

The Math

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You are obsessed with a house you cannot afford. There are seven numbers in the price, nine bedrooms, five fireplaces, a river view. The floors are worn; they need refinishing, all 10,000 square feet of them. The exterior needs repainting. The bathroom tiles are chipped, barely perceptively, at their corners, the truly broken ones hiding under the rugs, you imagine. But there is a bedroom shaped like a hexagon on the top floor, a library, a room that—according to the listing photos you find yourself visiting at least twice a day—seems to hold only a piano. If you could see it in person, you'd press a key on your way through that room, wait for the sound to touch the ceiling and return to your ears, as though that, too, could belong to you. You won't ask for a showing; you don't like to lie to others, only to yourself. You are not looking for a house.

In your 675-square-foot apartment, your husband sleeps through more and more of your waking hours. "He's sick," you've heard your mouth say, when you both know the truth: there is no better. In a movie, whoever played your husband's part would say the line "make plans," but in your world, the real world, neither of you talks about the future beyond next week. You keep the radio on low, the shades drawn, the bedroom door open a sliver so you can listen for how long his breath is rattling.

You fell in love with his laughter at a party; it pulled you across a neighbor's living room one December afternoon to his face, which was wide and lined and beautiful, as you knew it would be. Ever since, you've liked to watch this face change, its range of expression making you feel as if you don't understand the world as much as he does, that he'd been born with senses you don't even know the names of.

One afternoon you lie next to him while he sleeps, your phone aglow in the darkness, zooming in on the walls in photos 11 and 18, trying to get a better look at the art. Each painting is older than your husband will ever be, costs more than he will earn in his lifetime. He used to introduce you to his actor friends as "the money," even though you didn't have enough to cover everyone's drinks. He used to sing in his sleep. He used to argue with you about whether to go out or stay in, about that one restaurant you loved and didn't want to stop eating at when he won the argument and you did go out. Some future week he won't feel like eating at all.

The internet reveals the seller is a famous man, a man recently retired from a prominent job in the public eye but who came from money, coins passing from his father's fingers to his, from men who knew which old paintings to love, who knew they'd need a house on the river. You are an unfamous woman. You don't come from money but from a family that believes in its power to bring you what you want; you come from wanting. When you set off from this family, you'd wanted a six-figure job and the quiet apartment it afforded, a man you'd love till death. The only thing your husband will leave behind for you is the medical bills insurance won't cover.

You don't show him the house. You fear what his face might do when he takes in the seashell curve of the driveway, the light on the staircase, the ironwork on the bathroom window, fear he'll say something like "I can see you there, on the veranda." Fear he will know, despite the math, that the house feels like yours, that you will be furious when someone who can afford it moves in.

