House of Dreams

When an idyllic past meets a sordid present, the result can be oddly appropriate.

Yes, I should have known better than to go home again. But hounded by curiosity, I set out on a damp and clingy June morning to revisit the farmhouse in upstate New York where I grew up.

My parents were a pair of Brooklyn Jews who, before they met, fell in love with Jesus. Then they found each other, like two needles in a haystack, and having been largely cut off from their families, proceeded to reinvent their world, a world of fierce Catholic devotion that ultimately took root in that drafty old farmhouse.

I was their eighth and last child. To me, the house was magical—was Eden, it was life itself. Ringed by a sprawling garden and berry patches and the chicken coop, the house was full of confident, rambunctious brothers and sisters and my sure-footed parents, leading us fearlessly down the path of their adopted faith. Our rooms were adorned with crucifixes and statues of the Virgin Mary; on summer evenings, we knelt on the lawn to recite the rosary, my sisters’ hairdo glinting in the golden sunlight from all the Aqua Net, stray bits of driveway gravel digging into my hairless knees.

It wasn’t until my father died and I went off to college that my mother sold the house. Soon after, I began exploring my parents’ buried Jewish pasts and the desires that had led them to remake their lives; at the same time, I found myself tugged toward the religion they had abandoned. So here I was, an inchoate Jew returning to the Catholic Eden of my childhood to reclaim whatever memories I could and to see what magic the house might still work on me.

I drove in the back way, up Route 30, then onto Gallupville Road. The house, I immediately saw, had had a makeover: aluminum siding, new windows, a shiny roof. And where the garden used to be, two dozen cars were parked in neat rows.

I pulled onto the muddy roadside just as another car turned in. The man who got out wore khaki shorts, a button-down shirt, loafers. “Hello,” I called out, friendly. “Something’s happened here today, yeah?”

“Um, yes,” he said.

“ar ... what is it?”

seemed to blanch. “I don’t know,” he said, heading for the front door. He gave a short knock and slipped inside.

So much for a homecoming. I fumed for a few minutes,

then drove into town. I stopped in at Wolfe’s Market, where I used to stock shelves. After chatting a bit with Mrs. Wolfe, I asked her about my old house. “You don’t know?” she said. Know what? “Your house,” she said, “is a sex club. A swingers’ house. They call it the House of Dreams.”

She wasn’t kidding. Mr. Wolfe came in just then and they told me all about it. The fellow who bought the house, they said, fixed it up, installed a Jacuzzi, took out a post-office box right there at Wolfe’s Market. Mr. Wolfe told me that the state troopers had looked into the operation a number of times, but concluded that it wasn’t illegal.

I drove back to the house. All the shades were drawn. Our old tire swing still hung from the maple tree. The nerve. I thought about knocking on the door, innocently, asking for a look around my old house (as I’d intended in the first place). I thought about posing as a swinger, but I didn’t think I could pull it off — and I didn’t think I could bear the sight of a Jacuzzi full of naked strangers where our kitchen table used to be. Instead, I snapped pictures of all the cars’ license plates, dreaming of blackmail, and drove home.

The irony of the situation, I had to admit, was thick. My parents were extremely chastity-minded. They rigorously monitored my sisters’ boyfriends (who could only be Catholic); the word “sex” was spoken even less often than the word “Jewish” — which is to say, pretty much never. I once witnessed our dog and a stray coupling on our front lawn, and my mother rushed over to explain that they must have got stuck together by a clump of burrs.

I was in no mood for irony, though. I spent a week hatching plans to shut down the House of Dreams; I considered arson, anonymous threats, a buyback. I found the club’s Web site, which specified the functions of the three upstairs bedrooms: “an open swinging room, semi-private and totally private.” That would be my parents’ room, the girls’ room and mine.

My sense of violation was profound. But over time, violation gave way to wonder. It was only fitting, I realized, that the world my parents had created, built as it was on an obliteration of their own past, would be so radically obliterated the moment we surrendered its deed. A house has no allegiance, no conscience, no curiosity about its past. Nor should it. A pile of lumber and nails cannot be expected to retain sanctity—or memory. That is our job, if we so choose. Having foolishly gone home for one last glimpse of Eden, I learned what I should have known all along: Eden wasn’t the farmhouse, the golden light, the tire swing; Eden was us.

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