

# THE HOUSE



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with drawings by  
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### Acknowledgment

A slightly different version of “The House”  
is at <http://motley-focus.com/house.html>.

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to the memories of  
RC Morse & David Stoller



**T**he house is full of people. Fortyish couples chat with serious young men. Ladies in red velvet chat with ladies in purple velvet. Musicians in black ask one another questions, especially about the house. When did you first hear about it? Where do you go in it at night? Magicians do acrobatics on the beds, touching the smooth white ceilings with their disciplined feet. In the backyard, various languages are intoned. Lilies, roses, gardenias, petunias, and hyacinths never stop blooming, are always in season behind the house. The oranges are as big as grapefruits, the tangerines taste like limes, the apples look like lemons. Picking them, my friends always ask the same question: How did you happen to come by this lovely place?

On the second story we put on theatre, three nights a week, three acts a night. Forever the maids bustle about, serving cool drinks. Forever the butlers open and close doors. Doormen take wraps and fan the ladies. All day long, all night long, elegant cars pull up by the curb to drop off their elegant passengers. The short climb to the front door is worth the mild fatigue inevitably caused. Vitamins greet the guests; spoonfuls of tonics; mirrors that take years off their age.

The house, sitting on a hill, overflows with wicker chairs and white gowns. Red theatre seats line the second story. I once caught a huge blue trout from the balcony. When the guests left, I reeled it in and sat quietly on the lawn, contemplating the shadow of the fish against the unnaturally pale grass. The moon is full, as it always was in those days.

Three nights a week the actors speak in foreign languages. Language, abounding in the house, is never really studied, but sometimes echoes of an academic bent can be heard near the love seat by the bamboo grove on the east side of the garden. Then the "pearls" on the necks of damsels sparkle and the "pearls" on their ears reflect the light from the dining area, and most nobly too. "Pearls" hang everywhere, but not real ones. There are no real pearls in the house, nor are the guests allowed to wear them. Why, I can't really say. It's simply custom.

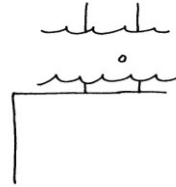
In New York the house is built of steel and glass, and of brick. Instead of bamboo on the west side, rows of maple and elm extend as far as the eye can see. The leader of the house braids her hair, trims her nails, puts on nylons and powders her nose, grows noticeably more silent by the minute, eats Northern Italian food in expensive



restaurants, and dresses molto casually on weekends. Each of her performances brings new acclaim. The audience, surrounded by the house, laughs and cries as it never has. The house envelops the entire block, the neighborhood, the streets for hundreds of blocks in every direction. When you are in the house you feel the pull of the shutters, the force of the wooden floors; you know when the house is tired, when it wants to close for repairs, when it is in love. But with its moonlit evenings, New York skyline, and fountains with colored lights, the house is always in love. Always.

The house appears different to different people. To some people it looks solemn; to others, gay. To the ushers the house is always one way, but what that way is they never know. To the manager the house is a good crowd pleaser, and he lives well. Cab drivers thank the house for a bit more fat in their diet; bus drivers pray for the day the house packs up and leaves, never to return. Fame has its way with them: They prefer serving to seeing what the fuss is about. Their families are more anxious than usual, their bosses less friendly, their grammar shakier. When the house settles on stage, the whole city breathes a sigh of relief that curtain call is on time. Next time they hope

it will be even more punctual, if such a thing is possible, though the house is always there, always on time.



In California the house has two stories; there is more privacy on the second, and you can see the mountains from one window and the ocean from another. There is a fireplace on each floor; a large, square lawn out back; and cement walkways wide enough for two, that expand to accommodate more if necessary. In front are a round patio, a green birdhouse, and seven birdbaths. While staying in the house you never grow old; your skin is always soft, your hearing excellent, and your beard stops growing. Your words form shapes and colors, depending on the day of the week. The scent of orange blossoms inspires you, and whatever you do—paint, draw, write, sing, laugh—is graceful and easy. It is hard to stop singing in the house. Once you start, you go and go for days and weeks, until finally you have to sleep. When finally you do fall asleep, an hour is all you need to do it all over again, which you always will do.

In the house, the guests look from one wall to another, shaking their heads in disbelief at the beautiful scrolls, at the iridescent colors, at the omnidirectional sound coming from what sounds like a symphony orchestra. The bookshelves were once a good conversation piece, but some guests missed their tennis, so courts were built in a corner of the racetrack, where dainty ladies can wet their toes on benches built for giants and fountains; where children can float forever, freeing their parents for the views of the Alps. On very clear days you can see the Himalayas too, and in January, if you stand near a small sphinx by the handball courts you can feel the icy air blowing down from Mt. Everest, tempered of course by the tropical sun. It rarely rains, but when it does, the musicians move under a frescoed terrace and we take lunch under the veranda by the wisteria and plan trips to Machu Picchu—where else? The house can take us there; the house can handle the reservations; the house is expert in luxury, in group travel. We always stay four nights and three days—for reasons that can be neither explained nor fathomed—and return with bold, revolutionary suntans.

I wasn't born in the house, but ever since I first stayed in it, I have taken care of the

gardens, front and back. Along the sides of the house are a filamentary canal with



teakwood houseboats for the flamboyant guests, and a cold Northern river inhabited by rare rainbow trout, for those who like roughing it. Waterlilies float in great masses, like seaweed on the Sargasso Sea. In Florence the house picked up on the design of the Boboli Gardens, so I built three lovely fish ponds and four marble fountains behind the cinnamon trees. Now a quiet breeze often pervades the center of the anterior garden, rustling the honeysuckle, and the view from even the smallest hill is simply magnificent: In the distance are the Duomo, the palace of the Medicis, Fiesole. The Roman amphitheatre holds enough guests to stage a full elephant-laden production of Aida. Beyond the wall is a cherry orchard, overrun in August with small children carrying brown paper bags, their fathers carrying tan knapsacks, their mothers and grandmothers packing Mexican straw baskets, the old grandfathers sitting under

elms, sipping syrupy juice-filled summer drinks from enormous crystal goblets and occasionally brushing the hummingbirds from the wide brims of their Panama hats. Thousands of cherries are swiftly eaten; the rest are canned for winter.

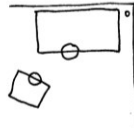
In late winter I prune the citrus trees. In spring, after marking the ends of the roots with a chalk circle, I turn the soil and transfer the bulbs from front to back and from back to front. Each week I water the maples, carefully soak the junipers, sprinkle the cypresses. From their quarters in the blue-cedar forest—a copy of the one in the Bois de Boulogne—the musicians move into the courtyard, like a desert caravan, and dancers weave among the nearby stands of redwood. I am always in a gay, generous mood during these times, and the rooms overflow with friends from around the world. The headlines are always full of the house: *The House Is a Hit*; *The House Is a Smash*; *The House in Los Angeles*. In 1975 the house, appearing at a Chelsea venue with Meredith Monk and Ping Chong, made a splash and wound up a literary star of the highest magnitude.

When the house goes to Europe, I go too. Its modesty impresses the French. The Germans

like its efficiency and the way it can drink beer after beer, day after day, until even the stoutest shopkeeper has to concede victory. The Italians worship the house for its spirit, for the elegance with which it rolls its double r's. All night long, month after month, visitors come to the house and leave singing. The Swiss take it skiing in the Alps, though of course the house has its own Alps and can ski whenever it wants. The Belgians feed it mussels. The English take the house for long rides in the country: The house appreciates the rolling green hills and quaint farmhouses as if it had always lived in a big city and never seen the country. In Spain the house beachcombs, goes fishing, drinks lots of red wine, whistles at the pretty señoritas, and flirts with the tall, dark men.

The house makes hundreds of new friends wherever it goes, and is loved wherever it goes. Whatever language is spoken in the house, everyone understands. The Japanese understand the Bulgarians, the Romanians argue politics with the Scots. The Irish make friends with the Lithuanians, the Armenians with the Israelis, the Liberians with the Turks. People who haven't said hello since the Tower of Babel cannot hug one another enough; the air echoes with thousands of years of family news. Needless to say the

conversation ranges from interesting to exciting to downright juicy. An iceberg is anchored to the south wall to hold the hundreds of thousands of Danish emperor penguins that settle there for the winter. The patios overflow with barbecues and séances. Downstairs in the game rooms, pool and snooker are shot twenty-four hours a day. Dinners keep coming and coming. Endless processions of cooks, waiters, hostesses, and butlers tumble through the endless rooms, filling the countless sets of china, paperware, and wooden bowls with meals whose menus would fill a thousand volumes. New dishes arrive each minute, thought up by the guests and requested in their thoughts:



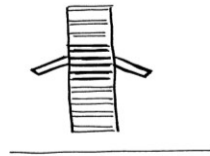
Naturally the house reads minds. Then the kitchen help remove their aprons and tuxedos and eat the food they cooked and served. Everyone laughs and cries and shouts, and no one is ever misunderstood. The stagehands have the lights running more smoothly than is humanly possible. The makeup hands do their jobs in breathtaking

fashion, creating entire races of beings in the wink of an eye, making everyone look like the same person, bringing out the best—as well as the worst—in everyone, depending on the occasion. Costumes are changed instantly, or so it seems. After each act, the house changes colors. The astonished audience claps and claps and claps. Then the audience, like one actor, takes a bow.

No one knows how old the house is, when it was built, or where. Yet all around the world, people know of the house. In Kiev, the house received a standing ovation, long before the city got its present name. The Chinese knew of the house, several thousand years ago: The *I Ching* was first consulted in the house. The Sufis believe the house was the home of the Prophet; it is also what you would see if Khidr appeared without his green cloak. Some people believe the Temple at Luxor was an early form of the house. The Maori sing of the house in their beautiful four-note songs. The songs sung by Miriam and the Hebrew women after crossing the Red Sea or the Sea of Reeds during the Exodus were a celebration of the house, symbol of the world that was, is, and will be. Amen.



In summer the leader of the house comes down from the mountains, by the back stairway. She writes the music, plows the fields, invents the texts that guide the actions and gestures, the thoughts and words. She throws the parties and fixes the rooms for the guests. Her prayers float over the vegetable beds like fine morning mist. When the tide is low she carries huge boulders from the islands to the highway and changes the direction of the traffic. Her silences guide the tone of the evenings. No one ever starves when she is at home; she is always at home in the house.



The gates of the house rise a hundred feet. On the summer solstice you can walk through them if you have an invitation. Only those who try too hard are never invited—at least until they stop trying. In early summer, when the house is cool and inviting, the guests never go outside, but lie in their rooms, sleeping and dreaming, or sit, meditating on large pillows. You can do whatever you want in the house, but when

you leave, everything returns to the way it was, except your mind, which can be as different as you want. Blue jays and mockingbirds flood the gardens with their songs. Horses run across the fields; in a special area, dinosaurs roam as they once did, in all their ancient abundance. At the height of summer, the ocean is brought to one of the side gates. The water is especially cold, though warm spots exist for those who prefer warm water. Cruises leave twice daily. There is nothing magical about the house and what it can do: There is nothing the house cannot do.

The house has room for everything; the house has room for everybody. It is always here when needed; it is always needed, though not everyone knows this. Not everyone knows of the house. When you are away from the house, you always want to return. When you are in the house, it is as if you had never been anywhere else, as if nothing else existed. That is the nature of the house, of those who know it or know of it or live in it, though the house cannot be lived in. Few who go do not return; few who leave do not want to return. Those who stay cannot speak about living in the house, until they leave; some who leave forget the house, over the years, until it is a vague memory of

something good, like a happy childhood looked back upon in old age. If they return in old age it is just as they remember it, with a few changes here and there: new paint, refinished floors, different music, new musicians. The leader of the house remains the same, though of course some could swear she is different.

The house is like a house without a history; when you are in it the past doesn't exist; what you do leaves no traces. But the house has a history; it is just not in the books. When you are away from the house, it sometimes seems unreal: The pull of life outside is ever so strong. But the house is real. The house exists—wherever you are, whoever you are, have been, or want to be. The house, which is always on tour and has been everywhere, which never really goes anywhere, exists in every place on earth, in every time in history.

