

TIME
AND PLACEJudy
Blume

I grew up in Elizabeth, New Jersey, at 227 Shelley Avenue. My friends lived on Browning, Byron and Keats. I didn't know they were poets until I got to college — no teacher ever told us. Isn't that ridiculous? It was a middle-class neighbourhood, Christians and Jews living side by side, which was a big deal.

We moved in in 1940. Upstairs, there were three bedrooms, a sun porch and a black and lavender bathroom that my father called the *bordello*. I didn't know what a *bordello* was, but I was proud to say we had one. My bedroom had twin beds, a dressing table with a ruffled organdie skirt and a three-way mirror. My father made me a desk. He was a dentist, but he was very handy. He was so proud of that desk. It was birch, with no nails, all tongue and groove. I have it with me now in Key West, all these years later.

When my parents were flush enough, they hired a decorator. We got a flamingo-pink and green kitchen. In the living room, they put in wall-to-wall rose beige carpet and chintz fabrics. We had a secondhand black baby grand piano. I sat there and made up stories while I was supposed to be practising.

I was a shy child, but when I was nine, we moved to Miami Beach for two years under doctor's orders — my brother had been ill. When I returned to Elizabeth, I was the new Judy, more outgoing. My father, who had stayed in Elizabeth to work, had created a finished basement. It had pine walls, a mirrored bar, green and black tiles, a leather banquette and a jukebox. It became the place to be.

I had birthday parties there, and we played spin the bottle. For my "sweet 16", my parents hung sugar from the

ceiling tied to pink ribbons. My dad hung up a disco ball.

My parents took cha-cha-cha lessons there on Sunday nights, with five

other couples. I sat on the stairs watching. My father, who was very funny, taped instructions to my mother's chest and looked down so he could remember the dance steps. He was the father all kids wanted — outgoing, fun, loving and generous. He built me a rustic playhouse outside, where I invented more stories and enlisted friends to act out my tales. We had secret clubs, like in *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*. Yes, we did chant: "We must increase our bust."

At the end of the living room was the sun parlour. As a teenager, my parents told me never to park in a car with a boy. I was to bring him home. It was safer. I'd wake up my parents to say, "I'm home." Then I'd go down to the sun parlour, play records and have little make-out sessions. But I knew the rules. I knew when to stop.

My parents didn't talk to me about sex. It was the 1950s. And my mother was fearful and anxious. But at 13, I wanted to know about the world of adults, so they let me read their books. I found John O'Hara, Saul Bellow, Ayn Rand. I just thought recently, what a great gift this anxious mother gave to me — she let me read anything. Reading was good, reading was safe, reading was fine.

My father died when I was 21, five weeks before my wedding. He was 54. I never got to know him as an adult. But how lucky I was to have him. I still dream about our house. Recently, I went back. An older man was outside, saying, "Isn't it wonderful? My daughter totally renovated it."

I was near tears. No, it's not wonderful. I'm sure the *bordello* and the flamingo-pink and green kitchen are gone. But my house lives on in my memories.

Interview by Hugh Graham

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Over: Photo: Andrew Chinn / The Image Bank

The bestselling children's author Judy Blume, 78, recalls her childhood home in 1950s New Jersey