

home alone

Does a singleton really deserve to have a home of her own? TEXT: CYNTHIA BROUSE

PHOTO: ERIC FRIDEEN

I blamed it on my pregnant sister-in-law and Ontario Premier Mike Harris. Impending aunthood and a threatened reduction of rent controls kick-started my skittish entry into the Toronto real estate market. Buying a house on my own had always seemed a bit pie in the sky, especially for a female Peter Pan type like me. Publicly, I professed that home ownership meant being co-opted into consumerist drudgery, but deep down some part of me felt that as an unmarried, childless woman, I didn't deserve a home. Like a single man I knew who told me that he didn't see the point in his buying a house without a spouse and children—that they were all of a piece—I was still waiting for my life to start.

But seven years ago, when my youngest brother announced he was going to be a father, my first thought was, "I can't have a niece or nephew coming for a sleepover in a cramped one-bedroom apartment." The realization that my brother, the youngest of four, was about to attempt parenthood, while I, the eldest, had managed to come within spitting distance of 40 without committing myself to an adult, child or pet suddenly made me want to do something—anything—that seemed "mature." When I went to my friend Kate's housewarming party and the first thing I said when I

walked in the door was "Can I see your furnace?" I knew my priorities had changed radically.

No turning back

Only a decade ago, few single women bought properties; today they're doing it in droves. But I made a lousy pioneer. I wept like a six-year-old over whether to buy a 90-year-old rundown row house very near Kate's. My offer was for more money than I actually had; the house needed work of the kind I had no talent for; I had noticed cockroach traps under the sink. Having to make the decision all by myself seemed overwhelming.

"I could get out of a wedding more easily than I could get out of this," I moaned the day I finally signed the papers—and I regretted my purchase for a solid year. For one thing, I was laid off three months after I moved in. For another, winter was coming, and a lonely sense of hibernation had descended on my new, strange neighbourhood. Above all, the expense and effort required to make the house mine were draining. After one of my brothers knocked himself out helping me redo the kitchen, our tempers were frayed. I began to wonder whether the house was mine or his—and I'm sure he was praying I would suddenly acquire a husband with a tool belt. I called a hiatus and spent the ▷

winter eating cheese popcorn in front of the TV amid unpacked boxes and plaster dust, wondering how I was going to pay the mortgage.

Fortunately a new job turned up, and so did spring. I timidly began poking around the weeds in the backyard, self-conscious lest my neighbours realize I barely knew the front of the rusty old push mower from the back. Heads began poking out of doors, and people said hello. I started to feel more like the owner of a *home* than of just a house, and I resumed fixing it up.

To help pay for the repairs, I took in a homestay student from Korea. Jung-hee spent her first evening with me in tears because she'd expected her Canadian living experience to be with a family in the suburbs, not with a single woman in the inner city, just up the street from a bar known locally as "The Kick 'n' Stab." I told Jung-hee that there were different kinds of Canadian families; mine just happened to have only one person in it. I was trying to convince myself as much as I was her.

Home free

Despite the stress and expense, I now think that buying my house was the smartest thing I've ever done. Carrying a mortgage alone can be scary, but in Canada's major cities, monthly rent may be even scarier. Both Kate and I were laid off after we bought our houses, and we both ultimately decided to freelance. Our banks allowed us

to negotiate lower payments to see us through the initial shaky period. Try doing that with a landlord. And because I usually have one or two tenants, I can deduct a portion of the utilities, mortgage interest and repairs. I've paid off a chunk of the principal, and someday the house will be all mine.

There are other payoffs. In the past six years I've acquired three nephews and a niece, who love visiting me. They like to stick their heads through the hole in the French doors where I've never replaced a missing pane, and at Halloween they smear themselves in pumpkin guts in my backyard. I realize now that the kids would have loved my old apartment too—that having a home is an attitude as much as it is four

walls and a roof. But today, after 20 years of not knowing any neighbours, I belong to something like a community, partly made up of other single women on my less-than-posh street.

A group of us meet monthly for a potluck dinner where we drink, smoke, eat too much and talk about our knob-and-tube wiring. The day we helped Kate pull down the fence in her front yard, the retired men in the neighbourhood stared at us, wide-eyed, before fetching their tools and pitching in. (One of them even admitted he kinda liked that women's lib stuff, marking the first time I'd heard that term since, oh, 1977.) There are squabbles and rivalries and tons of gossip. But perhaps because I'm now

old enough not to care what people think of me, the nosier my neighbours are, the safer I feel.

The road to independence

Though I've become an ace with a caulking gun, I'm not particularly handy—and I don't drive. Learning what I can accomplish when I set my mind to it has made me more confident, but learning to ask for help from others has been an even more important lesson. I owe a lot to my brothers. When my plaster ceiling caved in the night before I was to leave on vacation, and when the sewer backed up, spurted water onto my tenant's bed, all the childhood grief those guys gave me was forgiven.

But there's only so much I can ask of family and friends, so sometimes I hire the help. I've found that most service people are honest and helpful. When I described to my very sweet ceramic-tile guy what I planned to have done in the kitchen, he tore his gaze from my breasts long enough to blurt, "You just like a man, Mrs. Cynthia!"

Yeah, well, maybe—finally—I'm just like an adult. I'm not suggesting that buying a house is the only way to get there. For some, self-confidence and independence come from shedding encumbrances such as houses rather than acquiring them. Taking control of your life and finding ways to connect it to the lives of others are keys to the same door.

In spite of our rocky start, Jung-hee stayed with me for two years, becoming part of my extended family. Before she returned to Seoul to get married, she told me shyly that she looked up to me and admired my independence. When I was a girl, I knew no adults who were single, much less lone homeowners. I didn't set out to be anybody's role model, but I'll accept the position. □

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