

“Hardly a House”

The man has been going to the agent’s office a lot lately. He really wants to sell his house and he wants the agent to do it for him. The man’s wife says he shouldn’t ask him; he was involved in that controversial sale of federal land eight years ago but the man tells her it has rained a lot since then. As the locals say: it’s water in the past. She reminds the man about the lot that the agent sold only last year— the one where the big grocery chain moved in. The man shrugs at her, though. He’s already talked to the competing broker but that one is young and his eyes dart around a lot and he doesn’t show up when he says he’s going to show up.

“Just let it be, my little flower. He’ll make us a lot of money.”

It’s the middle of a hot afternoon when the agent locks his downtown office to go to the man’s house. Leaving the colorful, wooden shacks of the tiny downtown and shooting through the long promenade of palm trees leading past the marina, he skirts around the short, dusty airstrip and decides to take the more rugged route on the west side. The taxi drivers and tourists on golf carts must be taking a lunch break or lying on the beach, because the gray ribbon of

asphalt is mostly empty and he opens the throttle for a short dash. Along the perimeter of the center village he zips, drawing the attention of a snarling pack of stray dogs that gives chase, lunging at his thigh until he kicks out his foot and catches one of them in the jaw. Back onto the straight, vacant road he merges, hurtling far above the waves that crash against jagged cliffs and whip up a frothing, white foam. The air is thick and hot with the sea, and it spreads itself across the agent's face and neck and arms, worming its way under his shirt collar where it finally settles in a salty rind.

Inland and up a hill the agent turns, just before the invisible boundary at which the cacti take over and the iguanas roll their eyes at those who dare to straggle past. Farther on and the two coasts will find each other in a rocky tip that points to open water. At the top of the incline, the agent makes a few more turns, finally finding the man's house tucked halfway down a short street. Putting the kickstand down on the motor scooter, the agent swings his leg over and steadies the handlebars. He reaches up to take off his helmet, placing it between arm and hip bone, ruffling his silver hair with his other hand. The man emerges from the shadows inside the house and shakes the agent's hand. While the agent talks pleasantries, inquiring after the man's wife and children, he's also taking huge steps in front of the property, measuring the width of the whole building.

“This is seven, you say?”

“Yes.”

“Because I barely measure five.”

The man smiles. “The title says seven.”

The agent shakes his head. “I measure five.”

“But your step is so big.”

“I do this all day long. It’s five.”

The man goes inside to bring back a measuring tape, pointing at just the front facade.

“This I know is five.”

“No, that’s four. I can tell by looking at it.”

The man holds up the tape and stretches it across.

“What does it say?”

“Four.”

“What did I tell you?”

“Are you saying I have a fake title?”

“No, no, no. I’m not saying that at all. Sometimes they have to put those together in a hurry; they say what they have to.” The agent waves his hand to close the case and he begins surveying the front of the building from roof to floor. His eyes travel to the neighboring places on either side, both with painted facades and porch furniture that the man does not have on his veranda. Farther up the street is a communication tower from which he knows waves of radiation are traveling all day long. He nods his head toward the front door ahead of him. “Show me inside.”

The house is hardly a house. There’s a dark store on the bottom level and the man’s wife sits at the register just inside the door, her head nearly obscured by a line of glass jars filled with unwrapped candies. She nods without looking at the agent. On the shelves are dusty boxes of milk and bottles of cleaning products, and in the corner a cooler hums and sweats, stocked with bottles and cans and a few hunks of cheese. Just beyond that is a doorway that leads to the living

quarters, where the family of seven squeezes together. The floors are unfinished concrete and the walls are bare cinder block, the seams of mortar showing like food stuck between teeth. The agent stops in the middle of the kitchen area and scans his surroundings. On the stove is a large pot of thick soup with beans and a few hunks of meat floating around. Several pairs of shoes sit beside one of the bedroom doorways and the sound of a television floats out. He peers in to see five of them, half-grown and piled onto the bed in the dark, their faces illuminated by the screen. He smiles and says hello. They smile and say hello back to him.

He returns to the man. "So, two bedrooms?"

"Yes."

"And one bath?"

"Well, but come outside. There's more."

They go into the back garden, where palms and vines mingle, covering the ground and beginning to creep up the walls. A staircase leads up to the roof and the agent climbs the uneven stairs, the man following him.

"Just the two levels?"

"But then you put in columns and you can build a third one."

The agent looks around, his gaze pausing on two stand-alone structures. "Are these finished?"

Each is a small box that looks as if it has been merely stuck on the open roof and the man gestures at the painted one. "This one is. I rent it out." He points at the four walls, no roof, and just a window cut into the side facing the street. "This one is still being finished. It's going to have a bathroom."

The agent sticks his head in the front door and surveys the small quarters, barely big enough for a bed. Then he walks around to the front of it, where there's a window looking onto the street. "And why did you leave this space between the window and the edge of the roof? Is there going to be a balcony?"

"Yes, that's what I intended."

The agent frowns. "But there's no door, just a window."

"I'm not finished."

"I wouldn't keep working. You're going to sell it; let the new owner worry about it."

He and the man walk back down to the street together. The agent glances at the communication tower again, imagining that a tumor is growing inside his head at that very moment. "How much do you want for it?"

"A hundred and fifty."

The agent says nothing. He shakes the man's hand and climbs back on his motor scooter, fastening the strap of the helmet under his chin. "I just need to go back to the office and draw up some papers. I'll have it listed for you by the end of the week."

A few days later, the man calls the agent to ask if it's in the book.

"I'm just finishing it up now. What are we listing it for again? A hundred and twenty?"

The man is quiet.

The agent waits.

"Okay. But didn't we say one-fifty earlier?"

"I just don't know if you're going to get more than a hundred for it."

"How much would your commission be then?"

“You know, at that price, it wouldn’t be more than six or so. How much was that other guy going to charge you?”

“Seven.”

“I could do it for seven. I’ll list it with pictures, and we’ll wait and see.”

Weeks pass and nothing happens. No one even calls to inquire for more information. A year goes by. Finally, one afternoon, the man calls the agent and asks him to come visit again. The agent rides out on his scooter to find the man in the back garden with a teenage boy—knives in hand and leaned over a rickety, wooden table, each scaling a fish. At their feet are buckets of briny water filled with more silvery bodies—fins quiet, gills flat.

“Quite a catch you’ve got there.”

“The sea is very generous.” The man stands up straight, blade flashing in the sun. “She can also be very cruel.” He nods at the pile of fillets they’ve already prepared. “Please take some. We’ve got plenty.”

The agent smiles and shakes his head. “Thank you. You’ve got a large family. I’m sure you’ll find a use.”

The man shrugs.

Not blinking, the agent is staring at the hands of the teenage boy as he pulls out bright, red guts through a long gash he has sliced into the belly. The agent flinches when the man speaks.

“What about my house?”

“I don’t think you’re going to sell it.”

“What if we lower the price?”

“We could try that.”

Back at his office, the agent lowers the price to one-ten. Still another year passes and nothing happens. This time, it’s the man who goes to see the agent. Inside the cold, air-conditioned office, the sweat begins to evaporate from his brow and back.

“Would you like some water?”

“Yes, please.”

The agent pours the man a glass from a tall, metal canister on his desk and then he gestures for him to sit down.

“Can we lower the price again?”

The agent raises a shoulder to an ear and drops it. “We could do that. What do you want it to be?”

The man looks down. “What do you think it should be?”

The agent sighs. “We could drop another ten, I suppose.”

The man nods. “That would put us at one hundred even.”

“Or we could also drop significantly— down to eighty-five, perhaps.”

The man’s head bobs up and down again.

“Is that what you want to do?”

More bobbing.

Another year passes and still nothing happens. The agent sells many other properties in that time, including a huge hotel, but no one ever asks about the man’s house. One afternoon, the agent gets another call from the man asking the agent to visit. This time he finds him sitting in

the kitchen, a baby leaning back into his lap and a bottle in his hand. When the agent raises his eyebrows in surprise, the man laughs.

“My oldest sons are deeply in love with their wives.” He winks. “We have three grandkids now. Three in two years.”

A girl in her early twenties walks into the kitchen and takes the baby from the man. Standing, the man motions for the agent to follow him back out to the street.

The agent waits until they are both seated in the shade to speak. “I’m sure you want to know why your house isn’t selling but I don’t have an answer for you. We’ve lowered the price to almost half of what you originally wanted and—” He lifts his shoulders and raises his hands, palms up. “Nothing.”

“Other houses are selling for twice that.”

“Yes, but they’re on the water or they’re downtown or they aren’t going to be so much work to repair.”

“Is that what you’re telling people?”

“Of course not; no one has even asked about it for me to say anything at all. There is simply no interest in your house.”

The man looks at the ground. “I heard you bought a boat.”

“A sailboat, thirty-five feet.” The agent watches the man run a toe through the dirt. “There’s also that huge communication tower right there.” He tilts his head to the east. “Those things cause cancer, did you know that?”

The man shakes his head, still looking down.



The agent sighs. “I see two options: leave it as it is and see what happens, or lower it to half of what it is and just hope that someone wants it merely as a piece of land.”

“Let’s leave it.”

The agent shakes the man’s hand and returns to his office. Four more years go by. Whenever the man is in town to go to the bank or catch the ferry to the mainland, he pays the agent a visit at his office and every time, the agent gives him a glass of water and delivers the same news: no one has even asked about the man’s house.

One day, the agent hears that the man has been in a serious accident, while adding more boxes to his roof, and so he goes to see him. He finds him lying down in the same bedroom where years before, the agent saw his children watching television. “I told you not to work on the house anymore.”

The man smiles like a little boy caught in a fib. “I know. My family, though. It keeps growing. We’ve run out of places to sleep.”

The agent shakes his head and smiles. “Here. I brought you something.”

He hands him a box of candied dates and the man’s face opens with excitement. “Thank you. My wife loves these.”

“Your wife, eh?” He smiles. “What’s this?” He bends to pick up a book from the upside-down crate on the floor.

“My wife wrote it. A tourist visiting from up North heard about her stories and had them published for her.” He waves his hand toward a box on the floor.

The agent turns the book over a few times. “What are they about?”

“Her life. That’s why I fell in love with her: she told me a story one afternoon, lying under a tree.”

The agent raises his eyebrows. “Are they selling?”

“Yes, they’re doing alright.” He gestures at the copy in the agent’s hands. “Take it.”

“No, no, that’s okay.”

“Please. Take it.”

“Let me buy it at least.” The agent starts to pull out his billfold.

The man’s eyes darken. “No. Please, just take it.”

The agent reads it in one afternoon; he can’t put it down. The wife is one of the few natives on the island: at four years-old, she was making tortillas; at nine years-old, she was polishing shoes at the ferry docks. She used to entertain her clients with stories— the dog who bit her on the face as a toddler and left a long, peninsula-shaped scar on her cheek; the time her father was so enraged to find her curled under the stairs and reading, when she was supposed to be helping clean house, that he threw all her books into the sea. For years she worked at the shoe-shining stand, until the night that one of her clients followed her home, pushed her into a dark alley and took her virginity. She hadn’t even turned thirteen; she was still a year from her first period. After that, she went mute— refused to speak. There were crops in the middle of the island in those days and so she went instead to work in the fields, where she could hum all day and say nothing at all. It was there that she met the man— the one whose house the agent is now trying to sell. Four years her senior, he was a transplant from the mainland. At the age of ten, he had run away from a violent father and using the last coins in his pocket, had caught a ferry to the island, where he learned to spearfish and started saving his money— not drinking, like the

other young men his age; working all day long in the sea and the fields; sending any extra money home to his mom and planning for the day when he'd finally meet the woman he wanted to marry. It took nine years to find her but it happened under a kapok tree, where he patted the ground and got her to sit down beside him; where the shade from the branches allowed him to share his water with her; where she finally spoke for the first time in years; where he kissed her; where he pulled her into a crevice of those giant roots and seduced her, making her pregnant with their first child. That tree, it's still there and it's only steps from the communication tower.

When the agent finishes reading, he pours a drink and sits on his back deck. The salty breeze nuzzles against his skin and hair, finally settling itself in a thin film, like a lingering brush of lips. The agent leans back, resting his feet on the banister. The pink clouds have been whipped across the great, orange canvas of sky and squinting at the water below, the agent can see movement: thin, vertical protrusions— far too small to be submarines but similar in shape. He stares for a long time, watching them submerge and then pop up again in a different location. They're sea turtle heads: dozens of them dotting the surface in twos; each couple caught in the middle of a mating ritual. The agent watches them for as long as he can, until the sun has settled into the horizon and he can only hear the surf hissing in the darkness, imagining they're still out there, bobbing and thrusting, and thrusting and bobbing.

The agent stands from his chair, goes inside, washes his glass and puts himself to bed. He sleeps with the windows open, hearing the waves crash outside as he drifts off. Then he's in a dream, long and disjointed— a walk from one side of the island to the other; suddenly ending up in the enormous grocery chain that moved onto the lot he sold so many years ago; squinting in the aisles, because the fluorescent lights are so bright; cowering at the speakers, turned up with

rap music to the point of fizzling— water droplets in hot oil. One minute, he’s at a front register buying caramel sauce and realizing it’s the man’s wife ringing him up; the next, he’s on the beach at night, digging in the sand and looking for sea turtle eggs. They begin to hatch all around him and he realizes that he’s kneeling atop a bed of them. Panicked that he’s crushing them, he tries to stand but cannot, and their tiny flippers scratch at his hands and wrists, ripping the skin open in thin, red streaks. When he forces himself awake, the sheets are bound tightly around his legs and his hairline damp. He stands and closes the windows, turning on the air-conditioning.

Weeks pass. One late afternoon, only moments before the agent is going to lock the door for the day, a tall, bald man with blue eyes and blond eyebrows walks into the office, wiping his face with a white handkerchief. Dark circles fan out from under each armpit on his short-sleeved shirt and he has an accent that’s difficult for the agent to understand. He introduces himself as Todd and explains that he and his wife are looking to buy a house.

“To live here?”

“No, no, no. Just a nice place to bring the kids a few times a year, when we need a break from home.” He takes the catalogue of properties from the agent and turns each page, saying nothing and looking at every option. Then he turns the book so the agent can see it. “What about this one?”

The agent’s eyes focus on the man’s house. “Oh, that one. Yes, I could show you that one.”

The agent calls the man but gets the man’s wife instead. She says that the man is fishing and when the line goes quiet, the agent has to ask if she’s still there. She is. He clears his throat and asks if he can bring a client over. She says that it doesn’t matter to her.

Todd follows the agent to his car and they drive off, everything sliding noiselessly by on the glass windows—the colorful, wooden shacks; the promenade of palm trees leading past the marina; the dusty air strip; a pack of stray dogs, their muscles taut, their heads raised and motionless as just their eyes follow the vehicle gliding past them. When the agent pulls up outside the house and parks, Todd asks if this is the place and when the agent says that it is, Todd just looks at it for a long time. When he finally speaks, it's to say that it's hardly a house.

The agent shows him through the front door. The man's wife is sitting in her usual spot behind the register and the line of candy jars, and there's a customer talking to her across the counter, making her laugh and slap her knee. Mid-smile she raises her eyebrows and acknowledges the agent, waving him on. As the agent starts showing Todd the property, he explains that the store can be turned into something else, maybe a living room. Then they're in the kitchen with the unpainted walls and the seams of mortar but there's also a young woman, pregnant and standing at the stove as she fries plantains. At the table beside her is a toddler seated in a high chair with a cup of milk and a toy truck. The agent tells her it smells delicious, and when she smiles and asks if they want a plate, he can see how she inherited the man's eyes—the shy way that they waver before flicking down, then back up again, only able to hold his gaze for seconds at a time. The agent shakes his head— thanks her and says that he's just going to have a look around with his client and they'll be off.

Todd is looking the solid walls up and down. “There aren't that many windows.”

“No, but those are pretty easy to add.”

Outside in the back garden, Todd comments that there isn't much of a view.

“No, but it's so green and you have a lot of privacy.”

When Todd shrugs a reply, the agent offers to show him the roof: “You can see the sea.”

They climb the uneven stairs and then they’re standing under the enormous purple and pink heavens, and the agent is pointing through the neighboring houses to the strip of water that’s just visible in the distance, its usual turquoise darkening to black in the waning sun.

“That’s not much of a view.”

“Well, no. You’d have to build another level to really see it.”

Todd looks at the surrounding boxed structures: the original painted one; the second one with a balcony, the man never having replaced the window with a door; a third one, same as the first. “You can add to this level?”

“Sure. There are columns in place. You’d have to level the boxes, of course.”

“How much did you say it was?”

“Eighty-five.”

The hard line of Todd’s mouth relaxes. “I bet I could talk him down to seventy.”

There’s a scuffling sound on the stairs. They both turn to see the man emerge from below. He shakes hands with the agent first, then Todd. “Can I speak with you for a minute?” He pulls the agent off to the side. “You see— ” He has his back to Todd and his voice is low. “I actually wanted to come to your office. The thing is— I mean— I’ve decided not to sell.”

“You have?”

“My children have grown up, you know; they’ve started having their own children and they’re living upstairs. My wife and I can keep the downstairs and watch our family grow. We’ll still run the store.”

“You’ve got enough business?”

The man lifts his shoulders, drops them. “We have customers. And you know, I still fish.”  
He looks at the ground. “I’m getting old and— ”

“You’re younger than I am.”

“You know what I mean.”

The agent looks at the third box. The man nods at a patch of open space on the other side of the roof and says he has two more to go: one for each of his children. Then the agent looks off in the distance, spotting the communication tower. Halfway up its grated metal sides he sees the crown of the kapok tree. He’s never noticed it from here before.

The man has seen the tree, too, and his gaze has softened. “She only blooms every five to ten years.” He stares a long while more. “It happens when the rains have stopped. Then the leaves fall off, so that only the hard, green bulbs remain. All day long, they stay closed— tight, tight, tight until this very moment, only minutes before sunset, when the bright red flowers burst forth.”

The man falls silent and the agent says nothing, neither of them so much as blinking as they behold the splash of crimson against the lingering patch of pale eastern sky— drops of blood on cotton; stains of ink on paper; a story, finally told.

END