

On the Porch

Sunday mornings we sit with coffee and the paper. Neighbors wave. In the evening friends come by. Who knew a front porch would mean so much?

My husband and I have just come home from our summer vacation. Standing on the front porch waiting for Bruce to unlock the door, I notice an empty beer bottle under the wicker settee. On a table, next to a geranium, a saucer holds a pile of cigar butts. I know what's up: While we were away, some friends "borrowed" our porch.

It's happened before. One Saturday night after we'd gone to bed, we got a phone call. "Hey, guys, we've got some people here for dinner," said Craig, who lives across the street. "We were on the patio, but now it's raining. Do you mind if we come over and sit on your porch?" We didn't mind—and we fell asleep to the sound of their laughter.

Bruce and I didn't realize when we bought our house in Falls Church a decade ago how much the front porch would mean to us. Sunday morning on the porch with coffee and the newspapers is one of the purest moments I know. It provides a pleasant balance of solitude and engagement with the world. Dog walkers and joggers wave to us. Our next-door neighbor shouts hello while packing his two boys into the car. The squirrels plot another run at the bird feeder.

Front porches were once a way of life. They offered ventilation in the era before air conditioning and a place for socializing. My

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grandparents' farmhouse in Ohio had a long wraparound porch. When my family visited on Sundays, we pulled card tables onto it for games of Rook and euchre. My grandmother served ice cream in cut-glass bowls. All afternoon we sat there greeting neighbors who drove past on the crunchy gravel.

In this age of brick Colonials, decks are the thing—sometimes with hot tubs and gas grills the size of small cars. A power barbecue would feel like a caged animal on a front porch. Porches are where tamer creatures retreat. Where big ambitions wither as fast as petunias on an August afternoon.

Our house started out as a tiny Cape Cod. The family we bought it from had added a second story and the front porch. There's even a white picket fence. Today the families moving into the neighborhood are tearing down the 1950s bungalows and building new homes that fill the lots.

The author, with her husband, says the porch "provides a pleasant balance of solitude and engagement."

"If we decided to sell our house," Bruce says, "it would probably be a tear-down."

Surprisingly, the idea doesn't make me sad. Any sense of loss would be for the life we lived here, not the house itself. What matters now is that we have those warm evenings when my husband and I settle onto the porch after dinner and a few of the neighbors drift over to join us.

Over the years, some faces have changed, but the ritual hasn't. Bruce brings out a bottle of bourbon. Others arrive with six-packs, pistachios, cigars. We gather more chairs and sit talking while the lightning bugs flicker against the darkness. We sometimes linger till midnight because no one wants to be the first to say goodnight and go inside. **W**