat.

A month later, they called the realtor and said they wanted their money back. Listen, they said, This is not the house you sold us. It is not the same at all.

