

## THIS OLD HOUSE

When my mother was dying, at the point when her body was weak but her mind was still alert, I took a lawyer friend by the house to help Mother make out her will. Her largest possession, the only thing she and my father had ever owned that was worth any money, was the house where they had raised their seven children, the house we moved into in 1963, the summer before I was in ninth grade.

It was the first new house my family ever lived in. Because my father had been in the Marine Corps, we generally moved into houses just as the fresh paint dried, erasing forever the hand prints and other evidence of life by the previous family.

Our new home in Glenarden smelled like oak, perhaps because of the recently laid hardwood floors. The grass was still in square patches that had not grown together and the trees in the yard were skinny saplings.

From that day forth, we stamped imprints of our lives on that house until it became one huge fingerprint that told everything about my family. We could walk in the door and see our history, see who my mother and father were, who we would one day be. We grew up with the other children in the neighborhood, graduated, and returned to that house often for large backyard barbecues, birthday parties and family dinners.

In 1989 my father, weak from cancer, had to be carried out of that house to the hospital, where he died less than a month later. Then the house became “momma’s house” instead of “my parents’ house,” a significant change and one difficult to make at first. But eventually we got used to the new name—and the traditional celebrations assured us that not everything had changed.

Yet when Mother got sick life seemed to be pressed on fast forward, passing before my eyes at an unsettling speed—until it came too that Saturday afternoon when I took the lawyer to Momma’s house. At the time, it seemed right that she wanted the house to be sold and the money from the sale given to her children and grandchildren. After all, as I mentioned, my parents had no savings, no cars, no other property. Most of what they gave us could not be written down or inherited through legal papers. Most of what they gave us we got right there inside that house.

On Thanksgiving morning last year, less than a week after she signed her will, my mother died in her bedroom, succumbing to the cancer that had destroyed her liver. Suddenly the house was “our house,” a lonely phrase none of us—myself or my six siblings—felt comfortable saying.

For weeks after Momma’s funeral, my sister Carol went to the house just to sit and remember. It comforted her to feel the sofa that belonged to my grandparents before it was my mother and father’s; to look at the bedrooms we had shared in different combinations according to how many of us were still living at home; to stand in the lovely bay window my mother had installed in the living room with the insurance money from my father’s death.

But the house did not comfort me—not at first. My heart raced with anxiety if I got within a few miles of it. I knew once I stepped inside, I had to face reality: My mother was dead. My father was dead. Nothing would ever be the same again.

I busied myself with following my mother’s instructions. As the oldest child and executor of the estate I was responsible for getting the house ready to be sold. My

siblings and I met on weekends and cleaned and packed and threw away trash. In the bottom of a coffee table we found long forgotten black-and-white photos, including one of our father grinning as he changed a light bulb in the kitchen. We remembered that one of my sisters had just gotten a new camera and that this was the first photo she took.

And that—seconds after the photo was taken—a jolt of electricity threw Daddy off the stool and onto the floor against the refrigerator.

“He got up and said, ‘Whoa! That’s why I don’t mess with no electricity,’” my sister Vicki recalled.

“After that, whenever somebody changed a light bulb, he ran to the circuit breaker,” said Sondra.

“And turned off *all* the electricity,” Said Debra.

We laughed, “That Bill. What a man,” my brother, Dad’s namesake, said with affectionate sarcasm.

Throughout the house, there were the signs of Mother’s idiosyncrasies: in an end table in the living room, stacks of magazines with dusty issues that dated back 15 years or so and yellowing newspapers with headlines on the deaths of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy; on a shelf on the wall behind the bar in the basement, tacky souvenirs from Niagara Falls, Las Vegas, Jamaica; in bags in the laundry room, old clothes we thought had been given away years ago after our own children had outgrown them.

As we examined every artifact, I began to feel more comfortable. I could see and feel the memories enshrined in the walls and floors; could remember the cinder-block basement walls before there was paneling, the linoleum floor we learned to dance on before carpet was laid in the rec room. I fell in love with the house again and didn’t want to give it up. The house was all that was left of my mother and father—and of us, as a family. I kept hearing my mother’s voice: “We will never have to move out of this house.”

THE CHRISTMAS HOLIDAYS were difficult, but I believed I was mourning well. No sleeping pills. No fits of crying. Yet in my entire life, I had probably spent only one Christmas separated from my mother.

Christmas is my favorite time of year, and I did all I could to make it seem like any other year. I baked cookies, decorated my own house, wrapped gifts. But it didn’t work. A week before Christmas, I found myself staring at the Christmas tree, sinking deeper and deeper into a funk. This time, it wasn’t Mother’s death that consumed me as much as the thought of selling the family home.

Perhaps it was because my sisters and I had decorated Momma’s house for the holidays, just as she would have, with white Christmas lights lining all the front windows and the white angel with her face painted brown standing in the bay window. As we decorated, all I could think was: This is our last Christmas in this house. Our last time hanging lights in this window. Our last year looking across the street to see the blue lights on the Scott’s house, the colored bulbs in the Hills’ bushes, the flickering wreath in the Talberts’ window.

Some different family would live in my family’s house, sleep in the bedroom I used to share with Shelia, sit in the back yard where Daddy used to tie Tiger, our dog of questionable breed, to the chain-link fence; enjoy that yard, where, when I moved back

home briefly five years ago, my mother and I would sit and have Sunday brunch while reading the newspaper and sipping the coffee Momma made in the coffee pot her momma once used.

At my house one afternoon, I stared at the Christmas tree lights, lost in memories until a knock at the door brought me back to the present. When I answered I saw a young man whom I recognized as a member of the family that used to own my house. My husband and I had bought it from the young man's parents.

He was nervous, fidgeting. "I know this might sound weird," he began. "But on Christmas I want to ask my girlfriend to marry me. And I would like to ask her in the room where we had our first kiss."

"Here?" I asked, smiling.

"In my old bedroom." He stared at me, as if to brace himself for rejection, then added, "It wouldn't take long."

"It's fine," I said.

When he left, I recalled how his mother cried at settlement as she handed over the keys to the house where she and her family had lived for 14 years. At the time I could only imagine what it felt like to give up a house that had become a part of you. I also knew she and her husband were separating and felt sure that the woman was crying for a family that would never be the same.

I was learning that houses are more than buildings we live in. Some years earlier I had gone back to Beaufort, S.C., and stood on the doorstep of the last house where my family had lived while my father was in the Marine Corps. I knocked on the door and asked if I could have my picture taken in front of the house. The man inside said yes, and even came outside to take tit for me.

When I bought my first house as a single woman, a row house in a Southeast neighborhood, I had my minister bless it. Among those I invited to the ceremony was Syreeta, the woman from whom I bought the house. She had grown up there, and when her mother died she became executor of her estate. I questioned Syreeta, not just about the age of the furnace or the condition of the roof, but also about the things that had happened to her family while they lived there.

What she gave me, no real estate description could have. She gave my house a life, a history on which I could build. When I ran my fingers over the kitchen cabinets, I knew I was following the fingers of Elizabeth McGriff, who had worked as a domestic at age 12 and later, as a widow, raised her five children—including Syreeta—alone.

In late December, a month after my mother died, I opened an envelope bearing a certificate that officially appointed me executor of her estate. The certificate came from "The Orphans' Court." How appropriate, I thought.

ON CHRISTMAS DAY, at the agreed upon time, the young man arrived at my front door with his girlfriend. I had already apologized to him for turning his old basement bedroom into a kind catch-all room, a place where my husband worked out and played Sega Genesis.

It didn't matter. He and his girlfriend disappeared into the room. Five minutes later, both came out smiling. She held up her hand and I admired her engagement ring. My husband congratulated them, and for the next 15 minutes we talked about houses and their significance in our lives.

The young man said sometimes he drove by our house just to check on how it was doing. His fiancé said her grandmother's house in the South was her retreat and she could not imagine her family without it. When they left, he walked across our front lawn.

"You're doing just what you did when you lived here," his fiancée chided.

"You can walk across the yard anytime you want," I said.

IN EARLY APRIL, I noted the second anniversary of my mother's mastectomy, remembering how she laughed in the hospital before the operation, how we teased her because she talked on the phone there just as much as she did at home. She was on the phone when they came to take her to the operating room.

On Easter my sister Shelia told me that she went to Mother's house to sit in the back yard—and recall how Mother held an Easter egg hunt for her grandchildren each year. Walking around the yard, Shelia found three plastic eggs the children had missed the year before.

In late April my real estate agent called me with what she announced was "good news."

"We have two offers on your mother's house," she said, a smile in her voice.

I didn't know what to feel. Relief? Joy? Sadness? I insisted my sister Carol go with me to the real estate office. My agent was out of town, so she had her office mate Gene handle things. In the middle of negotiations, we discovered that one buyer wanted to settle within 30 days. My sister said, faintly, "That's a problem."

"You need more time?" Gene asked.

My sister explained that my daughter—her niece—wanted to take time off work to come home from Los Angeles for one last party we planned to have at the house.

"This is all happening too fast," she said, telling Gene about our mother's dying.

He began to rub his chest, as if he suddenly had heartburn. Then he told this story: "My mother die din 1985. A massive heart attack. She was working in her garden and just collapsed. She had just retired. We thought she would have fun. Relax. She liked to garden. She had that one massive heart attack. And it was over.

"There are two of us—sons. Because I am in real estate, I was the one who sold the house. She died a few days before Thanksgiving. By Christmas, I had a buyer. But I couldn't go to closing," he said. "I just couldn't do it."

He rubbed his chest with the palms of both his hands.

BUT IT DIDN'T MATTER how we felt about the house; we had to follow my mother's will, which stipulated that it be sold. This was a good thing. We were much too emotional to be rational.

In the meantime, my sister Sondra and her son had moved into Momma's house to live there until it was sold. Our neighbor across the street, Mr. Hill, came over one evening. Sondra told me, "He said he had never looked over here and seen anyone other than a Gaines. He said it was going to be strange."

We decided to make our final party a farewell cookout for our family, our friends, and Momma and Daddy's friends. We settled On Saturday, May 6, and my daughter, Andrea, flew in. Following tradition, my sister Vicki served as the official cook at the grill. We got barbecue ribs from the restaurant of Tommy Broadwater, a neighbor and goof friend of my mother.

My friend Gobie—once Momma’s confidante whenever Momma was worried about me or any of her children—took photos of everyone My friend Fran sat talking with my parents’ friends as easily as she had talked to my father, a man whose militaristic demeanor had scared most of my other friends into silence.

Mrs. Jackson, who used to live next door, brought the chocolate chip cake that Momma loved so much she used to hide it from us. Her children—Karla, who made my wedding dress, and Kai, who is now a television reporter in Baltimore—came as well. We remembered how, as children, my siblings used to play volleyball with the Jackson children, using as a net the fence that separated our yards.

Also there were our longtime friend Mrs. Cooper, whom Momma accompanied to court years ago, when the young men found guilty of murdering Mrs. Cooper’s daughter Denise were brought to trial; Mary, who owns the shop where Mother worked as a beautician, and who came with her daughters and a couple of employees and friends; Mrs. Walker, a family friend who brought Momma beautiful nightgowns while she was sick, accompanied by her husband, who moves a little slower because of a stroke and heart attack but who made his way to greet each of us and to look inside the house one last time; Charlie Meyers, Daddy’s best friend and service buddy, who stood guard over his body at the wake; Mrs. Meyers, our second favorite cook (next to Mom), with the fresh string beans we requested she make; the Bloomfields, parents of my best friend in high school, Patricia, who died several years ago.

Normally, at this time of year the back yard would have been full of color from the azaleas, impatiens and rose bushes planted by Momma. But this year, the roses looked sickly, and there were no other flowers. There was no one willing to invest time and seeds in soil that soon would not belong to us.

Friends of my daughter came—some with children of their own. We listened to music and danced, recalling how Momma loved to get out there and dance with us, lips pursed, arms bent at the elbows as she popped her fingers to the beat. We watched the basketball playoffs on the back porch, which is what our father would have done if he had been around. We jumped rope, the adults singing children’s songs like, “Not last night, but the night before...”

We walked across the concrete patio, where mother wrote with a stick while the cement was still wet: “Eleanor Gaines 5-23-90.” It was perfect weather, sunny and breezy, and the older people lounged on chairs and benches under the trees. One woman kept muttering, “Ump, ump, ump,” and shaking her head, saying at one point, “I can’t believe Eleanor is not here.”

I couldn’t believe it, either. There was a moment when I stood in my mother’s kitchen, looking out the back door, and tears welled up in my eyes because I could see what Momma must have always seen as she stood there preparing food: the remarkable and wonderful ordinary life we had.

For the few hours that we gathered, time stood still. Momma’s friends put their hands on our shoulders or hugged us gently, their way of letting us know they missed Momma and Daddy, too. When my sister Carol scolded the children, more than one person remarked that she sounded just like Momma. I looked at all the food and thought of how Momma would describe a woman by the dish she brought to the last cookout. “Remember, she’s the woman with the pea salad,” she would say.

Debra recounted how Mother instructed us to walk down certain streets on the way to school, so we would pass the houses of her friends, who were asked to watch out for us and report back to her.

We consoled each other with our presence—and our memories. We laughed at the old toilet bowl Momma set in the far reaches of the back yard, planting petunias in it. As daylight slipped away, some of us moved inside to sit in the living room. One of my daughter's friends walked in to find us, and—imitating my mother, who preferred to see people in the back yard or basement—yelled, “What are y'all doing sitting in the living room? You better get outside!”

The sun began to sink and shade fell over the yard. Everyone wanted group photos. People pulled cameras out of bags and pocketbooks. We crowded together on the back porch and the stairs, spilling out onto the patio. “I can't believe we won't gather here like this anymore,” said Kai. My sister Shelia, who had coped with the day by telling old stories, was now talking about how Daddy drove her to the hospital to have her son, who is now 18 and taller than she is.

The women went to the kitchen to get their pots, cake dishes and plastic containers. People wrapped up leftovers to take home. We promised to gather again around Mother's birthday in August to take what we named “The Eleanor Gaines Memorial Trip to Atlantic City,” to remember my mother and her love for playing the slot machines.

We kissed and hugged. Then we walked from the back yard together, haltingly, down the stones my mother had set as a path.

OVER THE NEXT couple of weeks—before the house was sold—each of us took pieces of the homestead with us. Debra planted some of the roses in her front yard. Bill carried away the china closet that had belonged to our parents and to our grandparents before that. Shelia hung Momma's lace curtains in her own bedroom. Vicki inherited the living room furniture. I got the table my mother and I once shared during those Sunday brunches in her yard.

Slowly, my siblings and I dismantled the place, taking away Tupperware, lamps, photos, draperies, a microwave oven, even our grade school papers.

After that, some of us chose to stay away. Bill, who lives in Virginia Beach, thought he would feel better if he didn't see the house, windows undressed, standing lonely in the middle of overgrown grass, Sondra just walked away, viewing the selling of the house as the beginning of a new chapter of life. Vicki, the youngest of us, wants to move now; she lives down the street from the house and finds it painful to look at.

But some of us wanted to go back one more time. My sister Debra went with her two children, to show them her old bedroom and to tell them how she carved her name on the top branch of the tree that used to sit in the back yard. She was closing the door when she remembered she had accidentally left a slip of paper inside. “I wanted to go back in to get it. But I just couldn't,” she said. “I said goodbye to the house and goodbye to Momma. I closed the door.”

My sister Carol and I went together. I was carrying out trash when I spotted Carol in the back yard, sitting on the concrete patio on top of our mother's name, tears streaming down her cheeks. She told me later: “I remembered Daddy being out there

early in the morning. The little boy next door would always throw his ball over the fence into the yard and Daddy would always have to get up and throw it back.

“I spotted two balls out there, a basketball and football,” she continued. “I couldn’t remember any of our kids having them recently. I was sitting there crying and the man from next door came out and said, ‘Excuse me, we were having a cookout out here the other day and the kids threw those balls over the fence.’”

When Carol came back inside, we bumped into each other in the narrow hallway leading to the bedrooms.

“How did they raise seven children here?” I asked. The bedrooms, which once looked spacious to me, seemed tiny now.

In the basement, I remembered how I learned to hand-dance by holding onto a pole, my imaginary partner. In the kitchen, I opened the empty refrigerator and thought of how many times I had come by my mom’s to get something to eat, and how my mother never threw away anything until it was covered with mold and I had to ask, “Momma, what is this?”

I remembered rooms the way they once looked, when seven children were running around, vying for space and attention. The laundry room jam-packed with bicycles. The swing sets that used to be in the back yard and how each time we broke one, another one appeared. I remembered my mother’s body being carried out of her bedroom and how I could not look because I knew she would never be there again. Then I whispered goodbye to my mother and my father, and wondered: Where will I go to feel close to you again?

I knew that I would carry them with me, in my heart, everywhere.

But as I closed the door to the house, the truth didn’t comfort me.

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