

Home Grown

I

Gimme Shelter

According to his autobiography, Rolling Stones guitarist Keith Richards once rented a house in Old Westbury, New York, the affluent Manhattan suburb where I grew up. Reading Richards's description of this "first of a series of mad movie-like mansions on Long Island" that his family lived in during the 1980s, with fifteen bedrooms and a ballroom that his son Marlon used to roller skate around, I tried to locate it in relation to my childhood home. Presumably it had belonged to one of the prosperous families—Whitneys, Phippses, Vanderbilts, Duponts—that founded Old Westbury in the early twentieth century. Some of these properties were later purchased by the state university system; some were rented out by owners who couldn't afford to maintain them in sellable condition ("It was an enormous place, semi-derelict. The landlord never did any maintenance," Marlon Richards recalled); and some, like mine, continued to be occupied by descendants of the original families.

Throughout my childhood in the 1960s, the fathers of Old Westbury either commuted to Wall Street for jobs as bankers, stock brokers, and lawyers, or idled around local country clubs monitoring their invested fortunes by phone. Today, the range of occupations has expanded: Matthew Ianniello, the Genovese family crime boss known as Matty the Horse, died at his Old Westbury home in 2012, and the reality show *Growing Up Gotti*, starring the mobster John Gotti's daughter Victoria, was filmed at her estate a mile from where I used to live. In *Business Week's* 2011 ranking of America's richest zip codes, Old Westbury placed second after Palm Beach. Pre-recession property values were so high that when my parents sold our house in 1999, the buyer, a Park Avenue plastic surgeon, repeatedly postponed the closing while he scrambled to come up with the down payment.

When it comes to real estate, these new money millionaires are no more ostentatious than their predecessors whose columned porticoes and football field-sized lawns I rode my horse past

on week-ends as a child. Nobody, neither a rock star nor an heir to combined shipping, steel, and banking fortunes (the latter being John Shaffer Phipps, whose house and grounds have been preserved as the renowned Old Westbury Gardens) needs all the square feet his money can buy, much less the kind of spectacular frontage that greets visitors to a typical Old Westbury residence. In August 2012, the *New York Times* reported that my one-time neighbor Cornelia Guest, daughter of the socialite C.Z. Guest, was taking bids on her family home, “Templeton.”

Screened by a chain-link gate, a long pebbled driveway winds past overgrown pastures, a greenhouse and cottages, and stops just short of stables, a clay tennis court and old-fashioned swimming pool that shimmers pale and blue in the sun. The house has twenty-eight rooms and an understated charm.

Our home wasn't quite that grand—eleven acres rather than fifteen, fourteen rooms rather than twenty-eight, lawns instead of pastures, toolsheds instead of cottages, and the stables a half mile away—but it definitely qualified as stately. One couldn't pull into our driveway under the fifteen foot high black iron gates, ascend an eighth of a mile through massive oaks and evergreens, and round the sharp final curve without being awed by the house's magnificent brick facade—symmetrical wings framing a deep blue wooden front door with brass knocker and narrow leaded side windows, all overlooking a parking circle larger than most suburban back yards. The impression of wealth—serious, old money, *Brideshead Revisited* caliber wealth—was irrefutable. As my friends and girlfriends made that turn for the first time, all my attempts to downplay my upbringing came to nothing.

Even my profoundest early experiences look pampered against this backdrop. For example, I spent much of my free time exploring the woods around our house, the smell of wet leaves and texture of brush underfoot a part of my sensory landscape. What most people would find novel about this portrait isn't the budding outdoorsman, but his privileged circumstances, the luxury of rural living forty miles east of Manhattan. Similarly, the spot on our lawn where I would tee up a football and boot field goals over a low-hanging branch was the same spot from which my great grandfather drove golf balls over his vast property in the early 1900s. In 1949, my father was bequeathed a parcel of that original tract and hired Stanford White's former assistant to design a house for his growing family. You get the idea—as the camera pulls back on the history of that scuffed patch of ground, my hours of solitary play there appear increasingly inconsequential.

I Love a Woman in Uniform

The house itself was a trove of curiosities, like the dumbwaiter with a fraying rope that I'd crouch inside and hoist myself between floors. On a panel in the kitchen, a white flag clicked up whenever my mother pressed a button by her bed. Our maid, Kelly, assigned me to watch for this signal, which I'd announce with a gleeful shout that sent her hurrying upstairs. To understand this scene you have to realize how much of my upbringing was left to Kelly, and my preference for her company to that of my parents, who kept to their rooms in a separate wing. In addition to performing her maid duties, Kelly functioned as my chauffeur and babysitter, and kept me occupied by delegating to me her lesser chores such as polishing silver and setting the dining room table. With my older siblings off at boarding school or college and my classmates living several towns away near our private school, she was my best friend, not just in the house, but in the world.

Kelly and I shared a private language that mystified my parents. For weeks after I learned the expression "Mum's the word," we whispered it to each other whenever our paths crossed, as she served afternoon tea or moved through rooms drawing curtains. She drove me trick or treating (the distance between neighboring estates made walking out of the question). As she trailed me up front walks, a child's costume on her tiny frame, people took her for my sister. Most boys would rather have died than bring their middle-aged female chauffeur along on their Halloween rounds, but I was happy to stand aside as she knocked on doors and demanded our loot. After a disappointing haul, she would coax me to stream toilet paper off a car's mirror or hold out a can of shaving cream that I'd never have thought to bring along.

One winter afternoon we were driving back from downtown Westbury, the adjoining village created to house the laborers who built the original mansions. As we passed the public high school, a few students stood smoking in the parking lot. Kelly drove on around a corner and stopped, telling me to lean out and scoop up a handful of snow. Then she circled back in front of the kids, who eyed us suspiciously. On her cue, I rolled down my window and flung the snowball as she sped off, trailed by loud curses. We made a laughable pair, with Kelly's head barely cresting the steering wheel and me so timid that the snow splattered to the ground before reaching its target. But I loved her recklessness and confidence that I would not report her to my mother.

When we arrived home from our outings, I would enter the house by the front door as Kelly went in through the utility room off the kitchen. She'd take off the coat she wore over her maid's uniform and resume her household duties. The uniforms were pink or green with white piping and a white apron, though for dinner parties she changed into a black dress with white lace trim—the kind a sexy housekeeper would wear in a porn film. I'm not sure why my parents insisted on the uniforms except that they had both been raised among liveried servants themselves. This probably also explains their belief, freely stated around their children, in their social, intellectual, and moral superiority to the help. I could understand this attitude in people who had earned their positions, building their assets up from nothing, but my parents had inherited much of their wealth. Perhaps the uniforms, like the black iron gates and other visible trappings, served as much to reassure them of their status as to impress others.

I never knew how Kelly felt about her job, her privacy and possessions confined to a tiny bedroom in the servants wing. By the time I was old enough to wonder, she had retired. On her annual visits back my mother would serve her tea in the library where she had once cleared away ashtrays and empty beer glasses. But the years I spent with her were impressionable ones, and even if I didn't analyze her life, I noticed it: how my sisters and I would troop into the pantry on Christmas morning to deliver her presents as she prepared to serve our holiday lunch; how she would return after her Sunday night off and hurry past the kitchen as we ate our one self-prepared meal of the week. Her clipped greeting couldn't hide the thickened brogue that betrayed a night of drinking. I only heard her disparage me once, when I was cast as a wise man in my school's Christmas play. She muttered to the cook that anyone being raised as godless as I was had no right to the part.

I'm hazy on where my family's money came from, though it seems to have had its origins in nineteenth century railroad, banking and oil fortunes. One of my great-grandfathers was a partner of J.P. Morgan, and the other, founder of the Wall Street law firm where my grandfather and father practiced, represented Standard Oil, the New York Stock Exchange, and the Metropolitan Street Railway. The fact that I had to look up this information shows how ill-informed I am about my history. Growing up on a secluded estate in a town of secluded estates and attending an exclusive private school, I wasn't any more aware of my relative economic status than if my world had been conscribed by a block of brownstones in Queens. When my education and travels introduced me to less comfortable lives, my response was to repudiate my

heritage rather than investigate it. Today I just try to shut up about it; conversations about this topic end with me feeling, justifiably or not, judged.

There's a mystique to old money wealth that fascinates people, even those who are rich themselves. My former sister-in-law, who grew up in a ranch house near the oil refinery where her father worked in southeast Texas, used to quiz me about my upbringing. It didn't surprise me that the life I was born into struck her as otherworldly, but over time her curiosity began to grate. She seemed so preoccupied by the expensiveness of my childhood that she overlooked the fact that it was a childhood, whose emotional, sensory and psychological aspects were more meaningful to me than its material ones. As an adult with a thriving insurance business, she had achieved far more financial success than I had, and inhabited a world of Cadillacs, elegant houses and luxury vacations. This was probably the source of her interest, that what she had worked for came to me without effort or hardship.

The funds that so impressed her have dwindled over time, with heirs like my father slowing the drain by holding lucrative jobs and others like myself accelerating it by schoolteaching or not working at all. None of my relatives have created new fortunes since my great-grandfathers' day; we were all born into money, each generation more removed from the self-made men who acquired it. My ignorance of my benefactors is partly my parents' fault and partly my own; they should have volunteered and I should have inquired more. When it came to family lore I only knew the newsworthy parts, that my grandfather was a world famous polo player and that his father was standing next to President McKinley when the latter was assassinated. I also learned that the divvying up of our land had continued with the arrival of the Long Island Expressway in the early 1960s.

Every Saturday and Sunday my sister and I would climb into my father's station wagon, ascend our back driveway and cross a small bridge over the expressway. Turning in another driveway that wound past paddocks and a run-down mansion, we arrived at a stable where a groom had our horses saddled for our twice weekly ride. The half mile we had traveled had once all belonged to my great-grandfather, and my father had grown up in the old mansion, surrounded by horses. He still owned it and rented it out, keeping the stables and a weedy tennis court for our family's use. After our ride, I'd accompany him over to the house, where he was friendly with the tenants, whose youngest son was in my class at school. But I don't remember thinking that this was where my father, whose brusqueness made it hard to imagine him as a boy, had spent his youth. And only recently did my research turn up a photograph of the building in its original state before an entire wing was razed. This explained why on one rainy day my father

parked his car on the side lawn and to the merriment of his tenants began to sink into the old foundation.

My father would never have done the kind of thing that I used to do with my son, eagerly pointing out his old bedroom window or describing the landscape before the expressway came through. The only morsel of information he offered on those trips was that a house perched on a hill above the expressway had refused to give way so Robert Moses ran his road through its back yard. My father was either too unsentimental about his past to share it with his younger children or had no interest in re-telling anecdotes he had told my much older brothers. His reluctance may also have had to do with the deaths of his own father and brother within four months of each other in 1942, the first by a heart attack at sixty and the second in a plane crash at twenty-four. Still, I can't help but feel that if my parents had instilled in me a sense of my heritage as something to take pride in and preserve, I would have felt less ambivalent about our wealth. I first realized this while visiting the home of my boarding school friend Walter Hunnewell.

Walter grew up in Wellesley, Massachusetts, a town that took its name from the house belonging to his great-great-grandfather, Horatio Hollis Hunnewell. "My great-grandfather was, above all, very much a family man," Walter's father said in an interview with the local newspaper. "His dream was, first of all, to build a nice house to share with his seven children. He then built each of them their own home—all on contiguous land so they would be together." Walking around the Hunnewell compound with its meticulously maintained gardens, and meeting Walter's parents, siblings, and cousins, I sensed their investment in the land and its history. "We're trying to continue the things my grandfather and everyone who came before him were interested in," Walter's father said. "Together, as a family, we're maintaining the integrity of this place as Horatio Hollis Hunnewell first envisioned it. It's our legacy, our responsibility, and our pride."

At school in the 1970s, I used to try to convince Walter to join me in cultivating a fashionable disdain for our backgrounds, but it wasn't in him to rebel. Whereas I never considered following my father into the family law firm, which might have allowed me to retain the Old Westbury house, Walter couldn't conceive of a career that kept him from preserving his ancestor's holdings. As far as I know, he has done just that, working in finance in Boston while serving as director of the Hunnewell Arboretum in the Hunnewell Estates Historic District. It's the same path my father followed, entering one grandfather's law firm while building a house in the other's back yard, and devoting himself to the sport in which his father achieved fame. Coming just a generation later, my choice of schoolteaching as a career and writing as an

avocation looks incongruous. That choice will affect my son's life as well, ensuring that he'll inherit neither the property nor its power to make his experience feel redundant. I respect active legacies like the Hunnewells', but not the burden they place on generations born into them.

Not that I'm immune to nostalgia. A few times a year I log onto Google Earth and call up the satellite view of my childhood home. From the prominent line of the expressway I trace my finger around the village pond where my siblings and I skated on Christmas afternoons, up a steep street named for my great-grandfather, and down our back driveway through my beloved woods. Beyond the back lawn, where my great-grandfather's golf balls came to rest in pastures dotted with grazing cows, subdivisions of McMansions are visible with their script of circular drives. Zooming out, I identify the original Old Westbury estates, the dilapidation that greeted Keith Richards nowhere in view. The former family seats of the Whitneys, Phippses, Vanderbilts, Duponts and Milburns survive, restored by a new generation of aristocrats, still dazzling to a commoner's eye.