

# THE HOUSE

The vegetables were on stands outside the market. Anne let other customers push ahead of her. She happened to look up; at the top of the tenement a boy threw a cat off the roof. Anne closed her eyes... on the way down the cat was crying... she felt for the cat... she had been hurt as far back as she could remember... diseases, wounds and curses... her father was picked up on the street by J. Edgar Hoover's anti-foreigner Red Scare agents and manacled and jailed after World War I and she was terrified when she went to see him behind bars.

She was brought from Italy to Hoboken as a kid and wasn't a citizen and the sight of a cop paralyzed her... at seventeen she worked in the lace mill—the son of the Swiss boss was in love and wanted to marry her—never even touched her—her father followed her in the rain and as she tried to telephone the nice Swiss her father beat her head with his umbrella and called her a goddamned no-good hoor.

Her bricklaying father was killed on the job and she went to the police station around the corner from the job—the desk sergeant shouted, “The wop is under the cardboard in the wheelbarrow out back!”... she recognized only the Bloomingdale's Christmas tie she had given him. Since then her nerves jumped at everything and made her heart pound and she was in dread of accidents from cars, planes, trolleys, subways, burning, drowning, bullets and bombs, bills, doorknocks, cancer, people, her teeth falling out and going bald and jagged objects piercing her eyeballs and hard solid things threatening to cut and crush and bash and break her and hurl her into the darkness.

Joe, the immigrant tailor she had married was timid—so were her three kids.

Now she expected the cat to squash on the sidewalk—but it landed in the stack of rhubarb and it was a young male the color of the rhubarb stalks.

The cat began his graceful four-footed walk. She called him, “Rhubarb,” and asked where he was going. Rhubarb turned and mewed for her to follow. He led her up the ramp of the Palisades to nearby Elysian Avenue on the Heights. One side was the park and playground, on the other, overlooking Hoboken, the Hudson River and New York City, was the row of three-story, vacant, dilapidated attached frame houses. Those were the houses that had been condemned for the proposed highway coming up from an additional tube to the Holland Tunnel. They were of the mid-nineteenth century, sixteen feet wide, the ground floor cellar-living quarters of brick, and a long wooden stairway to the high porch and first floor.

Rhubarb went familiarly through a hole in the wall and appeared at the window, standing upright on the sill and stretching his paws in welcome above his head against the pane.

Just then a real estate man came and nailed up a sign saying the houses were for sale at bargains—first come, first served. Anne let the man coax her to look through the

house because she wanted to be with Rhubarb. In the backyard was a granite marker monument with a bronze plaque telling it was the center-line of the proposed highway. Rhubarb sprang and perched on the monument. The real estate man said jokingly that the cat was a good omen and wanted her to take the house. Anne thought the man was serious, and believed him. The price was a steal. She had the strongest feeling Rhubarb was urging her to live in the house with him. She asked Rhubarb if she should dare to try to buy the house. She was positive Rhubarb nodded... and her goose pimples determined her.

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Anne's son, Tony, had returned from Vietnam. Between Tony's nest-egg, borrowing on the life insurance policies, a loan from Godfather Vincent, and Tony's GI mortgage, Anne became the owner of 390 Elysian Avenue. It was cagey to put the house in Tony's name and use his GI benefits—the government would never know it was really her house—you bet!—screw the government—God helps those who help themselves—and who better than Tony, a high school graduate, to look after the mysteries of mortgage payments, home-owner's liability and taxes? In this world you've got to use your head!

Anne rented the small apartment on the third floor to her daughter, Mary, and became “the landlady.” As Anne said, she was reaching her “plateau.” Her husband, Joe, was a union tailor; her son, Tony—God bless him!—a drugstore clerk who gave her half his paycheck; her retarded son, Mike, was an errand-boy and also shined shoes in Tony's drugstore—who would have believed that she who had been anemic and fearful was becoming rosily buxom and confident? You see how the wheel turns? Every dog has his day—knock wood!

Anne set the pace in the competition on the block to renovate. At first, changes were done on the exteriors front and rear—for all to see. Rotting shingles were replaced by pink and blue asbestos and chrome edgings. Anne put a pole and the American flag out front—and of course, soon, the neighbors did the same. Ann had the ace in the hole—redhead Godfather Vincent the bricklayer! Vincent had a wife and children in Italy whom he had not seen in thirty years (he supported them). He had a furnished room and lived as a sporting bachelor. For Anne and Joe he built a trellised summer house in the backyard and planted grape vines for a shady retreat. He put a fake fireplace in the parlor and put fancy bricks wherever possible.

The Sicilian widow, Ophelia, next door, operated a hot dog stand on the corner and made money hand-over-fist. Grateful to Heaven for her business she put a life-size white cement Lady of Fatima and grotto in the front of the house and outfitted it with twirling spotlights at night.

Anne went Ophelia one better. Godfather Vincent removed the rickety gingerbread porch and put up a

stunning precast simulated-marble stairway and brass balustrade that led to a balcony porch held up by four limestone voluptuous caryatids that he rescued from a demolished mansion.

As Anne said, who the hell were the people on the block anyway? One worked in the Tootsie Roll plant, another in the mustard factory, a fourth was a garbage man who worked in the sewers like Art Carney's Ed Norton. . . go ahead—let them bust their balls copying all they wanted to. Her house was the incomparable gem of Elysian Avenue. Why lower herself to get chummy? Let them show off with their motorcycles and hot rods. Who needed those headaches? It was the house alone that counted!

The family's earning went into paint, wallpaper, tile, converting the coal stove to kerosene, tiny lawns—and Joe on hands and knees snipping the grass around the two pink concrete flamingos with tailor's shears. And they stopped going to Holy Mass so that they could devote Sundays to the house.

Anne never left the house except for a momentous occasion—like to take Rhubarb to the vet. But what did she need “out there”? The world was the mountain that came to her through the radio, the *Enquirer*, the *New York Daily News*, the telephone and television. She didn't care for color TV—she said the actors looked like they were made up for their coffins. To behold her property becoming more valuable with the new nylon clothesline, aluminum storm doors, screens and windows, kitchen cabinets from Sears-Roebuck, Frigidaire, vinyl floor, washing machine, steam iron, toilet off the kitchen, (with deodorants), was a thing of joy forever.

On Fridays, smiling freckled redhead Godfather Vincent, wearing his jaunty wide-brimmed Stetson and fashion-plate clothes, brought fruits of the sea—fish, lobsters, crabs, conch, periwinkles—or varying surprises like zucchini, chicory, spinach, broccoli-rabe, escarole. Sundays he brought shopping bags filled with fingerlicking gifts and wines. Then in the evening on Sunday night Godfather Vincent would go to the Irish saloon, hob-nob and shoot pool or play shuffleboard with what Anne called the corned-beef-and-cabbage Archie Bunkers. Walking home, drunk from a lot of beer on top of a lot of wine, Joe and Vincent would argue and philosophize—Godfather Vincent was cheerful around the clock; he said, “take it as it comes.” Joe would roar, “the best thing to do is work hard, eat hard, drink hard, crap hard, mind your business and worry about nothing!”

Celebrating the Fourth of July away from the house was more pain than pleasure. They went on an outing to the Long Island North Shore. . . hunting for mushrooms and dandelion Anne got awful poison ivy and was chewed by chiggers. The men sliced their feet on oyster shells digging clams. The other holiday journey was to the picnic park by the Statue of Liberty. They went loaded with food and drink by subway to the Battery and by the ferry to Liberty Island.

They found a sanctuary away from the blacks, Puerto Ricans and out-of-state sightseers. With Lady Liberty untiringly holding her torch and looking on them they ate a gargantuan lunch dotted with ants— and got badly sunburned.

Ellis Island could be seen close by. Anne remembered arriving there in steerage with her young mother. They had had tags: “Italians. Husband Geremio will get them.”

Now corroding deserted Ellis Island was a visible ghost.

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At 390 Elysian Avenue, Rhubarb was number one. All of Anne's affection went to the cat. She held personal dialogue with it: “Where oh where were you last night?”

Joe, would fume, “That surly bastard's stink makes me vomit—does his nibs bring money into the house? *Porca Miseria!* have you lost your bovine brain that you talk to a parasite animal like that—what is Christ's world coming to?”

Anne would flaunt, “I'll talk if I please to my love. . . and yes, if it comes to choosing between you and Rhubarb—you know what I mean? If Rhubarb hadn't led me there at precisely the right moment there would be no house, Mister J.” That would bring Joe's “O.K. . . you repeat yourself!”

There came a year when nothing more could be done for the house. 390 Elysian Avenue's mortgage was free and clear—thank you! How many home owners could say the same? No living beyond her means for Anne. She and Joe received their Social Security checks on the third of the month. They had their Medicare cards. . . and Joe got his tidy pension— not much, but better than nothing—from the Amalgamated Clothing Workers' Union. Anne would read aloud, “United States Treasury. . . Pay to the order of Anne so and so,” and puff with pride. Life was on the good track.

Reading gossip columns, listening to soap operas, learning from talk shows and female shrinks on TV made Anne smug and superior. She developed an uncanny knack of analyzing and criticizing that fascinated her family. “Hey, the Prez is going to speak from the Oval Room—what a crock!—get the enema can and put on your hip boots.” “Here comes that beauty, the Secretary of State, Dr. Bullshit!” “Look at the satchels under Barbara Walters' eyes—she's wearing contacts—her eyes are bulging—she's not pretty this morning!” She was convinced all people were liars, schemers and rip-off artists. She picked her neighbors apart to the amusement of her family.

Anne's ears were her bugging apparatus. She'd pretend to be asleep on the sofa in the parlor and soak in the secret dirt. She heard Ranieri, her son's burly raucous pal, brag to Tony about Angelina, the divorcee daughter of Ophelia, the hot dog vendor next door. And Anne caught every word of Ranieri's description—“Wow! that's a hot one!”—Ophelia with the spotlighted Madonna in the front yard that attracts weeping derelicts—oh that mealy-mouthed religious hypocrite. Her husband died in the mental ward. And that prize daughter divorced from a jailbird has two married daughters and is seducing young Ranieri! Boy oh boy if Ophelia gets huffy she, Anne, will let her have the info word-for-word about Angelina with both barrels—over the phone!

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Tony took to going out nights and returning very late. Anne thought there was nothing to worry about. After all, he was forty and his hair streaking gray. In the mornings she noticed his blanched condition. . . and the expression of thinking—figuring. She simply had to say, “Tony your lips are big and cracked and burned like you've eaten five pounds of salty *baccala*—and son—you're gray and green



as if a vampire worked on you.” And this was her Tony who had taken his vitamins, chest expander and punching bag to the front lines in Vietnam!

It was a hot brilliant Sunday morning. Joe came down into the kitchen, gave Rhubarb his broiled lamb chop and let him out.

Then he went out to the sunny backyard and watered the fig tree.

Anne was at the second floor window calling out orders to Joe—who kept nodding and mumbling obscenities under his breath. Mary was at the third floor window hanging the wash of the family’s underwear. Anne gazed from her window with the style and contentment of a rich opossum... the sights and sounds were beyond anything on television, beyond imagination. Below the Palisades lay squat Hoboken with its weathered shabbiness endearing and peculiarly glorious, evoking the nostalgia that is felt for crumbling mortar joints, peeling paint, tarnished tin, tired walls, leaning chimneys, drift-glass, the faded, the worn, the lived-in mute testimonials of another American time.

She had seen Hoboken wear the blizzard’s icicles and snow, be hosed and scoured by spring showers, bake and bask in summer’s torrid smiles. And she studied on tenements’ ornate brick faces the tristful dancing light-and-dark fall shadows. She never ceased to be startled breathless by the broad silvery Hudson that bore giant toy ships—and the continuous placenta of vehicles gushing from the steel uterus of the Holland Tunnel. There was the phantasmagoric Manhattan skyline that in fancy she reached out and caressed from the George Washington Bridge to the Statue of Liberty—which her father had archly dubbed, “The much screwed Madonna of U.S.A.” Within Anne was the mute poet. To her, life was feeling.

The enthralling view from the house was never twice quite the same, and night came down on the river changing the ziggurats of Babylon into bejewelled temples and patterns of light. The hidden, fine, deeper Anne sensed that this phenomena sprang into being from the pure, elegant language of mathematics... the hand of man and Godly nature combined... Yes, Anne was aware that people wished for greener pastures, a someday happy Hollywood ending place, a chicken farm, avocado groves or mink ranch, a cottage or trailer on a lake, Leisure Village, castles in Spain, pipe dreams... but 390 Elysian Avenue was the nook of privacy and Macy’s window on the world, her Shangri-La.

It was like any Sunday... Natty Godfather Vincent was the male *duenna*, bringing *provolone* and *Locatelli* cheese, *prosciutto*, salami, olives and wine. It was as though he were visiting Buckingham Palace. He treated Anne as if she were empress, Joe her consort, and Rhubarb, the cat, the princeling of the realm.

As always, Joe and Vincent helped Anne mix, knead and cut the *fettuccine*, arrange the antipasto, stuff the artichokes and eggplants, and with appropriate Italian toasts—to thee for a hundred—nay—a thousand years!—launching the day’s wine-drinking effectively under way.

Vincent was the pin-cushion Joe could fondly prick with impunity. Heady from Zinfandel he would chide Vincent for having abandoned his family in Italy for the many years, and admonish him for his show-off extravagance to the women of Hoboken, Union City and Jersey City. The weekly flagellation was a sop to Vincent’s conscience. He

would grinningly sigh and attribute his remissiveness to Destiny. Anne would put her two cents in.

“People who live in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones—Mister J., would you be willing to put a gun in my hand and tell me to shoot you through the heart if I found out the truth about your sleeping with Puerto Ricans in Union City, too?”

Mike, thirty years old, was a cretin, but no problem. He was addicted to kissing everybody in a gentle, wispy, patronizing way. He would say in his adenoidal penny-whistle voice, “Would you believe—That’s for sure—You can say that again...!” He could crack his knuckles back and forth in perfect time to Kate Smith’s singing *The Star Spangled Banner*. He loved to ride buses; he’d tell you over and over that the man said, “Leave the driving to us”... and mimic all the sounds of bus riding so that you’d swear the Greyhound was coming through the house; and Sundays with a hand full of schedules he was off on bus excursion specials to God knows where.

That Sunday morning Tony spent an hour before the mirror over the kitchen sink grooming and preening. When he left he casually said he was bringing a friend to dinner.

It was two o’clock in the afternoon... dinner began then and went on for three hours. Mary and her family came down to the big oblong kitchen table, and they all waited for Tony.

When Tony arrived, bringing Angelina the aging divorcee daughter of Ophelia, mouths fell open. Anne knew Angelina was playing around with Tony’s pal Ranieri, and now had the brass to entice Tony and come into her house acting as virgin as Doris Day. Just dig her ton of make-up and perfume and that chain around her neck with the gaudy cross with a Christ on it big enough to hang a midget! Anne would make *scungilli* sauce out of this nervy bum Angelina!

Anne pretended to be gracious and unconcerned, the while pointedly pumping Angelina with embarrassing questions to spoil her appetite and put her to flight.

“Angelina’s husband was already out of jail—oh on parole?—and remarried? How interesting!—Angelina worked in a drugstore too—as cosmetician—oh yeah?—Hey—cosmeticians make good money—by now Angelina must have ‘piles’! And her daughters were married and she was a grandmother—how... nice... why Angelina must have been married when she was a baby—oh was she really fifty? Did she have her change of life?” If Angie thought she was going to hook her Tony, the scummy Sicilian woman was barking up the wrong tree!

They put the heat on Tony. Bringing Angie into the house made them suspect he had a fine taste for dung. What the hell did he see in that black slimy Sicilian ten years his senior, dressed like a gun-moll from the mafia with her teased, dyed, smelly hair, chandelier earrings, mangy white angora stole, beads and junk jewelry, harem skirt with the slit up the leg, spike-heeled platform clogs, slave bracelet on her bony ankle and around her neck a Woolworth’s economy-size crucifix—now come on!—who did that broad think she was kidding!

Tony took it without a word. See, he knew in his guts his mother was right. No one could pull the wool over Anne’s eyes. If Tony got married it should be to a young virgin with dough. Why doesn’t he marry his Jewish boss’ daughter and end up owning the drugstore?

One morning towards dawn a month later, Anne awoke

and heard Tony's Lawrence Welk music. She sneaked down to the parlor and spied on Tony. He and Angelina were making love on the sofa. Anne was flabbergasted by what she witnessed—and immobilized for minutes like an innocent dove hypnotized before writhing snakes. . . .

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Godfather Vincent, always well, suddenly became seriously ill. It was cancer. The operation was useless. Within weeks he wasted away in St. Mary's Hospital in Hoboken, and died smiling. . . that he had been screwed by Destiny. A strangeness set in 390 Elysian Avenue. Fridays and Sundays came and went and no Vincent bringing fish and greens, cheese, cold cuts, olives, bread and Gallo wine. Now there was an irritability in the house. Anne and Joe were not sufficient to themselves and each other and could not fathom it. The rituals of Vincent's company and the ever-driving impetus to doll up the house were gone. Anne's exciting no-holds-barred campaign against Angelina and her mother Ophelia—via the telephone—had simmered to a halt. The danger of Angelina winning Tony seemed done with. Mary had her hands full upstairs; conversation with retarded Mike was impossible. Rhubarb was his own person and only came home to recoup his energy for fights. Tony didn't talk but went about humming grimly. Only Godfather Vincent had made Anne feel she was a lady. He had been charmingly complimentary and appreciated every trivial thing she had done for him. Did Joe ever seat her to the table before he sat to gorge? Or hold her coat, open the door for her, direct poetic phrases to her? She had taken Redhead Vincent for granted. He had been the respectful cavalier in her house, and though he never over-stepped the line, perhaps he was secretly in love with her—of course—that's why he never sent for his wife—you see! And didn't she just automatically dress and pretty herself only when he visited! Vincent was manly and rugged like the Marlboro ad—and he smoked Marlboros. He seemed forever young, whereas Joe had become shrunken, yellowed and acrid like an old Chinaman. It was Joe with his unfair Italian ideas who kept her a human snail in a shell! She wasn't going to let him get away with it—better late than never. It was time to train her guns on Joe!

Her war with Joe seemed necessary to establish her ultimate superiority in The House. It began jestingly as a game of can-you-top-this insults. One snide word led to another. She ridiculed his bunions and Charlie Chaplin walk, his long fingernails, broken English. . . confounding him and relishing his frothing retorts.

The daily skirmishes of sarcasms, revilings and imprecations became exercises that rounded out the surfeit of time. If she called him Mister Halitosis or Senor Goat's-Armpits he retaliated with obscenities. They vented every wounding thought that came to mind, he finally accusing her of infidelity behind his back with Godfather Vincent, and she chortling and goading him to guess the worst—speaking of a Mexican divorce, dieting, a face-lift, gambling and "boy-friends" in faraway places.

Then the bomb was dropped—Mary told Anne that she had it from the horse's mouth that deceitful Tony had been seeing Angie night and day and was positively planning to marry her. The news electrified and reunited Anne and Joe. They had to save Tony. The common mortal enemy was Angelina. Anne felt invincible. She would devil

Angelina to her knees and destroy her guts and feathers! She could do it right from the kitchen by telephone. At all hours she phoned Angelina's mother, family, friends, ex-husband and boss scathingly painting pictures of sodomy, piles and so forth.

Tony silently packed a bag and moved in with his promised bride. Anne was nervous—but sure he'd think it over and return. Weeks and many months passed. Tony wouldn't let Mike shine shoes any more in the drugstore. He refused to communicate with Anne and Joe nor care to be further regarded as their son. When his father went to the drugstore where he worked and doggedly and tearfully insisted upon speaking to him and giving him love he summoned a cop. Angelina had put the curse on the house—she had the *fattura* done to Tony.

The house was Anne's touchstone of being, its floors, roof and walls, her magic well. The House was her reality, her love, the past, present and future. . . The House was her womb, her eternity and paradise beyond which all other things were non-existent and inconceivable. Now, a piece of paper—the deed with Tony's signature—would collapse and disintegrate her cosmos.

Then Anne's main weapon, the telephone, worked against her. It would clang eerily in the bowels of the night. When she lifted the receiver she would hear Angelina's cackling triumphant laughter. She had the telephone disconnected.

Mary got a shyster lawyer for Anne who took her savings as a binder and allegedly prepared suit to claim The House.

Joe broke every damn one of Tony's Lawrence Welk records and threw them into the garbage can. Joe wandered the area buttonholing strangers and telling them his son had the evil-eye stuck on him by Angelina. . . and that his son had stolen The House and was putting them out to die in the gutter. . . and he ran yelling through the streets that he was going to shoot Tony and Angelina and burn The House to ashes.

The Court ruled in Tony's favor. Tony's lawyer sent Anne and Joe the dispossession papers.

Anne was swirled back to her childhood and years of hurt and hopeless fear. Was there a God? She had not given her love to God, Joe, the children or society, but to The House, and Rhubarb, because the cat brought her to The House. But perhaps The House had a spirit of its own and had wanted to die and not be made over to live on. . .

Anne and Joe could not eat. They neglected themselves waiting for their son to relent through pity and transfer The House to Anne's name. During the severe winter they got the Asiatic Flu. They did not care to resist Death. For it was the comfort that freed them from Final Notice.

At the funerals Angelina and Tony wept and said they would not have put Anne and Joe out of The House—it was just that they "wanted to learn them a lesson."

Inflation and Recession came. Men were taken off welfare and put to work tearing down Elysian Avenue, and the long-intended highway was realized. The proceeds of The House were held in escrow. . . and consumed by lawyers. The only thing left of The House is the refurbished monument in the backyard which designates the exact centerline of the great new concrete expressway.

When the weather is sunny you'll see a beat-up old Tom cat crouched in front of the monument like a proprietary red sphinx.

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