

Moving House
by
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We have just moved house to 7 Cromarty Close – a three-bedroomed property, not overlooked to the front. It cost £180,000 but will retain its value well or most likely go up! It has solar panels on the roof and a cost-efficient central-heating system throughout. It has two bathrooms, inc. en suite to the master b'room. Substantial gardens front and rear complete the picture in an exclusive new development in a semi-rural setting. I've got my own bedroom at last. It's got footballer wallpaper, which I chose myself.

To be architectural about it, I found the new house disappointing.

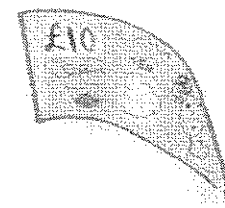
I remember Cromarty Close when it was made of string. Dad took us to a big field near the railway, all overgrown with brambles and nettles. A man with a checked shirt and a clipboard led us to a place where the brambles had been cleared and the grass cut short. It was criss-crossed with avenues of string. He pointed down one and said, 'Dogger.' Then he walked to the corner of the next one and said, 'Finisterre.' Then he pointed off to the left and said, 'Cromarty'.

'What d'you think?' Dad said. 'Want to move here?'

I said, 'Yes, please!' very enthusiastically.

So we did.

Actually, my enthusiasm was because of a misunderstanding. I thought he was suggesting we live in the field, with the string. A lot of saints have lived in unusual houses. St Ursula (4th century) lived on a ship with 11,000 holy companions. St Simeon (390–459) tried to avoid the temptations of the world by living on top of a three-metre column. When sightseers started coming to stare at him, he moved to a ten-metre column so he wouldn't hear



them. And when they just started shouting (in 449), he moved to a twenty-metre column, where he ended his days in peaceful contemplation.

Compared to that, living in a field full of brambles and string seemed sensible and pleasant. I was looking forward to it. When we came back, all the brambles had gone and there was a sign saying 'Portland Meadows – exclusive, discreet, innovative', and four rows of houses with very pointy roofs and funny-shaped windows. Number 7 Cromarty Close is a three-bedroom detached with substantial gardens and solar panels. Anthony said, 'Detached houses hold their value better and three-bedroom is the configuration most sought after by most buyers. The solar panels are added value.'

Compared to a boat with 11,000 companions, or a twenty-metre marble column, our house seemed a bit unsaintly, so I built myself a hermitage.

Dad decided to get rid of the cardboard boxes. We ripped them open and found all sorts of stuff that we'd forgotten we had. One was full of vases. One was full of bedding. One had the Christmas decorations and a Micro Machines racing circuit inside (we set it up in the boxroom). I found the one

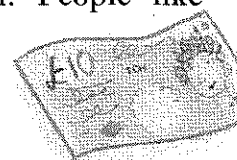
with Mum's dresses in and her make-up.

When they were all empty, I took the boxes down to the railway, slotted them inside each other and there you go, a hermitage. It was tunnel-shaped, with little flaps for looking out. When the trains went by, the whole place shook. If it was dark, the trains lit up the inside for a second. There was a line of holly bushes between the gardens and the track, so the hermitage was nearly invisible from the houses. I took a few things down there – such as my St Francis bookmark and a tube of tinted moisturizer I found – but not much, the whole point being to live a simpler life. Not full-time, obviously, because of school. But whenever I could. I got a bit scratched going through the holly, but that was OK because suffering is good (it's called mortification).

I got the idea for the hermitage from Rose of Lima (1586–1617), who lived in one at the bottom of her parents' garden from when she was a little girl. She had multiple and marvellous visions, including those of the Blessed Virgin and the Holy Ghost, and visitations from many saints. Personally, I didn't get any, even though I stayed there until it was really cold.

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I went on Google to try and find out why my hermitage wasn't working and the answer was obvious. Not enough mortification. People like Rose of Lima didn't just live in hermitages. They fasted for weeks. They went everywhere barefoot. They wore uncomfortable clothes. They scourged themselves.



Some forms of mortification are just not practical. Fasting for seven years, for instance, is not going to happen when your dad is obsessed with everyone eating five pieces of fruit a day. And as for scourging, well, there were no facilities in Portland Meadow. But I did sleep on the floor that night. I waited until I heard Dad's light go off, then I got out of bed and lay down just under the window. It was uncomfortable, but that's the point. Then on the way to school the next morning, I let Anthony get ahead of me and slipped my shoes off. It was fine when we were walking across the field – though my socks did get wet. But the path up to the road is made of little bits of gravel. I think one of the builders must have employed someone to sharpen each bit of it before they put it on the ground. It was really, really mortifying. I was greatly tempted

to walk on the grass verge, but I resisted. The pavement was easy after that.

I met Mr Quinn at the school gates. He noticed my feet and said, 'Something wrong with your shoes, Damian?'

I said, 'Mortifying my flesh, sir.'

I think he was impressed.

During Numeracy Hour Jake came and tapped me on the shoulder and then went, 'Ow!'

'Jake, what are you playing at and is it maths?' asked Mr Quinn.

'I was going to ask him for a borrow of his ruler, sir, and he's spiky.'

'What?'

Now everyone was looking at me.

Jake said, 'I just touched Damian's shoulder, sir, and it hurt.'

Mr Quinn came over and touched my shoulder. Then he leaned down and whispered to me to come with him. 'Just get on with it, the rest of you.'

Out in the corridor, he made me undo my shirt and show me what was inside. On totallysaints.com it tells you about Matt Talbot, who wore chains all the time. Obviously, I couldn't get any chains as

such, so I'd stuffed my shirt with holly from the hermitage.

'Who did this?'

'Did it myself, sir.'

'You're cut. Take the holly out and I'll get some plasters.' When he was putting the plasters on, he said, 'I want you to come and see me at Home Time. I'm going to give you a letter to take to your dad. You're not in trouble, but it is important. OK?'

The letter was in a brown envelope. It was quite thick. Dad opened it as soon as I gave it to him. He read it and then put it in his pocket.

Anthony said, 'What's it about? Are they going on a trip?'

'No,' said Dad. 'Or. Yeah. Maybe. In a way. Eventually. Go and wash your hands.'

It was my turn to wash up and Anthony's to put away. Dad was supposed to be doing the floor, but when I came back into the dining room to make sure we hadn't missed any dishes, he was reading the letter again. He put it away as I came in, but I saw that one of the pages was yellow and it said 'Special Assessment'. I thought, 'Special', that's pretty good.

I think Dad must've stayed up late that night, because I fell asleep in my bed before he came upstairs to brush his teeth. In the middle of the night, I woke from a dream (which I don't want to talk about), got up and stretched out on the floor under the window again. It was really cold after the warm bed. I couldn't get to sleep. Suddenly I realized there was someone standing in the doorway. I thought, finally, a vision. But when it came closer, I could see it was just Dad. He bent down and picked me up, whispering, 'Shhhh, Damian. You've fallen out of bed. I'm just going to pop you back in. Don't wake up.'

I didn't like to tell him I was still awake. I just lay on my side so he wouldn't be able to see my face. I thought he'd go away then, but he didn't. He sat on the edge of the bed for a while. Then he tugged the collar of my pyjamas down at the shoulder. He was looking at the scratches. When he finally got up to go, I whispered, 'Dad, are you OK?'

'Are you awake?'

'Yes.'

'Go to sleep.'

'OK.'

'Damian ...'

'Yeah?'

'What happened to your back?'

'Just some holly, you know.'

'Damian. Be good, won't you? Be really good.'

'That's what I'm trying to be. That's what I'm trying to be all the time.'

'I know it is, son. I know that.'

Then he went. After a while I heard the toilet flush. Then I got back on to the floor.

It's not as easy to be good as you might think. For instance, on the Monday the doorbell rang just after Dad had gone to work. Now, we're not supposed to answer the door when Dad isn't there. On the other hand, it was time to go to school. So it was a moral dilemma – answer the door (disobedient) and be on time for school (good), or don't answer the door (good) and be late for school (bad). Anthony doesn't think about these things. He just headed for the door, pulling his blazer on. I stopped him.

'Dad said not to answer the door.'

'It's twenty to,' he said. 'We're going to be late.'

Then whoever it was rang the doorbell again.

'But Dad said not to!' I was shouting now. It was making me panicky. 'Dad said not to do it and we're supposed to be being good!'