

## A Short Story



# The Pink House

by John H. Richardson

WE STOOD IN AN EMPTY HOUSE LOOKING at a walk-in closet. At least Mom and I did; Dad stood by the window smoking a cigarette and pretending to ignore us. We had been house-hunting for three days, and Dad had been cranky since the middle of the first day, when he realized just how much house he could expect for his money (double what he could get in the States, but there was no telling him that). By now he was impossible. As the real-estate agent ran down the history of the house, he gazed out over the red-tiled rooftops with a look of growing misery. The sun flowing into the dark room etched pits and hollows into his face until he looked as harsh as a monk in a medieval woodcut.

Mom leaned in to inspect the closet. She nodded her head at the shelves, confirming their existence, doing the polite thing, making the agent happy.

"Walk-in closet," Dad muttered. "We don't need a walk-in closet."

My parents had been living in Mexico for almost two years, since shortly after my father retired. They chose Tonalá because of its superb climate—second only to Nairobi's, everyone said—and because it housed the largest expatriate community of retired Americans in the world, nearly a hundred thousand of them. There were book clubs, garden clubs, eating clubs, golf courses galore, the American Society and its many functions, and Mom and Dad had quickly gathered a group of friends. Now Mom wanted to buy a house. She promised Dad his own garden, his own library. It would have a high wall, Mexican style. An oasis. They'd pay for it in cash and never have to worry about rent again.

Dad wasn't persuaded. He spoke again, louder: "We don't need a walk-in closet."

Mom avoided the agent's look. She spoke with patient reason, as to a child. "There's nothing unusual about a walk-in closet."

Dad cleared his throat gruffly. "Well, I don't need one

and I don't see any point in spending a small fortune to have one."

This was one of his tricks for getting out of something he didn't want to do: simply saying he didn't feel like it would be rude, by his lights, so he worked up a steam of indignation until we gave in to his bad mood. He brought his cigarette to his mouth. The cigarette had a very long ash, nearly half its length. We all looked at it. Despite the slight trembling of Dad's hand, the ash didn't fall.

"Maybe we'd better come back another time," Mom said to the agent, giving her a stretched-across-the-teeth social smile.

In the car she opened her purse in her lap and began adjusting her makeup. We waited. "Really, Richard," she said. "Must you embarrass me like that?"

Dad said nothing.

"That was a perfectly reasonable house. There was nothing extreme about that house."

"It had a swimming pool," Dad said.

Mom made a *tch* sound.

"There'll be bills," Dad said. "Cleaning bills, heating bills, bills for chemicals and what-not. I don't need a pool. You don't need a pool."

"It might be nice to go swimming," Mom said.

Dad scowled. "I'd say your swimming days are over."

Mom was silent for a moment. Finally she spoke. "Thank you very much," she said, a stop in her voice.

Watching from the back seat, I thought Mom was overdoing it a bit, enjoying the melodrama of a personal offense. "Looked like a great house to me," I said.

They ignored me. But I knew it would be best to continue to fill the silence, that being one of the primary functions of children. So I babbled. "The acoustics were great, what a place to play guitar, that living room, big kitchen, loved all that tile work, it was just great."

That was for Mom. Now for Dad: "Of course, I don't see what you want to buy a house for down here anyway. I mean, California, that would be cool, near the beach, but that's me, and you guys have your own priorities and

*He did not want a swimming pool, or walk-in closets. He wasn't sure he wanted to buy a house in the first place. His wife and son, however, hoped to show him the way*

needs and stuff, which I guess include living in this God-forsaken, disease-ridden, macho, sexist country."

"I'm not sure I do want to buy a house," Dad said. "Your mother is the one who insists on it."

Dad flipped on the turn signal and glanced at the lane to his right, his face dark with concentration. Mom didn't speak until there was a break in the traffic. "Honestly," she said. "You talked to the accountant. You talked to Dr. Joe. You were the one who said we should do this—and I agreed. Now, when it comes to the point of actually doing something, you make everything impossible. This happens every time we try to make a decision."

Dad just compressed his lips and looked out his side window. Mom could see that continuing the conversation was pointless, and we rode the rest of the way home in silence.

When we got home—home that year being an apartment near midtown—Dad went straight into the kitchen. After a moment we heard the clink of glass and bottle. When Dad emerged, glass in hand, Mom gave him a critical look, which he ignored. "I'm going to read," he said, heading for his bedroom.

Mom shook her head and sighed, moving toward the kitchen. I followed. "Are you hungry?" she asked.

"I thought I'd go out for a while," I said. "Get some tostadas."

I leaned against the counter as she went through the refrigerator. The kitchen was blue—blue fridge, blue counter, blue walls. "This is the way it's been," she said. "He's been this way ever since he retired. I honestly don't know if I can stand it much longer."

She shifted a few Tupperware containers in search of something.

"Come on, Mom," I said, thinking she was being melodramatic again. "You're not talking . . . divorce?"

"I've thought about it," she said grimly, wiping her mayonnaise knife clean with two definite strokes against the edge of a slice of bread.

I was quiet for a few moments, giving ritual gravity to Mom's statement even though I didn't remotely believe it. Now she was setting up a tray with salt and pepper shakers and a placemat, good china, a Steuben crystal glass, even a miniature vase and one small rosebud. In our house there was always a flower on every tray.

Divorce: the thought annoyed me. The confidence annoyed me. But it had nothing to do with me. I hadn't even seen much of the folks for the past seven years, since I was sixteen and they got hysterical over some minor recreational drug abuse. I got into college early, came home once or twice for vacation—the last time two years ago, the year Dad retired and I graduated from college. That was another disaster. So I was surprised and a little flattered—and secretly pleased—when Mom called me up and said that Dad wasn't doing very well, could I come down?

"This'll blow over," I said. "He's just having trouble adjusting to retired life."

"Some trouble," she said. She looked the tray over, aligned a fork, picked it up, and started for the door.

"Maybe if you didn't wait on him hand and foot," I said.

"He should eat," she said, taking the tray to his bedroom.

When she opened the door, I saw Dad lying sideways on the bed, propped up on his elbow with a cigarette in one hand and a book in the other. He turned a page and looked up, his expression vague. As Mom carried the tray to the bed, he shifted to make room for it and his cigarette ash fell on the bedspread, which was already burned in a half-dozen places. "Oh, Richard," Mom said, quickly brushing the ash away.

**E**SCAPE! I SHOT DOWN THE STAIRS OF OUR small apartment building (pillbox balconies, smell of damp cement) and burst out onto the street. The street was narrow here, choked with trees that split the sidewalks, but down a few blocks was a broad divided boulevard with grass and trees and fountains in the middle and a statue on every corner. At one end stood a huge sculpture of the Child Heroes, a few dozen schoolboys who had fought the North American imperialist armies with primitive guns and no grown-up supervision (they were slaughtered, of course, but they showed initiative). At the other end was a huge grocery store, an example of the recent national fad for giant *mercados*. For a while I just strolled around looking at girls. Finally I ducked into my favorite tostada place—wherever I was, I always found a favorite restaurant and always ordered the same thing—and ordered two beers and tostadas, which I wolfed down with sudden hunger. Then I picked up my head and inhaled the balmy, flowered air: jacarandas, bougainvillea, gardenias. It seemed a terrible injustice that there was no one around to have sex with.

**T**HE NEXT MORNING AT NINE-THIRTY MOM was already walking around the apartment, picking at things. She fluffed the pillows on the sofa. She ran a finger across the lid of a cigarette box. "I told him we were leaving at ten," she said. "This is just like him." Then she turned to me and confided, "He was up all night." She called out his name.

"I'll get him," I said. I went to Dad's door and knocked once, twice, pushed it open. The room was dark and stank of cigarettes. Dad lay on his back, his mouth open, his fringe of gray hair tufted from his skull. I touched his leg to see if it was warm.

"Dad," I said, shaking him by the shoulder. "Dad." His eyes opened. It took a moment for him to focus. He gave me a weak and pitiful smile. "Oh," he said, clearing his throat.

“Mom’s getting antsy,” I said, my voice cold. “She wants to get going.”

“I’m getting up,” Dad said. He folded back the covers. His body seemed smaller than I remembered, his legs and arms brown and wiry, his belly pregnant and white. As he sat up, the fly of his boxer shorts gaped open.

Dad sat on the bed, his feet on the floor, his hands holding the edge of the mattress. His big toes had extremely thick nails that curved sideways, making his feet look almost deformed. The toes were bright red.

“What’s wrong with your toes?” I said.

Dad said nothing.

“They look infected,” I said.

Dad grunted dismissively. He put his hands on his thighs and moved forward into a half-crouch; then he pushed off the bed, balancing and straightening at the same time. He faced me, gave an absent nod, and then bowed his head and reached for his robe.

An hour later he was dressed in his uniform of double-knit pants and *guayabera*, an open-necked Mexican “dress” shirt, which seemed to me quite a come-down from the expensive suits he used to wear. His face was like a shirt from a suitcase, clean but creased. We rode the elevator down to the garage and got in the car and drove off, Dad maddeningly slow at everything from locking the front door to getting the car out of the garage. As we got to the garage door, Dad said, for the third time in as many days, “This is an electronic door. We have all the latest improvements here.”

Despite his hangover, he was trying to be hearty, a proper member of the stoic generation, the Depression generation that never complained, that took pride in bluffing their way through the day no matter how bad they felt (except for those occasional explosions). This annoyed me, and I stayed glumly silent. How could he resolve his problems if he ignored his feelings? When I had a hangover, I babied myself.

An hour later Mom stood in the middle of a kitchen as the real-estate agent threw open cabinets. The agent was talking about how wonderful it was that this house had so much storage space. Mom oohed and aahed. “Is this a mi-

crowave?” she asked. “That’s the first one I’ve ever seen.”

“Mom,” I said, “we owned a microwave. Remember? In Whittier?”

“I meant down here,” she said. “You hardly ever see them down here.” She turned to Dad, who was standing in the doorway trying to muster an expression of mild bemusement. “Look at that, Richard. A microwave.” Dad grunted.

“No walk-in closets this time,” the agent said. Mom and Dad forced out social chuckles. “There is a safe, however,” she added.

“That would be useful,” Mom said. “We could give up the safe-deposit box. Save a few hundred pesos.”

Dad put on a mock expression of joyous gratitude—his eyebrows went way up, his smile spread absurdly wide. “Now, that interests me,” he said. “Now you have caught my interest. You’re appealing to my deepest desires.”

The agent laughed. “Would you care to see it?” she said. We trooped off to the bedroom to inspect the safe. It was set into the wall, the paint around it darker where a painting must have hung. It was gray, like gun-metal but stippled, with walls about an inch thick. The inside was just big enough to stack five or six hardback books.

“It looks sturdy enough,” Dad said.

“It’s fireproof, too,” the agent said.

We all stood there for a minute, staring into the gray steel box.

“WHAT WAS WRONG WITH THAT house?” Mom asked bitterly an hour later, as we drove home.

“Am I not permitted simply to dislike something?” Dad said. “Did I work my entire life to be forced to buy a house I don’t want to buy?”

“It would be nice if you had a reason,” Mom said.

“I didn’t like it,” Dad said. “I just didn’t like it. It was too bright, or too dark, or something.”

“Too bright or too dark? Honestly.”



"Well, damn it," Dad said.

"I agree with Pop," I said. "That house sucked."

"Daniel," Mom said, this time using the same exasperated tone on me.

"It did. It was too close, like a zoo or something, the way all the bedrooms and even the kitchen opened onto the living room. I kept expecting to see bars on the doors and some little cave in the back where the animals go to hide."

"That's exactly it," Dad said. "I couldn't have put it that well myself, son. That's exactly it. A zoo. A Goddamn zoo. At the cost of over one hundred thousand dollars."

Once again Mom sighed, chastising me with her eyes in the rearview mirror.

"And there was no pool," I said, just to be a monster. Dad fell right in with it.

"At that price it should have a pool," he agreed, nodding. Mom widened her eyes in outrage.

LATER THAT DAY MOM HELD OUT A CANAPÉ tray to Frankie Day, her principal ally in the Battle to Buy a House. Frankie was about fifty, with a crewcut and bright red cheeks. He was a retired real-estate mogul, and Mom's confidant.

Even though Dad was sitting right there, Mom spoke in a whisper. "We can't even get through two houses a day, he gets so mad."

Frankie spoke to Dad with his exaggerated, ironic drawl. "Really, Richard, you can't expect to see just the thing you want your first day out. You know Raoul? Who owns that little restaurant in Los Oblatos? He spent two solid months looking, and he found that marvelous place—you were there on Leticia's birthday—with the flowering trees?"

"It is lovely," Mom said.

"What did he pay, though?" my father said. For reasons obscure to all of us, he showed Frankie a lot of respect. "I can't believe these prices."

Frankie nodded. "Everything is going up," he agreed. "It's the market—it's absolutely wild, and I don't think it's going to get better."

Mom gave him a look. "At least not soon," Frankie said quickly. He knew the rules.

But it was too late. Dad went off on a fret about the local stock market. For the past year or two it had been his personal gold mine, and every time he'd mentioned it he had preened like a proud father. But he also seemed to worry about it constantly. What if it were all a delusion, a mirage? What if he lost his *guayabera*? These doubts made him even more fiercely loyal. When I wondered out loud if the Mexican stock market was the best place to put his money, he gave a little chuckle that said he knew better. But when Frankie said he had his doubts too, Dad started asking fearful questions. What have you heard? Which stocks are weakening?

Finally Frankie and Mom managed to steer the subject back to the house. "You know, Richard," Frankie said, "if you want to save money, the best places are outside Chapultapec altogether. Even Providencia is getting expensive."

Mom had suggested this dozens of times, but Dad would have none of it.

"You can get a mansion out at the lake for . . ."

"I will not live at the lake!" Dad blurted.

Mom frowned at him; his sudden vehemence was inappropriate. "Richard," she said.

Dad shook his head and waved his cigarette, refusing to be shushed. "Everyone we know lives here," he said to Frankie. "Margaret wouldn't want to live too far from here."

"Nobody said we had to buy at the lake," Mom said. "We're just talking."

"I don't like the lake," Dad continued. "It's too damn remote from everything. It's isolated. There's no hospital. I just don't like it."

"Okay," Mom said.

"Well, damn it," Dad said.

Frankie and Mom sipped at their drinks while Dad pouted.

"I always liked the lake," I said.

Frankie took over again. "What you want to think about, Richard, is somewhere out on the outskirts, like Chapalita or Oblatos. Quiet, close to town, cheap. Lots of people are moving out there now. Rancho Contento is a lovely place, for instance."

"Which one?"

"The one near Oblatos, away from the *barranca*," Frankie said.

"The one that changed its name?" Mom said. There had been a lawsuit between the two Rancho Contentos, and one was now called Rancho Mirage, but everyone still enjoyed the confusion and refused to use the new name.

Frankie nodded. "Remember, Richard? Where Dette and Bo live? The Breeces, from Texas?"

Dad shrugged.

"And Serena, the actress," Frankie said.

"It's nice, isn't it?" Mom said. "Remember the cobble streets?"

Dad nodded grudgingly. "I don't think I could live in a place named Rancho Contento."

"It really is a charming place," Frankie said. "I hear you can get a three- or four-bedroom house with a half acre for about sixty thousand American. That won't buy you maid's quarters in Chapultapec."

"Sixty thousand?" Dad asked.

Dad was weakening, and Frankie ran with it. He mentioned the convenient shopping center, and the advantage of access to the back road to the airport, and the popular Aguas Calientes hot springs nearby. The Rancho even had its own little nine-hole golf course, splitting the older, top half of the development from the newer half

below, with the lowest green fees of any course in the area. There were lovely places to walk. It was well protected, surrounded completely by a wall, and always had a guard at the gate. Not to mention the convenient Club Deportivo de Tonalá, with its tennis courts, indoor pool, and popular bar. And the nearby town of Los Oblatos was so historic. "You know the Arabian Nights, that marvelous little restaurant," Frankie said. "With the patio? We ate there. With the peacocks?"

All this was according to Mom's plan. We weren't surprised when, immediately after Frankie left, Dad solemnly observed that perhaps we should look a bit out in Rancho Contento, despite its awful, unfortunate name.

Mom looked at me and rolled her eyes.

Later Dad confided in me. "Your mother prefers it here," he said, "but it's just too damned expensive. I can't afford to buy here. I have to think how she's going to manage when I pass on."

The next morning Mom made a few calls, and by lunch we were driving out to Rancho Contento. It was a rustic-looking private development with wide, rough-cobbled streets, completely surrounded by a mossy brick wall. In the lower half most of the houses had open lawns, in the American manner, but above the golf course the streets wandered into the foothills and the houses all had walls. There were even a few crumbling haciendas dating back to just before the Mexican Revolution, huge shady estates as quiet and timeless as monasteries. On the widest of five avenues horses moved slowly along the dusty center divide. It looked exactly like an older Mexican neighborhood, but without any of the dark little corner stores that sell nothing but bread, sodas, cigarettes, gum, and tired-looking fruit.

Dad had never been above the golf course before, and was quite impressed. As we explored, the real-estate agent told us the peculiar history of the Rancho. It was originally settled near the turn of the century by an American who had made a fortune in the Alaska gold rush and came south to found the proverbial gleaming city on a hill. But the American got chased out by the revolution and returned north a broken man; not only was his wife killed in the fighting, but his sister took up with a young Mexi-

can revolutionary and actually carried a rifle into battle by his side. The American left behind only a few scattered haciendas and the rough outline of imagined streets.

Half an hour later we were standing outside a huge house. We were in the highest part of the Rancho, where the streets parted around giant gnarled cottonwoods and all the gates looked like entrances to Aztec tombs. The house before us was at least fifty years old, maybe sixty, one of the first large places built on the hillside after the revolution. The wall around it was massive, ten feet high and at least two feet thick. The agent was saying we

could get the house "for a song," because the owner wanted out quickly.

"It's quite impressive," Dad said.

Mom didn't say anything.

The agent pushed open the door. Inside, the house was dark and dusty; Mom's nose wrinkled in immediate distaste. At the back of the foyer a curving staircase rose up to a narrow balcony. On one side was a living room, on the other what seemed to be a library. "Well," Dad said. He was still standing just inside the door. "It's quite baronial."

The agent said the house was selling for just ninety thousand dollars. Dad appeared to be pleasantly surprised—this house was twice the size of the ones we had been looking at.

Mom ran her finger along a table and brought it up for inspection. It was black. She

looked at the ceilings dubiously.

"It hasn't been cleaned for months," the agent said quickly. "Not since the owner went back north."

"It is dusty," Mom said.

"Look, Margaret," Dad said. "Built-in shelves!"

Dad led the way into the library, admiring the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. He then posed himself with his back to the fireplace and actually clasped his hands behind his back. The agent smiled.

"Does it work?" Mom asked, nodding at the fireplace.

"Of course it works," Dad said.

"Yes, it works," the agent said. She led us back through the foyer and across the living room to a set of French doors. They opened onto the back yard. She opened the doors and displayed the yard with an upheld hand. "No pool," she said.



Mom narrowed her eyes and sniffed.

By the time the tour was over, Dad was clearly in love with the crumbling old house. He went on and on about its charm and scale and what a wonderful place it would be to entertain. Mom was pointedly silent. When we got to the foyer, Dad said he thought we should make an offer. Mom paused in the middle of a step, took Dad's arm, and smiled sweetly at the real-estate agent. "Could we have a moment?" she asked.

The agent said she would wait in the car; we could just close the door behind us when we were finished. The minute she got out of sight, Mom exploded.

"I can't believe you, Richard," she said. "Here you are, ready to make an offer. Look at this place! It's huge."

Dad looked confused. "I thought you wanted space," he said.

"Space, not a warehouse," Mom said. "This place is so old, I'll bet anything it has a million things that need repairing, old rotted this and that and rusted pipes and whatnot. You can't just make an offer. This place should be surveyed by a professional. We don't know what we'd be getting into. And why has it been on the market for months if it's such a good deal? Just imagine cleaning it!"

Dad appeared to be dumbfounded. "Well . . .," he said. "I thought . . ."

## APHRODITE AND THE NATURE OF ART

I want a net made of iron to hold  
what I am. I love artifice.

Hephaestus made the net that hoisted up  
his wife, Aphrodite, and her lover.

Caught them in their gleaming hardness,  
all ecstasy and soft, most secret flesh.

Good, she thought, at the root of her being  
as she locks her ankles around the gardenia  
that she is. While the two men yelled  
at each other, the women filed out of the room  
full of chaos as well as shape. Their husbands  
standing amazed at what they were seeing,  
the wonderful fish-like economy of her lower back  
seeing the links pressing into her body's delight  
leaving their imprint rose-colored on her  
pale flesh. Hair swelling through some of the gaps  
as the crippled maker raised them like a masterpiece  
higher in the half-light of the vast room.

—Linda Gregg

"You didn't think," she said, turning and walking out the door.

After a moment Dad looked at me and shrugged. I shrugged back. "Looked okay to me," I said.

**T**HAT NIGHT DAD WENT ON ONE OF HIS HORRIBLE benders. Mom and I sat in the living room talking in hushed voices, and every now and then Dad would come walking through in his boxer shorts with a crystal water glass in his hand. He'd nod his head to acknowledge us. Once he said, "Still up?"

"I don't want him going with us," Mom was saying. "He gets so upset, and then this. I'm afraid he'll have a heart attack."

"He's going to feel awful in the morning," I said.

"I hope he's alive in the morning," Mom said. "I always go in there wondering."

After a moment I suggested that I stay with Dad while Mom went house-hunting alone. "I mean, if it upsets him that much."

"You know your father," Mom said. "There's no way he'll let me go alone."

"Why don't we commit him to a mental institution for a week?" I said. "We'll say it's a case of temporary insanity—ours, if we don't get him out of our hair."

Mom laughed. Then she sighed. "I wish I could," she said.

At that moment I noticed something dark on the floor.

"What's that?" I said. "Look."

It was a bloody footprint. Looking down the room I saw another, and another, and another, a whole series of bloody footprints leading to my father's room.

"He probably dropped a glass and cut himself," Mom said, not getting up. "He's done it before."

I went to the pantry where we kept the liquor, looked around, and came back out. "No sign of any glass," I said. Mom got out of her chair and we headed toward Dad's room. We knocked, heard a grunt, and pushed open the door. Mom gasped. The whole bottom half of Dad's bed was soaked with blood. Dad was lying there reading, completely oblivious.

Twelve hours later we stood at the foot of Dad's hospital bed. Mom was shaking her head. "You really are a strange and stubborn person," she said. Dad looked sheepish.

His feet, it turned out, were horribly infected after being gouged deep and long by two fierce ingrown toenails that had actually imbedded themselves nearly half an inch into the pulp of his big toes. Apparently he'd been trying to dig out the ingrown toenails with a nail file when he drunkenly stabbed himself in the ankle deep enough to require three stitches. Then, it seems, he'd given up his efforts at home surgery, dabbed at the

wound with his sheet, and gone to get another drink.

We left Dad in his private room and walked down the hall with Dr. Joe.

"It's really not that serious," he said. "What's surprising is that he let it get that bad—he must have been in pain for months. Anyway, I can have him out of here tomorrow."

Mom's reaction was instantaneous. "Oh, no," she said.

Dr. Joe looked at her curiously. His hair was going prematurely white—he wasn't much more than thirty—and that, combined with his stodgy bedside manner and the medicinal smell he gave off, made him seem almost as old as his patients.

"Can't you keep him for a while?" Mom said.

Dr. Joe laughed. There were people waiting for the bed, sick people, he said. He had no right to mislead an adult patient about his true condition. Besides, Dad would kill him if he ever found out.

"If he keeps drinking the way he has been," Mom said, "he won't live long enough to kill you."

Dr. Joe puffed out his lips and clasped his hands, tapping his thumbs together.

"You know how he is about spending money," Mom continued. "This house thing has got him rattled so; I've never seen him like this. If you could just keep him for a week, we could buy something and it would be over."

Dr. Joe pondered. "He really shouldn't be drinking with his EKG," he said.

"He smokes two packs a day," Mom said.

"More like three," I offered.

Dr. Joe nodded and said that maybe keeping Dad for a week's detox wouldn't be such a bad idea. He was amazed that the old man survived the things he put his body through, he said. Maybe a week in the hospital would put the fear of God into him.

Mom said she thought that was a great idea.

When we got back to his room, Dad was offering his pathetic smile to a nurse, who was shaking her head and saying no, no, no. "*¿Por favor?*" Dad said, holding up a finger and speaking in a voice full of mock anguish. "*Solamente uno, solamente uno.*"

"*Eres un hombre muy malo, Señor Sinclair,*" the nurse said, shaking her finger back at him. "*Tu sabes aquí no se puede fumar.*"

He was begging for a cigarette.

With Dad in the hospital, house-hunting became much more efficient. Instead of touring every house at length (Dad thought that saying no at first glance would insult the agent), Mom took a quick walk through and said it would never do. In this way we got through three or four houses in a morning. During the afternoons I would visit Dad and tell him about the day. Though he would never admit it, the old man seemed relieved to be out of the picture. Most of the time when I came in, he was flirting with a nurse, playing the pitiful invalid to cadge a cigarette or a smile. The nurses seemed to get a

big kick out of him; the lecture Dr. Joe had apparently given him had worked, giving him an apologetic, sheepish quality that made him, I had to admit, pretty damn lovable.

I learned not to dwell on the specifics of a house; some detail was sure to set Dad off. I tried to stay vague and bright. When things got tense, I diverted the subject to my latest scheme for making money: I was thinking of importing fire agates to the States with the help of a Mexican kid I had met at the tennis club. Dad was always pleased when I showed signs of entrepreneurial enthusiasm. But he seemed happiest of all when I told him I didn't like any of the houses we'd seen that day, as if that were a sign of our toughness as buyers. He was very concerned that we were not tough buyers.

Mostly we played chess. Once or twice I beat him, and Dad praised my playing. "You're a natural player," he said. But he added immediately that I was too hasty, too impatient, and the unhappy speculations these criticisms raised about my future turned him dark for the day.

Once, he told me I was growing up "to be a fine young man," which left me in shock.

**F**OUR DAYS AFTER DAD ENTERED THE HOSPITAL, the real-estate agent told us that another house had become available in Rancho Contento. It was an emergency sale, solidly below the market price, and another buyer was already interested. We drove right out. It was the Pink House. Mom loved it at first sight—the gazebo and cactus garden out front, the faded pink paint a perfect pastel against the white wrought-iron bars on the windows, the sun-room that doubled as an entrance, the arched brick ceilings (also white), the red-tile floors, the flagstone back porch with its awning heavy with vines, the narrow staircase to the roof choked with bougainvillea, the swimming pool with inlaid angelfish winking from the bottom, bubbles of white tile rising from their mouths. It was a lovely place, a true oasis, abstracted by high white walls from the dust and tumult of Mexico.

"It's lovely," Mom said. The agent watched us with a knowing smile.

Without showing any particular enthusiasm (she was canny in that way), Mom asked the agent about price and closing costs and so on. It was selling for around eighty thousand, which was at least ten and probably fifteen thousand dollars below the going price for that much house in that neighborhood.

As we drove away, Mom asked me what I thought.

"It's nice," I said.

"Did you see the kitchen?"

"Lots of space."

"The yard?"

"Dad'll freak about that pool."

Mom gave her head a little impatient shake and actual-

ly said *pooh*. She nodded her head several times and gripped the steering wheel. "I'm going to make an offer," she said very firmly.

A few days later we were ready. Back at the hospital, I went in to talk to Dad first—the shock troops in Mom's battle plan. "Build it up," she had told me. And I did. "It's really beautiful, Dad," I said. "It's like the perfect house."

"You say it's pink?" Dad asked, frowning.

"Yeah. You can paint it if you don't like it."

He seemed very skeptical. "Yeh," he repeated, mocking my diction in a blatant attempt to stall for time.

"You're focusing on the negative," I said. "You can paint a Goddamn house. The point is, Mom's in love with it, and it's really a great house. It's everything you wanted. It's even cheap."

"I wouldn't call eighty thousand dollars cheap."

Patience, I told myself. "You'd pay twice that in Chapultepec," I said.

Dad shook his head, dubious about my statement and the general state of the world.

"But the Rancho," Dad said. "I really don't think your mother will like being so remote."

"Dad! She loves it! She's the one who wants to move there! And you're the one who wants to save money! It's perfect! You're driving me crazy!"

Dad continued to shake his head. "I don't know."

"Dad! You haven't even seen it!"

Calm down, I told myself. This is not productive. Dad lifted his hand to his mouth and laid his fingers against his lips.

"It's hard for me to think," he said, indicating with a slight wave the absent cigarette.

"Blackmailer," I said.

He smiled.

Mom and Dr. Joe were waiting out in the hall. Mom gave me a questioning look. I shrugged. "He wants a cigarette."

"The condemned man," Mom answered wryly, un-snapping her purse and pulling out her pack. Dr. Joe shook his head and said he couldn't approve of this at all, but he seemed amused. We all trooped into the room, me in front holding the cigarette forward like a white flag. Dad snatched it as soon as I got within range. He examined it. "I shouldn't smoke this," he said.

He wasn't talking about health. Mom had given me one of her American cigarettes, which cost twice as much as the local brands. Dad was offended by the lapse in his sterling record of self-denial. But he lit it anyway and leaned back in his pillows, inhaling deeply and gratefully.

"A pink house," he said, shaking his head at the world's infinite peculiarity.

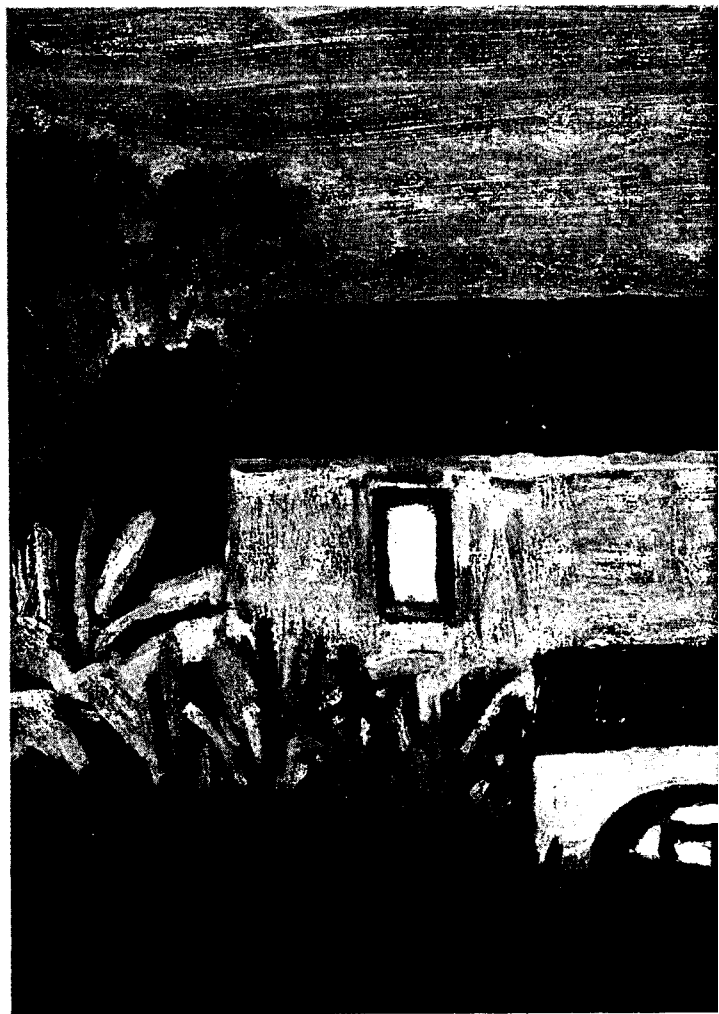
Mom pulled a chair up to the bed and sat down, all business. She'd been hard at work since finding the house, and already the offer had been accepted and the

purchase contract had been vetted by our lawyer. It was now in an envelope in the purse on her lap, waiting for Dad's signature.

"A pink house," Dad repeated. "It sounds like something for a chorus girl."

Mom made the *pooh* sound.

"I'll tell you right now," he continued, taking another deep drag on his cigarette. "I will not live in a pink house. I will never live in a pink house."



**W**E RETURNED THE NEXT DAY WITH Frankie. "Look at the fabulous invalid," Frankie said as he swept into the room. "I hear you're flirting shamelessly with all the nurses."

"Oh, no, not me," Dad said, too heartily. "I'm too damned old."

He didn't look well. His toes, however, poking from the bottom of the sheet so that the infection would get air, had gone back to nearly a normal color.

"You look like hell," Frankie said. Dad chuckled weakly, and Frankie leaned over the bed and pulled something out of his pocket. I saw the flash of glass. "Don't abuse it," Frankie said. It was a half pint of vodka.



Dad looked puzzled at first, and then smiled with touching gratitude.

"So, have you heard about your gorgeous new house?"

Dad pushed the bottle under the covers and reached for his bedside glass. "Can you empty this for me?" he said. As I headed for the bathroom, Dad turned to Frankie and answered, "I don't know about that."

"I saw it this morning," Frankie said. "It is really, truly a beautiful place—you will absolutely love it. The yard!



The garden! And I'm telling you, as an investment you couldn't do better. You know they're expanding the shopping center and building a whole new development between Oblatos and the turnoff—that whole part of town is coming up faster than downtown Dallas."

"Margaret didn't tell me about a development," Dad said, taking the empty glass I held out. He clamped it between his legs, unscrewed the vodka top, and poured out a fist of booze.

"Well," Frankie said, his tone forgiving. "She's just in love with that house."

"What about the neighborhood?" Dad asked, taking a grateful first sip.

I slipped out and went to the office, where Mom sat

gossiping with Dr. Joe. "How're they doing?" Mom asked.

I shrugged. "He's listening."

Mom shook her head, a gesture at once understanding and a little bitter. She knew exactly what I meant. Dad would give Frankie the respectful attention he could never give a member of his own family.

It took a few more days. Dr. Joe helped too, painting the house as an oasis where Dad could finally find the peace to reform. In the end Dad was ready to sign the papers. Dr. Joe and Frankie were there to give last-minute support. Mom handed Dad a pen.

"I need a cigarette," he said.

"Richard . . .," Dr. Joe scolded.

"For God's sake," Dad said. "It's a huge amount of money."

"Oh, give the poor man a cigarette," Frankie said. Mom opened her pack and handed Dad a cigarette.

"Two," Dad said.

She gave him two.

**T**HE NEXT DAY I WENT TO PICK DAD UP. DR. Joe was finally releasing him. I wondered if Dad knew that the whole hospital stay was just a vicious conspiracy by his family and friends to force him into buying a house he really didn't want to buy. He seemed frail as he walked to the car, bent from the week in bed. He shuffled; maybe his feet still hurt him. His head hung. I could see his gray hair clumped against his neck, which seemed as rough as elephant skin. It made me feel tender and sad. I opened the car door and held back a branch so that the old man could squeeze into the shotgun seat. It took a few long moments.

"Let's go visit the house on the way," I suggested. "Have a look at what you bought."

"Oh, no, son," Dad said. "I don't . . ."

"Come on, Dad," I pleaded. I wanted to be there with him, see the pink house through his eyes. I wanted him to like it and be happy. "Mom gave me the key."

He said okay. We didn't talk much as we drove out to the Rancho. Finally I pulled the car up outside the wall and helped Dad to the gate. I unlocked it and pushed it open and stood back. "Ta da," I said.

For a moment he just stood there, looking through the gate at the faded pink house. His face showed no reaction, but his eyes were hooded and a bit sad. There was a little foreboding in them, a little anxiety. In the flame tree that rose above the gazebo to the left, a bird trilled a long series of notes. The tree was in flower, and Dad, looking up in the direction of the bird, let his eyes linger on the bright orange blooms. Then he looked back at the house where he would live until he died. He sighed once and began walking toward it, moving past me without a word, composed and ready to inspect his fate. □