



FICTION

Selling the House

“Then cherish pity, lest you drive an angel from your door”

—*Holy Thursday*, William Blake, 1789.*

By Susan Hubbard

The day did not begin with the Australian, it began when the doorbell rang. Marianne, still in her bathrobe, went to answer it. She was alone in the house. The children were at a soccer game with a neighbor, and their father was away on business.

A uniformed delivery man carrying a cone of tissue paper stood at the door. Marianne’s heart jumped at the sight of him. Flowers!

It wasn’t for sale,

Smiling, she opened the door. But the man already was turning away. “Sorry,” he said to her. “Wrong house.”

but then that’s not

what he really

Yes, that’s where the day began—with a small disappointment. No one had sent her flowers for years. Marianne closed the door again. The last man who had sent her

wanted anyway.

flowers was . . . she couldn’t remember his name. It had happened more than 10 years ago. But they were white roses, and the man who brought them had sat on the floor of her apartment and held her bare foot in both his hands while he recited his poetry.

Marianne knew that she should think about getting dressed. She should think about clearing the kitchen table of the breakfast things. She should think about vacuuming and about catching up with the laundry, and about making an up-to-date grocery list. She should think about changing the sheets on all the beds, and about cleaning the downstairs closet. But she was still

thinking about the roses when the doorbell rang again.

A man in a black raincoat stood outside, his shoulder toward the door, his head tilted back. He seemed to be studying the porch roof.

When Marianne opened the door he spun around. “Good morning!” he said. “This house wouldn’t be for sale, by any chance?”

He had sleek dark hair, a lean face, bloodshot blue eyes, and a day’s growth of beard.

“Why did you think that?” Marianne asked.

“I’m looking for a house,” he said. “I like this one.”

He spoke with an Australian accent. His tone had something final in it, as if he was accustomed to commanding action.

“We have thought of selling, from time to time,” Marianne found herself saying. “Ted—my husband—thinks we would be happier in a more modern house.”

The stranger shook his head. “How very misguided of him. Now, I myself wouldn’t dream of living in a modern house. And I’m sure you agree. You look like the sort of person who appreciates old things.”

Marianne clutched the collar of her bathrobe and laughed nervously. The stranger ran his hands along the stonework of the doorway. “A perfect period piece,” he murmured.

“You must be a long way from home,” Marianne said. He raised his eyebrows. “I noticed your accent,” she added.

“I was born in Perth,” he said. “But I’ve been in the states for nearly five years.”

“Do you teach at the university?”

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*Several quotations and paraphrases are of lines taken from *Blake Complete Writings* (Geoffrey Keynes, ed.), Oxford University Press, 1972.

He smiled. "Not now. But I did. I was a visiting lecturer there. Of course, I have my own business. But look here, I haven't even introduced myself. I'm Ian Coburn." He extended his hand.

Marianne shook his hand. His hand felt cool and hard. "I'm Marianne Baker," she said.

I know this is quite unusual," Coburn said. "But do you think I might just have a look round the house? I realize that you're not on the market now, but one never knows."

Ted had been away for more than a week, and during that time Marianne had done as little housework as possible. She hesitated, thinking of the unmade beds, the half-eaten bowls of cereal, the baskets of unsorted laundry.

"I do realize that this is an intrusion of your privacy," Coburn said. "But anyone who knows me would tell you, I really do love these old houses."

"Oh," Marianne said, and he walked forward. "The place needs cleaning," she said, but he was already in the living room.

"Curious," he said, as he stepped lightly over a pile of the children's toys.

"They're called Lego," Marianne said.

"No, actually I meant this." He gestured toward the hole in the living room wall.

"Ted did that," Marianne said. Coburn looked at her quizzically. "My husband. He did it last spring," she added. Ted had made the hole with his fist after returning from an unsuccessful business trip, but she couldn't think of a tactful way to explain it.

Coburn said, "Ah."

"The house was built in 1855," Marianne said. "Built by a physician, we were told. He owned 25 acres, and after his death his wife sold most of the land in parcels."

Coburn was staring at the cracks in the living room ceiling. "You don't say."

"The doctor's name was Crutch." Marianne smiled. "I always thought that was funny."

Coburn looked at her.

"Dr. Crutch," Marianne said, her voice sounding thin.

Coburn didn't say anything. Marianne began to move toward the kitchen.

"Of course," Coburn said, suddenly. "I do see. Dr. Crutch. Sounds like 'Happy Families,' a card game we played as kids. Mr. Snip, the barber. Mrs. Bung, the brewer's wife."

Marianne retrieved a pair of children's socks from the corridor and entered the kitchen. Coburn followed her.

On the kitchen counter, Amelia, Marianne's daughter, had left a half-full bowl of Pix cereal and milk. The cereal had stained the milk with streaks of red and yellow. Coburn gazed into the bowl as if he had never seen anything like it before.

"Is that . . . food?" he asked.

"Something like that," Marianne said. She wished she didn't have her oldest bathrobe on.

Was that why he'd said she looked like the sort of person who appreciated old things?

Next to the bowl of Pix lay a half-eaten banana, a crust of cold toast, two vitamin pills, and a full cup of orange juice. Marianne walked past them swiftly.

"The pantry is in here." She gestured broadly toward the adjoining room. "Laundry is over there. All pretty cluttered right now, as you see."

"I've never minded clutter." Coburn's eyes looked even bluer here, in the bright light of the kitchen.

"Where do you live now?" Marianne stood before the basement door. She didn't want him to go down there; the floor was partially flooded from the last rainstorm, and she could never begin to explain how the furnace operated.

"Where do I live now? Nowhere much." Coburn plucked a thread from the sleeve of his trenchcoat. "I've just got divorced."

"I'm sorry," Marianne said.

"Oh, don't be sorry. I'm not. I've no regrets." Coburn picked up an unused plate from the table and flipped it over to examine its back. "I miss my kids, of course." He sighed. Then he righted and replaced the plate. "I have a temporary place now. An apartment. A big white box. You call this clutter, but to me it's very warm and cheery. How exquisitely the external world is fitted to the mind."

Marianne blinked.

You haven't remodeled the kitchen," Coburn said.

"Ted has always intended to—"

Coburn interrupted. "No, no, you were quite right to leave it alone. You'd never find a sink like this one anymore." He poked his head into the pantry and surveyed the shelves of canned food, then quickly turned around again. He was a good-looking man, Marianne realized suddenly—and he'd look even better once he had a good night's sleep and a shave.

"Could I have a look upstairs?" Coburn said. "Just for a moment, to see the configuration of the rooms."

"I haven't made the beds," Marianne said.

"You know, I didn't make mine this morning, either." Coburn smiled, and moved toward the staircase. "It's very good of you, letting me have a look. I won't be a moment." He took the stairs two at a time.

Marianne remained in the kitchen. She picked up the cereal bowl and flung its contents into the garbage can. She thought of the pile of unironed shirts on the bedroom chair, and of the pile of unsorted socks on Amelia's bed. She set the bowl in the sink. This house, she thought, is a mess.

Marianne finished clearing the counter. She caught sight of her face in the mirror over the kitchen sink—her face was flushed, and her hair wasn't combed, but she did not look unattractive. The old chintz robe was oddly becoming. She tightened its belt.



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Minutes passed. She emptied the garbage and then moved on, into the laundry room. She began to sort dark clothes from light ones. Then she loaded the washing machine and added detergent. Finally she could be patient no longer. She went to the bottom of the stairs. "Mr. Coburn?" she called.

In an instant he bounded out from her bedroom and ran down the stairs. "Sorry, sorry," he said. "I was admiring the view from your windows. I do love this countryside. A green and pleasant land indeed!"

He looked at her with such good humor in his face that she thought, it's all right. "The downstairs bathroom is in here," she said, touching a door. "It's been modernized, I'm afraid."

He swung the door open and peered inside. "Ah yes, yes. Pity. But what was done can be undone. The blow of his Hammer is Justice, the swing of his Hammer Mercy."

"Excuse me?" Marianne said. "Were you quoting someone?"

The clock in the dining room began to chime. "It can't be noon already," Marianne said. "I'm supposed to pick up my children."

"How many children?" Coburn asked.

"Two," she said.

"That's not so many."

He took a step closer to her, and her instinct was to move away. But her legs felt numb, as if they were asleep. "If you have children yourself you'll understand," she said.

He looked puzzled.

"I mean, you'll understand the mess here." Marianne folded her arms.

Their eyes locked.

"I have to go now," she said slowly. "I have to pick up my children."

"Right." He shook his head slightly. "I'm sorry. I've taken enough of your time for today." He reached inside his coat and pulled out a wallet.

Marianne thought, is he going to pay me?

"Look, what would you want for this house?" The wallet seemed to spring open in his hands, and bills and certified checks fanned out.

Marianne said, "My goodness." Then she said, "I have no idea."

"I can offer you \$150,000 today." Coburn glanced at the money in his hand. "And another \$20,000, in cash, if we can close the deal this week."

Marianne stared at the money, then at Coburn. "The house isn't for sale. Even if it were, it isn't mine to sell. I need to talk to my husband."

Coburn extracted a card from the wallet. "Do you have a pen?" he asked.

"By the phone." She gestured toward a table behind him. Coburn turned and picked up a pen. He began to write on the card. "Out of ink," he said, returning the pen to the table. He found a pencil next. He crossed out something on the card, and penciled in something else. "Now I want you to keep this in a very safe place," he said, handing the card to Marianne. "I've put down the numbers

where you can reach me, day or night."

Marianne glanced down at the card. "Ian Coburn," it read. "Coburn Environmental Systems Ltd." Beneath it, printed telephone numbers were crossed out, and others penciled in.

"You do environmental work?" Marianne asked.

"I'm an environmental engineer," Coburn said. "We do radon monitoring, asbestos removal. Things like that." He moved toward the door. Marianne followed, feeling like a sleepwalker. When he reached the door he turned. He put one hand lightly on Marianne's waist. "The soul of sweet delight can never be defiled," he murmured. Then he removed his hand, and walked outside.

Marianne stood in the doorway and watched him drive away in a small red car. I must get the children, she said to herself. She made herself move upstairs.

About an hour later, amid the din of the children's cartoons and the susurrations of the washing machine, the spell was broken. She wondered why she had ever let him into her house. She went from room to room, checking to see if anything was missing. But he hadn't taken a thing.

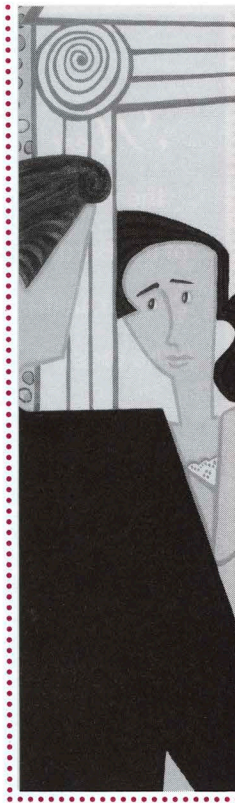
On the following day, when Ted returned from his business trip, he was excited to hear about Mr. Coburn. "He just walked in here and wanted to buy the house?" he said, marvel in his voice. Marianne didn't tell him about the hand on her waist, nor about the cryptic quotations—not that she wanted to hide anything. Her recollections were vague, dream-like. She was beginning to think that she must have imagined some of what Mr. Coburn had said and done.

Ted acted as if Coburn's interest were an omen. He had been complaining about the house for years—it wasn't efficiently insulated, he said, and it was too small. Its age made it "all maintenance, no convenience," Ted said. He had his eye on a new development over on Chase Road. They were laying the foundations now, and the houses would be in "move-in shape" before fall, he told Marianne. "You won't find any water in those basements," he said.

Yes, Mr. Coburn's visit was a sign that they should make a move, Ted said. They could sell this house and make a profit. They could move into a brand new, larger house, and still have money to furnish it.

Marianne loved the old house. It was small, true, and its walls were cracked, and its plumbing faulty. But it was the house into which she had brought her babies. There were so many memories here.

They talked about moving for days. Gradually, Ted grew insistent. "What better time than now to make a move?" he asked Marianne. "Amelia's old enough now to hold her first slumber party. And Joe needs a space he can play in. I need a study—somewhere I can spread out my paperwork. And you could even have a sewing room, so



you wouldn't have to set up the machine on the dining room table anymore." He took a deep breath.

"Those lots over on Chase Road are going fast," he said. "And we've already got a potential buyer."

Marianne said, "But I love this house."

Ted began to pace the length of the living room. "Be reasonable, Marianne, can't you? Just this once? This is a golden opportunity. But you're acting as if it's a problem."

Marianne's resistance, admittedly never her strong suit, soon was worn away. Perhaps Ted was right. They might never have a chance like this again. "All right," she said. "Let's call Mr. Coburn."

But to her surprise, Ted said that was a bad idea. "He was just one fish in the ocean," he said. "Who knows how many others there might be?"

"But he offered us \$170,000," Marianne said.

"No," Ted said. "We're going to do this thing right. We're going to hire professionals."

And the very next day, the real estate agents arrived—two expensively dressed blonde women wearing perfume that Marianne recognized from magazine inserts. The perfume was called Opium. "You'll have to clean this place up, dear," they told Marianne.

By the end of the week, the "For Sale" sign was up, the house was clean, and every room reeked of Opium. Marianne found herself kept busy, dressing each day with care, then scrubbing away evidence that a family of four was in residence. The real estate agents were supposed to call before they showed the house, but sometimes they didn't (although they always claimed that they had tried). They told Marianne not to talk when prospective buyers were around. "Let us do the selling," one of them said. But Marianne sometimes heard them whispering to the prospective buyers, as if they were criticizing her, or the house. Once she heard one of them telling a househunter that he hadn't seen anything yet—wait till he checked out the open house over on Chase Road. She mentioned this to Ted and he told her that was the way licensed realtors worked.

Meanwhile, Ted had signed the papers to purchase the new house. He was so clearly delighted with the prospect of moving that Marianne tried to act as if she were, too. But in fact she was not thinking clearly these days. She felt as if she was waiting for something to happen. Not moving. Not selling the house. Something that would really make a difference in her life.

One night about three weeks later, when Ted was away again on business, and the children were asleep, and she was sitting in the living room, reading, the telephone rang.

She recognized his voice at once. "How are you, Mrs. Baker?" he asked.

"Mr. . . . Coburn?" she said.



"Hear
the voice
of the Bard!"
Coburn said.
"Who present,
past, and
future sees!
Sweet Marianne,"
he went on,
his voice soft.
"Sweet dreamer."

"The same," he said. "I've been waiting for you to call me."

"Ted—my husband, you know—Ted said it was better to work through a realtor."

There was silence on the line. Finally Coburn said, "Wilt thou take the ape for thy councillor?"

"That must be William Blake," Marianne said, excited. "I started reading poetry again after you came here. I went through a whole anthology, and the only one who sounded anything like you was William Blake."

"Hear the voice of the Bard!" Coburn said. "Who present, past, and future sees! Sweet Marianne," he went on, his voice soft. "Sweet dreamer."

"But why haven't you come to see the house?"

"My circumstances are . . . reduced," Coburn said.

"Oh dear," Marianne said.

"To tell you bluntly, my ex-wife took me to the cleaner's. First she took the kids. Now she's taken everything else."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Marianne shook her head.

"It's of no consequence," Coburn said. "After all, What is the night or day to one o'erflow'd with woe?"

"I'm very sorry," Marianne said. Her right hand clutched her left shoulder, as she listened.

"And in what houses dwell the wretched, drunk with woe forgotten, and shut up from cold despair?"

When he'd finished she said, shyly, "Some are born to sweet delight."

"Some are born to endless night," Coburn said. "God, this is depressing even me. When can I see you?"

"See me?" Marianne let go of her shoulder. "You mean see the house."

"No," he said. "I've seen the house. It's you I want to see."

"I thought you were interested in buying the house," she said.

"And so I was," he said. "So I was. But I'm, um, I'm afraid that just now I lack the necessary cash. So. Come and dance with me. I'm in the laundromat. It's the Suds Your Duds down on Route 18. You could be here in five minutes."

"I'm afraid that's impossible," Marianne said.

"You won't come?"

"I can't!" Marianne said.

"Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires," Coburn said. "Wasn't that one in your anthology?"

"I don't remember it. I'm not sure I even understand it."

"No bird soars too high if he soars with his own wings," Coburn said. "Enough! Too much!"

The line went dead.

Marianne never saw or heard from him again.

Sometimes, as the years passed, she wondered if Coburn ever really existed. But then she remembered the look in his blue eyes, and the sound of his voice, and even the touch of his hand on her waist. And there was his business card, which she kept in her jewelry box, with the penciled-in telephone numbers that she would never call.

Yes, he had existed. And, when you came to think about it, he had changed her life. She now lived in a new house with a fully modern kitchen. It was immaculate, and she kept it that way. She liked to say that this house was easy to clean.

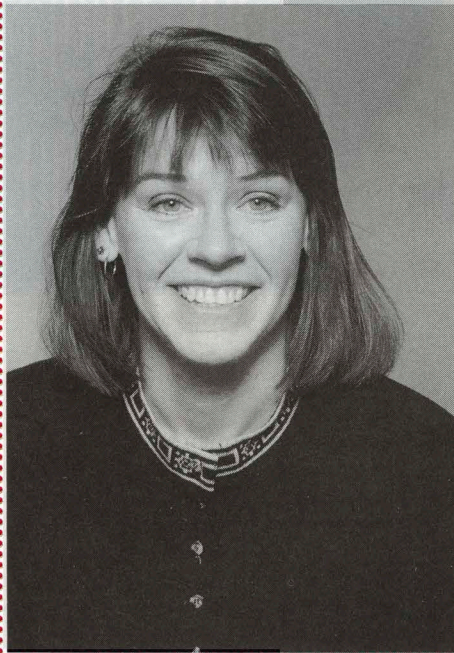
The old house, on the other hand, remained on the market for more than a year, but in the end it was purchased (for just \$110,000) by an insurance executive. The executive hired an architect, and the house eventually acquired an extension with skylights, a deck, and an in-ground pool. Marianne sometimes detoured for blocks, to avoid driving past it.

And Ted, despite the low sales price of the old house, Ted was happy in his new home, and delighted with Marianne's new devotion to housework. He had sought and acquired a promotion that took him off the road and forced him to pay more attention to his family. He never knew how much he owed to the Australian who had turned up at his door one morning in need of sleep and a shave.

Yes, Marianne thought, in the end things had worked out for the best. She liked stories with happy endings. And if she sometimes had trouble sleeping, if she sometimes sat by her window staring out at the green hills across the valley, if she spent more time reading poetry than making clothing in her new sewing room, and if she tended to slow her car whenever she passed the Suds Your Duds—well, those were small aberrations in an otherwise quite satisfactory life.

Never pain to tell thy love, love that never told can be.

One winter afternoon, as Marianne returned to her new house from the supermarket, she noticed a splash of dark red against the snow near her doorstep. Her heart began to beat faster. She picked up the two grocery bags and braced them against the car as she locked it. She carried the bags toward the house. Six red roses lay strewn across the snow, splayed as if they had been thrown there. No box or card accompanied them. Marianne stepped over the roses to unlock the front door. Inside, she made herself put the groceries away. Only after the last bag had been emptied and folded did she go back out. She gathered up the roses. Their buds were tightly curled, barely open; their color was the deep velvety red that borders on black. She brought the flowers inside and put them in a vase with water and an aspirin. They looked well for nearly two weeks, although they never bloomed. ■



Susan Hubbard

THE PERILS OF EVERYDAY LIVING

As an investigative reporter, Susan Hubbard unveiled the illegalities of Connecticut's juvenile detention system and budget malfeasance at Southern Connecticut Community College. As a fiction writer, she turns her microscope to different kinds of troubles: the unexpected perils of everyday living.

"The risks attached to ordinary events fascinate me," Hubbard told a reporter last year. "Every day, people take extraordinary risks. Extraordinary consequences can result, and often do."

Her first collection of short stories, *Walking on Ice*, was published in 1990 by the University of Missouri Press. The book was awarded the 1990 Associated Writing Program's Short Fiction Prize and was nominated for several other honors, including the PEN/Faulkner Prize and the Ernest Hemingway Foundation Award.

Selling the House comes from Hubbard's collection in progress, tentatively titled *Conversations with Men*. "A common theme in the

group of stories is crossed communications," she says. "They are certainly consistent with the earlier collection, but also very different. I'm exploring some new ground stylistically."

The former journalist entered Syracuse's Creative Writing Program in 1981, and has been teaching and writing since earning her master's degree in 1984. Currently teaching in Cornell University's Engineering Communication Program, Hubbard is also at work on a novel.

—R.G.L.