

I'm not just thinking about selling my house anymore; it is now officially on the market.

I hope that the right person will find it, hidden among the trees I've so lovingly tended for the past 20 years. I hope the right family will settle there, trace its own growth from room to room, etch its own path into the garden. I'm done with it.

I didn't expect this to happen so abruptly, so soon after my younger son had left for college, but I was overcome with a feeling of completion. Time to move on. This son came home one day to tell me that his father was moving into the city and that it was time for me to do the same thing; his older brother echoed the sentiment. Strange: we've been divorced more than a decade, and still the children think of us as bound together, as if in a caravan, so that when one tent pulls up stakes, the whole show has to move on.

I still love the house, and the garden. I still care about how it weathers the latest storm; I still enjoy the way the light moves through each room. What got to me, actually, was how much I still cared, how redolent of our lives together each room is, and how much I missed that communion. It all, suddenly, felt drained, empty. The whole house seemed to be saying to me: This chapter of your life is over. You're rattling around, wandering aimlessly from room to room, sniffing the empty air, hoping to catch the scent of a child. And when you aren't doing that, you're moping in an armchair.

So the house is on the market. This is worse than going through the process of applying to college. Rather than writing eloquent essays proving that you have lived a rich and industrious life by the time you are all of 16, you must, having lived a rich and industrious life for 50 years, erase all signs of it, because no potential buyer wants to feel crowded out of a house they don't yet own. Down come the children's drawings, out go the seashells and stones, along with the souvenirs and mementos and school reports and newspaper clippings. The counters must be cleared so that others can grasp the idea that there is room here for their imagined lives. The bottle of olive oil is whisked into the pantry, the houseplants are sequestered in a sheltered corner, the bath oils and sponges and lotions go into the linen closet.

Then, of course, comes the real cleaning. I keep house with a relish, yet my sister and I spent a weekend putting things away, scrubbing floors, rubbing oil into wood, rearranging

furniture, organizing closets, attic, and basement, and generally enhancing the appeal of the house to the point that I was ready to buy it all over again myself. Sure, the stairway runner is threadbare and the floor needs waxing, but I had forgotten how well those rooms polished up. There was something quite beautiful about the new emptiness (a relative term) of the rooms. Maybe, I thought, I don't need to sell the house; maybe I only need to sell everything in it instead, and live a simplified life—with six bedrooms. But then I caught a shadow on the wall where the sun had faded the paint around one of the boys' drawings, and I understood that I would spend the rest of my life looking backward here, no matter what was (or was not) around me.

The natural next step should have been to throw a party, but I had to leave. It is a strict rule with realtors that owners cannot be present when a house is being marketed. I think things should be otherwise: I would want to ask an owner lots of questions, but maybe that's the point. In any event, I am now in the strange situation of having been banished from my house. Suddenly, I'm accepting invitations to spend weekends with friends; I'm going to movies at three in the afternoon on Sundays; I'm not only washing my breakfast dishes before I've finished my eggs, but I'm drying them and putting them away, which is a waste of time, to my mind, as I'm only going to use them again 24 hours later. I can see why one becomes desperate to be done with this charade.

Now I'm experiencing the heartbreaking realization that each and every person who walks into my house doesn't instantly

fall in love with it—the way I once did. I know my house has unique curb appeal; it is hidden from the street, and it will take someone with a sophisticated eye to understand its quiet beauty. Furthermore, gardens, much as we like to look at them, confuse most people—they suggest unending labor, which is true, of course, but it is work for those who love engrossing solitude, and work that yields innumerable and lasting pleasures. So I wait, hoping that someone falls in love with my house, and hoping too that everyone will leave me and my house alone.



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