

Home for the Holidays

A New York journalist faces loss and redemption at her childhood home in Pittsburgh

BY DANA MICUCCI

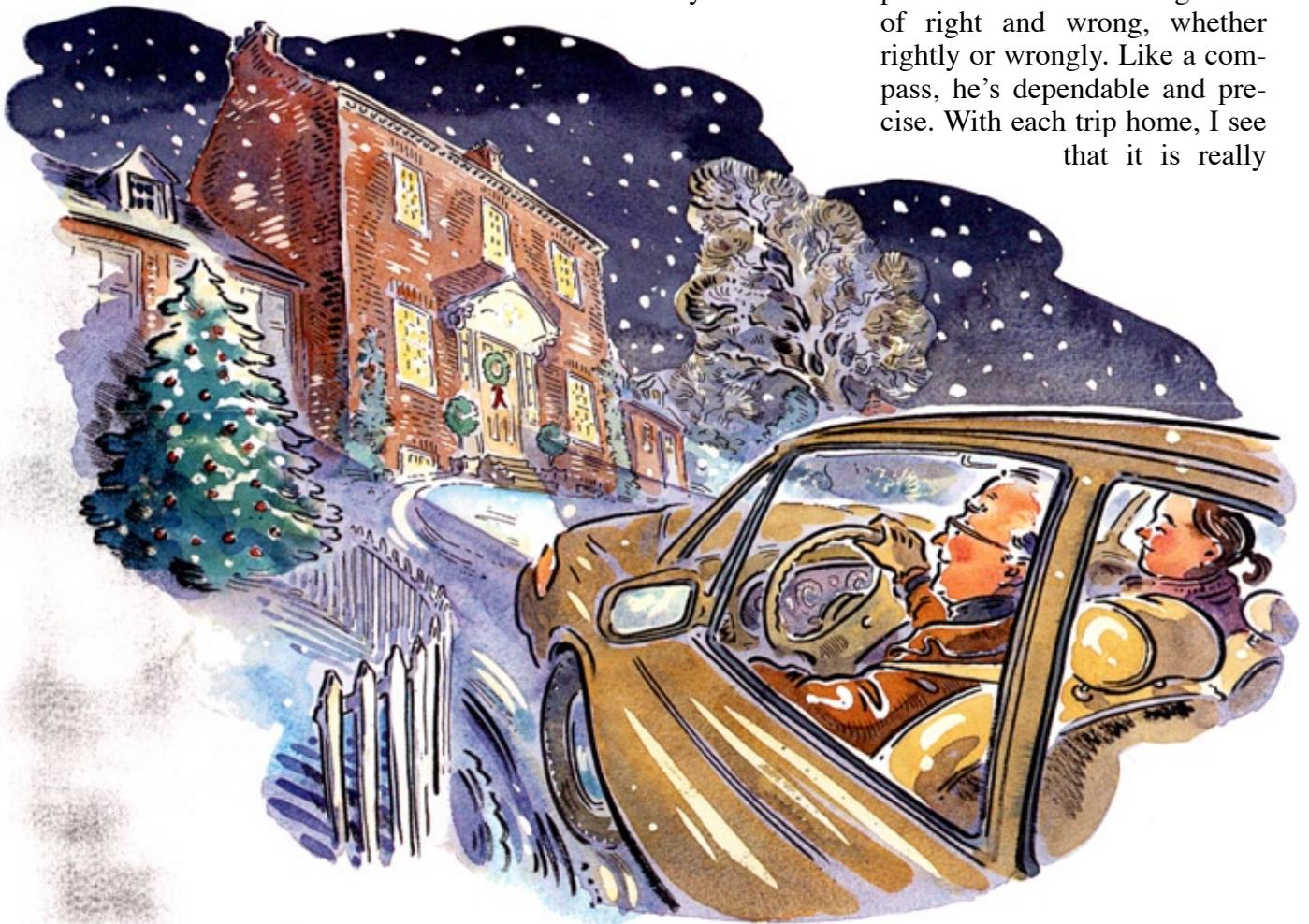
BACK HOME IN PITTSBURGH it's Christmas again, and everything is the same as it has always been: The majestic redbrick house straddling a snow-dusted lawn. The red-ribbon wreath stenciling a perfect circle on the oak door. Each window suffused with the orange glow of holiday candles. It might be any house in the suburbs. But as soon as this house, my childhood home, reveals itself from around the bend, my pulse quickens to its steadfast welcome and the stresses of New

York City instantly melt away. It is not just any house. For me, it is a touchstone, an anchor, a container of profound affections and seasonal rituals that begin with my father waiting patiently for me at the airport.

"Dad, you'll be driving me home when I'm 80," I tease him, as usual. "I'm always here for you," he says softly, his gaze fixed with certitude on the road ahead. During the long ride home, there is talk of family and friends (especially the six grandchildren), of stocks and politics, dreams and deadlines, and what my mother is

making for Christmas dinner. He never fails to mention the buckets of apples he has so painstakingly peeled, yet again, for the pies. Most of all there is the silent gift of mutual respect and understanding that makes all words seem superfluous.

My father is strong and sturdy, in both body and mind. This occurs to me every time he swings my suitcases into the house as if they were mere handbags. Or when he opines, often heatedly, on everything from the Steelers and Alan Greenspan to golf etiquette and Sunday drivers. He is possessed of an unerring sense of right and wrong, whether rightly or wrongly. Like a compass, he's dependable and precise. With each trip home, I see that it is really



the little things about him—the quick flash of his smile or the firm grip of his hand—that make me feel like I’m always standing on solid ground. A bit shorter than he claims to be, he has the build of a linebacker and the soul of a sea captain who has weathered all variety of storms. This holiday, he is trying out some new medication that the doctor said would curtail his arrhythmia. One of his few weaknesses is that his heart beats too fast.

As I enter the house of my youth, the familiar pine scent mingles with traces of clove and cinnamon, peppers and onions. I’m aware that I’m crossing a threshold into a haven of simple comforts and complex devotions, glimmering like shiny tree ornaments in the maze of my memory. For an instant, past and present collapse and I am no longer who I think I have become but who I have always been, defined by the events and attachments that transpired here, long ago, in this house. It is a singular creation, this family homestead, born of a dream seed and watered with plenty of sweat. And like the three children it once sheltered, it is the inevitable product of a close collaboration. My father laid the foundations from countless root canals, fillings, crowns, and extractions. My mother filled it with beauty and laughter and lots of lists, both to herself—“pack lunches,” “buy school supplies”—and to other family members—“Please do not use this bathroom. Just cleaned.”

“Doesn’t the house look pretty?” Mom says, proudly surveying the gifts displayed like gemstones on and around the living

room sofa. Each box is expertly wrapped, each ribbon a work of art. The candles are lit. The tree is trimmed to brilliant perfection, bowing slightly from the weight of hundreds of ornaments lovingly accumulated over the years.

“Mom, the house always looks pretty,” I answer appreciatively. She is soon busy with another project, another creation. There are more wreaths to hang, more cookies to bake. With all her magnetic energy, her bottomless reservoir of warmth, she is like the trick birthday candle that never blows out.

I go down to the basement in search of a bottle of champagne. As usual, the holiday wine and spirits are there in quantity, along with the soft drinks and house supplies my dad always buys in bulk as if outfitting an army mess hall. All will be consumed eventually, and the cycle will begin again. There is something so comforting about these routines, about returning again and again to a place where there are few surprises.

My eyes settle on my dad, ensconced comfortably in his armchair, as we chatter and sip champagne. This is his domain, the house where he plants flowers, rakes leaves, shovels snow, reads newspapers, watches ballgames, and lugs innumerable logs up from the backyard to the family room, where he builds innumerable fires, mainly for me. We often sit here together at the fireplace, quietly watching the flames dance. “See all those books, dear,” my dad nods toward the leather-bound volumes in the tall twin bookcases. “They’re yours. When we’re gone.” He smiles tenta-

tively. “Stop it, Dad. Don’t talk like that,” I hesitate, reconsidering. “Sure. I’ll take the books. Thanks.”

It is just two days before Christmas, and I notice the log supply is alarmingly low. Though I am old enough to plan for my retirement, my dad does not feel right, idly standing by as his daughter sets out on a midnight log run. We go together to buy more logs. It is another family ritual, the building of the fire, nurturing warmth and intimacy. Tonight, real wood is scarce, so we settle for fake Duraflames. “Tomorrow, we’ll go out and get the ham,” Dad says. He is retired and intent on maintaining his usefulness. “Yes, the ham.” I watch him climb the stairs to bed. I feel his arms carrying me, a sleepy child, up those same stairs.

I awake the next day to a deafening crash, thinking I am dreaming, until I look out at the backyard. The massive oak tree that stood tall and proud for decades has suddenly and inexplicably uprooted itself and fallen. My family gathers around the kitchen window in shock. “It’s a miracle,” I observe, “the way the tree fell, off to the side, away from the house.” Yes, we all agree, it is definitely a miracle. As if guided by an inner knowing, the tree had spared us from a tragedy. My dad and I are secretly grateful for another reason. Not only do we still have the house, but we now have more firewood than we ever could have imagined. Before long, my dad is outside in the blizzard with my brothers, vigorously chopping away at the big old oak. The view from the kitchen window is different now.

It was only a tree, but still it is a loss, an unexpected rearrangement of my safe universe. And although I am comforted by the prospect of numerous blazing fires, my heart grows heavy at the sight of my dad with the ax. The finality of it all.

If the fallen oak tree has caught me off guard with its sudden rupture of the status quo, then our dining room table calls me back to the present moment. Christmas dinner. A Sunday night like many others except for the honey-glazed ham, chocolate Yule log, and piles of holiday cookies, especially pizelles—the Italian ones that taste like anise and look like thin waffle snowflakes. Sundays have always been sacred in my family. Not for religious reasons, but because it is the official family gathering day, a tradition that started with my Croatian grandmother. Food and drink are not the only things that flow in abundance on these occasions. Mostly there is conversation often revealing, sometimes instructive, always entertaining. My father sits at the head, a natural storyteller. My mother laughs at everyone's jokes—good or bad. We linger at the table long after dessert. And when guests stop by they, too, are unable to pry themselves loose from this lifeboat. Sometimes we even

play games around the table. This Christmas my brother Jay gave my father a dartboard covered with the business cards of New York City restaurants and, much to my dismay, small photographs of my head. Each dart

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guarantees a free New York dinner, courtesy of my brother. If by chance my photo gets hit then I will also benefit from his generosity.

But what makes this particular Sunday dinner different from all the rest is something my father says. First there is a lull in the conversation and then the solemn, urgent words as if he is

issuing a flood warning. “Your mother and I. We’re going to sell the house.” Just like that, from out of nowhere, comes the curveball. It strikes hard, right in my gut. I am shell-shocked, unable to speak. I look to my mother for support, reassurance that this is just another one of my father’s impulsive schemes, like the time he tried to make grape jelly in the basement by himself. But her glittering smile has disappeared. She gets up and begins clearing the table.

“But you can’t sell the house, not this house!” I say, aware that my pulse is racing. It doesn’t matter that I don’t live here anymore. This house is part of me and always will be. It’s more than just a necessary shelter, a reliable stopover between comings and goings. It’s the connective tissue that holds us all together, defines our place in the world. “We’re getting old. Time to scale down,” my father says.

One by one, every significant moment of my life in and around our house plays out before my eyes. My first bicycle, a purple Lady Sting-Ray with a white basket. My father patiently walking beside me, helping me to balance. My pen-and-ink drawings that my mother had proudly framed. The books I read here. Lewis Carroll, Twain, and Kipling. The music I played.

Three Dog Night. David Bowie. My embarrassing teen idol pinups. Slumber parties. The mumps. My first homecoming dance. Senior prom photographs. Organ lessons with Mrs. Riggemeier and never practicing. Tennis lessons. Learning how to drive. My graduation party, then fleeing the nest. My mother and father have always thought it strange and even shocking that I did not shed a tear upon leaving home, but wept like a child when it came time to leave college. I tried to explain that home is a feeling I carry with me. It is always just a heartbeat away. And for that I am grateful.

“Everything has its cycle,” Dad continues. “Hurricanes, earthquakes, even houses. You know, when I was a boy I slept on the sofa in the living room. Never had my own bed.”

“Can you imagine? Your father never even had his own bed,” Mom says with mournful disbelief as she has so many times before. What that childhood misfortune has to do with our house at this precarious point in time I will never know.

The drive back to the airport is mostly silent. Every now and then I glance at my father. There is no expression on his face, just a vacant stare. He says goodbye with the same faraway look in his eyes, like he knows something I don't. His embrace is a shadow of his usual bear hug. Something in him has changed. I leave feeling helpless and unsettled.

It is three o'clock in the morning in New York, three weeks later, when the phone rings. My brother Bryan's voice is hushed and quivering. “Dad passed

away. A few hours ago, in his sleep. A heart attack.” I feel a knife pierce my chest. The tears don't come at first like I had expected. I just lay there awake in bed for hours, immobilized with dread. Finally, in a slow motion daze, I dress, book a flight and pack a suitcase. But it's not until I get back home that the loss becomes real, overtakes me completely. My father is not waiting for me at the airport. That's when I realize everything is upside down and nothing would ever be the same. Not even the house. My brother greets me at the door with open arms. My mother is weeping in the kitchen. I walk from room to room as if exploring the house for the first time. Each object has taken on a completely different appearance, its earth-bound solidity contrasting sharply with my father's absence. I keep touching things that hold his memory, as if to steady myself. The dining room table. The desk in his overstuffed den. The coins and stamps he collected and displayed here. The unsigned birthday card he had just purchased for my mother. The empty armchair at the fireplace. The cashmere cardigan I had given him for Christmas just weeks ago. The small bottles of heart pills lined up on the kitchen counter. The stack of unopened mail from the Publishers Clearing House Sweepstakes. (My father thought he'd hit it big someday.) The porcelain dolls he had ordered for his granddaughters, still sealed in their boxes. He was always buying gifts for people. Outside in the snowy stillness lay what was left of the oak tree, all the logs waiting to be chopped. My grief fuses

with anger then indifference and stubborn resignation.

The day of the funeral we leave the light on in my father's den as a tribute to him. When we get back later that night, I notice that the light is off. I am stunned. “It's Dad,” I say with instant certainty. “He's trying to communicate with us, through the house.” “Don't be silly. Your father did not turn that light off. He's dead,” Mom says. I haul some logs up from the backyard and build a fire. I picture my dad sitting across from me in the armchair, solid and certain. I can still hear our rich conversations, sense his unswerving faith in me. No, he is not really gone. He is right here in this house, in my heartbeat, as always.

Over time, the laughter returns to the dining room table. My brother Jay sits in my dad's chair now. My mother still keeps the light on in the den. She calls it the eternal lightbulb. I sort through my father's collection of world coins, recalling how he so enjoyed telling me their stories. When I take the coins back to New York, they sell for much less than what he'd paid. He was too trusting. But that is all right. He enjoyed giving things away. I smile when I hear that his dental equipment, through the efforts of a local charity, has wound up in Cuba, where it is needed most. Not surprisingly, he's still taking care of people. And there is one more gift. When I ask my mother if she plans to keep the house, she says without hesitation, “Yes.” I can't help but feel my dad would have wanted it that way.●