



JUST AN OLD HOUSE

Revisiting childhood haunts reminds us that nothing stays the same.

By Kathryn Hunter • Photography by Sonja Sommerfeld

Some places belong to you by right of law. Others belong to you through deeper, though less tangible, means — a bond found not in title or deed but in the bones and blood.

This house knew me as a girl. I'm back for the first time in nearly 20 years, bringing my mother, stepfather, husband and my own two small children. Much is as I remember it: the deer heads mounted on the walls, the old glass medicine bottles and hurricane lamps on the shelves, the antique stove stolidly guarding the hallway near the back door. Like the patio stones outside that were almost certainly taken from the Sabinal River below, these objects have always seemed indigenous to the house, belongings left behind rather than imported for the purposes of rustic decor.

Old houses are known for their ghosts, but I have a theory that hauntings have less to do with age than a place's personality.

Imperfections make it possible to see the lives that were lived there.

My old house — mine by virtue of a three-day rental, in addition to emotional attachment — is located off a farm road north of Utopia. Though it's been a vacation rental for decades (my family booked it for a week every summer for four or five years in the mid-1990s), it would have started as a simple Hill Country ranch house. The kitchen and nearest bedroom are the bones, probably built in the 1930s or 40s. The rest would have evolved over the course of the next half-century: more bedrooms, living areas, bathrooms, porches. Likely most of the work was done by the owners. Walls and floors are a patchwork of materials and designs meeting at their borders unharmoniously, like

The rivers, the hills, the trees, a vacation home stuck in time — the Utopia area serves as the setting for the author's childhood reminiscences. For this Southeast Texas native, the Hill Country was an exotic destination.

countries on a map. Some rooms are built at slightly different levels, and as I walk around I find I can almost close my eyes and remember where to step down or up.

My husband and stepfather, both seeing the property for the first time, think it's ugly. My mother, who shares many of my memories of the house, and as fondly, is frowning at the thick layers of dust and dirt that have settled in the corners and the cabinets. She finds a leak under the kitchen sink and a pot beneath that's near to overflowing. The house is not a high-dollar rental and never was, but I know that my mother's a little disappointed, a little angry, a little nostalgic. I know this because I feel those things, too.

My 3-year-old son is drawn to the low-ceilinged, airless rooms in the attic, long ago stuffed nook-and-cranny with twin beds. The heat from the tin roof always made it too hot for sleeping in the summer, but I used to play hide-and-seek up there.

If anyone can understand this place's magic, it's a child. I resurrect for my son the stories: swimming and fishing, day trips to Lost Maples State Natural Area, fireflies, roasting marshmallows for s'mores, tinny-tasting orange juice in small cans. Of course, I do so at my peril, since those were warm-weather days and the weekend we've chosen in late March has turned gray and cold, stubbornly holding on to winter. A light rain falls in sheets.

Perhaps because the weather had never kept me indoors, or perhaps because I've only recently learned the value of sitting still, on this trip I discover a small room that doesn't exist in my memory at all but which



I now think of as the best in the house. Paned windows on two sides fill the room with light; built-in bookcases line the walls. Next to a scarred wooden table, there's the ugliest, yet most comfortable, chair in the world. One of the previous inhabitants of the house was said to be a painter, and this was her studio. My 9-month-old daughter has an ear infection, and each night in the shadows and moonlight I sit in this room and rock her in my arms while everyone else sleeps. Except the ghosts, of course.

They don't have much to say, beyond the occasional creak or rustle. But I sense a sympathetic understanding.

How many other mothers have nursed their babies through long nights in the history of this house, these hills? People talk about "different times" and "simpler times," but nostalgia is the stuff of rosy lenses, dangerous in its potential to turn an idealized past empty of its flaws into "kids these days" and a darker vision of the future.

Native Americans settled the Edwards Plateau region of Texas between 6,000 and 10,000 years ago. In the 18th and 19th centuries, present-day Real and Bandera counties — which "my" old house sits roughly at the border of — were bastions of the Comanches and Lipan Apaches. The banks of the Sabinal



How do you relate to a place? The sights, sounds and stories combine to create impressions that can linger for years.

River formed an eastern branch of the Comanche Trail, a well-traveled route that stretched from Mexico north to the Panhandle and beyond.

Brutal violence and bloodshed followed early Anglo settlement in the mid-1800s, and Southwest Texas was a remote and hostile frontier long after most other parts of the state were tamed. The last Indian raid in the region occurred in 1881. Though the house would not have witnessed this era, perhaps the people who lived here held something in their collective

“These used to be my mountains,” I tell him, explaining that for a rural Southeast Texas native like me, this part of the state was exotic. The ball moss, the sharp green smell of sycamores over the water, the elevation change, the coolness of the air at dusk and dawn... Where I was born night is almost as hot as day and rivers run warm and brown as tea; here the water’s always cold and so clear that you can see a scale on a fish’s nose.

I explain, too, that this is not the same “middle of nowhere” it used to be. Granted, we’ve got no cell or internet service at the house, and the nearest full-sized grocery store is an hour’s drive. But a few miles down the road there’s a winery, a motorcycle museum and lots of big, fancy gates emblazoned with big, fancy-sounding ranch names. You used to hardly ever see cars driving by, but now there’s a steady stream.

That’s why my family stopped coming here, in the end. It got a bit too crowded even then. The river was dammed upstream from the house to make a road, and hung with wire and “Posted” signs on either end where the best swimming was. We were left a slow, shallow trickle of water and the feeling that with so much wide-open country all around us, we were still hemmed in.

Part of me wants to upend my city life and buy my old house, fix its leaking pipes, love it for all that it is and isn’t. But the other, more practical part of me knows that I won’t be back.

When you love a place, you can think of the place as belonging to you, but really it’s the other way around. You belong to it — another story, another ghost to commune with, even if future visitors are standing on the hollowed-out ruins of what used to be.

What do you say to a crumbling piece of your own history?

Not “Goodbye.”

Perhaps a simple “Thank you,” or maybe what my son has learned to say to his friends, in parting or in sympathy: “I wish you well.”

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memory of what occurred in those days, the stories of their parents or grandparents.

My old house is surrounded by acres of land, much of it fenced-off pasture. Did they raise cattle, sheep, goats? Mohair was the area’s largest export for roughly half a century starting around the late 1800s, though by the time the house was built, demand and production were probably waning.

“Why did your family vacation in the middle of nowhere when they were from the middle of nowhere?” asks my husband, who grew up in Houston. We’re watching my son throw rocks into the river. The hill on the opposite side of the bank rises so steeply and to such a height that from the right vantage point it looks like a wall.