

When Your Childhood Home Isn't How You Remember It

by Hana Schank

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Ever since my parents split up when I was 27, I fantasized about walking back into my childhood home, which they moved out of six years before they parted ways. The divorce seemed to invalidate my entire childhood. All the carefully saved bits and pieces that documented my existence before my 20s — concert T-shirts decorated with safety pins, a white jean skirt bought with babysitting money — were gone without explanation, tossed out by movers, lost in the chaos of a hasty real estate transaction or appropriated by new people passing through my parents' now-separate lives.

With the artifacts of my childhood gone, I came to see myself as a person who did not exist before my parents' split. If I could only hear the screen door wheeze closed or take one last look at the cream carpet in the living room, I would know that my childhood had been real.

One day last year, I was heading on vacation with my husband and young children, and as we approached my old highway exit, I heard myself say, "Who wants to see the house I grew up in?"

"Yes!" my children responded. Maybe they thought there would be toys.

When we arrived, I pulled open the screen door and let it rest on the back of my calf as I'd done a million times before. I rang the bell. Moments later, a woman with wiry brown hair opened the door. I smiled, told her my parents' names and said we owned the house in the '80s.

"Oh, we bought the house from them," the woman said.

I said my children would like to see where I grew up. She hesitated, and something dark flitted across her face.

"I don't know," she said. But then she changed her mind.

As we stepped into the entrance hall, I pointed out a few things that had changed. There were built-in bookshelves over the coat closet. The paint color was different.

"So through here, is that still the kitchen?" I asked, as we made a right turn off the foyer.

"We moved the kitchen back," the woman said.

"Oh, what a good idea," I chirped. I wanted her to think I approved of her decorating and design decisions.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/09/magazine/when-your-childhood-home-isnt-how-you-remember-it.html>

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It was when I walked into the large tropical bird that I first sensed that things had gone awry in my old house. The bird was on a perch near the door that led into the dining room. It spread its wings angrily and let out a deep squawk as we entered.

There was a dining-room table there, in the spot where I ate dinner for years. But the table was covered with layers and layers of paint, canvases and brushes. It hadn't hosted a meal in possibly a decade. Beyond the table was what looked to be the interior of a pipe organ. At a loss for a chirpy comment, I began babbling at my children.

"We had this amazing soft carpet in here, so we used to love to lie on it and jump on each other." I looked down at the carpet, which was stained and filthy. "Actually, is this . . . ? Wait. Is this the same carpet?"

Our host smiled nervously. "It's the same carpet."

At that point, I realized that being in this house was wrong. I felt my whole body go clammy, and I couldn't meet the woman's gaze. I knew she saw what I was thinking, but somehow neither of us knew how to extricate ourselves from this situation.

"Would you like to see the downstairs?" she asked. Well, sure, maybe downstairs would be better.

Downstairs was not better. Downstairs was worse. We wended our way through boxes and stacks of books on the floor into the room that had been my parents' bedroom. "This is my room," the woman said. I sucked in my breath. Junk surrounded a mattress on the floor. There was a path through the junk that led from the door to the mattress, and another leading from the mattress to the bathroom.

Once we were safely back in our car, I turned around and explained to my children that the house looked a lot different when I lived there. "I was wondering," my son said. "It seemed kind of weird."

As we pulled out of my old driveway, I felt rattled — but also satisfied. Opening the door on a happy family living in a tidy house might have only underscored what I had lost. But seeing the house in a state I could never have imagined somehow brought it back to me whole. That night I closed my eyes and could see my childhood home as it once was: clean, intact and mine.

Hana Schank is the author of "A More Perfect Union."