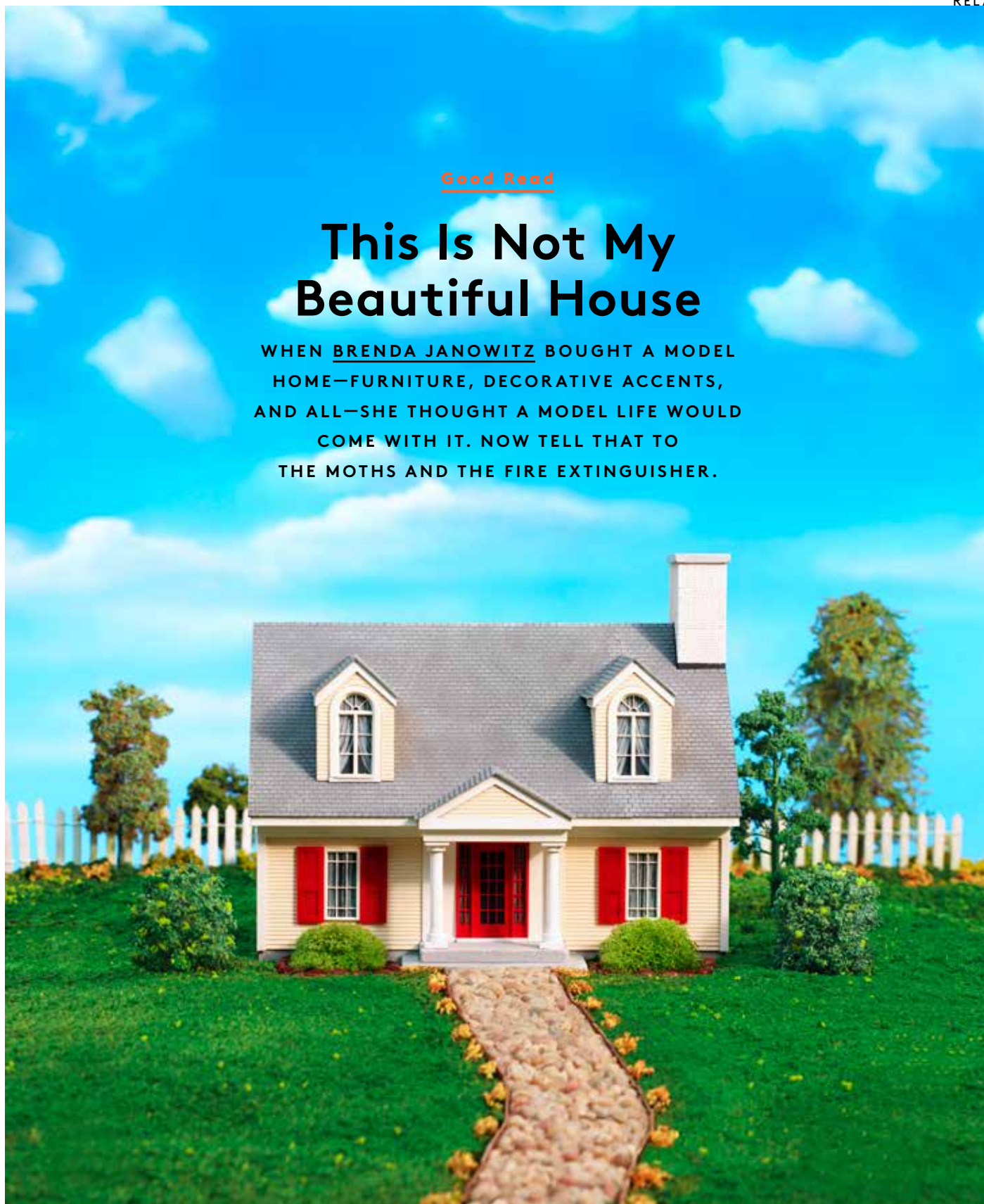


Good Read

# This Is Not My Beautiful House

WHEN BRENDA JANOWITZ BOUGHT A MODEL HOME—FURNITURE, DECORATIVE ACCENTS, AND ALL—SHE THOUGHT A MODEL LIFE WOULD COME WITH IT. NOW TELL THAT TO THE MOTHS AND THE FIRE EXTINGUISHER.



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**The author and her husband strike a model pose in front of their model home.**

wedding presents, swapped the staged books out for our own, I could see the new “me” unfold: I would live in a model home. I would have a model life.

I’d certainly waited long enough. I was 33 when I met the man who would become my husband. That may not sound old to some, but for a Jewish girl from the South Shore of Long Island, I felt older than Sarah when she gave birth to Isaac at 90. On my first date with Doug, we competed over who was more obsessed with Halloween (I won, though he’ll deny it). On our second date, at the restaurant Fig & Olive, neither of us could taste the difference between the gourmet olive oils (we still can’t). He made me laugh. And much to my grandma Dorothy’s delight, he was a doctor.

“Don’t mess this one up,” my father joked, and I laughed. But a tiny voice in my head wondered, “Would I?” We got engaged three months later, and married a year after that. I would not mess this one up. And the model home would be the perfect expression of my life as an ideal wife.

To properly live the way this model home promised, I decided everything should look just as it did when we first took ownership, much like my friend with her couch. June Cleaver became my muse. I cleaned compulsively. I used fresh linens every night for dinner. And napkin rings. People said I’d never use those silver Vera Wang napkin rings I registered for—I’d show them!

It was the embodiment of domestic bliss. Except I was exhausted from keeping it all up, especially after having my first child a year later. But there was no time to rest, no time to sit down on the overstuffed armchairs—there was simply too much to do to maintain it, this aura of being like the model family who would live in this model home.

I would *not* mess this one up. I would live in a model home. I would have a model life. But not for long.

A year after moving in, I saw it: one tiny moth. Then another the next night. And the night after that. The exterminator came and easily identified the culprit: a moth that ate wicker. “Do you have any?” he asked. My husband pointed to the staged garage and the shelves of wicker baskets. But they look so pretty! And they organize our (untouched) sports equipment! The exterminator turned each basket over; they were covered in nests.

I told myself it didn’t matter. The shelves came down,

and I continued my nightly routine—I put our baby to sleep, cleaned every counter, fluffed every throw pillow. It was just a garage, and I was happy it wasn’t the inside of my house that was ruined.

Then, the fire. With my kitchen, I needed to cook like a pro, just to live up to my high-end appliances. One evening, four months pregnant with my second child, with my 19-month-old at the table, I decided to surprise Doug by making corn dogs from scratch. Deep-frying couldn’t be that difficult, I reasoned. Sandra Lee made it look easy. I put my oil on the burner and, minutes later, it began to smoke, then catch fire. With the help of an extinguisher, I got the fire out, but not before the flames licked the stove’s hood and smoke filled the room.

In an instant, my kitchen was ruined. Smoke patterns on the ceiling, scorched cabinets, and a lingering smell I thought would never go away. I was wrong. Painters came in and used a special base coat that removed the smell, and a week later it looked new again.

The kitchen was quickly put back together, but I was not so easily fixed. I couldn’t cook, I couldn’t sleep—nightmares about the fire consumed me. I couldn’t stop thinking about how foolish I’d been, how this fake aura of perfection had almost burned my house to the ground, with my child and unborn baby in it.

I’d live in a model home, but I’d no longer live a model life. Turns out, there’s no such thing. This idea I’d been chasing wasn’t real—what *was* real was even better: my husband and our two sons. Our family. The life we created.

Today, I don’t use fresh linens for weeknight dinners. I don’t clean like a maniac. I allow throw pillows to remain strewn on the floor. I help my kids build forts in the family room. While we did take up biking, we still don’t canoe. I love my house—from the inlays in the wood flooring (now scuffed), to the intricate faux painting (made even more detailed with marker stains), to the soaking tub in the master (which my kids use, though seldom to take long, relaxing baths). But it’s not the model home anymore. It’s *our* home.

“**DON’T SIT THERE!**” my friend said, pointing to her couch. “It’s new, and I want to keep it perfect as long as I can. Let’s sit in the kitchen? I know you must think I’m crazy.”

But I didn’t—at one point, I felt the same way about my entire house.

Six months after I got married in 2008, the economy collapsed, bringing down home prices all over Long Island. A model home on the North Shore became available, and we wanted it. A fully furnished house, filled with all the great features available to you, should you choose to buy here—inlays in the wood flooring, intricate faux painting, a soaking tub in the master bath. It was staged so anyone who came in could immediately picture themselves living the way the imaginary occupants supposedly did.

The model home was meticulously curated. The fabrics, soft and supple. The finishes, shiny and gleaming. The couches had never been sat on, the beds never slept in. Books lined the library shelves. A grand piano waited to be played. (We didn’t know how.) The table in the kitchen had been set with coordinating dishes, flatware, and linens. The garage was set up like REI—bikes, helmets, and a canoe hung from the wall. I suggested to my husband that we take up canoeing. Or at least biking.

We bought all of it. Virtually every last item came with the purchase. As newlyweds without children, we brought little with us: mostly wedding gifts that were still in boxes and the few things we’d had in our small apartment. Even as I replaced the staged dishes with the ones we’d gotten as



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brenda Janowitz is the author of six novels, including *The Grace Kelly Dress*, which was published by HarperCollins in March. She lives on Long Island, New York, with her husband and two sons—and no moths that she knows of.

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