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The House That Got Away

I still remember the master suite, tucked on the top floor, away from the other bedrooms. The en-suite bathroom was freshly renovated with a soaking tub and shiny tiles. We didn't buy that house. We didn't even make an offer.

The house was perched on a cliff, a location my husband instantly saw as a deal breaker. The grassy back lawn sat about five feet above a sheer drop to a stone patio with no fence to keep someone, like, say, our toddler, from teetering over the edge. And the front yard, if you could even call it a yard, was a series of terraced retaining walls. Each one, my husband estimated, would cost a bundle should it ever need repair. And what would happen in heavy rain?

Details. Details. But had he seen the kitchen? New granite countertops! Stainless-steel appliances! I loved that place long after we bought a perfectly sensible house with good bones. (Good bones because the flesh needed a paint job.)

I'm happy with our house. It's a solid house on a flat lot, the kind a responsible person would buy. But owning it did not stop me from dreaming about its one-time rival.

We came upon the Cliff House again about a year later, as we drove through the winding roads that surround our neighborhood on a sunny afternoon. "That one wouldn't have needed its floors refinished," I said as we flew past. "It was turnkey!"

"Turnkey, maybe," my husband said, barely glancing at it. "A deathtrap, definitely."

Death trap! That really seemed beside the point.

To me, the Cliff House was the house that got away. The one I did not buy, but always loved. While my actual house needed to be cleaned and updated, with an endless list of mundane repairs, the Cliff House was forever untainted by the drudgery of real life. There were no scuffs on its walls. In this house, the Viking stove (it must have been a Viking, and not some lesser brand) was never splattered with tomato sauce.

It is not uncommon to have a home that occupies an outsize place in your memory. Maybe you were outbid on a Classic Six on the Upper West Side and never found its equal. Or maybe you swung by an open house on a lark, and dwelt ever after on the beauty you encountered by happenstance.

Years pass, life goes on, but that other home lingers like an unanswered question. Just as you return to thoughts of the college boyfriend you broke up with senior year, you wonder about the residential path not taken. As the years pass, your memory softens, and you remember a charmer, not a dud.

Elizabeth Kee, an associate broker for CORE real estate, encounters many buyers who suffer from unrequited house love, but she's sure our minds can play tricks on us. "It wasn't meant to be, but sometimes you look back on it and think: Why wasn't that the one?" she said. "The more you think about it, you begin to idealize it in your mind and you begin to believe that space was actually better than it was."

But letting go is not easy, particularly if you are still searching for your perfect house. Rebecca Foxon, 40, an artist in Manchester, N.H., occasionally drives past the house she didn't buy three years ago, just to torment herself. "I whimper a little each time," she said of the four-bedroom Craftsman-style house.

Mrs. Foxon and her husband, Scott Foxon, 38, a manager at Newbury Comics, still live with their two children in the cramped three-bedroom house she was hoping to move out of when she saw the Craftsman.

Initially, her four-bedroom love object was too expensive. But when the price came down, the Foxons' house wasn't ready to go on the market. "We were slowpokes," Mrs. Foxon said. "That's why I cry."

The Foxons never found another house that measured up — even as Mrs. Foxon continues to scour listings for a bigger home. So either the Craftsman was an irreplaceable gem, or time has improved it, like fine wine. "My memory is definitely skewed," Mrs. Foxon said, suspecting that her family might have outgrown the space by now anyway. But no matter, fantasies can self correct. "We could have added on if we wanted to," she said.

It's amazing what the mind can do if it really wants something. "Good memories tend to add luster with time," said Dan Buettner, the author of "Blue Zones of Happiness: Lessons from the World's Happiest People." Rather than pine for some alternative existence, Mr. Buettner suggested we spruce up the space we already have: declutter, buy houseplants or rearrange the furniture.

But imagine what would happen if you received a second chance.

Cara Erickson, now 38, an artist, could not stop thinking about a three-bedroom cabin. It was 2008 and she was living in Pasadena, Calif., northeast of Los Angeles, and the cabin was in Crestline, a mountain town about 70 miles away. The listing was pulled before she could make an offer. So when it came back on the market a few months later, she and her husband, John Erickson, also 38, bought the place without considering what it would mean to move so far from Los Angeles.

“I was emotionally invested in buying that house for the wrong reasons,” Mrs. Erickson said.

She envisioned Crestline, a town of about 11,000 people, as a place similar to Topanga, an artsy enclave in the Santa Monica Mountains above Los Angeles. But it was far more rural. Their car got stuck in the snow, they lost power, and a tree fell on their deck in a storm, severely damaging it. The neighbors were as icy as the weather, leaving angry notes and yelling at Mr. Erickson, who now works in a print shop, for not shoveling adequately.

The last straw came four years in, when an undetected leak in the refrigerator rotted out the drywall and the wood beams beneath it. The Ericksons sold the house in 2013 for a modest profit — enough to “lick our wounds,” Mrs. Erickson said — and returned to Pasadena.

I, too, received a second chance. A few months ago, as I was scrolling through house listings for no particular reason, I came across one for the Cliff House. I clicked on the images, eager to catch a glimpse of my beloved. But it was no dream. The years exposed a cheap renovation, with worn-out kitchen cabinets and a bathroom that already looked dated. Those retaining walls were crumbling, as my husband had predicted.

By comparison, our house looked and felt cheerful and loved. I emailed a link of the listing to my husband, with the subject heading, “You were right!” and finally shut the door on my love affair with the Cliff House.