

## THE HOUSE ON RIVER ROAD

I might easily have passed by the small sign reading “Sea Cove” that suddenly appears at the edge of the highway. In my recent travels I’ve grown used to seeing sign posts and markers of every variety, but in this moment, I find it impossible to remain on the black top that would take me inland. It’s as if a warm hand has taken hold of mine to put a stop to my meandering. Veering right, I leave the freeway as easily as if I had intended doing so all along.

The narrow road seems to fall away. I feel as if I might have conjured up the string of buildings, freshly washed by a sudden summer storm that has picked up her skirts and rushed off to the east. I draw a deep breath, staring hard to make sure that what lay before me is not a bit of leftover illusion rising up from my stash of childhood imaginings. Beyond, the sky and sea are a perfect canvas, coming together like a line blurred by an artist’s brush. It comes to me that I have just witnessed the subtle joining of past and future and someplace deep inside me - the remnant of something sad - gives way. I feel my heart lift.

*This is meant to be.*

Now, I sit in a little outdoor café, one hand wrapped around a cup of delicious coffee. With the other, I press a finger on an ad in the local newspaper -firmly -as if the words might otherwise escape the page:

“Cottage for rent: 401 River Road. Apply in person.”

I am filled with the conviction that this cottage is meant to be mine - that it has been waiting there for me to step up and claim it.

I've managed to find *River Road* on a map and follow it over a little bridge to a narrow driveway with a mail box marked "401." My heart begins to sail.

The cottage sits on a small rise with an unobstructed view of the ocean; a stand of fir trees makes a stately backdrop. Now, I'm on the doorstep - newspaper in hand - ready to point to the ad as justification for my presence. At the same time I know just as sure as fire there's no need to explain to the man standing in the open door that I have come home.

It hasn't taken long for the two of us to understand that I was led here for a purpose greater than finding a spot to settle in and get on with my work. Naturally, there are those who will reason it was no more than that faceless thing called happenstance that cast the net that fell, drawing Mike and me together. To my mind, one must apply the meaning of words like fate, destiny, kismet.

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Mike likes to claim it was actually *he* who found *me*, which is silliness of course, because he had been here for quite some time before I appeared. He still laughs softly as he goes on to tell me he'd taken one look at me and without thinking about it, said. "I've been expecting you." After that truth had fallen from his lips he'd momentarily lost his power of speech. It hadn't struck me as an inappropriate reaction, for what can you say when you look into the eyes of a

stranger and see the broken pieces of your life suddenly fitting together like a perfectly mended piece of china?

Mike says he knew at first glance that I was exactly the right person for the cottage and, for that matter, exactly the right person for him. He knew we were destined to be together. I confess that a similar idea had flitted into my mind to roost there like a beautiful bird bursting with song.

My husband is a very fine architect. At this moment, he is away, submitting the final blueprints for a new community of beach houses all the way up the coast. He knows exactly how to design them, how to do a proper floor plan; how to catch both the morning and evening light. He has certainly worked his magic on our cottage, giving it wings: a studio for each of us, three lovely bedrooms and a nursery. There are plenty of walls on which to hang my artwork. There are deep window seats and softly polished wood floors to show off my pillows and woven rugs. He's topped it all off with a sturdy pirate's nest where we can lie on fat pillows and count the stars and gaze up at the moon resting on her back or playing hide and seek as a storm begins to build.

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Mike has left me in the care of our cat, Jack, who keeps his green eyes fastened on me. I think of him as an earthbound spirit, a guardian angel in a beautiful fur coat. Now, as the day wears on, Jack and I are alone in our perfect world. My thoughts are drawn back to that time, a brief three years ago, when I

can safely say we rescued each other from a very shaky future. Each of us, to stretch the metaphor a bit, was homeless. Alone, who knows where we might have wound up? Together, we filled each other's deep reservoir of longing and took heart. With Jack nestled into a basket of yarn in the back seat of my car, we teetered forward on what was at first only a slim ribbon of hope. Before long we were surely guided here, to this magical place called Sea Cove. How else could we have found it? It isn't on the way to any place else.

I have been luxuriating on the deck all afternoon. The air is warm with just the hint of a cool breeze. I feel lazy and contented, like my cat, who has kept one eye on me as I sit in the old wicker chair, an abandoned basket of knitting at my side. Jack gets up from his spot that is being overtaken by shade, stretches and saunters over to rub against my ankles. Twisting his head to look up at me, he releases a long string of meows. I understand cat-speak very well and he's telling me it's time for dinner.

I bend down and gather him in my arms, my fingers automatically scratching behind his ears. "Yes, I know."

Jack lays against my shoulder like a bag of sugar. How silly, I think, but these days I am often attacked by little bits of fantasy. My childhood was built on make-believe, so it feels quite normal to leave the real world on hold in the afternoons; to curl up in the window seat with Jack purring away; mingling his cat dreams with mine.

With his mysterious rumble vibrating against me I wonder if he can hear the deep hum of contentment emanating from me. I'll bet he can. I wonder if he

knows there's another little heart beating inside me. Probably. Jack knows just about everything about me.

“Just another minute.” I tell him. “I need to see this sunset.”

Mother Nature has flung a scene of extraordinary beauty against the far edge of the sea. The incoming fog looks like a pair of giant angel's wings caught up in a swag of apricot-tinted chiffon. I wish I could take a pair of scissors to it, cutting out the part where a line of pink snakes through the lavender and scarlet streaks quickly fading in the blue-gray sky. If I could commit the colors to memory, just that one little piece would be the perfect finishing touch to the nursery. Although, if I use the paints I have on-hand, the scarlet would have to be translucent maroon. “Hmm, that might work.” I tell Jack, knowing he understands every word. Of course he does.

Mike swears my pregnancy has had a deep effect on Jack, casting him in the role of constant protector. It's true. Jack's eyes travel my every move. Mike also says I have begun to purr in my sleep. I laugh, saying he's taking it a step too far, but if what he hears are tiny sounds born of pure happiness, then I suppose he is right.

I try to imagine what Jack will do after the baby is born. Will he stand guard over the cradle, fascinated by the small human we've interjected into his world, or will he feel displaced and sit with his back to us, feet tucked under him and his eyes at half-mast, sulking?

“Well, we will soon find out, won't we? “

I adjust my cat on my knees and linger for a few moments, watching the edge of the sun hesitate on the rim of the earth before drowning itself in the sea. Now, there is only the sound of the surf pulling at the sand and the soft beginnings of a lullaby as a breeze stirs the trees.

The calm is interrupted by the sound of wings flapping in sudden flight; the complaining scream of seagulls. I watch a dozen birds lift off like white paper airplanes, quickly settling back to earth to strut about, indignantly. Recently, a pair of beautifully painted brown geese, a truly handsome couple, adopted our little stretch of beach interjecting themselves into a well-established flock of gulls. They are made uneasy by the presence of their larger cousins. I'm convinced it will take lots more than a bit of screeching from critters half their size to scare those two off. Evidently, like Mike and me, they have no intention of leaving this sheltered cove. Ever.

I place Jack on the deck. "Okay, kiddo, let's go."

He heads for the door at a trot, dancing in a circle, looking up at me with emerald eyes. I ease myself onto my feet, thinking that only a few months ago I, too, would have sprinted to the house with ease. Now, I move like a sponge, carefully, as though any sudden movement might spill away my joy.

*My, I think, stopping to pull a ripe tomato off the vines trailing along the perimeter of the decking. I'm every bit as firm and round as you are. How we have grown!*

I had spent hours nursing those young plants into adulthood. As they'd reached upward, I'd driven in stakes, run strings, propping them up with their faces turned toward the sun. My crop is ripe now, perfect. My dedication to the basics has indeed born fruit. And just in time, for tending to my own young sprout will shortly become my main line of work.

My unborn child does a summersault, making me grimace and smile at turns, imagining that just one more well-placed jab with an elbow or foot, and that will be it. I will simply burst. The absurdity of this thought makes me giggle.

Inside the house, Jack is content to munch his food. With Mike away, I cave into my craving. Ripping the top off a box of macaroni and cheese, I fill a pot with water. While it comes to a boil I shuffle around the house, closing the shutters against the darkness, proudly pulling together the linen curtains I have woven on my very own loom.

"I just love this house." I say. Jack glances up and slowly licks one upturned paw. He leaps easily, settling into Mike's chair to do a leisurely and thorough job of washing up.

Tomorrow afternoon, Mike will be home. In the evening, he will run his hands over my girth and smile and we will light tall candles and let them burn down while we prepare dinner, lightly touching each other as though needing proof of our excellent existence. While we eat, we will likely take up the subject of names for our baby. Mike will make a great show of claiming not to agree to anything until he has personally looked into the soul of his child. People come into this world with their own names, he tells me. He smiles as he says this,

teasing, for he knows that I will continue to press for my favorites. I know, because he loves me, he will easily allow me to have my way. Later, he will take Jack onto his lap. They have become great friends and I am delighted not to feel even a hint of jealousy.

As I lick the last bit of what passes for cheddar cheese from my fork and tidy up the kitchen, I am pleasantly aware of not having a single thread on which to fasten fear.

As the moon rides high and the stars pierce the blanket of night, I sink into my feathery bed to dream of tomorrow - tomorrow when Mike will be home and we will pick up the silken strands of our lives, adding another, weaving them into a perfect, never ending tapestry.

THE END