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HOUSE CALL

Richard Lewis on what's so funny about growing up in Jersey

The comedian recalls his 'lovingly dysfunctional' family

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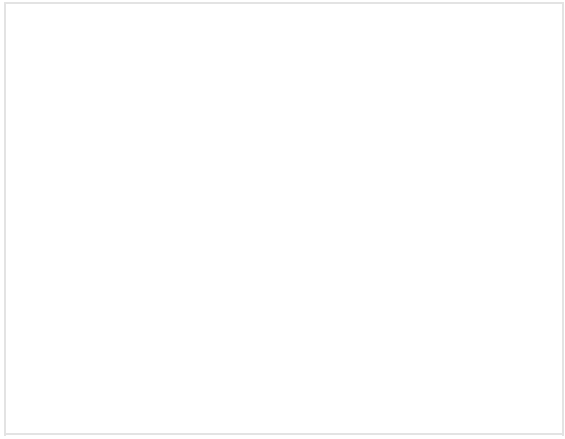


Comedian Richard Lewis at the Sunset Tower Hotel in West Hollywood, Calif. *Ethan Pines for The Wall Street Journal*

Comedian Richard Lewis, 67, is author of "The Other Great Depression" (PublicAffairs). He just released "Bundle of Nerves"—a two-DVD set featuring two films, a live concert and a documentary. He spoke with Marc Myers.

The last memory I have of my childhood home in Englewood, N.J., was escaping it at age 17 to attend Ohio State University. My family was lovingly dysfunctional, and life in our house was like 1,000 sitcoms.

Englewood is just over the George Washington Bridge from Manhattan, and we lived comfortably in a middle-class neighborhood. Behind our house were thick woods where my friends and I played, but no matter how far in we went, my mother would be out there screaming for me to get home for dinner. It was so embarrassing.



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The strange thing is she couldn't cook. She had some Jewish "Joy of Cooking" cookbook that she only opened to make one special dish: baked flounder topped with sour cream, onions and breadcrumbs. It was actually pretty good. She also made a psychotic lunch for me every day when I came home from elementary school: cut-up bananas topped with thick sour cream and lines of sugar, which made it look like something out of "Scarface."

My father was the food guy. He co-owned Ambassador Caterers in nearby Teaneck and was a big shot in the area. I rarely saw him because he was busy all the time, which was hard on me because my mother and I didn't really get along. She had tremendous low self-esteem, which annoyed me at my young age. Perhaps because my dad was so important in the community, she felt marginalized. Who knows.

I was the baby of the family, and I'm still convinced I was a mistake. My brother is six years older than me, and my sister is nine years older. She married in 1959 when I was 12 and my brother moved to Greenwich Village in the early '60s. With my dad always working and my brother and sister out of the house, my mother and I were the only ones home. We became a Neil Simon play without the jokes. The slightest things would upset her and we got on each other's nerves.

Our house was a two-story Tudor built in the 1940s. When we all lived there, my brother and I shared a room upstairs. He wasn't exactly Wally from "Leave It to Beaver." While I'd try to do my homework, he'd be reading poems of Beat poets aloud, like Ginsberg's "Howl." My mother had no idea who Ginsberg was, but when I'd protest one day, "Why are you complaining? Have you read 'Howl'?"

My sister had a small room upstairs, but when she was 15, she faked asthma so she could be sent to high school in Miami Beach. When my brother moved to Greenwich Village, I inherited the entire bedroom. All of a sudden I had a double bed and a ton of closet space. There wasn't much I could do about the walls, though. My mother had originally put up wallpaper with cowboys and Indians and wouldn't change it even though I was in junior high school. So I had to go to sleep every night with a guy pointing a rifle at my forehead.

My mother also chose the kitchen wallpaper. Because it was the kitchen, the theme had to be food. She went with strawberries, making the walls look they had a rash. Our living room was great. My mother designed the space with antiques that once belonged to dead relatives. The furniture was beautiful—or so we were told. It was all covered in plastic.

When I was in high school, my parents began taking weekend trips. Before leaving, my mother would label everything in the fridge, including obvious stuff like the butter and mayo. She obviously thought I was an idiot, which left me with enormous resentment. My parents weren't big drinkers, but they had a walk-in liquor cabinet in the basement. My father threw many parties in the backyard and had a great stock of booze for his guests. One weekend, my parents went on one of their trips and accidentally left the liquor cabinet open.

Back then in high school, you drank at the prom and that was about it. But that weekend, my friends came over and we had a few sips. When I saw my mom had locked the basement freezer, I went nuts. She probably worried I would eat the 3,000 fillet mignons my father had stored there for work. To me, it was just another sign that I couldn't be trusted. I was so angry that my friends and I had a huge food fight upstairs. Eggs, Jell-O and everything else went all over the place. When my parents came home, I was grounded for weeks.

My father did one cool thing with me. I collected baseball cards and had all of the Dodgers, Giants and Yankees from 1955 and '56. One day, we decided to put all of my New York team cards on a closet door in the basement. He mounted them onto the door's exterior and shellacked the surface. With that amber tone, it was like a cheap trip to the Baseball Hall of Fame every time I passed it. The door became a shrine.

Years later, in 1989, when I became a celebrity and was performing at Carnegie Hall, I hired a car to take me to my old neighborhood. When we arrived, I saw this kid out front on a tricycle. My parents had moved in 1970, and when I told the kid I used to live in his house, he started screaming. Fortunately his parents recognized me and invited me in for a tour. I saw they still had a lot all of the furniture my parents had left behind, which freaked me out. It was like being home again, without my family there.

Eventually, we wound up in the basement. That's when I saw the door with the baseball cards. I had a lot of cash on me, so I said to the guy, "This door, uh, you don't

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really need it. Why don't I help you take it off the hinges and we'll put it in the limo outside? I'll give you a grand for it." The guy looked at me like I was nuts. The cards on the door were worth much more—even shellacked. He wouldn't sell, and I left feeling like a jerk for trying to take advantage of him.

I wish I knew the current owner of the house. I'd make an offer to buy that door. It's my "Citizen Kane" sled. When I'm on my back dying in an actor's home someplace and the crystal ball rolls out of my hand, they're going to see a miniature door in there with the shellacked baseball cards.

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Andrew Wilt

This piece is more about him and his than about where he grew up. I'm sure he could have written basically the same thing had he begun life in Texas. Having grown up in Jersey myself there are many things Jersey he could have written about but did not. It's amazing that some people get the attention they do.

8 days ago



Robert Clark

I love the Curb Your Enthusiasm shows with Richard and Larry David. The last season or so got kind of contrived, and so, I understand a theme/story eventually runs its course as its creativity reaches the bottom of its barrel, so to speak.

But ever once and awhile, re-run these shows for a great laugh.

8 days ago