

**KNICKKNACK**

Ng found this vintage tin windup toy cat behind a radiator. Today it lives on a bookshelf.

**Good Read**

# The Secret History of a House

FOR CELESTE NG, A GUT RENOVATION REVEALED  
A SURPRISING WINDOW INTO THE PAST.

**IT WAS CHARMING:** That's what we thought at first. We were recently married, childless, and moving to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where we hoped to settle and start a family. The real estate agent, a George Lucas look-alike who smelled of cigars, walked us through.

"It's the top two floors," he said. "The owner used to live here, but he's moved to Gloucester. A young couple is renting the first floor." He opened the door. "It has everything," he said. "You'll love it."



**PAPER TIME CAPSULE**

This water-stained envelope held two photos from Cape Cod, now framed and displayed in Ng's dining room.

with a farm scene. According to the Internet, they dated from the 1930s. I thought about someone in the heart of the Depression, carefully selecting the exact pictures they wanted, then sealing them in the walls, not to be seen again until now.

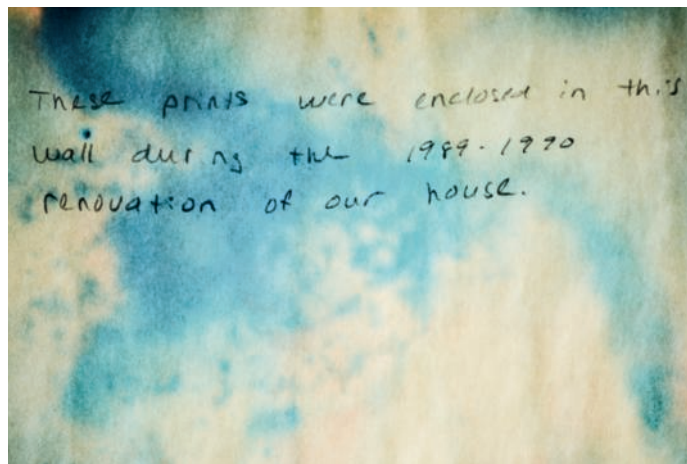
Some of the finds were mysterious. In one crawl space we found a musket ball, but we'd never know how, or when, it got there. Other items were startlingly specific. In another back corner of the attic, we found a wedding invitation: "Mary M. Owen and Louis A. Palena invite you to join us celebrating our willingness to love, share, cherish, pleasure and support one another. We will be married. SunDay, May 28, 1978." I Googled, trying to find out more about them, but to no avail. Whoever Mary and Louis were, they'd left no record—except this one oddly capitalized, oddly worded artifact of their lives, tucked away in the house that they'd once shared and that we now shared with their memories.

The last items we found had been left quite deliberately: a certificate from the Nikon Advanced Systems program, stapled inside the wall of our kitchen, dated 1990 and bearing the name of our former landlord. Pinned to it was a small medal, but when I reached to remove it, it fell between the cracks of the floorboards, where it remains to this day. Then, wedged behind one of the studs in that same wall, we found an envelope, with a water-stained note: "These photos were enclosed in this wall during the 1989–1990 renovation of our house." Two black-and-white photographs of Cape Cod, undated.

**WITH EACH DISCOVERY**, I asked myself the same questions: Who had left this? Why had they chosen this to save for later? What did it say about them, and what had they intended it to say?

By gutting the house, we thought we'd be starting over, building a home that was ours alone. But even the space, we soon realized, would always be shaped by everything that had come before. Why did the wall stop right there? Because behind it was a chimney, from the days of coal heat stoves. Why had they put a soffit there? Because long ago, someone had run a pipe to make the upstairs bathroom.

The lives of all the former residents overlaid the house in just the same way. They would always be there, and they gave the house its character. They made it not just a house but this house, our house. A house that had held many lives, that bore in its bones many memories. We'd never know all the answers about those previous



lives, but the more we found, the more we discovered we didn't want to strip all that history away. We wanted instead to add to it, to find a way for our lives and those other lives to overlap.

Before the workmen closed up the wall of the hall closet, we made a time capsule of our own. It's not the whole story of us, of course, but it's the way we'd like to be remembered, the memories we'd like to leave behind for whoever rebuilds our house 20, 50, 100 years from now. Two family portraits: one a photograph, one crayoned by our then 5-year-old. A business card with the cover of my novel and my email address, in case we're still around for them to contact. And plans of the house as it was built and as we'd changed it.

There's no such thing as a clean slate, I reflected as we tucked the envelope into the closet wall.

Now that we've moved back into the "new" house, it looks quite different. We'd moved doors here, created rooms there. Our furniture fills up the rooms; our pictures hang on the walls. But I've framed the Cape Cod photos that had been sealed up in the kitchen and hung them in the dining room; I've mounted the elephant-head door handles in my office. I posted the wedding invitation in our guest bedroom, and every time guests visit, they ask about it, and I tell them the story again.



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