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ESSAY

Little House on Linden Street

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**Little House on Linden Street**

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We pull up to the front of the 1932 brick Tudor, and Randy stops the car but does not turn off the ignition. Linden Street. This is the house; cottage might be a more appropriate word. It is so tiny that I know exactly what my husband is thinking.

"I don't think so," he says.

"Let's give it a chance," I urge, struggling myself to keep an open mind. "Use our imaginations."

"Well, if you want to live here, you're going to have to live hereby yourself," he says. "There won't be enough room for the three of us."

Not that long ago, it seems, we were agreeing to plunk down the initiation fees to join a country club, to add a carriage house behind our custom-designed home, to sail the Caribbean in the presidential suite of a luxury cruise liner. There was a time when making these decisions was as simple as pulling the checkbook from a drawer. At the height of our careers, my husband and I both reaped the rewards of owning thriving businesses. Seven years ago, however, I sold my advertising agency for the freedom to stay at home, where I could greet my kindergartner at the bus stop each day, where I would sit at my father's bedside as he lay dying from leukemia in my sun room, where I would write my first book. My husband's business has been uncharacteristically sluggish for a year now. And we're not sure how long we can tolerate living in the throes of a negative cash flow.

And there's something else. A verse. A little over a year ago, while I was thumbing through the pages of the Bible, a verse jumped out at me, started waving a flag with my name on it. So compelling was this verse to me that I copied it onto a yellow post-it note, stuck it to my dashboard, and prayed it every time I got in the car. *Lord, turn my eyes away from worthless things. Preserve my life according to your word.*

Now as I take in the mismatched brick on this dollhouse-size home, the lopsided antenna on the slate roof, the air conditioner hanging from the propped window, I am wondering if God is answering my prayer.

My friend Steven's ear is glued to his cell phone. His stylishly cropped hair is as gray as mine would be if it weren't for the monthly visits to the hair salon.

"Get the media department on it," he says, probably talking to one of his account executives. "Tell them to tighten the budget, maybe take television out of the mix."

Steven is keeping me company at a table in front of Strawberry Square's B. Dalton Bookseller, where I am signing books. The book was released within days of my family's move to our smaller home, indicative perhaps that certain life changes are inextricably woven one with another.

Steven and I started our ad agencies around the same time, almost twenty-five years ago. We experienced the same growing pains, the same triumphs. For seventeen years, we swapped stories about everything from client pitches to incessant deadlines, all the while competing for the top spot in our region's award shows; once we actually shared the honor. His has now grown to be the area's largest ad agency. Mine, of course, is no longer mine.

The book signing is going slowly. Occasionally a friend or colleague of Steven's dashes around the corner. Steven waves them over, extols the virtues of my book, never mind the fact that he himself has not yet read it. The friend nods, has me sign the book, buys it. And then Steven is back on the phone.

"How's the reach with radio? Maybe combine radio and outdoor, keep some synergy going." He talks on and on, using language I once used myself, language with which I've become rusty. Finally, Steven snaps his cell phone shut. He looks directly at me.

"You don't miss it, do you?"

"No. I don't. Not even a little." I say this not because I am ungrateful for a career that was good to me, but because this bend in the path at which I now find myself — with all the snags and bumps along the way — feels like a comfy old robe and favorite pair of slippers that have been waiting for me to return home.

Here in the little house on Linden Street, I remember the first time we stood at the doorway of this room, now my study. It had aged floral wallpaper, a radiator crusty with peeling paint, old metal blinds.

"What would we use this for?" Randy asked.

"I'll take it," I volunteered, imagining freshly painted walls and trim, a refinished wood floor, built-in bookshelves. "It could be my study."

"But it would be depressing," he said.

"No, it wouldn't," I objected. "There are five windows in here!"

A talented architectural designer and friend affirmed the house's "good bones," the viability of remodeling on our budget. Still, we were nervous. So when the agent called to inform us another being presented that evening, our hearts started pounding.

"I just want to do whatever God wants," I said. "I wish he would tell us." Randy agreed. Within fifteen minutes, the kind voice of a friend, a trusted financial advisor, came through the telephone.

"You're making the right decision," he said.

Now through my study door, I see the freshly painted living room fireplace flanked by two miniature six-paned windows. These were the windows that, when I first stood taking in their craftsmanship, made me whisper to myself, "I think I can live in this house."

Though we can't see the manicured fairway, as we could from our former house, it is a ten-minute stroll to Dosie Dough for blueberry banana bread. A short distance beyond that is a park with a stream and ducks and little stone bridges. There is no in-home theater here like the one we left behind, no three-car garage, no spare bedroom, no carriage house, no neighborhood tennis court, no front gates that require a pass card to enter.

But outside my study windows stands a huge old maple that must have been planted seven decades ago. Our twelve-year-old's study nook at the rear of her bedroom — we call it her "treehouse" — looks out onto leafy branches, as if it is perched in the treetops. And one story below in our tiny stitch of backyard, Randy stoops over, warmed by the sun, charting the newly planted flowers that will bloom in our garden come spring.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A Lititz resident, Jan Groft is the author of a memoir, *Riding the Dog*.