

# This Old House

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# Home invasion

Take a deep breath—then hold it for two hours. That's what it feels like to open your home up to a historic house tour By DAVID GIFFELS + Illustrations by SERGE BLOCH

## T minus 48 hours

I never stopped to consider how many shades of white there are until now, at this very moment, as I struggle to paint over the nicks, scuffs, and work-boot-induced abrasions on my foyer baseboards.

You see, white is the color I've painted every wall and sill, every inch of crown and baseboard molding in my house. But never did it occur to me that with each successive trip to the paint store I was choosing a different shade. At the time I figured any white would do, but now I realize my folly, as I sort through can after half-used can of paint, deeply pondering the subtle differences between Swan Wing, Angel Cloud, White Bisque, and Sun-Bleached Shell.

The reason for my paint paranoia is that my house—a 1915 Tudor Revival that my wife and I saved from condemnation and spent the past two years painstakingly restoring—has been selected for inclusion on a historic house tour. Sure, it's an honor, but it also means that, in just two days, several dozen hypercritical strangers will arrive on our doorstep to inspect and ultimately judge our taste, workmanship, and lifestyle. Yes, I am terrified.

The local preservation society asked us to participate in this act of public scrutiny because our house, derelict for so long in a distinctly public way, is considered something of a community property. It was built by a wealthy industrialist as a wedding gift for his daughter. It fell into rapid decline in the latter part of the 20th century. For decades, everyone in town knew it as "that house," the big place with the billiards room, the pond, the waterfall, the infestation of raccoons, the no working plumbing, and the mutant wisteria that



had busted through the walls and started growing like a bean stalk through the attic. Think of it as the drafty old house George Bailey chucked a rock at in *It's a Wonderful Life*. Over the years, countless curiosity seekers had crept through the dense overgrowth that once surrounded this place, trying to peek in the

windows, wondering about the rumor (true, it turned out) of a reclusive old lady living inside. Many had thought of restoring this house themselves, but we're the ones who made the risky, somewhat misguided, decision to take on what many thought of as our town's ultimate DIY project. Needless to say



there's quite a bit of civic interest in the work we've done.

That's why I'm hoping the sun will be fully set when our guests arrive, the better to hide the uneven joint lines in my rebuilt front stoop. My masonry work follows the muse better than it follows a string line. And I'm hoping they'll be distracted enough by the refinished oak floors not to look up at my repairs on the elaborate plaster moldings, which reflect a level of craftsmanship usually seen only in the work of preschoolers at summer camp. Still, we are determined to present this house not only as expertly restored but also as though it exists in a perpetual state of magazine-photography readiness. As if it were occupied not by a middle-class couple with two young children but by a well-tended heiress with the name of Gosamer. This explains why, in the weeks leading up to the tour, I found my wife on a two-story ladder obsessively cleaning the chandelier with an eyeliner brush.

### T minus one hour

Our children are sequestered miles away at their grandparents' house, where they can do no damage with their arsenals of saltines and sippy cups. All their toys are stowed away behind a closed door in the basement, where we've hidden all our secret shame: the unpaid bills, frayed toothbrushes, toilet plungers, even the half-dead houseplants that we keep making mental notes to water but never do. All of it is here in this secret room, holed up in house-tour exile.

I continue the deception by replacing the stack of *Rolling Stone* magazines on my nightstand with some classic works of literature, loading the wine rack with bottles well beyond our usual price range, and masking any offensive odors

with scented candles. As I dart across our living room to wipe off the fingerprint I just noticed on one of our brass switch plates, my wife calls out to me.

"You're wearing *that*?"

"What?"

"A tie?"

"Yeah. I want to look nice."

"You never wear a tie. You didn't wear a tie to my sister's wedding, David! You look like a 12-year-old being dragged to church."

All those weeks of tension suddenly come rushing on a wave of adrenaline.

"Fine!" I shout, unjustifiably shrill, grasping at my throat. "You win!"

Then the doorbell rings.

### T minus zero

We open the front door and address the long line of tour patrons with our carefully rehearsed air of surprise, as though we weren't expecting anybody. "Oh my gosh! Is this the night of the tour? Well, I hope the place is presentable for company!"

In every town, there is a quirky subset of the population devoted entirely to local history. These are the white-haired patrons of the hometown symphony, the people who form book clubs, starch their flannel shirts, and attend house tours. And now they are here, inspecting our home like wine experts at a sports bar.

"Is that bathroom tile original?" one visitor asks.

"Why, yes, of course," I reply.

"But wasn't this house built in 1915?"

"Uh...yes."

"Funny. They didn't make that tile until the 1930s."

And I really don't know what to say, because I'm actually being called



**We open the door and address the long line of tour patrons with our carefully rehearsed air of surprise.**

**"Oh my gosh! Is this the night of the tour? I hope the place is presentable!"**

out as a fraud on the subject of my own home, and this is something no one ever anticipates.

I break away to monitor the flow of foot traffic, heading down toward the basement billiards room, only to discover that our secret door is open! A dozen people are milling about in the one part of the house that contains all the dark realities of our true selves. The solid evidence of our mundane middle-class existence.

"So, is that chandelier in the living room original?" one of the invaders asks me, and I am afraid to respond, certain I'll get the answer wrong.

But then, quite suddenly, it's over. After all these tortuous hours of primping and dabbing and polishing and cleaning, we find ourselves relaxing with a glass of proletarian wine and a bag of potato chips where we always sit when we're being our true selves: on the back stoop, staring into the driveway with a relief that washes over us with a sort of whiteness that could only be described as Pebble Bluff.

Or Waterfall Mist.

Or Victorian Cameo.

Or maybe just plain old white. ■

*David Giffels is the author of All the Way Home: Building a Family in a Falling-Down House, which comes out in paperback in June.*