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House Call: A Runner's Guide to Real Estate

Over the winter, The Wall Street Journal's Mansion section asked readers to submit essays about a memorable or special home. Here is another favorite:

By Margie Goldsmith

After my divorce, I looked around for a New York City co-op, but everything was either too expensive, too small, too dark or had too many flights of stairs to climb. I'd pretty much given up. Then, one Saturday morning about a decade ago I was running along the East River, training for a marathon. Suddenly, another runner, a man with a red nylon jacket, passed me. I'm not very fast, but I am competitive, so I picked up my pace and surged ahead, clearly, the undisputed victor.

I was smugly congratulating myself when I heard the swish of his jacket. Neck and neck we raced until I could no longer maintain the killer pace; but not wanting to lose face, I said, "You're really making me work for this."

"You're doing the same to me," he replied. That allowed us both to slow down and start a conversation. He said he sold real estate and he mentioned the company he worked for.

"Residential?" I asked.

"Yes. Why? Are you looking?"

"No, I've given up, but when you're out looking for your other clients, if you ever find a light-filled co-op with a wood-burning fireplace in this neighborhood, which doesn't cost a fortune, call me."

"Why only in this neighborhood?"



“I like it here.”

He asked for my name and address, and I gave it to him, even though I knew he'd never find anything.

The next morning, my doorman handed me an envelope with a hand-written note: *“How nice to meet you yesterday. I've found a spectacular co-op with a wood-burning fireplace only four blocks from your apartment. If you want to see it, please call me.”* Surely, this was a come-on. I was sure he'd tell me that it had already been sold but there were at least 20 other apartments he could show me—I know the game. Still, I called him back, and he asked when I wanted to see the apartment. I told him right now. But the seller, he said, wouldn't let anyone see it on the weekend. Did I want to see it Monday? I knew this was a ruse.

On Monday, we met in the lobby. The apartment he showed me had a working wood-burning fireplace and a laundry room, two spacious bedrooms, two full baths, a windowed kitchen and enormous closets. But all I could see were the ugly dark walls and the dark painted hardwood floors. The oversized windows were so filthy I could barely see the brownstone gardens below.

“It's dingy,” I said.

“All it needs is a good coat of white paint and some floor scraping. It has great potential,” he said. Just then, the sun poked through a cloud and streamed into the living room turning the apartment sunny in spite of the dark floors and walls. No matter what the flaws, the price was a bargain in any neighborhood.

“So what's the catch?” I asked.

“There isn't any.”

“How long has it been on the market?”

“A week.”

“In this market it should have sold already. Why hasn't it?”

“I'm not really sure, but it's a small building, only fifteen units. And most people want a twenty-four-hour doorman and a much bigger lobby. This only has a 16-hour doorman.”

I didn't care about a big lobby or full-time doorman. All I cared was that the fireplace worked and the place was huge and cheap. I could already see my house-warming party: We'd toast marshmallows over a roaring fire and make s'mores.

“Do you want to make a bid?” he asked.

I made an offer below the asking price prepared to bid more, but my bid was accepted. I researched where to buy fire tools. I studied the floor plan. Was there enough room to store a half-cord of wood? Then the phone rang.

“I have bad news,” he said. “There’s been a new offer for the original asking price, but the seller said if you’ll match it, it’s yours.”

“But I thought my offer was accepted?” I knew it was over.



Margie Goldsmith in her Midtown Manhattan dream home. (Photo by Steve Baum)

“So did I,” he said. “Unfortunately, in New York, it’s not a deal till until you’ve signed a contract.”

I raised my bid and waited. A week went by. I heard nothing. I stopped fantasizing about reading the newspaper in front of a roaring fire. I threw away the wood-delivery phone number. I reminded myself that 10 days ago, I hadn’t even been looking for a co-op. Real life isn’t that easy and

fortuitous. And then the phone rang.

“Congratulations,” he said. “Your offer’s been accepted. They’re sending over a contract.”

I couldn’t believe my good fortune. Here I was, about to own my dream apartment all because I raced a stranger on the East River. But then, when you think about it, isn’t that the way things happen in New York City?

New York City writer Margie Goldsmith is novelist, journalist and essayist, and has won 26 awards for her work, including the 2012 Gold Lowell Thomas Award from the Society of American Travel Writers.