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# This Old House: Leaving the Empty Nest

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# This Old House

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C.J. Hribal reflects on a few final moments in his empty nest. Photo by David Szymanski

[C.J. Hribal](#) October 19, 2015

## **Eventually, the only things left to move out are memories.**

Fifteen years ago, I wrote an essay for this magazine called “A Marriage with Milwaukee,” in which I waxed rhapsodical about my love for the city, and used as a metaphor my own marriage – how the mystery of always discovering new things about your city and your partner would keep you with both forever. As with many things about which you seem certain, I was wrong. The marriage was over six years later, and a decade after that, I was moving out of my lovely arts and crafts house of 24 years, relocating from Milwaukee to (shudder) the wilds of Shorewood.

It’s a hard and exciting thing, leaving a house in which you’ve raised three children. You’re Janus, looking forward and back. You are overcome with nostalgia yet also all aflutter, exhilarated at this next new stage of your life.

We had bought the house for a song from neighbors who were splitting up. Although the house was built in 1909, it still had its original stained-glass windows, brass fixtures, oak floors and wainscoting, built-in bookcases and china cabinets. There were window seats in the dining room and one of the bedrooms, a second-floor porch off a back bedroom, and a porch out front that was large enough to have its own ZIP code. We loved it, and loved the neighborhood, made up mostly of large Victorians occupied by a UN of hyphenated Americans.

We plastered cracks, blew insulation into the walls (requiring 187 holes – not that I counted – to be cut into the plaster and then filled), stripped paint, repainted walls, spent hours applying Kilz over the brown paint of one room before painting it a cheery yellow, and turned the unfinished third floor into a massive bedroom for the two boys, the newly insulated and drywalled dormers forming a cathedral ceiling tall enough for them to play basketball, had they wanted. We added a bathroom, wallpapered the stairway and two bedrooms, painted the attic floors. And we watched the Tom Hanks-Shelley Long movie *The Money Pit* with wary knowingness.

You do not let a house like that go lightly. I had told my kids when their mother and I divorced that I'd hold onto it until the youngest (now 21) had at least graduated from high school. The emotional jerkings of a split household were such that I didn't want the disruption to be any greater than it already was going to be. Besides, I loved the house – the woodwork, the glass, the feeling of old laughter still in the walls.

But your kids grow up, go off to college, and soon you find yourself the curator of a kid museum. I started spending less time there, having fallen in love with a terrific woman who still had small children at home. We talked about moving in together, which I did, sort of, once she was diagnosed with an aggressive and rare form of cancer, and our relationship shifted from romance to caretaking. Eighteen months later, she was dead, and I was adrift.

Late middle age is not a great time for drifting, but a fortunate series of events helped reorient me. My department at Marquette University moved into a refurbished building, and throwing out 24 years worth of files, notes, books and what-have-you was tremendously liberating. I looked at my house and thought, "It's time." Time to downsize, time to declutter. In a couple of weeks, two-thirds of my clothing went to Goodwill.

I also fell in love again, with someone smart and funny and generous and wise and beautiful, whose smile lit her up from within. After some months of dating, it seemed right to combine our lives. And given that her sons were grown, her smaller house, situated between the lakefront and the Oak Leaf Trail, was perfect.

But my house was still full of stuff. Fortunately, my oldest son, Tosh, had gotten married the previous summer and just bought a house with his wife, Elizabeth. Whatever furniture wasn't going to Janet's and my new house was going to theirs.

It's not the big stuff, though, that defines a home. Jokingly, I ceremoniously gave Tosh my charcoal starter chimney and his first roll of duct tape. What got me choked up, however, was reuniting him with Carbondale, his teddy bear, and Hania, my 21-year-old daughter, with her bear Blueberry, so named because he was bright red. (She also had a blue bear named Raspberry; my daughter the contrarian.) Younger son Roman claimed Stellaluna, the large mama bat that accompanied the book.

In deciding what to keep, what to jettison, what to pass on, you're a living embodiment of *The Great Gatsby's* last line: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past." Because my family is scattering (Tosh to Greendale, Roman to Spain, Hania to New York), the emptying of the old manse took on a special poignancy. One night over Lisa's pizza (and Lakefront beers), we sat at the dining room table going over gazillions of family photos, divvying them up, making a stack everyone wanted copies of, and laughing uproariously over the doofus looks we sported in one photo or another.

Roman posted on Facebook a photo of our stove, Stewart, which dates to 1929 ("Stewart" is the brand name, but like Wilson the volleyball, our stove had a personality). He wrote about the kitchen, site of pumpkin carvings, many meals, much laughter, and yes, arguments. The kids noted that I'd had the landing on the third floor patched where their Hot Wheels had raced down the banister and crashed into the wall. They claimed their hockey skates, framed posters, favorite pictures.

Another evening was spent separating out their books, which is where the real history of our family life resides: Sandra Boynton's *The Going to Bed Book* (I'd sing that every night, along with Paul Simon's "Was a Sunny Day," one of the few tunes I could reasonably carry), *Goodnight Moon*, the Richard Scarry books (which had the Polish

words written in by their mother, so they grew up passively bilingual), all the Babars, all the Berenstain Bears, all the Tintins, the C.S. Lewises, the Brian Jacques, *The Hobbit* (I do all the voices; I'm a very good Gollum) and my *Lord of the Rings* from college, now falling apart. Also the Harry Potters, which I read aloud to them through volume IV, the one in which He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named returns to life. After that, in a moment not unlike when your child first refuses your hand when crossing the street, they wanted to read the books on their own.

Happily, most of these went to Tosh and Elizabeth, "on loan," to be passed to each household as new little beings get welcomed into the world. My heart swelled.

As evenings go, it was joyous, sentimental, bittersweet, sad – a long strange trip, to quote somebody else well over 50. The house now emptied, I was happy. I'd raised my kids here, given them the best I could, shared with them great joy and sorrow. Time now for the next new journey, wherever it leads. The thing about leaving a house is you don't want to end up like Gatsby, "borne back ceaselessly into the past." The past is a place to visit fondly. You live there at your peril. I moved out. I moved on.

**'This Old House' appears in the October 2015 issue of *Milwaukee Magazine*.**