

Jane Rule

HOUSE

Sooner or later, people settle down and buy a house. At least that's what Harry thinks would be best for his wife, Anna, and the kids. Little does he know how wrong he is.

It's a case of retarded development," Harry shouted. "You're thirty years old."

Anna, kneeling on the floor by a half reupholstered couch, looked up at him and smiled through a mouthful of tacks. Then she went back to her hammering, letting it punctuate or machine-gun down his complaints, depending on their accuracy.

"Other women want to buy houses. Other women want their kids to have a yard to play in. They like to reupholster their own furniture. They don't have to be dragged, screaming and kicking, into middle-class and middle age. They take pleasure in it."

Anna's answer was fortunately both short and incomprehensible though it was not difficult for Harry to imagine what of his army vocabulary she was returning to him. Other women not only didn't say that sort of thing; they didn't let their husbands get away with it either. But lecturing her about that would be side-tracking the argument. The first step toward civilization had to be taken before the subtleties could be considered.

"Wouldn't you just look?" he asked, trying to sound more rea-

sonable. "Just drive around with the kids this afternoon and look?"

She pounded in the last of her mouthful of tacks. "Harry, baby," she said. "I've told you what I'm doing with *my* money. Six more months of chewing tacks, and I'm buying that island."

"I'll sell the boat," he said. "I will. I'll sell it. It was ridiculous to buy it in the first place. *Your* money! What about *my* money?"

"So buy a house," she said.

"I haven't got the money. You know perfectly well I haven't. Anyway, it's supposed to be for you. You're supposed to want it."

"I know," she said. "I'm depriving the kids. Now they play in two hundred acres of public park, thirty miles of beach, and spend their weekends cooped up in a boat, when instead they could have a thirty-foot-wide backyard and a wading pool. And you could mow the lawn and I could overstuff our own furniture. You know what I think, Harry. I think the only thing between you and being an overstuffed shirt is me, and I'm getting bored with it. An island's just right. Sell the boat, buy yourself a house. When you miss us, swim over."

"My kids are not living on any island..."

"That's telling her, Harry," Joey said, wandering in from the kitchen with a banana, shoeless and shirtless, his very small jeans riding low.

"Don't call me Harry!"

"Who is this guy, Mom?" Joey asked, jerking his head toward his father. "I thought his name was Harry."

"Oh, he's some sort of real estate agent," Anna said.

"He is not," Doll bellowed, an even smaller version of her brother, identically dressed, with a similar banana. "He's my father."

"Doll, honey," Harry said. "Joey? Don't you guys think it would be fun to live in a house, I mean a real house with trees around it and grass and rooms of your own?"

"Sure," Doll said, "if I can sleep in Joey's room."

"You don't want to live out on an island, do you? Summer time's all right, but what would you do in the winter time? Where would you go to school?"

"With the fish?" Joey suggested and then fell onto the open springs of the couch in delight at his own joke.

"I'm not kidding," Harry said, a hurt in his voice that alerted and sobered them all. "I really think it's time we all grew up."

"You are grown up," Doll protested.

"How much older than six do you have to be?" Joey asked.

"You don't have to be any older," Harry said, "than how much older than six you are."

"And a half," Joey said, thoughtfully.

"Come on," Anna said. "Find your shoes, mine too, while you're at it. Dad wants to go for a drive."

"Why do we need shoes?" Doll asked.

Anna nodded to Harry for explanation. He could think of nothing but a stern look which amused both children into obedience.

It was no good, on a beautiful summer Saturday, to come out of their shabby apartment block, get into their car and turn away from beach, yacht club, and park to drive into the residential sections of the city, rows of stucco bungalows with high basements on thirty-foot lots. Though Harry knew these flat lands were where they should begin, the way the rest of their friends had ten years ago, he drove through them to the city hills where lots were fifty or sixty, sometimes even one hundred feet wide, where houses were set high on the land to look out over bay and mountains, the same view they already had from their kitchen and the condemned balcony beyond it. It had been a great view when everyone else they knew lived in ugly, little closed-in houses, but now their friends were moving up onto these hills, enjoying the view from large, well-furnished living rooms, from terraces with garden furniture. Nobody else he knew had a cabin cruiser, but some people were buying outboard motors. Who needed to sleep out on the water on a Saturday night if he had a house like one of these to come home to?

"The McLears have just bought that place," Harry said, slowing so that everyone could see enough to share his envy. "There's a fish pond beyond that hedge, with goldfish in it."

The children sounded dutifully interested in the goldfish. Anna said nothing. They drove on, passing occasionally a house for sale, some marked "open house," but they were expensive, even pretentious places, and anyway the kids weren't properly dressed, nor was Anna, in work trousers, sneakers, and an old shirt of his. Then Joey threw one of Doll's shoes out of the window, and Harry had to stop the car, get out and go back for it. Walking back, he looked at the

car, the same one he'd had when they got married, a great car then, a souped-up Buick with all the paint burned off it, full now of sulking wife and fighting kids. A man, pushing a new power mower, looked up with detached interest.

"Shoe," Harry said, holding up what even the Good Will would not have taken. There was really nothing for the man to answer. "Well, forget it," Harry said, getting into the car and slamming the door. Once he could have cut out with blasted mufflers. Now the car could only cough like a rest-home patient and moan up the rest of the hill.

"Out sightseeing or house-hunting on Saturday?" McLean asked Harry as they took a break from checking specifications for a new school.

"Just out on a drive," Harry said.

"Something wrong with the boat?"

"No. As a matter of fact, I'm thinking of selling it."

"No kidding?"

"Well, you know, it can get to be like everything else."

"It's a honey of a boat."

"Yeah," Harry said, but he didn't get any pleasure from the admiration, perhaps because it was no longer tinged with envy as it used to be.

Oh, Harry had been the lucky one, all right, the cake-and-eat-it-too boy. His wife liked noisy cars and boats and crazy apartments. She also liked beer parlors and football games. So did all the other girls, until about two weeks after they were married. Then suddenly it was Austins and mortgages and TV sets. But not for Anna. She couldn't have cared less. That is, she did care. "If you're going to watch the fights, watch the fights," she'd say, and so they left their friends to the eyestrain of the five-dollar-down, five-dollar-a-month flickering screens and went to the fights, the meets, the games: ringside, fifty-yard-line-living. And Harry and Anna were the only ones who didn't have a child anywhere from six months to a year after they were married. Joey took a lovely, leisurely three and a half years to turn up. By that time they had the boat. Harry knew perfectly well that the boat was all that kept them in touch with most of the crowd, and even the boat didn't change the wives' attitude toward Anna. It would have been all right if Anna had been just one of those buddy kinds of women, trying to outswim, outrun,

or outyell any man she was with. She did sometimes try that, of course, but never with anything but fun in it, fun finally to catch up with her, tumble her into the drink and go after her again. She looked better in a bathing suit than other women could take. The baby was supposed to change all that. Harry's friends warned him with malice and sympathy. And Harry half believed them. He even tried to get ready for it, thinking of mortgaging the boat to get a down payment for a house, but Anna never mentioned a house. She talked about going to Europe instead. And three months after Joey was born, that's what they did because he was not much more trouble than a backpack. It was a marvellous summer, Joey their human passport in every village.

"Listen, McLean, a kid's a social asset if you've got the right attitude about it," Harry explained when they got back.

The salary he'd given up and the money they'd spent worried Anna not at all. She decided to start reupholstering furniture. Space? Their living room. They'd never got round to buying much besides beds. So what she worked on during the day, they sat on in the evening, and she made money at it.

Harry had always wondered a little more than Anna how other people lived. He had what she called "patches of worry" about things. For instance, because the kids slept in what should have been the dining room, they never had people over for dinner. They entertained on the boat or in Chinatown or at the Greek Village. And they didn't watch television. The kids seemed more interested in clam digging or tree climbing than in anything that kept them indoors, and Harry and Anna read a lot, sitting in the comfortable corners of other people's furniture.

"They call me the Frenchman at the office because I never entertain at home," Harry would say, or "Television has its good points, after all."

What weighed on his mind most of all was their lack of debt and Anna's savings account. In a good mood, he'd explain he had nothing to gripe about at coffee breaks, no killing mortgages, no idle, money-spending wife. In a bad mood, he brooded about what they must be doing to the economy of the country, which survived and grew, as far as he could tell, on interest payments.

"Let's buy a plane then," Anna would say. "We could have some race horses."

hook Harry two weeks after that first drive into lawndom to raise the subject again, this time beginning more casually and quietly.

"McLean's started fuchsia cuttings in his office window."

"You could take one of your avacado pits down," Anna suggested.

"For his garden," Harry said.

"You want to be a gardener? Hire yourself out on Saturdays, two dollars an hour."

"Anna, couldn't you be happy in a house? Couldn't we just try?"

"You mean for psychological interest? We could hire ourselves out for the air-raid shelter project. They pay the whole family."

"But we know about that, honey. What I want to know is, can't we live with space?"

"That's a pretty exclusive project," Anna said. "I don't think we're the right material."

"I am being serious," Harry shouted. "I am asking you, as my wife, if you could live in a house, H O U S E."

"Why?"

"Because I would like to do something *ordinary*, for a change. I am an ordinary man, and I'd like to be ordinary just to see what it's like."

"Kids!" Anna shouted. "Shoes. We're going house hunting."

"And not just shoes this time," Harry said. "House hunting and beachcombing have different costumes. We've got to look well turned out."

"Then we've got to go shopping first," Anna said.

"I will not be distracted."

"You are distracted," Anna said. "You're out of your mind."

But that was her last negative comment. Saturdays and Sundays for six weeks the boat stayed tied up at the dock while Harry, Anna, Joey, and Doll became experts on open houses and empty houses, everything for sale from the bottom of the hills to the top. The kids, reluctant at first, adapted and developed skills for this new game. Joey, in a number phase, memorized down payments and mortgage rates. Doll became obsessive about colored plumbing. Harry catalogued views and fruit trees. Anna spent most of her time in basements. At the end of each hunting day, they would vote on the

house they all liked best. It was never unanimous. Some times they had to settle on any house that had the approval of only two of them. Then Joey would give them the figures, Doll the state of the plumbing, and Anna the cost of rewiring or new hot water tank or copper piping or furnace. The result was always the same. Unless they sold the boat, they couldn't afford anything they were looking at.

"Well, why not?" Harry asked finally. "Why not sell it?"

"And just always house-hunt on Saturdays and Sundays?" Joey asked.

"Watch television," Doll said.

"If we sold the boat, we could buy a television," Harry said.

"Why don't we take next weekend off and go out on the boat?" Anna suggested.

"As a sort of farewell?"

Harry couldn't have had better luck with the weather. It rained. He couldn't have had better luck with the boat either. Everything in it had gone cranky with neglect, including the people, who had forgotten how to live pleasantly at such close quarters.

"It smells," Joey said.

"It squeaks," Doll said.

"It needs money spent on it," Anna said.

"That settles it," Harry said.

And it seemed to. Anna, Joey, and Doll climbed off the boat on Sunday night without so much as a regretful look backward. It was Harry who stood for a reluctant moment in the rain with all those sunny memories. Anna put the ad in the paper. And Anna showed the strangers over the boat. The night Harry was supposed to sign the papers, he became generous with hesitations.

"If this seems selfish to you, honey," he said, "I'm perfectly willing to talk about it."

"Sign," Anna said.

After that, they had to buy a house. There was no reason not to. And they found one, not quite up on the hill but tilting in that direction, and there was a view of the mountains if you left the frosted window open in the upstairs bathroom, which had a violet toilet and yellow tub and basin. There were fruit trees and a dried-up pond in the sixty-foot yard. There was a television aerial on the roof. It had lots of rooms, not very big ones, but Joey figured out

that there were two rooms apiece with two left over. The down payment was small enough and the mortgage big enough so that they had cash left over for a television and some furniture.

"Why don't we just go ahead and trade in the car?" Harry said, a morsel of panic in his voice.

"Why not?" Anna agreed.

"I mean, we could get a new little Austin . . ."

And they did, a grey one. Joey said it smelled funny. Doll said it squeaked, but Anna pointed out that it didn't need any money spent on it, that is, except for the monthly payments.

The night before they moved, Harry lay on his back staring up at the familiar footsteps over his head. That morning McLean had said, "I never thought I'd see the day when you looked like a candidate for ulcers. What's the matter with you?"

"Bills," Harry had said and said it again now.

"What?" Anna said.

"Honey, are we making a terrible mistake?"

"Sure," Anna said. "That's the way we like to live."

"But this is different."

"What's different about it?"

"The boat, for instance. Now, if that was a mistake, it was out of your own. This is the sort of mistake everybody makes."

"Right," Anna said. "Ordinary."

And that's all she would say. She went to sleep, leaving him with that terrible and lonely idea, which had been his idea all along.

The next night was worse because there they all were, exhausted from the move, baffled by the new furniture and all the rooms.

"I think I'm deaf," Joey said, as he was getting into bed. "I can't hear anybody anywhere."

And Doll had to come down the stairs to tell them she was crying. It obviously seemed to her a very odd message to deliver, but she was grown up about it. They moved her bed into Joey's room. It had to go up against the closet door until they could figure out a better way to arrange the furniture. The old dining room had been bigger, or maybe it simply hadn't had any closet doors to get in the way.

On his back that night, Harry didn't have the courage to say what a terrible mistake it all was. He fell asleep wanting to cry and dreamed all that had happened to them, lost in furniture stores, in

vaults of banks, the boat sinking under them with mortgages floating about in the debris.

In the morning he could hardly get out of bed, yet he wanted to get out, right out, get into his car. Then he remembered the Austin, and his sense of disgust was physical.

"Maybe I've got the flu," he said.

"No, you haven't," Anna said. "You just haven't got your hand legs yet. Stand up."

The kids were cheerful enough after they found their way down stairs, but, when Joey turned on the television before they sat down to breakfast, Anna's swat lifted him right across the room. Breakfast was very tentative and mannerly in the dining room.

"Sort of like an English boarding house, isn't it?" Anna said. "I should cool the toast in the kitchen."

All day at the office Harry swung from daring plans for escape to depressing hopes that they might all get used to it. At dead centre between these two solutions was his conviction that he just didn't have the kind of courage it took to be all these good things: a middle-class, middle-aged man with a mortgage and an Austin. And sooner or later, Anna was going to face him with it. Why hadn't they bought that crazy island? Or a plane or a race horse? Something to feel guilty and defensive and proud about. What could you feel about a house, particularly an ordinary, sensible sort of house with a dried-up pond in the backyard? You could feel awful, and that's what Harry felt, bobbing along in the smelly, squeaky, little Austin, eighteen months off even being his own, toward a house he'd be paying for for fifteen years.

On the front porch, he thought the noise must be coming from somewhere else, but in the front hall, the heavy thuds and falling plaster were clearly his concern. He leapt up the stairs, calling as he went, opened the door to Doll's room, empty now but for a chest of drawers, just in time to see a wrecking bar break through another patch of wall.

"What are you doing?" he shouted, peering at Anna through the ragged hole. Behind her on Joey's bed, the two children sat, their attention as fixed as it might have been on television. "What the devil are you doing?"

"We decided there were too many rooms," Anna said.

"But how do you know that's not a supporting wall?"

don't," she said. "It may be a mistake," and she let the wrecking bar crash through the wall again. "On the other hand, it may be a solution. Here, take a turn. You'll like it."

He stood with the wrecking bar in his hand, doubtful. Then he swung it at the wall and felt the plaster give. Over the sound of falling bits, he heard the kids cheering.

"That's great," he said, and he did it again.

"So we can get rid of the dining room," Anna said, "and we can bash our way through to a view. And we can tear down the back porch."

"Marvellous," he said and swung again.

"We're going to put a ladder up to the back door," Joey shouted.

"And sit on the toilet and look at the view," Doll explained.

"I sent back the TV," Anna said.

"Lovely," he said, and he knew, in his delight, that they might go too far, might tear down the whole place by mistake, but that didn't matter. After all, it was theirs, mortgage and all. The house rang with the wrecking bar again.

"Easy now," Anna said. "Easy, baby. I'm not quite ready for outer space."

"But you could be," Harry said, "if we ever decided to move."

Responding

1. How does Harry's attitude toward houses change after the family purchases their house? Why is the family "wrecking" their house at the end of the story?
2. Create a character sketch of Anna in writing or in a drawing, making specific references to the story. Share your character sketch. Explain how Anna differs from her peers and whether you think she would be an interesting person to know.
3. Where do the social pressures Harry feels to buy the house come from? How are they conveyed? When have you felt social pressures to do things you later realized you didn't really want to do? What happened? Share your experience(s).

4. How does the author create humor? In a paragraph, give examples of details and dialogue from the story that you think are amusing.
5. Is this story mainly a story of character, conflict, or theme? Defend your choice.
6. What will Harry's and Anna's family life be like in one year's time? Will they still be living in the house? Discuss.

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