

## Finding Beauty

Designer **Matthew White** grew up in the Texas Panhandle, inspired by an industrious mother and his improbable surroundings. His life these days may seem all glamour and polish in contrast, but he has never lost his appreciation for the simple things that make a home's beauty timeless.



MY PARENTS' FIRST HOME WAS A 14-FOOT TRAILER IN the Tumbleweed Trailer Park in Amarillo, Texas. As our family grew, so did our trailer houses until the six of us ended up in the ultimate—a double-wide. I can still picture the big metal-and-neon sign on Grand Avenue with each letter of Tumbleweed angled off-kilter to suggest the rafting dried weeds of the Panhandle.

There wasn't much around us back then except Leo's Drive In (best burgers in town), the bowling alley, and a filling station with a Coke machine. Eventually, truck stops and a motel sprung up nearby, but mostly, the area consisted of farmhouses, barns, and fields surrounded by barbed wire fences—the only things that stopped the tumbleweeds.

Growing up in a trailer park was not exactly a visual feast. Occasionally, a retired couple kept a neat toolshed filled with gardening tools and fertilizer. One couple set a pristine turquoise-and-white trailer into a garden that was manicured to perfection. A birdhouse hung from a Chinese elm, and a birdbath sat in its shadow. To see the lilacs and daffodils bloom in the springtime was heavenly. I can still smell those lilacs.

Though these tiny bits of Eden were few and far between, they made an impact on me. My mother worked hard to improve our garden, and every year it grew more beautiful. Each spring, filled with optimism and the delicious anticipation of beauty, we went to the local nursery to buy flats of petunias and perhaps a climbing rose or two. The intense smell of rich, fresh soil was strangely alluring. And the colors! Flowers everywhere—quite a contrast to the dry, utterly flat Texas landscape.

The impetus for these nursery trips was the inspiration we gleaned from what we called "the fancy part of town." A few times a year, Mama would take us to look at the rows of elegant houses and their gardens. My two brothers, my sister, and I would load into the white Chevy, and off we'd go in search of escape and inspiration. Making it even more of a special treat, Mama would stop at Leo's Drive In on the way. Bags of burgers and onion rings

filled the car with a delicious aroma as we each carefully held a red-and-white paper cup of ice-cold Dr Pepper or, on a good day, chocolate malt. Then we would continue on our way. Mama, at only five feet tall, would wrestle the Chevy without power *anything* to the fancy part of town.

For Mama, this was dream time, and it was for me too. It was like entering a foreign world. The streets were paved in old red brick that rumbled reassuringly under the wheels of our car. Enormous trees, creating a canopy of dappled green, lined the streets. Squirrels would frolic among them as if they were movie extras paid to create atmosphere. Even the air seemed different there, somehow softer, cleaner. It would splash against our faces as we rolled the windows down—and there wasn't a tumbleweed in sight.

Most of the 1920s homes were set back from the street, each one perfectly framed by a garden as if it were waiting to be photographed—banks of tulips, crocus popping up spontaneously under budding maple trees, daffodils by the thousands in huge circles of brilliant color. The lawns appeared to be flawless plains of emerald green velvet.

The houses suggested luxury and permanence, quite different from our house on wheels. Some were honest-to-goodness mansions, all perfectly maintained, with grand columns and huge lanterns. The shutters looked freshly painted, and the windows sparkled, reflecting fragments of garden color and our passing white Chevy.

Occasionally, we would see a place so beautiful that Mama was forced to stop so we could take it all in. We would share what we liked and then drive on, our heads rhythmically moving from side to side.

We never once felt poor, though I suppose by some people's standards we were. We didn't look at these houses with envy; instead, we studied them for ideas. As we slurped the last drops of Dr Pepper and balled up the crinkly paper that had wrapped our now devoured hamburgers, Mama would sigh. Then, with



4. A 21st-century channeling of Elsie de Wolfe's take on white space, this living room has all the hallmarks of a beautiful space: pleasing tones, soft touches, and attention to detail. Feminine accents, such as the raspberry satin trim on the bergères, and cooling hues, found in the collection of plates and on the lampshades, add elegance to the space. *March-April 2005*

great resolve, she'd say, "This fall we'll plant bulbs." Putting all her 98 pounds into turning the car around, she'd take us home.

This of course was a long time ago. The trailer park was sold and in its place stands a Super Wal-Mart. Gone are the enormous lilac bushes, the communal clothesline court, and Mama's garden. Gone too is the well of sweet Texas water that kept our petunias from scorching in the unblinking summer sun.

Because of my dreams, and fate, and many blessings, I now live in a house that people slow down to view. I live in the fancy part of town, and no one is more surprised than I am. When I see a car creep past, I am reminded of that skinny, freckle-faced country boy from a trailer park in dusty Amarillo. I can picture my mother driving that old car in search of beauty as if I were sitting in the backseat at this very moment. I see her dreaming and planning and working hard to create that blissful moment when sturdy little stems broke through the snow and faced the unending West Texas wind. It reminds me that beauty is not only where we find it. It's where we make it. ♦

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