Thirteen Ways of Looking at My Living Room

(WITH APOLOGIES TO WALLACE STEVENS)

By Maureen Egan

1) It wasn't my living room then. It was very much the Shumates' home — unusual angles, high ceilings and walls of windows with views that seduced us. During that first visit nearly 17 years ago, the house wasn't even on the market, but my husband and I were in the Shumates' living room with a Realtor nonetheless. We were made for each other: We weren't ready to buy and they weren't ready to sell.

2) Calling it the purchase of a house doesn't suffice. Once we had a contract, Mary and Stuart invited us back, wanting our young children to explore it, welcoming us with homemade cake to boot. Their pride in the home and gardens that they'd built 40 years before was as understandable as our kids' excitement at the waterfalls in the creek at the bottom of the hill.

3) I was so taken by Mary's watercolor paintings that covered the walls — soft, subtle paintings, mostly of gardens — that I didn't notice the seven kinds of '60s- and '70s-era wallpaper (eight if you counted the powder room ceiling) visible from the living room. The blue plaid, the textured solids, the multicolored stripes, the oranges, golds and olives, all trend-setting once, didn't register as peel-worthy until they'd moved out.

4) The morning we moved in, I looked out the window to see then-81-year-old Mary in a skirt, raking leaves onto a tarp. She wanted to leave the yard pristine for us and suspecting correctly that we were overmatched, didn't want us overwhelmed with outdoor chores right away. That labor of love soothed us both that day.

5) Two days later, I was in the kitchen when I heard Mary's voice. It was one of several episodes of "I Love Mary" we appeared in. She needed to use the phone in the kitchen. I needed her to stay out of the kitchen. I tried to keep her in the living room while I searched for the cordless, not wanting her to see what I was doing — or undoing. Naturally, she headed to the wall phone in her old kitchen, dialed and looked up at the far corner. I saw the flicker on her face when she realized I'd wasted no time painting over her French's yellow-mustard-colored kitchen cabinets. I felt terrible, but she pretended she hadn't noticed my little betrayal and moved on, sunny as ever.

6) It's like living in a tree house. Standing in the living room, we're in the branches with owls, hawks, bluebirds and swallows. A pileated woodpecker will peck at the front windows, hoping to come in. More than once, a great blue heron slicing through the yard at eye-level has made me gasp. Raccoons nest in our trees and appreciate a cookout on the patio as much as we do. I don't want to talk about the spiders.

7) Soon after Mary and Stuart moved, I picked up the newspaper to see a full-color spread of them posing by their community's pool in swimsuits and smiles. I was just about to start stripping wallpaper off the living room walls. Some people know how to live.

8) One of her paintings hangs in the living room still. I remember another of the gully blooming with periwinkle that I wish I'd bought. Not a weed in sight. Her adult children say that weeding the gully was their punishment in their youth. It long ago became mine in my middle age.

9) Out the living room toward the street, low rock walls add substance to the front. Mary told me that she tied a rope around her waist and pulled the rocks up from the creek to make them. Sorry I missed that. She was spry and sprightly, and the evidence is everywhere that she pulled more than her own weight. →

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Bob Scott illustration

Thirteen cont'd

10) One year Mary called to ask my permission to cut some sprigs of japonica across the creek. Typical Mary. It wasn't my shrub or my land. She'd planted the japonica on someone else's property alongside a stone wall that showcased it to stunning effect so that we benefited from the pairing. The landowner she'd gotten permission from decades ago had since sold the property, so Mary straddled someone else's fence to get to the hedge. She gave me blooms for the table.

11) Last summer Mary treated my daughter and me to lunch and then took us to see Stuart in their apartment. They had downsized again, but the living room had all the essentials: Mary's watercolors on the walls, good books, flowers blooming outside the window, Mary and Stuart and company. More than once I'd phone her in the evening and hear a hubbub. She'd call me back once their guests left.

Her handmade Christmas cards often included the line, "We're so pleased you're living in our house." And so are we.

12) Getting mail from Mary was an instant mood-booster. It was pure joy to have such a fan, such a friend. She was the one Richmond magazine subscriber I could take credit for. Her handmade Christmas cards that hang in the living room every December often included the line, "We're so pleased you're living in our house." And so are we.

13) I was downstairs early when I heard Mary had died. I looked out of the living room at her yard, smiling through the tears, the azaleas and dogwoods as irrepressible as she was. I'm forever grateful there was no arm's length, anonymous real estate transaction for us. I'll bring flowers from the yard inside more often now. It's natural to want to keep some of Mary's exuberance close.

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