

In My Grandmothers' Homes

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Seeing the Jonas Brothers live in concert on September 19, 2019, for the first time in 10 years, flanked by my two best friends from high school, was the high point of my year. *It can only go up from here!* I remember thinking, gleefully sharing my post-concert Instagram photos—which were, of course, captioned with a quote from my middle-school-era Jonas Brothers fanfiction.

Nine days later, as I served Saturday mid-morning beer at my church's Oktoberfest, I received the call that my paternal grandma, Peggy Rabuse, had passed away after a week in the hospital. Not even four weeks after that, my maternal grandmother, Dorothy Sabo, died peacefully in my uncle's and aunt's home, surrounded by her son, daughter-in-law, grandchildren, and the smell of her famous standing rib roast. After receiving this second blow in less than a month, I numbly took two CTA trains through the freezing rain to meet up with the new guy I was seeing, icing over my emotions with strong blended drinks at a suburban tiki bar.

My routine lines repeated over and over like a doll with a pull-string after their deaths were, "It's pretty incredible that neither of them went to a nursing home. They lived in the same houses their whole adult lives."

At 89 and 91 years old, Peggy and Dorothy, my grandmothers, had objectively lived full, long lives and undoubtedly left a mark on the world and their families. They also left two houses to sell.

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SHORTLY AFTER THEIR MARRIAGE in 1953, Peggy (née Margaret Miller) and my grandfather, George Rabuse, began building their lakeside home in Sunfish Lake, Minnesota. Beginning with the bottom two levels of their split-level, my grandfather, a lifelong 3M employee who would pass away in 1996, then worked to build

Confluence



The Rabuse property, summer 2020.

the upstairs dormer, which was finished in 1960. Not knowing how many children they'd be blessed with, my grandparents ambitiously built a four-bedroom house that would soon be filled with four sons and two daughters.

Situated on almost four acres, my Rabuse grandparents' house is one I know almost as well as my own, only a five-minute drive away. The lot hosted overnight camping sleepovers, afternoons fishing at the dock catching sunfish, and adventures poking around the detached barn that held my late grandfather's collection of World War II army vehicles, notably the ammo trucks, multiple Jeeps, and the half-track. We, the fourteen assorted grandchildren, were housed in our respective parent's childhood bedrooms (preserved in 1950's, panel-walled glory) whenever Mom and Dad went out of town. This almost always guaranteed post-Sunday mass breakfast at Bakers Square and, later, a viewing of one of Grandma's three DVDs: *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, *The Wizard of Oz*, or *Frosty the Snowman*.

We knew we were allowed to explore the "dead storage" closet



An aerial view of the home, summer 2020.

My father's
childhood bedroom,
finished by my
Grandpa Rabuse in
the 1960s.



to grab holiday decorations but to never climb the three extra steps and open the door to “dead, dead storage,” where the threat of bats roosting over the four-stall garage addition (built in 1967 with the help of an ex-German bomber pilot) lingered. Peggy hated bats, absolutely loathed them, and my memories are full of near-fatal (for the bat) interactions—memorably when she locked herself in the den after spotting one of the creatures lying in a corner of the kitchen. My father, protected with goggles and gloves, was dispatched and stalked the creature, only to discover it was, instead, a discarded wrapper from a box of chocolates.

Four generations of Rabuses roamed the property, explored the woods that creep up on three sides, and were well-acquainted with the sounds of either the Green Bay Packers or Fox News blaring from the den. We’d enter the house, usually finding my grandmother sprawled out like a queen on her loveseat, a game of solitaire laid on the table in front of her, with a rosary and a pack of Kleenexes to the side.

Even as she neared the end of her life, my grandma Rabuse (“Peggalicious,” we called her, out of earshot) would declare, “I know this house is too much for me, but I can’t imagine living anywhere else.”

Loss manifests itself in different ways. I remember standing with my entire extended family, almost 30 strong, as we gathered around Grandma Rabuse’s casket at her funeral. At that moment, I realized a gaping hole had materialized; the matriarch, the thread who tied four generations together, was gone—with so much of the family’s identity rooted in the Delaware Avenue house. Our reason for congregating there had evaporated. The memories of 61 Christmas Eves that my father holds close, as well as my 22 years



Peggalicious with Dwight, Sandy, John, and Victoria Rabuse, summer 2019.

of night-before-Christmas cousin gift exchanges and inevitable oven malfunctions, have come to an abrupt stop, screeching and exploding in the cold Minnesota air.

Each time I've been home over the past year, I've been at my grandma's house, going through Christmas decorations, picking out Depression glass mementos (wrapped carefully in newspaper to transport back to Chicago), or scrubbing down the vintage Conant Ball furniture with Murphy's before the next real estate showing. I've simultaneously hoped it will sell (easing a headache for my dad, the estate's personal representative) even while hoping no one will move into this place that has been, and will always be, Grandma's.

Now, the house sits near-empty, having ping-ponged between realtors and finding itself the subject of more than one strongly worded email from extended family members. As of today, my dad, who has been mowing the grass since he was nine, tucked the lawn tractor away for what will probably be the last time. There's a pending offer and, if the radon test passes and the well water is deemed safe, new tenants will move in, claiming what has been the heart of the Rabuse family for more than 60 years.

Even though that heart—the essence of Peggalicious, found in the small things, like the always-overflowing cookie jar and Shania Twain Greatest Hits CD on the kitchen table—has been sanitized, staged, and shooed out of 2580 Delaware Avenue, I feel the welcome embrace of a homeownership legacy enveloping me like one of Grandma's vintage mink stoles. The romantic in me has

Steve and Dorothy Sabo, mid-1990s.



known it for a long time, but I feel the same fierce pull toward aging gracefully, defending the family castle to the very end.

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IF ANYONE COULD GIVE Peggy and George Rabuse a run for their money in homeownership tenure, it would be my mom's parents, Steve and Dorothy Sabo. The children of Eastern European immigrants, my maternal grandparents also wed in 1953 and joined the post-war exodus to the Cleveland suburbs, where they purchased a lot on East Frontenac Drive in Warrensville Heights. Previously, the Sabos lived in the upstairs of a two-family home, which had become cramped with the arrivals of my uncle and mother in 1956 and 1957. "My mother always remembered the day we moved into the house," my mom shares, "because it was the day I took my first steps."

Like my dad, my mom fondly recalls roaming the woods backing the property. Government-owned and never developed, the land was left wild and acted as a barrier between the housing development and the nearby sanatorium where tuberculosis patients were housed. My brother and I followed her example, making bridges from fallen limbs, creating forts,

4415 East Frontenac, front view.





The sparkling basement at East Frontenac, featuring the refurbished glider.

and occasionally getting lost in the hours before dinner. Grandma would keep an eye on us from the sunroom jutting off the master bedroom—crossword puzzle in hand—or the small patio where she'd sit and feed the wildlife, including her favorite deer, Irma, who learned to eat from the hand.

Although the Sabo house was more modest than the Rabuse estate, the same mentality of working hard to achieve a dream ran through both families. Dorothy had worked for the Sohio (Standard Oil of Ohio) accounting department since high school until her kids were born in the late 50s, then elbowed her way back into the workforce part-time in 1963—one of the only moms in the neighborhood who worked. A World War II veteran who worked as an American disc jockey in Berlin following the war, my grandpa obtained his Case Western Reserve degree, courtesy of the G.I. Bill, as soon as possible after returning to the States. My grandparents never took out a mortgage on the house, because it was important to both to pay it off immediately, having rented (or been in the Army) for most of their lives.

The main floor of their three-bedroom ranch was my grandma's territory, kept clean and dusted and easily accessible, especially as she entered her 90s. The basement, on the other hand, was my grandpa's domain from the time I was a kid, filled with wild and wonderful things, collected over decades with his packrat tendencies. A concrete-floored, veritable cavern of Ariel's treasures, the basement was a place where, for many years, we waded through a sea of 5-gallon glass containers from his wine-making phase, woodworking scraps, brand-new tools preserved in their original 1970s plastic, and countless magazines, newspapers, and catalogs dating back to my mom's and uncle's childhood. Until we sold the house earlier this year, we still held onto the hope we'd stumble upon the first-edition *Playboy* magazine with Marilyn

Enjoying a drink in the basement for Dorothy's 90th birthday in October 2018.



Monroe gracing the cover (which Grandpa always promised was somewhere under all the junk).

Although we began the Great Sabo Basement Cleanup™ before my grandfather's passing in 2009, it was only in the last few years that we restored the basement to (better than) its former glory, finally adding the laminate top to the built-in bar, installing flooring over the concrete, and putting the last bag of garbage on the “tree lawn” by the curb. For the first time in decades, Dorothy was able to enjoy her basement, rocking away in the green and white glider that my uncle and cousins had stripped and repainted as a surprise—the very same glider where my grandfather had proposed in the early 1950s.

The extended family certainly took advantage of this new entertaining space when we visited, too. In October 2018, I flew to rainy Cleveland for Grandma Sabo's 90th birthday celebration. After dinner, we gathered in the pristine sublevel, popping bottles and turning up the volume on the Hi-Fi stereo, which spun records all night. Almost a year to the day later, the same group gathered in the basement, drinks in hand, but this time to toast my grandmother's life the night of her burial.

I'd return to the house one more time after that, pushing my sleeves up for a weekend of cleaning with my mom, brother, uncle, and new Chicago boyfriend in tow. He and I drove back to Chicago not even a week before COVID-19 shut down the world, the back of my car packed with tables, linens, and a rocking chair. The house sat on the market for less than a week.

Asking my mom about walking away from her childhood home for the last time, she gives a small smile, saying, “It got easier as we emptied the house. It started feeling less and less like my

mom was going to walk through the door at any second. She didn't want to move anywhere else. And she got her wish."

Several hundred miles away, I no longer have an excuse to be in Cleveland, huddled at the kitchen table with my mom and grandma late into the night, bottles of wine on the table, and Hallmark romance movies playing in the family room while everyone else is asleep. The Sabo house has already belonged to someone else for almost half a year, but I still find myself clicking through the few photos on Zillow from time to time, where the house is preserved, looking, as my mom shares, almost like my grandma is about to walk through the door.

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ALTHOUGH NEITHER HOUSE is passing on down through the family, I can see the inheritance from both my grandmothers in ways both tangible and non-tangible. The same warmth I found sitting with my grandmothers in their homes exudes from not only the memories I keep tucked away. I mix drinks and pour them into beautiful, Depression-era glassware; water my succulent that sits on the marble side table from Peggy's living room; slip on the 1991 Minnesota Twins American League Champions sweatshirt that still smells like the house, even after numerous washes; and set my mail down on the entryway table that greeted family and friends for years at East Frontenac.

Although finding the Marilyn Monroe *Playboy* would have added a nice monetary chunk to the physical inheritance, I'm not upset about what's been left behind. Resisting the change in ownership would mean resisting what made these homes the standard of excellence I'll be striving for when I buy a place: the ability to bring family together. That magical power stems from the homeowner—not the house's physical structure or furnishings. I saw it, hundreds of times over—from Peggy's constant parade of descendants, coming by to grab a snack or mow the lawn or hang a shade; to Dorothy's house, filled with retro music and bartending grandchildren, all while her grand-dog, Henry, made moon-eyes for table scraps.

My family doesn't have to worry about updating the butter-yellow tile that climbs the walls around the matching tub and toilet in the Delaware Avenue house. We don't have to worry about the outdated kitchen and wobbly front porch railing on East Frontenac.

We don't have to worry about clinging to what has left the building.