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Converted from a garage apartment, the office in Kathleen Cambor's new house gave her writing life a different dimension.

BY KATHLEEN CAMBOR

OUR HOUSE

AFTER I MARRIED, my husband and I searched for a long time in order to find a house that suited us. I must admit to being less discriminating than he was during this process. As a young wife, and relatively new bride, I saw every house we were shown through the scrim of my flushed happiness. Squat bungalows, pillared colonials, undistinguished red brick boxes—they all shimmered with possibility for me. But my husband was older, a bit more seasoned, and from the start he objected to what we came to think of as the “Houston floor plan”—two stories with the stairway rising from the entry hall, the living room and a little sun room on the right, the dining room on the left, the kitchen predictably behind it. He wanted something different, something uniquely itself.

So on a rain-soaked afternoon in February of 1973, when I phoned my husband with the news that our realtor had found a pink California mission-style house for sale, I heard excitement in his

Sometimes a house can become not just a home, but family

voice for the first time since we'd begun our search. Pink, stucco, on a quiet cul-de-sac, I said. He cleared his schedule to come with me later that same day to take a look.

It was as if the word charming had been coined to describe it. The house was like something from a 1930s movie set, completely different than anything we'd seen in our long months of looking. Inside, the walls were a textured plaster, and they met the ceiling at a graceful curve rather than a sharp right angle. Rounded archways led from one room to the next and gave the house a kind of Spanish flair. Old built-in glass cupboards, relics of another era, caught the sun's rays in the dining room and kitchen. Although the rooms were spacious and the ceilings tall, the space had a rather cozy, compact feel.

Three bedrooms surrounded a small square hallway on the second floor. The fringed edges of a striped awning on a tiny balcony just off the master bedroom

slapped sharply in the wind. Shelled recesses, which had been built in random places in the plastered walls, gave rise to speculation about their function. Had there been religious icons, statues of saints, placed there? Other things about the house also seemed odd and unexpected. At some point in its lifetime a 40-foot-long room, one side of which was walled with glass, had been added, and the size of it—you could have large parties, you could have had a dance in there—suggested that someone had once wanted this home to be larger and grander than it was, that someone had been ambitious for it.

Our realtor, a friend, confided that a church had owned the property years earlier, and that under its auspices the house had been used as a commune, a refuge for young runaways. It was said that the vagrant teens lived there unattended by adults, that there were strange comings and goings in the night, that the yard had been let go to seed, that the awning

was tattered and the stucco crumbled. Refurbished and for sale, the house was now well tended. But the story lent the place a certain aura, gave it a shady past—a quirky, checkered history that appealed to me. My husband had three children from a first marriage, and they and I were still feeling our way in our new family. And although I was young, I was not foolish. I knew that with stepchildren I was bound to make mistakes. There would be missteps, failures, and hard times ahead. For that kind of life, it seemed to me that we were going to need a home that wasn't picture-perfect, just as we were not the picture-perfect family. This house looked like one could allow for that, a flawed house that would not hold our flaws against us.

And it didn't. It took us in, and adapted to us in ways that another, more formal place might not have. It was not quite big enough for all of us, especially after I had one, and then another baby. But this home was somehow endlessly

accommodating. It grew as the family did. The lot was big enough for us to add an atrium, a bath, and two bedrooms at the end of what we always called “the long room”—and that addition became a kind of wing for the older children. Rooms intended for specific use lent themselves gracefully to a variety of functions. We lined the walls of the so-called living room with bookshelves, and it became a library. The tiny sitting room off the master bedroom was easily converted to a nursery. One summer, not long after we moved in, my younger stepson and a friend built a go-cart from a kit and a lawn-mower engine, and for lack of a better place to work they commandeered one end of “the long room” for their project. It was an unlikely setting for such a construction, but with a drop cloth spread beneath them, tools heaped everywhere in adolescent disarray, day after day they labored, and the sounds of their tinkering and laughter became the background music of that summer.

Throughout my childhood I had longed to be a writer. So seriously did I take myself and my ambition, that when I was eight years old I wrote a novel—derivative to be sure; I was much influenced by the Nancy Drew books I couldn’t get enough of at that time—but it was a novel nonetheless, four fat notebooks written out in the Palmer penmanship in which I had been so well trained by Benedictine nuns. I’d always been a reader, but the completion of the book was evidence to me that I possessed the patience and fortitude to be a writer too, that I had “the stuff.” Convinced I had found my true vocation, I devoted myself to it. When I was 12 I won a statewide essay contest, then five years later a national writing competition for high school seniors. But neither my ardency nor my modest successes impressed my practical parents. For them writing was a form of make-believe, an unseemly self-indulgence, and certainly no way to make a living. So they began the girls-should-become-nurses argument that they meant to win at any cost. The harder I tried to convince them how much I loved literature and writing, the more vociferous their objections grew, and by the middle of my second year in college they’d worn me down. I put aside my own desires and gave up all thoughts of writing. For years after that, as if not to taste of the forbidden fruit, I found it difficult to even read for pleasure.

But now, in my adult life, the wish to write came alive in me again. And as it did, I began to dream of houses, each dream a variation of the one that came before. I enter an unfamiliar house through a door that has been left ajar, and walk through the living and dining rooms and kitchen, each room furnished simply, all ordered and contained. This is all there is, I think, there is nothing unex-

pected here. Then I turn a corner, and am amazed to find another room, and then another, and then another still—a space for reading, one for writing, all the rooms that I could ever need.

Not long after the dreams began, when my second child was not quite two, I took a writing workshop at the University of Houston. Once again the sitting room adjacent to the master bedroom underwent a conversion. I claimed it as my study. I began to rise at 4 a.m., before the children, and wrote in the pre-dawn silence in a circle of light cast by a single lamp. In the years that followed I had two stories published in literary magazines. After reading one, an agent who admired it contacted me. I began a novel, and chose as its setting my grandparents’ house, a place I’d lived for long periods of time in my childhood, and that had meant a great deal to me. A fireman, like my grandfather, was a figure in my story.

I wrote and wrote, and my writing life expanded as the house and children grew. After attending college in the east, my two oldest stepchildren came home to Houston for medical school. We decked and bricked in the small back yard. My husband brought home an electric pasta machine (before they became ubiquitous) whose directions were printed only in Italian, a language that none of us could read, but as a family we gathered in the kitchen and, by trial and error, figured out together how to work the thing, so that we could triumphantly make fresh pasta the new hallmark of our meals. My stepdaughter moved to Oregon for her medical residency and then, on a quick visit home, in that same kitchen, she met the man who would become her husband. By the time my first novel was published, the two youngest children—those born to me—were preparing to go away to school.

Rooms once full stood empty now. Rooms and more rooms, just as it had been in my recurring dream. My publisher was eager for a second book and I was eager to write one. An idea for an historical novel took hold of me, a big project. With the children gone, I moved my work into my son’s bedroom—a larger study that could accommodate the books and maps and timelines I would need to guide me through the writing of the book. For a year I labored in that blue-walled room, cool northern light slipping through the shutters.

For a while after the children left my husband and I luxuriated in the extra space, but gradually we realized that we now had too much room. Besides children, we’d always filled the house with friends. We loved to cook for them, and had had countless small dinners and large parties. But with my writing taking so much of my time, we didn’t entertain as much as we once had. Even so, whenever the possibility of moving to some place

smaller came up in conversation, my husband and I quickly skirted past it. How could we abandon the house we loved? In it we had done the work required to become the family we so much wanted to be. We had had a Suzuki violin recital for 40 six-year-olds, an eight-course Chinese dinner for 20 middle-schoolers, a wedding reception for a beloved daughter. So much had been endured and celebrated there. One or more of the children began to cry each time we mentioned the possibility of leaving.

And then, in the fall of 1997, there was a terrible explosion that set the house ablaze like so much tinder. The young man who lived in the garage apartment on the property behind ours extinguished his stove pilot light, turned his oven on, filled his rooms with gas, and waited for deep, drugged sleep and a painless death. An ill-considered but carefully constructed plan, except that a tiny spark ignited all that accumulated gas, and by some law of physics that I have never understood, the great heaving force of the explosion hurled itself at us. It was a Saturday night, I had just gone to bed, and the sound and impact were such that I thought, “a plane has crashed, a bomb has detonated, it is the end now, soon we will be dead.” The explosion unleashed a force that rocked the entire neighborhood so powerfully that it not only shattered all our windows, but those in houses many blocks away as well. It ejected nails from sheetrock, separated walls from baseboards, flung pictures to the floor. It sent brick and board projectiles hurtling like missiles down the length of “the long room.” As quickly as the firemen got there, by the time their sirens sounded on the street high flames had licked through the rear of the house and the rooms that we had built for the older children.

No one was hurt. That’s always the first thing we say to ourselves after a trauma, a brush with death. At least no one was injured. But there was no ignoring the fact that we had had come so close to it. If one of the children had been home, if my husband had not left his study in the back of the house in order to fetch a glass of water from the kitchen. If the windows over the bed into which I’d just slipped had not exploded but had imploded instead, pelting me with little knives of glass. So we were lucky, and we knew it. The first thing I did in the pre-dawn light after the firemen left was to crunch my way across the broken glass that covered my study floor to turn on my computer. Lucky again. It, too, was unscathed; the precious (to me) pages of the new novel I had begun had not been destroyed or damaged.

Yet in the weeks that followed, as the slow work of reconstruction began, we came to realize that the sense of shelter and safety, real or illusory, that we had

felt in our home had disappeared, and would not be returned to us. By the time a year had passed and the repairs were finished, we had come to understand that it was time for us to leave. What had once felt impossible seemed obvious now. The family that had been sheltered in these walls was grown and gone. Time I had spent “keeping the house” could now be spent writing. Nonetheless, after the movers left with the last of the furniture, after we’d walked through the empty rooms one final time, I could hardly bear to close the door and drive away.

Live in a house for a long time, and it becomes so known, so familiar, you almost stop seeing it.

What I hadn’t anticipated about the move was that in a new space, everything looked new. The light shone differently at different times of day in unfamiliar rooms. The sounds of traffic on a busier street made me feel more like the city dweller that I was. Our new house had a garage apartment, and my writing life acquired another dimension when I turned it into my office, my own little building, to which I could retreat each day, a separate space a little distant from the domestic distractions that so often beckoned. My work had slowed during the upheaval and reconstruction after the fire, and now, in new surroundings, the pace quickened again. And my novel, about the Johnstown Flood of 1889—a great disaster—grew deeper because I’d experienced the terror of a small disaster of my own.

The raising of a family is intrinsically a drama. In our case it was a drama that unfolded in a California mission-style house on a quiet cul-de-sac.

In our new house we live a drama of a different sort, one comprised of uninterrupted, work-filled days. Much of the loving patience that was required of me while I was raising children is now focused on the characters I invent. The life of a writer is by its very nature rather dreamy, and so it is for me. It’s both wonderful and at times frightening to spend so much time in my own head. When the work goes well, I find myself submerged in a kind of fugue state, where all manner of strange thoughts and feelings rise up suddenly, unbidden.

Sometimes when I’m submerged that way, in my mind’s eye I see the pink house, and more than once it has occurred to me that perhaps it sacrificed itself, that it burned and shattered as a way of freeing us. Maybe, like a tender parent, it had known that it was time to let us go. And when those thoughts come to me (and only a writer of fiction could imagine so far-fetched a thing) I let myself believe for an instant that it’s true, that our pink house had loved us as much as we’d loved it. ■