

# welcome

## Renovation Blues

**L**ate last fall I was closing up my beach house, knowing I wasn't planning to return for a couple of months. A friend volunteered to shut the windows, and before I could warn her about their idiosyncrasies, she had exerted a lot of pressure on a jammed crank, which suddenly gave way. The window let out an angry sigh, swung violently shut, and then, with a loud groan, the entire contraption fell out of the wall, exposing blackened rot under the casement. We shoved the window back and nailed it shut. I knew then that I could no longer put off the renovation.

I had to face facts: more than half the windows were inoperable; a door was sinking into the foundation; there were a few large, mushy spots in the cedar siding that no amount of paint could hide; the floor had a suspicious spring to it; a water mark had begun to play across the ceiling. And this list doesn't even cover the things that were already wrong with the house when I bought it. The previous owner had taken the path of least resistance when he added the second floor. The stairs cut through the kitchen, which was in turn pushed into the living room, creating the need for a new entrance to the library—through a bathroom.

To say that the resale value of my house was in jeopardy is a joke. I was the only person, a decade ago, crazy enough to buy it after it had been on the market for a few years. And I'm happy I did—it has a glorious view over a marsh pond to the ocean; it is full of light, magically sun-warmed in winter, and cool under its vine-choked trellis in summer. I had done (well, helpful men had done) enough work to make it habitable, replacing rotted floors, cleaning out generations of mice. I had promised myself a renovation the following year; after all, it is wise not to rush into these things, and everyone always says you have to live with problems before you can understand what to do about them. I don't know about the wisdom of this recommendation: it seems the smarter course is to get rid of problems before you move in with them, or, perhaps better, appreciate the full weight of the problems, and not move in at all. But no, I'm the kind of person

who likes to see right through problems to the core beauty, who believes that love will melt obstacles so that the best will eventually out. This may work with people; if it doesn't, all you suffer is a little heartbreak, nervous depression, and exhaustion. But with a house? Inner beauty could be virtually oozing from the walls, but that may only be a sign that they are about to collapse. I didn't mean to put off addressing the problems for a decade—it is just that houses prove that there is no such thing as time; you turn around and suddenly the babies are grown up and the windows are falling out.

The problem is I don't want to renovate the house. I love it exactly the way it is. I know I shouldn't; this is an immature, fantastical sort of relationship in which I project onto a building my own feelings of being oddly constructed, quietly cantankerous, hard to figure out, and on the downhill slope of physical well-being. There's just something so easy and comfortable about being in a place that you love in spite of its faults; there's something endearing about eccentric difficulties. I also get a perverse pleasure from living with radical unstylishness, and in seeing which of my friends has the brains and heart to see true value. It is just too tiring to think of trying to achieve perfection. I'm happy enough to find it—and admire it deeply—in other people's houses.

But there is the problem of rot. I'm old enough now that I am beginning to think about what I will leave my children. These fantasies shock and thrill me. They are also a way to maintain the illusion that I am going to control where and how they live—near me, in a place that bears the marks of their childhood. I

don't want to turn over a mess to my children. I don't want to hold onto a mess unreasonably. It's just that this house, with its music system sitting on the floor, the important numbers scribbled on the wall by the phone, the surfboards and picnic baskets in the old bathtub, reminds me of what it was like to be a teenager myself—caring nothing for conventional appearances, seeking nothing but inner beauty, and longing for the misfit that would make me fit. By strange

