

# LIVING IN *Another Woman's* HOUSE



photos: Tom Dooley

## MY JOURNEY

by Tammie Dooley

Flat on the floor, I sweep my arms into arcs that are met with resistance not from the glory of snow, but rather a sea of cocktail napkins. Two more slow sweeps and I realize that my task of cleaning this particular kitchen cabinet has ceased in a meltdown.

There had been many cabinets and boxes and closets before this, but it was the enormous cadre of cocktail napkins that slapped me in the face, divulging my shortcomings. I lay there long enough to become dry-eyed and calm. Staring at the ceiling, I ran through all the possible uses for them; the reasons why someone would have hundreds, maybe thousands of cocktail napkins of every color, motif, pattern, shape, and size. Earlier, I'd been struck by the fact I didn't know such things existed. About the time I began to feel the hardness of the floor, the cause of my meltdown became clear: I was living in another woman's house. A woman whose shoes I knew I couldn't fill.

My husband and I married only eight months after his wife's death. He'd offered to sell the house to give us a fresh start, but it sat on a large, heavily wooded lot in the middle of town, was beautiful, he loved it and, well...I'm pragmatic. *The home is lovely and over time, we'll make it our own. I have no reservations about living here.* I meant every word.

My husband's first wife had been publicly successful as the assistant U.S. attorney. She came from a well-known family, belonged to the Junior League, was an amazing chef and entertainer, extraordinary gardener, a photographer, a magnet of compassion, an angel to those less fortunate, and loved by many. She was tragically killed at the age of 51.

She and I were very different, but I hadn't exactly sat around twiddling my thumbs for 40 years. I raised a son on my own, put myself through college, acquired CPA and CFP professional licenses, and worked for the same financial services company for 17 years. I was just two years into the dream job I'd landed in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, when Tom and I met and fell in love. My dream job still didn't compensate me enough to pay college expenses for my son and have anything left over. I'd never owned a home, didn't own enough furniture to fill my two-bedroom apartment, and had never thrown a party. I didn't have time to volunteer or pursue hobbies, and outside my family and close circle of friends, I was relatively unknown.

When Tom and I married, true love and its euphoria meant that none of these things mattered. And in retrospect, rightly so. I'd been happily single for almost a decade and hadn't been thinking of marriage until I met him. We both knew instantly that we had found the right person. I quit the dream job and began life anew, throwing myself into cleaning out over 20 years of stuff accumulated by two successful people who had never thrown anything away. Tom had taken care of removing Ann's personal effects. But because she'd passed away so recently without a will and with no children, many things in the house and all of the furniture – her family's antiques – needed to be distributed to her family and friends.

Getting these things to the people she would have chosen became my task. I was now living in the house where Ann could not return to take care of the things she'd loved. Being a mother and a career woman had honed my pragmatism and sense of confidence. But my identity was under assault. My self-confidence had limits. I'd struggled in the past with a sense of belonging, and the progress I had made took a serious setback. I'd never been one to feel entitlement; you want something, you work for it. That attitude meant I had no feelings of possession or ownership for anything in the house, although at times my own possessions seemed lost and miniscule. I was very careful to be respectful and sensitive towards Ann's things, and her friends' and family's feelings about my new position were paramount. I wasn't the type to come in and take over. Quite the opposite. I had a lot to learn about running a house, besides dealing with the serious inadequacies from first-hand exposure to Ann's accomplishments and talents.

For months on end I sorted stacks for Tom to review and decide what should go to whom. Rows of things were spread across a formal dining room floor for Ann's

family and friends to come over and pick through. It was my full-time job for well over a year.

And now the cocktail napkins. Tom and I had been married long enough for the blush of new love to recede and our senses to fully return. For the first time, there on the floor, I wondered what his expectations were. Yes, I could cook, but having been raised on a ranch, food like biscuits and gravy, cornbread, venison, and fried potatoes were my repertoire. Nothing continental. No appetizers. Didn't know how to mix a martini. Didn't know the purpose for many of the kitchen gadgets. Of course, I gave them all away, but not before my self-esteem had been pummeled by unidentifiable tools.

The thought of using these cocktail napkins made my stomach lurch. I knew there was only one purpose for these: parties. That day in the kitchen as I lay flat on my back, I decided that as beautiful and pleasing as the napkins were to my eye, they represented a skill I had no desire to possess. They had to go. They were in the last cabinet to be cleared and cleaned. They were the last "thing" over which I'd have to face this kind of insecurity. With that decision I bagged every last one and gave them away to a delighted friend.

I asked Tom about his expectations, and for the first time I told him of the difficulties I'd been having and the cocktail napkin incident. He didn't expect me to be the same as Ann; he just wanted me to be myself. I decided not to go back to my financial career. No longer defined by that, it took diligence and an open mind to discover who I was in this new life, to learn new roles and responsibilities, to figure out what I liked and didn't like – what I wanted to learn and what I didn't care about. I'd never had the freedom to explore like that. Simultaneously daunting and exciting, it was through a day-by-day process that I transformed the house into our home and myself into a person with her own new and very different set of life skills.



It's six years later and I run and maintain the household like a pro. I've thrown several parties for close friends and enjoyed it. I've become a gardener. I've learned to trust my decorating

instincts - ones I was certain I didn't possess. Our home envelops us and our friends and family with warmth, comfort, and joy. I wouldn't go back and change a single decision. I chose to marry Tom. After that, my choices became part of the direction that initial decision put into play. Sometimes we become things we didn't set out to pursue, things we couldn't imagine becoming. Sometimes, we even wind up purchasing our very own cocktail napkins. *Mia*