

Free to a Good Home

by Eve Marie Mont

FOR SALE, Westerly: Sprawling beach house with five bedrooms and expansive water views. The modern kitchen with granite countertops and brand-new Sub-Zero appliances is perfect for entertaining, opening onto a multilevel deck looking out on an enormous yard with inground pool and Jacuzzi. Join the nearby Westerly Beach Club for private beaches, tennis, swimming, fishing, boating, and golfing. Westerly is a picture-perfect Norman Rockwell town with carousel, family entertainment center, weekly large-screen movies on the beach and more.

Everyone needs a hobby. Mine is searching through real estate websites. People tell me I should have been a real estate agent, but they don't really get it. I'm not looking for houses for other people to live in. I'm looking for myself.

And it's not as if I'm in any position to buy one either. It's more like my form of pornography— feverishly scrolling through thumbnail photos, feeling my heart rate elevate as I read the specs: nine-foot ceilings, crown moldings, a master suite, three working fireplaces, a swimming pool, a view of the bay!

Sometimes I feel I could look all day long, forsaking all other responsibilities as I imagine myself living in each house—how would my life be different? What would I do for a living? How many children would I have? Who would my husband be? Who would I be? As if a house had the power to change anything. To change me.

As a child, I loved playing house. Not that I didn't also have a rebellious tomboy in me who loved to climb trees and collect bugs in jars. But deep down I saw myself being a mother, a wife, having a house that was my sanctuary. I never got into Barbies—their blond perfection seemed too cold and remote for me. I had no aspirations to drive a pink convertible or wear a tiara, even at age seven when every little girl believes she will grow up to be a princess.

No, I preferred my Betty Crocker kitchen with its double-basin sink and stovetop oven, my dolls that ate baby food and wet their diapers, my shopping cart full of fake frozen dinners and plastic produce.

Sometimes I'd make my younger brother play my husband, dressing him up in my father's old sport coats and ties, watching him pretend to make phone calls or type memos at my desk where he worked his imaginary high-powered job in the city.

If you'd reminded me of this archaic 1950s fantasy when I was in college, I would have denied it, convinced at the time that I was a raging feminist. But some say we are more ourselves at age seven than at any other time in our lives. And that we spend most of our years pretending, trying lives on for size, instead of doing what would really make us happy.

But what is that? I used to think I knew. Marriage, a big house, lots of children. But life is funny. The minute you think you know something for certain—the moment you let yourself believe everything is settled—life gets a sense of humor and shows you that nothing is ever, ever certain.

December

It's two days before Christmas, and I'm driving through Bristol to see the decorations in town. All the shops have twinkly lights around their doorways, garlands of evergreen on the handrails, trees in the windows adorned with carefully chosen ornaments (dog biscuits and plaid ribbons for Pabby's Pets, miniature wooden spoons and whisks for Crazy Kitchens). It's nice, really, this shameless display of holiday mirth, even though it's mostly for the benefit of tourists looking to find a bit of nostalgia in our quaint New England town.

I look in the rearview mirror to check on Beatrix, a half-blind cocker spaniel mix we've had at the shelter for two months now. It's difficult to place an older dog like Beatrix who doesn't have the irresistible puppy factor anymore, who's taken a few too many punches in life and maybe doesn't have the same boundless enthusiasm as the others. Sometimes I take her and others like her home with me for the weekend, just to keep them socialized in case they get adopted one day. All right, let's be honest. I take them home because I love them and would adopt them all if I could. Plus Zeke loves the company, big attention hog that he is.

On the way home I stop to pick up a bottle of wine just in case Jay wants to come in for a drink. I don't know why I'm so nervous about seeing him. It's been six months, and I know he's going to look as handsome as ever. Last Wednesday, I got my hair cut at one of those expensive salons in town, where I let myself be talked into a short haircut. Sort of flapper girl meets Grace Kelly. Since then I haven't been able to duplicate the stylist's look at all, so I leave the house most days looking more like Prince Valiant than Princess Grace.

Beatrix and I head across the bridge toward home, or what was meant to be a temporary rental house but has become my permanent residence for the past years. It's not such a bad place, really—a tiny two-

bedroom shoebox painted in gingerbread colors, with a small fenced-in backyard. I put a birdhouse out there, and every morning before I leave for work, a pair of cardinals comes to visit, the male feeding the female so it looks like they're kissing. I love that some birds travel in pairs, comforted that nature, which can be so cruel, also has this capacity for romance.

When we get home, my street is mercifully quiet. My neighbors on both sides, while lovely people, don't quite understand the meaning of privacy. It doesn't help that our houses are spaced about three feet apart. If I take the trash out, I'm bound to get into a twenty-minute conversation about weather or politics or old cars, or be accosted by one of the eighty-seven children who live in the neighborhood and seem to be selling Girl Scout cookies, wrapping paper, or bake-at-home pizzas every other day of the year.

On one side of me are the McKeevers: Dan and Danielle and their three blond, indistinguishable boys who range in age from three to six. Danielle once told me she can get pregnant just by holding Dan's hand. Of course, it might help if she didn't rely on the rhythm method as her contraception of choice.

On the other side of me are Mike and Trey, ex-military buddies in their late twenties who, after coming home from Iraq, made it their primary mission in life to perfect the art of the party. The sound of their recycling going out on a Monday morning is like some postmodern Philip Glass composition that goes on so long it's comical. Adorning their house are about seven American flags and, adorning their driveway, a motorcycle and three bumper-sticker-laden cars, only one of which will start at any given time. In their backyard sits every kind of lawn furniture imaginable—a slightly left-leaning gazebo with a half-dozen plastic chairs, a gas grill, three chimineas, a hammock, and a ten-foot inflatable pool with a pink flamingo drink caddy.

After pulling into the driveway, I grab my wine and Beatrix and head inside to get ready. Zeke hears us come in and bounds to the front door, his tail whisking against the table where I keep my keys. Zeke is a Great Dane mix, a carousing big dope of a dog with a heart of gold. He's so sweet with all the animals I bring home, even the cats, playing with them gently at first until they adjust to their surroundings, licking their noses, crouching into play pose to let them know he means no harm.

I lead Zeke and Beatrix out into the backyard to let them get acquainted, watching them for a few

minutes to make sure there are no ugly tangles. Beatrix looks so small and dainty next to Zeke, who is basically a sweet, slobbering face attached to a hulking canine body. This dog has no idea how powerful he is, how easily he could maul Beatrix, or me for that matter, if he weren't such a gentle giant.

After confirming that Zeke and Beatrix are going to be pals, I head to my bedroom to get ready. Jay is taking me to *Simpatico*, a lovely little bayside Italian place with the most delicate homemade pasta I've ever tasted. That's one thing Jay and I have always had in common—we love food and drink and finding excuses to eat out even when we know we shouldn't. Jay never had to worry about his weight—he's tall and slim and likes to run. I can't imagine liking to run; when Jay used to make me go with him, I always felt like I was being chased.

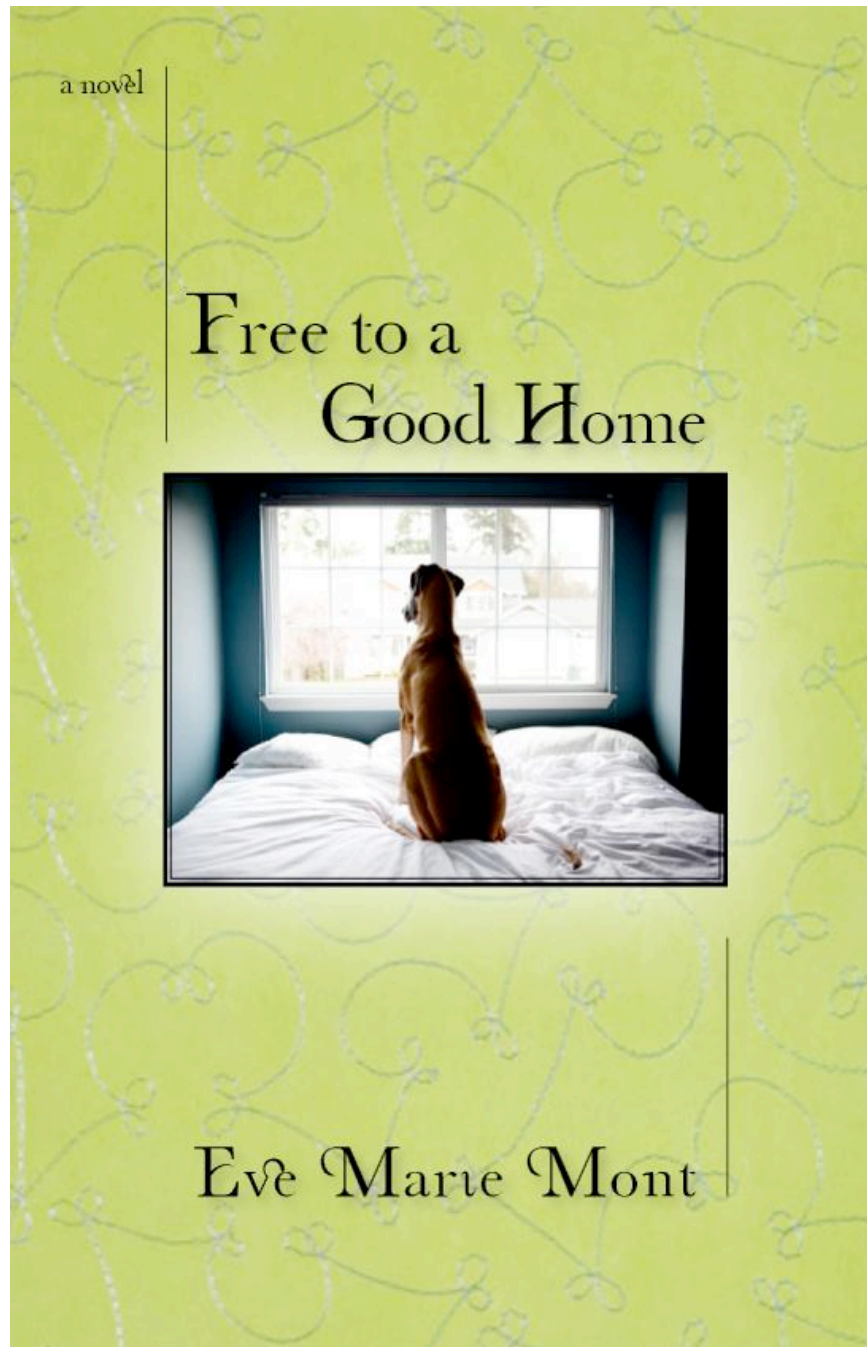
From my closet, I choose the stretchy sweater with the silver threads running through it because it best camouflages the dog hair. I put on my nicest pair of jeans, the dark rinse ones that normally fit perfectly but feel a little snugger than usual. Must be the Christmas cookies. Then I apply a little raisin lipstick and a hint of blush, take a quick check in the mirror, and realize I'm looking at a fool.

I'm having dinner tonight with Jay. My ex-husband.

And yes, I still find him irresistibly attractive. And yes, I still love him. He's the sweetest, most charming man I know. He never cheated, never gambled, never did drugs, and tells me he loves me still.

So why aren't we together? Good question. And I have a good answer. An exceptional answer, actually.

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