

This old house

Whether it's ghosts, gnomes or just plain entropy, householding woes sure keep things interesting



I'm beginning to think this house is haunted," Lover said last night.

"No!" I yelled in protest. Not because I find ghosts unnerving or anything.

The last straw came after a joyous and exhausting holiday celebration. Nothing looked better than closing the automatic garage door behind us and collapsing onto the nearest couch. But the garage door wouldn't close.

We'd bought an old—realtors would say "vintage"—house which had "vintage" heavy wooden sliding garage doors. Closed, they presented gaps we could walk right through. Skunk-sized slugs, rats, possums and raccoons had free rein. Not to mention the free rain that blasted in at our cars, bikes and tools.

I was so pleased when the Automatic Door Installer arrived for the first time. The second time. The third time. The fourth: We've waited and waited and, with cables and track dangling, it's open house instead of open sesame.

This is a great house. Really. It's got lath-and-plaster walls, except for where it doesn't. The foundation was poured with concrete when they knew how to mix concrete, except in spots where we have to weed the cracks.

Maybe we have mischievous gnomes—we've always had the key- and sock-stealing variety. A wood-burning furnace? How quaint, I thought, how ecological, how economical. How (gasp! choke!) smoky. There is a fan, and a fan-gnome inside whose idea of humor is imitating the sounds of an amateur speedway.

This furnace, which hasn't been airtight since Quentin Crisp came out, works on the same principle as a campfire. Remember toasting marshmallows? How wind shifts smoke into your face? That's what it's like in our house—without marshmallows, s'mores or even tofu wieners to show for it.

We hired a company to convert us to electric heat. No problem. Except did we know that our wiring is up to the 1941 electrical codes? Before grounding was required or, it seems, much of anything else.

"And your ducting? It's asbestos."

"How come no heat goes to the second floor?"

"Well," answered the Heat Guy, scratching his chin, "when they added on this li'l dining area, they just tore out the duct and never did connect it again. There's no way to get heat up there."

"Come on," I dissented, "there's got to be a way." Two hours later he announced that he could run duct up the side of the wall in the li'l dining area. "Hardly notice it once you hire a carpenter."

At least the house is dry. Mostly.

After two tries the Plumber eliminated the bathtub leak and the subsequent frog pond in the basement.

This old house is just like my grandma's, especially when cooking smells fill the air. Which they can, now that we've replaced the stove. The Stove Man told us the continuous-cleaning oven that came with the house had been abused. It'd been scrubbed with an oven cleaner and even if the rampaging thermostat were fixed, we wouldn't be rid of the toxic fumes in a millennium. Grandma's recipes would never taste the same.

Yes, this old house has some problems. We occasionally lament that they will never end. Then we laugh and remind ourselves that when the refrigerator died it was only because the Pump Repair Guy had messed with the fuse (yes, fuse) box. And when a car sank into the soil atop our new fiberglass septic tank the Tank Man, for a fee of course, came right out with a load of gravel.

So what if the toilet flushes itself now and then? So what if the pretty bay window over the sink floods—what easier way to water the plants? So what if no one mentioned that the guy next door gets his water from our well?

Our old house has a history, a personality. In Provence or Tuscany, it would be considered not merely vintage but quaint and full of character. The gnomes and ghosts? We'd pay extra for them.

Now and then my paranoia decides the Plumbers, Heat Guys, Electricians, Tank Men, Appliance Repairers, Automatic Door Installers (who five days later still hasn't appeared) are taking advantage of two lone women, or (couldn't be!) a little homophobic.

A non-gay woman who moved nearby 10 years ago reassured me: "Get used to it. Around here, tomorrow is any day after today."

This old house ought to last at least until tomorrow.

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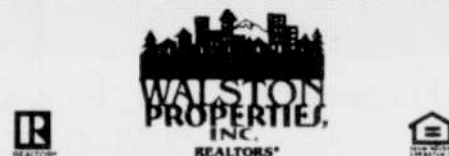
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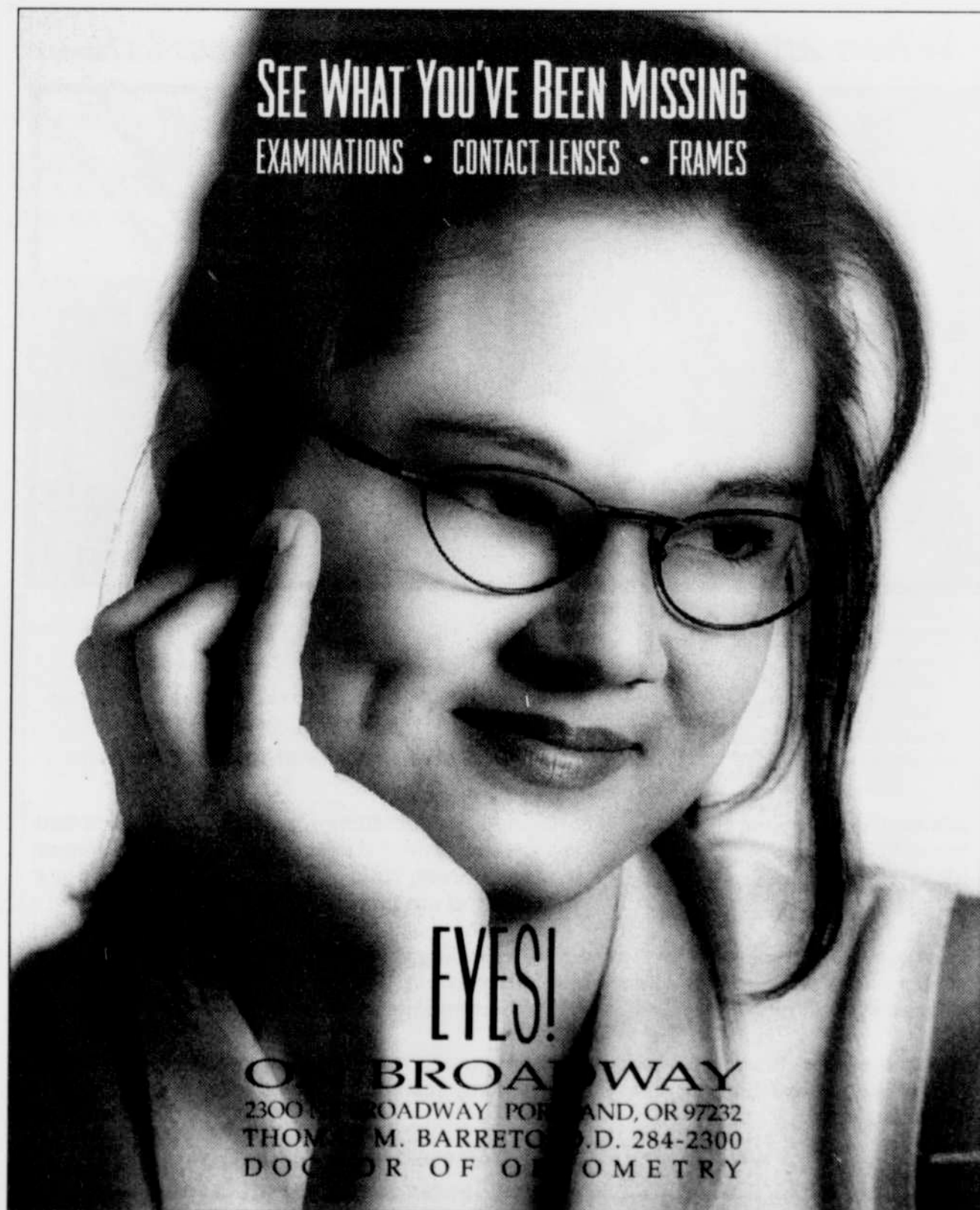
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