

welcome

Things We Love

THESE DAYS I am thinking of selling my house and moving. It is a house I love. It has sheltered me through the end of love and the beginning of love. It has been home to two boys; the younger plans to move to California when he graduates high school. His favorite surfboard will be strapped to the roof of the car; he plans to buy it with money earned at the photographic studio of his uncle. The job is hard work for which (I thought) he was radically unprepared, but it seems that somewhere along the way (certainly not at home, despite my best efforts) he learned to mop a floor. Such are the signs of a child growing into his adult life—the small, necessary, surprising things they learn to do when you are not looking.

I have been given varied and conflicting advice about how to prepare for the empty nest, and, as with all advice, I lean toward that which suits my prejudices and temperament: put it off; don't do a thing. However, just knowing that my days of raising children are about to end has launched me into a bath of tentativeness about the future, and nostalgia for the past—even while it is the present. Every dinner conversation with my son feels freighted; how few are left to us, at the end of a day of school and scrubbing? (Not that there is so much to hang onto in his words; he has entered the realm of “Nothing”—as in “What happened at school?” “Nothing.” “What happened at work?” “Nothing.” “What is happening in your head?” “Nothing.” But I am determined that nothing will not stop me.)

I've already had one child leave home, and, believe me, it was no picnic. The wrench of separation has nothing to do with whether or not your life is busy or fulfilled. It has to do with the finality of inevitable endings. Of course, I am still a mother. My sons still need me—as I need my parents, in some fundamental way, whether or not they are present. It is a human need for guidance; a grounding for the moral compass hopefully, artlessly, even negligently, wittingly or unwittingly, implanted by parents. I will always be mother to my sons, but I am at the end of raising them.

Wherever I am will always be home to them—a home, should they need or want it. But I've been aware of a making a home *for them*, all around their needs, and mine, primarily as a mother—whether it is the sofa in the kitchen so the boys can linger in the morning or the mudroom for every sort of skateboard ever made or the peaceful ambience of the library, meant to capture one reluctant reader and ensconce two avid, contented ones.

As I think about leaving this home, I wander from room to room, wondering

what I will take with me to the next home I make. This is a startling exercise—and a way to begin wrapping my mind around the idea of a new stage of life. In the beginning, my tendency was to figure out how I could move it all. But then I found myself wanting to scale back, to simplify.

The list of things I would move has dwindled; it has turned into the list of things I love, that carry real meaning for me. There's a liberation in recognizing what you don't need, as well as understanding what you want. The things I love are beautiful, like the large, chalky white Ming vase that sits on the hall table. They are useful. Or they are beautiful and useful, like the 1910 Steinway. We have enjoyed a peaceful coexistence, and I want to keep them close so that the new life feels familiar.

Some friends tell me I shouldn't think about moving until my younger son is finished with college. I can see the wisdom of that: he returns home for holidays, so home should be *exactly* what he left behind. But it can't be. Why pretend that nothing changes? Everything does. I know that, in my misery at confronting an empty house, I will find it unbearable to open the doors to rooms that were once filled with the lives of boys. In fact, I'm so sure that this will be heartbreaking that one evening I began seriously to consider selling the house before my son graduates. I raised this with him—“You don't even talk to me at dinner anymore, so what do you think of that idea?” He raised a weary head from his dinner plate—“Nothing, Mom.” But after dinner he walked over to the piano, opened a book on the music stand, and began, for the first time in years, to play. Beethoven's “Moonlight Sonata.” That moody,

haunting music appeals to adolescents of every generation. He was still playing as I drifted into sleep, so that my dreams were full of moonlit resolution. The next morning he was up early, and playing again; I finally got the message. Of course I could not even think of leaving a moment before that music stopped. Of course I would put off, until the last possible second, leaving a house that we so productively, fully occupy. And of course I will take the things I love with me to the next home, for the things I love most are as durable, light, and portable as a memory—the stuff of dreams. There will always be room for love.



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