

LESSONS FROM MY PARENTS' HOUSE

By Eliza VanCort

I walked into my parents' house today. It's an old, big beautiful house on the corner of our street.

The house is almost empty.

The pictures on the walls are gone. The furniture is gone. All of my mother's beautiful treasures from her adventures are gone. And the signs my dad put everywhere, like the one by the fireplace written on a burned piece of wood which says, "FIRE PLACE TOOL DO NOT BURN" at the top - gone.

Almost everything is gone. Almost.

We walk into the dining room. My mother says, "Look at this little box. I think it's beautiful don't you? You can put little trinkets in it."

Yes, it is beautiful I say.

I look at her face. She exhales softly and looks away. "I'll take it," I say. I don't know where I'll put it, but I'll find a place.

A House isn't a house.

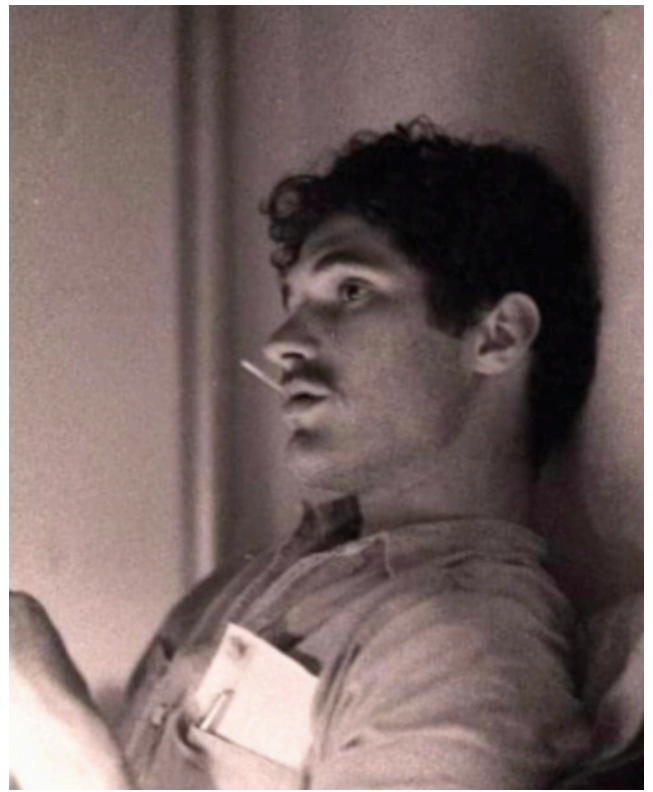
A house is a place where young couples go to start their lives or newly blended families think, "This will be a fresh start." It's a place where people stand utterly alone as the person they thought they would spend the rest of their life with walks out the door, and it's a place where old people sit on porches holding hands, marveling at how fast life goes.

Houses can be full of hurt and pain and secrets. They can be dangerous places that shelter violence and abuse. But houses are also shelters from a world that isn't always kind.

They are places where you learn what kind of person you are, or strive to become the person you want to be. Houses teach us about ourselves. Did you get a house to keep the world out- a beautiful safe space where you don't have to be around anyone but the people you love who live there? Or did you get a house to create community, a place where people you hardly know can walk in and feel safe, and welcome?

The house we grow up in is our teacher. We watch what our parents do and think, "I'll never do that" or "That's the kind of life I want."

When I was little, I thought it was just going to be me and my dad, but then my stepmom and her kids joined our family and we became one big family.



When our big family started, we lived for a while in a little house. That house had smushy carpet on the stairs. We'd get our sleeping bags and slide down those deliciously steep magical stairs on our butts, laughing till our stomachs hurt.

When my dad was young, he was a tree surgeon. He shimmied up a tree in our backyard and built us a tire swing. We loved that swing. We would run off the patio ledge and leap in the air, the swing taking us on a ride so high and so long you wondered if you'd sprouted wings. One kid hesitated when he leapt, and broke his arm.

"Do you think his father will sue us?" my parents asked. "His dad is a lawyer."

"Fucking lawyers," my dad mumbled, "Fucking lawyers."

He didn't sue us. I'm guessing because every kid in our neighborhood loved that joyfully treacherous swing, and because back then it was assumed hard play might sometimes result in a broken arm.

Then the house around the corner was up for sale. This house. The almost empty one. It was big, and it didn't have a swing.

I didn't want to move. But months later I found myself drawing straws in the new house with perfect off-white paint and sunny walls to find out which room I would be stripping the wood in.

"Not the living room, not that huge living room," I said to myself. It was an old craftsman house with trim everywhere, and the living room had a huge fireplace with a big wooden mantel. "Not the living room, anything but the living room."

I got the living room.

I spent hours in that living room with my friend Sue, stripping that damn wood. We laughed and laughed and laughed. The wood looks so pretty now. You should see it.

And soon, that house became the house without the swing but with the big pool table in the basement. My parents got it for a steal at a yard sale. Sometimes we would put a ping pong table top on it and play for hours. Once we snuck out the creaky basement door to go to a party. I was so scared the entire time that I'd get caught. We stuck with the pool table after that. I thought about the tire swing sometimes. I missed it, but I was a teenager, and the pool table was cooler.

Our house was grand and beautiful and decorated with understated class, but it wasn't an easy house and it wasn't perfect. It had a cool old intercom, but it didn't work. And it was a corner house. It had no yard. And most importantly, humans lived in it. And humans aren't perfect. Humans are hard. And in the hard moments I swore I would do better when I got older. I would do it right. I would be the perfect parent in the perfect house. I mean, how hard could it be if you understood the problems and were committed to fixing them?



Then I had my own house and my own kids and my own divorce and my own pain and my own mistakes. I made so many mistakes. Mistakes that were, in many ways, like the mistakes made in my parents' house, the house I stand in now, with the empty walls and echoing rooms and a basement without a pool table and an intercom that was never fixed. And I felt like a failure.

But then time passed. My kids struggled in so many ways, but they also soared in bold, unexpected ways that took my breath away. I looked back on my life with different eyes.

I realized some of my best memories came from my parent's imperfect house. And some of my best lessons.

My parents' house was welcoming. There were always dozens of kids running around. My friends felt welcome there. And when I became a parent, my house was full of kids. My parents taught me how to create a home you walk into and feel like it's your home too. You open the fridge and get a drink without asking because you've been told over and over, "Our house is your house-make yourself at home."

In my parent's house, every night at the dinner table they talked about politics and history and the world. I learned it's important to care about making the world better, that life is not just about staying in your silo, staying in your little house with people who look like you and act like you and come from the same place you do. You have to go out of your house and work to make the world better. And you have to leave your house and have big, fun adventures all over the world with your friends. Fun is also important.

I learned how to sweep floors and clean toilets in my house, and that it's important to laugh at the hard things.

I learned that grownups could be your uncles and aunts and their kids could be your cousins, even if they had no relation to you at all. And they will love you, and you love them.

And I learned that houses can be places where stepmoms become moms, and one day grandmothers. Not everyone learns this. I was lucky. I did. My kids learned these things too, these lessons from my parent's house.

Now, as a divorced middle aged woman navigating a new relationship, some lessons that I didn't always see, or maybe took for granted, have become clear.

I learned second marriages could not only work, but be beautiful love stories. I learned what it looks like when two people truly devote themselves to each other. I learned you could fight once in a while and keep loving each other, and that couples can make huge mistakes and that doesn't mean it has to be the end and that no matter how old you are, you can look at the person you love and be completely smitten.



I also learned that when your parents are old enough to move out of the house you grew up in, they are not too old to love you and teach you new things. Parent child relationships can deepen in ways you never thought possible when you were younger, when you were living in your parents house. These are important lessons, lessons that were right in front of me, but sometimes hard to see.

I'm grateful I see them now.

I stand in my parents' house, such a big, beautiful house on the corner of our street.

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Almost everything is gone. Almost. My memories aren't gone. They remain.

My mom puts the keys on the counter, placing them carefully on the final note my dad wrote. It's a long list of complex instructions. I smile, wondering if the hopeful young couple with the two little boys, and mellow dog will read it after a day hauling in furniture and unpacking box after box. I hope that they do, but I'm guessing they won't.

I thank the house, and shut the door.

FOR MY PARENTS♥



