

the gift of
an ordinary day

A MOTHER'S MEMOIR

KATRINA KENISON

author of *Mitten Strings for God*



Also by Katrina Kenison

Mitten Strings for God

Copyright

Copyright © 2009 by Katrina Kenison

All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in database or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Springboard Press
Hachette Book Group
237 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10017
Visit our website at www.HachetteBookGroup.com
www.twitter.com/grandcentralpub

First eBook Edition: September 2009

Springboard Press is an imprint of Grand Central Publishing.
The Springboard name and logo are trademarks of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the following for permission to reprint previously published material:

Clarissa Pinkola Estés: Excerpt from *La Curandera: Healing in Two Worlds*, by Clarissa Pinkola Estés. Copyright © 2009, reprinted with kind permission of the author, Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estés, and Texas A&M University Press.

HarperCollins: Excerpt from *Grasshopper on the Road*, by Arnold Lobel. Copyright © 1978 by Arnold Lobel. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins, New York.

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company: Excerpt from “St. Francis and the Sow” from *Mortal Acts, Mortal Words* by Galway Kinnell. Copyright © 1980, renewed 2008 by Galway Kinnell. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, Boston and New York. All rights reserved.

Paulist Press: Excerpt from *Hope for the Flowers*, by Trina Paulus. Copyright © 1972 by Trina Paulus. Paulist Press, Inc. New York/Mahwah: NJ. Reprinted by permission of Paulist Press, Inc.
www.paulistpress.com.

ISBN: 978-0-446-55809-9

For Steve, unsung hero

Every step in the dark turns out, in the end, to have been on course after all.

—JOHN TARRANT

contents

[Copyright](#)

[introduction](#)

[1. change](#)

[2. best](#)

[3. solstice](#)

[4. ordinariness](#)

[5. doors](#)

[6. partners](#)

[7. questions](#)

[8. applying](#)

[9. transformation](#)

[10. home](#)

[11. gifts](#)

[12. tests](#)

[13. waiting](#)

[14. settling](#)

[15. pansies](#)

[postscript](#)

[acknowledgments](#)

[about the author](#)

[reading group guide](#)

[discussion questions](#)

introduction

The book you hold in your hands is not the book I intended to write. What I envisioned was something shorter, simpler, and less personal.

Ten years ago, when my sons were six and nine, I wrote a small collection of essays about my efforts to slow life down in a world that seemed to be moving too fast. As a young mother, I wanted so much for my children, and I expected quite a bit of myself, too. And yet, somewhat to my surprise, motherhood was forcing me to reexamine all of my preconceptions about what it meant to live well and to do well by my family. Trying to do it all, have it all, and give it all to my children, I realized that in fact I was setting a pace that left us scattered and exhausted.

It dawned on me that what I really wanted was to enjoy those fleeting years with my husband and our sons rather than race through them. Writing was a way to remind myself to savor the quiet pleasures of everyday life, to pay more attention to people than to things, and to allow my young sons the time and space to play, daydream, and begin to figure out for themselves who they were and what they cared about.

The book grew directly out of my own experiences with my two little boys—baking bread, sleeping in a tent in the backyard, telling stories at bedtime, coloring Easter eggs. I felt so certain then that a good life was right at hand, if I could only remember to keep it simple and unhurried.

My book, *Mitten Strings for God: Reflections for Mothers in a Hurry*, didn't really say anything about slowing down that hadn't been said before. I simply offered a few more thoughts on the matter as it pertained to children. My husband and I had a joke that year that while he was downstairs after dinner taking care of the kids, I was upstairs writing about them. The good news was, it didn't take long. The book almost wrote itself.

It also struck a chord with other mothers who felt as I did and who shared my desire to run around less and stay at home more. In a culture that emphasizes activity, enrichment, and early competence as the tickets to adult success, we tend to equate full engagement calendars with full lives. In a few brief essays, I tried to offer a glimpse of another way. A decade later, I still receive letters from mothers eager to share their stories of how my book inspired them to find more realistic, livable, enjoyable rhythms for their own families.

Meanwhile, my own little boys grew up. The five-year-old who once nestled himself under my arm while finger knitting a long blue mitten string for God is sixteen now, shaving and driving. His older brother, who used to climb into my bed with his beloved copy of *James and the Giant Peach*, is reading Plato at a college halfway across the country.

I always thought that someday, when my sons were older, I would write a second book, a kind of sequel to the first. But as my sons grew into adolescence and our family life became more complicated, I felt less and less sure of my ground. It was one thing for my husband and me to decide that we would opt out of T-ball and elaborate birthday parties in favor of pickup baseball games in the backyard and unscheduled weekends. But it is quite another to try to shape family life with two teenage boys who have their own agendas, social plans, and strong opinions.

My original intent was to write about the unprecedented expectations and pressures experienced by today's teenagers and parents and how important it is to offer an antidote to that pressure at home. I wanted to remind myself as much as anyone that there are alternatives to our culture's narrow

definition of success, and to suggest that we'd be doing all our sons and daughters a service if we'd relinquish some of our collective anxiety over their unknown futures and simply trust them more to find their own way.

But as my two sons became teenagers themselves, our stable, orderly life flew apart. Instead of growing in wisdom, I was searching for answers. The idea of trying to offer anybody advice about anything seemed ludicrous. When I tried to write, what came out seemed messy and complicated, as messy and complicated as our own everyday lives. So I realized that I had a choice: I could give up on my idea altogether, or I could take a longer, more circuitous route. I could try to tell my own midlife story of living, loving, and letting go, knowing that doing so would also mean owning up to all that I don't know, all that I'm still trying to figure out.

Unlike the first book, this one hasn't come easy. For one thing, writing about teenagers, I soon realized, is even harder than living with them. They are extremely private creatures, after all, demanding of respect. There were many lines I could not cross. As for myself, I am not a parenting expert or a therapist or a teacher. I'm just a mother confronting the vicissitudes of middle age—change, loss, a twenty-one-year-old marriage, children leaving home. And none of it is smooth sledding. All I really have to guide me these days is my own response—joy, gratitude, sadness, fear—in the presence of all that seems most precious now, as my two nearly grown sons strain inexorably against the ties that bind us.

It is, of course, a universal drama—children grow up, they leave home, clocks tick in empty bedrooms, and untouched gallons of milk turn sour in the fridge because no one's there to drink them. Parents mourn the loss and, at the same time, discover the will to reinvent themselves. I know I'm not the first mother who's found it hard to let go, who's yearned for change only to resist it when it comes, who's found it painful at times to accept the fact that my sons are pulling away, moving out into lives of their own. Nor will I be the last.

And so I offer the story of my midlife searching and mothering over the course of five unsettled years, in the hope that other mothers will recognize aspects of themselves in these pages and remember that, unique though our own experiences may be, none of us really travels this path alone. Parenthood is what binds us. Our own doubts and questions awaken empathy for parents everywhere, and our fierce love for our own children deepens our compassion for all children. Walking in the woods with a friend, or gathered around a dinner table when the candles have burned low, or sitting in a circle in a church basement, we share our struggles, open our hearts, tell about our lives and our children's lives, in an effort to make sense of things, to learn the hidden truths of ourselves, but also, of course, to share the small discoveries that may somehow ease the way for someone else. This is how it's been for me.

K.K.

change

To exist is to change, to change is to mature, to mature is to go on creating oneself endlessly.

—HENRI BERGSON

When my children were small, I would sometimes lie in bed in the early morning and try to envision the day ahead. Not the schedule we would keep or the activities in store, but rather the attitude I wanted to bring to these things. Imagining myself being patient, calm, accepting, I would create a picture in my mind of the mother I wanted to be for my two young boys. Of course, at some point the day's challenges would always get the better of me. Jack would stick a bead up his nose and tell me it had magically disappeared. Henry would spill his third glass of orange juice in a row. And I'd catch myself being impatient, critical, brusque—not the kind of mother I'd envisioned at all.

Back then, I took comfort in knowing that when things got tough, we could always regroup and start over. I could take a deep, slow breath, pop my cranky children into a tub full of bubbles, toast bagels, let the storm clouds blow over. (Well, the bead up the nose did require a trip to the ER.) Still, I felt so certain that tomorrow would be just another day, another chance to try to get it right—followed by another, and another after that, and hundreds more, all more or less like the very day I was struggling to get through at that moment.

It seemed to me during those early years of child raising that my sons' childhoods would go on forever. I couldn't imagine any life other than the one that consumed me right then, a life shaped by the joys and demands of raising young children.

From the time my older son was three months old, I had a job I could do from home, editing an annual anthology of short stories. For a former literary editor not quite willing to forgo her publishing career, the setup was ideal—I was getting paid to read. With a little self-discipline, I could easily slip back and forth between work and children. If the boys were occupied, I'd grab a pile of literary magazines and retreat to the couch. When they were small, paid child care bought luxurious stretches of uninterrupted time at my desk. Later, I arranged my schedule around theirs, glad for a workday that ended at three, for our sacred weekday afternoons.

For years, I felt fulfilled in both realms, fortunate to have work I loved and continually challenged by the requirements of motherhood. My life's purpose seemed clear—I could keep a toe in my professional shoes and be a stay-at-home mother at the same time, certain that I could best sustain and nurture our family life simply by being there. My morning meditations among the pillows might set the tone or an intention, but the real practice, I came to see, was in the ritual of starting over, day after day, caring for my husband and children, striving for balance, trying to meet my deadlines and, at the same time, meet our basic needs for rest and laughter and togetherness.

I learned a lot about myself, and many lessons in mindfulness, during those long days. Intense and demanding as they are, the years we spend with our young children can also be deeply, viscerally

gratifying. We know exactly where we are needed and what we need to be doing. Immersed in the physical and emotional realm of parenthood, we develop reserves of patience, imagination, and fortitude we never dreamed possible. At times, the hard work of being a mother seems in itself a spiritual practice, an opportunity for growth and self-exploration in an extraordinarily intimate world, a world in which hands are for holding, bodies for snuggling, laps for sitting.

As our sons grew up, my husband and I marked their heights on the side of a pantry cupboard, savored every milestone, and marveled at how well settled we were, completely absorbed in lives that revolved around our children, work and school, and friends with whom to share it all. For a long time, life unfurled predictably, steadily, like fat ribbon from a spool.

The changes, when they began, were subtle at first. Somehow our treasured family ritual of reading together at bedtime slipped away. No one asked for stories anymore. Baths were replaced by showers, long ones, at the oddest times of day. The three-year gap between our sons, insignificant at six and nine, seemed to stretch into a chasm, unbridgeable at eleven and fourteen. Baseballs stopped flying in the backyard. A bedroom door that had always been open, quietly closed. Board games gathered dust on the shelves. And then one day, toward the end of my older son's eighth-grade year, I looked at him over breakfast and realized I had absolutely no idea what he was thinking about. And when, for heaven's sake, had he grown that hair across his upper lip?

Sensing the ground shifting beneath my feet, I resisted this new, unknown territory, already nostalgic for what I'd so recently taken for granted. I missed my old world and its funny little inhabitants, those great big personalities still housed in small, sweet bodies. I missed my sons' kissable cheeks and round bellies, their unanswerable questions, their innocent faith, their sudden tears and wild, infectious giggles, even the smell of their morning breath, when they would leap, upon waking, from their own warm beds directly into ours. I missed the person I had been for them, too—the younger, more capable mother who read aloud for hours, stuck raisin eyes into bear-shaped pancakes, created knight's armor from cardboard and duct tape. Certainly my talents didn't seem quite so impressive anymore, my company not as desirable as it once had been.

If I thought the journey from childhood into teenagehood would be orderly and predictable, the transformations steady and almost imperceptible, I was wrong. Our family did not glide easily from one phase of life into the next, but then, perhaps no family ever does. The confluence of my own midlife and my sons' adolescence hit us like a blast of wind, blowing the front door wide open, hurtling through the house, and rearranging the furniture of our lives. Some of the chaos undoubtedly came with the territory, and some we surely brought upon ourselves; by the time our older son stepped across the stage to receive his eighth-grade diploma, we were rolling up the rugs in the living room.

I am a person who thrives in the familiar comforts of home, a nester, a sanctifier. Since earliest childhood, I have marked and claimed spaces—from the fairy cave beneath a weeping willow tree in my grandmother's backyard, furnished the summer I was four with soft striped blankets, china teacups, and stacks of picture books, to the rambling, green-shingled house on a short cul-de-sac that my husband, sons, and I inhabited so fully and for so long that none of us thought we would ever, could ever, live anywhere else.

In the midst of an upscale, well-groomed suburban neighborhood, ours was the funky house, having been built originally as a barn two hundred years ago. Its history as a home for livestock was still evident in the ancient, oddly stained beams and low ceilings, the vision of the 1920s architect revealed in the leaded glass casement windows, the handmade fireplace tiles, the tiny bedrooms, old-fashioned kitchen, and unlikely floor plan. Idly house hunting and then enchanted by this particular house's eccentricities, my husband and I wondered how we would fill those little upstairs bedrooms. We made

an offer anyway—only to learn, the following week, that I was already pregnant with our second child. It seemed like fate. ~~By the time we brought Jack home eight months later, we felt as if we'd always been there.~~

As our children grew, we created gardens and traditions, laid stone paths through the flowers and installed a swing set under the towering pine, planted trees each Mother's Day, tended to vegetables growing in the backyard and to close, abiding friendships with the neighbors on all sides. Standing outdoors sometimes at night, looking in through the lighted windows at the familiar, cherished rooms, I imagined our house as a living, breathing organism, animated by us and filled to the brim with the stuff of our lives, every moment, memory, word, and gesture of our family's history contained within its embracing walls.

For thirteen years we were held, loving that house so much that it seemed almost to love us back. Until the day when, to my surprise, being held began to feel more like being restrained. Slowly, almost without my knowing it, I had begun to hunger for something, or someplace, else. Someplace wilder and a little rougher around the edges, with a wider sky, perhaps, a longer view from the kitchen window, and a deeper kind of quiet than could be found in any suburban neighborhood.

In my mid-forties, with our children on the brink of adolescence, I longed for something I could scarcely name but that our orderly, well-defined life seemed no longer to provide. Watching my sons growing and changing so visibly, almost from one day to the next, I sensed something inside me breaking loose and changing as well, something no less powerful for being invisible. It was almost as if, having strived for years for predictable comforts, urban conveniences, and the security of our well-established routines, I was suddenly haunted by all the things I hadn't done, the dreams that might never be realized, the sense that the tidy, civilized life we'd worked so hard to create didn't quite fit the person I really was, or, rather, still thought I might be.

I didn't want to leave my marriage or quit my job. I had no interest in a makeover or a sports car, and we couldn't afford a second home. Yet I was beginning to understand the reckless impulses that drive so many of us at midlife headlong into mysteries and mistakes, new identities and unlikely adventures. If some essential part of me was already disappearing as my children moved into increasingly wider orbits, well then, I wanted to reach out and claim something else to take its place. Freedom was one word for it; I nursed a new, uncharacteristic itch for more space, empty roads, dark night skies.

Who knows, really, where dreams begin? Perhaps they first take shape in the unknown realms of sleep or in the far corners of our consciousness, gaining size and substance off in the distant wings of awareness, until one day, just out of the corner of your eye, you see it—the hazy shape of a new idea that is suddenly too big and insistent to ignore.

Perhaps my own first impulse to pull up stakes and move away had its earliest stirrings in such a dream. Off at the edges of perception, as my husband and I considered high schools for one son and imagined possible futures for the other, arose a disconcerting sense that perhaps the comfortable old shoe of a life that had fit so well for so long wasn't quite the right size anymore.

What began as a fantasy of light and space and room to stretch evolved, without my even realizing it, into yearning—for the opportunity to write a whole new family chapter, in a place where we might expand our understanding of what it means to live well. A place where, despite the challenges of adolescence, our sons might find some kind of counterbalance to the social and academic pressures they had already begun to experience in the well-stratified world beyond our own front door.

Much as I wanted both my children to benefit from whatever material advantages we could offer them, it began to seem even more important that they also come to appreciate the value and the beauty

of ordinary things, gifts that come with no price tags attached but that can nevertheless seem increasingly out of reach in our noisy, fast-paced, overcrowded world—the snap of an apple picked from a roadside tree, the silence of deep woods after snow, the majesty of a clear night sky, the solitary bliss of a swim across a lake on a summer afternoon.

Neither my husband nor I was bound to a location for our livelihoods. I could read short stories at the kitchen table. When we first moved to the suburbs, Steve had been a publishing executive, commuting by train each day to the city, earning a salary that could easily support us all. But he had left that career to try his luck with a start-up; when that and then a second venture failed, he'd launched a small business of his own from a corner of our guest bedroom. For a couple of years, life went on as usual—vacations, music lessons, private school. And then, one tax time, we simply added up the money that was coming in, compared it with the money going out, and realized that something would have to change.

Thus began a year of soul-searching deliberation and many, many late night conversations. What holds anyone in place? How do we know where we belong? Could we be just as happy in a smaller house somewhere else, where the cost of living might be lower? Somehow, we needed to learn to live on less, so we asked ourselves if life in a slower, quieter, less populated place might actually suit us better. We could go anywhere. Or not. There was much to be said, as my husband kept insisting, in favor of tightening our belts and staying put, in the only home our two sons had ever known. More than once I wondered if the longings that plagued me were legitimate or whether my midlife crisis was just taking the form of boredom with all that was familiar.

After nearly a year of indecision and uncertainty, of endless house hunting in every corner of the New England countryside, and of countless house showings of our own (flowers on every table! clean towels at every sink! spotless toilets!), we were exhausted and more confused than ever about what we really wanted. In the end, we got ourselves into the regrettable position of having sold our old house without managing to find a new one.

By the time we finally had to confront the painful task of dismantling the home we now regretted selling, our romantic vision of a simpler new life in the country seemed like a pipe dream. We'd lost our zeal and confidence for going forward. After having tried and failed to make a desperate, last-ditch deal to keep our old house, we had to accept that there was no going back.

Shaken, we went on autopilot, filled boxes, and labeled them “Deep Storage” or “Accessible Storage.” In fact, almost everything we owned was going into storage of one kind or another—including, or so it seemed at the time, our capacity for rational thinking. Hard-pressed for some kind of plan, and for a roof over our heads, my husband and I arranged to move in with my parents until we sorted things out.

A month before our older son was to start high school, we left our beloved house, gave away many of our possessions, packed the rest, and embarked on what turned out to be a three-year quest for home, roots, and a new life elsewhere.

On the day we locked our back door behind us for the last time, bade our best friends and neighbors good-bye through one last wash of tears, and followed the moving vans north, we were also, without quite realizing it, closing the door for good on our sons' childhoods and bidding farewell to the life we'd so carefully constructed and then so swiftly dismantled. Three and a half years later, when we finally sliced into the boxes of Beanie Babies and baseball cards, these once precious talismen had lost their magic. Both of our sons were full-blown teenagers. We were in new territory altogether.

Over these last difficult, unsettled years, change has seemed to define us, and at times I've wondered if it would, in the end, undo us. Our children have braved new schools, new towns, new lives entirely. After thirteen years in one place, we suddenly found ourselves with claim to no place, unsure about where we would live or even exactly what we were looking for. We were completely in flux. But I've come to see that even though the particular details of this midlife journey may be unique to us, our story of upheaval is not all that unusual. As I look around at the families we know, I realize that almost every one of them has endured transformations of one sort or another as their children moved through adolescence.

The changes are various, some exhilarating, others heartbreaking, some deliberately set in motion, others completely unexpected. It almost seems as if the strict requirements of life with young children tether us for a time, creating limits and enclosures that hold fast through elementary school. We know our children need security, rhythm, and routine in order to thrive, so we sacrifice, perhaps at great cost to ourselves, to provide those things. It's what parents do, if we possibly can. But as high school looms, even the steadiest families begin to rock.

As writer Phyllis Theroux observes, "We set off like captains of clipper ships outfitted with the latest gear and tackle to race across the ocean. Then, somewhere midcrossing, we realize that the expedition is essentially beyond our control. That time coincides with children becoming adolescents. Adolescence is a mutinous, confusing time when everybody is trying to get off the boat."

Not many of us actually jump ship. But the fact is, midlife—which hits most parents just about the time our children are hitting their teens—finds a fair number of restless, graying seekers out charting new courses, often through unexpectedly rough waters. Whether we choose change or it chooses us, the only thing we can know for sure is that security of any kind is an illusion. The life we know is always in the process of becoming something else.

I have friends who, having put careers on the back burner while raising children, are suddenly realizing that it's now or never and are heading back into the workforce as their children spend fewer waking hours at home. Couples we know who have struggled to keep unworkable marriages together for the sake of their children decide, as those children become teenagers, that they have held on long enough. Families that appeared tightly knit seem to unravel overnight. Others find themselves caring for elderly parents who, though vibrant just months ago, suddenly seem astonishingly frail and all too mortal.

A few weeks ago, good neighbors on our street were stunned to lose their house to foreclosure; they aren't sure where they'll go next. On all sides now, people I care about are having heart attacks, losing jobs, starting businesses, moving to follow new dreams or revive old ones, remaking their lives in all kinds of ways and for all kinds of reasons. Most of the changes fall into the realm of challenges, not easy, perhaps, but inevitable bumps on the road of life. Others, however, are simply devastating.

As I look back over the last few years, my mind fills with memories of indelible moments when I've been abruptly, painfully reminded that we can take nothing and no one for granted.

It is early on a March Sunday, my husband and I just waking up to a gray dawn when the phone rings. My husband answers, grabs the back of a chair, and asks in disbelief, "Who's dead?" My best friend's son has been stabbed, killed while trying to stop a fight near his college campus.

It is October, my birthday, and I'm having lunch outside with two dear friends from my old neighborhood, basking in the sunshine of a perfect autumn afternoon. Happy to be reunited, we're eating deli sandwiches and complaining about our crow's-feet and sagging eyelids, wondering if we'll ever have the nerve for face lifts, joking about finding ourselves a group rate somewhere. A week later, one of these friends, just my age and in the bloom of health, is diagnosed with advanced stage

four ovarian cancer, enters treatment, and begins fighting for her life. No one is complaining about wrinkles anymore.

My book group has gathered on a February evening to drink wine, catch up with one another, and discuss a recent Oprah selection. We go around the circle, each of us offering a few sentences about what's going on in our lives, what's happened since we last met. There is a pause as a good friend takes a deep breath, looks up, and announces in a voice shaking with pain and determination, "I'm getting a divorce."

At the age of forty-six, my brother has become a dad at last. But his son is born seven weeks early and is fighting for survival in the ICU, a three-pound scrap of humanity not quite ready for life on this earth. I look at my kid brother in his hospital scrubs, his eyes full of tears, his heart bursting with pride and hope, and realize that he's not the same person he was just yesterday; that no matter what happens to that tiny little boy in the incubator, my brother has been forever transformed by fatherhood.

These are just my stories, the ones that happen at this particular moment to be very close to home. But every woman I know has her own ready list of tragedies, trials, wake-up calls, and, yes, opportunities for transformation.

I remember the book my own mother, then on the brink of forty, was reading when I headed off to college in the fall of 1976. In that bicentennial year, Gail Sheehy topped the best-seller list with *Passages*, suggesting that midlife is no safe harbor after the turmoil of young adulthood, but rather a critical turning point in the life cycle, a time when our heightened vulnerability also offers us unprecedented opportunity for growth. Sheehy struck a huge chord with her reinterpretation of the midlife crisis, or "passage," as a necessary element of the spiritual journey into self-knowledge and renewal. "If you want to grow," she proclaimed, "you must be willing to change." Thirty-plus years and thousands of self-help books later, this is no longer news. Yet, truth be told, I still feel broadside by the changes that have hit me over the last few years and am deeply sobered by the enormous losses so many close friends have suffered.

Many nights I lie awake, worrying about what's next. Difficult times are inevitable, and I have no doubt that my own losses and disappointments will continue. Somehow, I need to learn to weather them, to strengthen my belief in the rightness of things as they are, even as I transform this deepening awareness of mortality and suffering into a more accepting kind of faith.

Before long, I will turn fifty. Soon, one son, and then the other, will leave home. And I am overcome these days with a new sense of urgency about all of it. For years I have been caught up in the work of raising children, earning a living, turning pages on the calendar, checking items off a list. But time that once seemed to move so slowly has all of a sudden begun to go way too fast. Childhood doesn't last forever after all, nor does any season.

Change, it is said, always goes hand in hand with opportunity. Growing older, I begin to see that finding fulfillment in this next stage of life will demand a kind of surrender that seems beyond me now, a new way of being and caring that I can barely begin to imagine. I suspect I have a lot to learn about letting go.

I recall my younger, intensely ambitious self with a wince—how avidly I set my sights on the future and how hard I worked at becoming the person I thought I ought to be, in pursuit of the life by which I thought I could define myself. So many aspirations—for a rewarding career, security for my family, success for my children, a marriage that worked, and a life that mattered. I wanted it all. And

believed that if I nurtured those dreams, tried hard enough, and planned well enough, they would one day come true. The funny thing is, now, as my children begin to pull away, it is the present moment that concerns me most. Yet try as I might to pay attention, I find myself confronted with all sorts of unexpected and conflicting emotions—pride in my sons, of course, and gratitude for what we've had, but also an almost heartbreaking sense of just how short life really is, and how incomprehensible. How in fact life is not all about planning and shaping, but about not knowing, and being okay with that. It's about learning to take the moment that comes and make the best of it, without any idea of what's going to happen next.

It's been quite a few years since I began my days by imagining them first from bed. But now I think it's time for me to visualize again, if only to remind myself to begin each day with gratitude for what is rather than worrying so much about what still might be. I now know that although each day does indeed afford us an opportunity to start again, the days are numbered after all. Instead of regretting what's over and done with, I want to be glad for life as it is right now, accepting that we are each one of us, struggling along as best we can to become the people we are meant to be. Instead of mourning the passage of time, I want to live with a sense of abundance in the here and now, knowing that what we have is exactly enough. Instead of wishing that my sons could be somehow other than they are, I want to remind myself to see, every day, what is already good in each of them and to love that.

We are entering a kind of homestretch here, the end of family life as we've always known it, the end of the day-in-day-out, zip-your-jacket-here's-your-sandwich kind of mothering by which I've defined myself for so long.

My sons will be graduating from high school and leaving home before I know it. Although we've spent the last three years in transition, in borrowed rooms and temporary arrangements, the real changes have only just begun. In the months ahead, our family will move at long last into a house of our own. One son will begin his freshman year at a large public high school where, on the first day, he will know almost no one. The other will be a senior at the small alternative high school where he has grown, in the last three years, from a shy, diffident boy into a quietly confident young man. My husband and I will drive, supervise, proofread, cheerlead, negotiate curfews and car privileges, and write lots of checks.

And then, just a year from now, our older son will pack his bags and head off to college, and our family will begin the inevitable shrinking and shifting that will conclude with my husband and me looking at each other over dinner, in a childless house, wondering how it all ended so quickly.

best

To freely bloom—that is my definition of success.

—GERRY SPENCE

He stands sometimes, lost in thought, with wrists crossed, palms twisted toward each other, dreaming melodies. He sleeps deeply, as if hurled onto the bed from a high place, head thrown back, mouth open, arms and legs bent at odd angles, feet in the air. But in the morning he's the first one up taking the pulse of the day. After his shower, the hair on his head sweeps forward, as if he's just blown in on the wind. His eyes are green, then gray, changeable as the sky. He hunches over the sports page at breakfast, devouring every scrap of baseball news along with his Rice Chex, laughing out loud at the funny parts, which may of course be funny only to him.

Before a single word is spoken, he can sense the mood in a room. He embodies a silence that is quieter, deeper, than not talking. He needs fewer words than most, but more music. His fingers carry memories of sonatas, jazz riffs, Broadway melodies. He wears his shirt unbuttoned over a faded tee, his pants baggy, his shoes often half-tied. When he walks out the door, he always calls good-bye, and coming home, he asks, first, "How was your day?" If the dishwasher is full of clean dishes, he empties it.

Evenings, he sits at the piano and, from some unknowable place within, brings forth his own heartbreaking improvisation on the old Nat King Cole tune "Blame It on My Youth." In the hallway, pause, a basket of laundry in my hands, surprised by a sudden lump in my throat as the house fills with sound.

As an eighth grader, this boy who never asked for much asked for just one thing—to go to high school in a place where he wouldn't get lost in the crowd. It seemed to my husband and me a fair request. He was looking not for escape, but for a place to grow, a place where a shy, unusual kid, small for his age and all too easy to miss in a world of larger, louder personalities, might be seen and valued.

The public school in our suburban town was good, but exactly where he didn't want to be. So we began to look around. It seemed there was a wealth of possibilities nearby, all manner of private schools promising individual attention, small classes, care. We added up costs, calculated commuting distances, and signed up for the SSAT, surprised to learn that an achievement test taken at thirteen could set a trajectory for life.

One windy autumn night, my husband and I drove from Massachusetts to New Hampshire to visit a small alternative boarding and day school on a country road just a few miles from the house where I grew up. Back then, I'd known the school only by reputation, as a place for artsy kids who wanted to sit at potter's wheels, study Shakespeare, learn the constellations. Although the campus was practically in my own backyard, I had never once set foot there; to a public school girl like me, it was the counterculture. So it was with some sense of irony that I found myself visiting for the first time thirty years later, wondering if this small, idealistic high school might be the right place for our son.

It was dark when we arrived, and there were no lights to guide us. We parked the car and wandered for a while, having no idea what any of the strange, shadowy buildings might be or where we were meant to go. There were no signs to point the way. Standing alone on this gusty, wide-open hilltop, far from town and lights and civilization, the two of us felt as if we'd come not to visit a school, but to receive instead a direct audience with the sky. A full moon lurked behind fast-moving, translucent clouds. When they parted, we could get our bearings for just a moment, make out a dirt path, and take a few steps toward campus. Then, plunged in darkness again, we'd stop, disoriented and wondering what on earth had brought us here.

Eventually that night, we did find our way to the library and the informal session we'd come to attend. We were impressed by the dedication of the teachers, the love they expressed for their work, the engaged, articulate students, the cozy room. But what I remember most is an odd feeling I had while standing outside in the dark. As the moon by turns illuminated and obscured the cluster of old farm buildings that constituted High Mowing School, I assured myself that this brief exploration would end soon enough, that my husband and I would get in our car and drive home, back where we belonged—after all, we had a good life already and all sorts of schools to choose from that would not require moving from one state to another. At the same time, some wiser part of me knew quite well that, like it or not, our journey had already begun.

I have another memory from just a bit later in that unsettled year that seems, in retrospect, equally pivotal. The more my husband and I talked about the possibility of moving, the more we tried to convince ourselves to stay put. Life was rich and good, we told ourselves, our children were thriving and would surely be fine, our dearest friends lived next door, our dark green shingled house was the vessel into which we'd poured every memory we had of parenting, of our children's childhoods. The best part of our lives had been played out right here—Christmases, birthdays, sing-alongs, untold numbers of baseball games, campouts, and dinners on the back porch. Surely we could figure out high school, work out a budget, settle back into the life that was already ours, and find a way to satisfy my restless middle-aged soul without pulling up roots and overturning our entire existence.

Our blueberry bushes were amazing that year, abundantly fruitful all summer, blazing red come fall. On an unseasonably warm late autumn afternoon, I climbed out of the car, a pile of mail in hand and paused on the path between our overgrown flower garden and the little stand of blueberries. The leaves had not all fallen, frost had yet to claim the last of the chrysanthemums and cosmos; we were suspended in that fleeting, precious moment just before true cold. On this loveliest of days, it was easy to believe that we were already in exactly the right place, that we would be here always. The yard was bathed in deepening shades of gold and red, and the air carried the sweet scent of damp leaves, earth, fallen apples, wood smoke. Standing there in the light of early dusk, I ripped open the envelope containing my son's SSAT scores.

In that instant, I knew two things for sure: Our son was not the number on that piece of paper. And somehow, no matter what it took, we would see to it that he came of age knowing that who he is as a person is more important than how well he performs on a test. By the time I walked through the back door, something inside me had shifted for good.

Most parents do not up and move as their children enter high school. Yet we all aspire to find for them the environments in which we think they will best thrive and grow. No matter where we fall on the financial spectrum, no matter what our circumstances, as parents we feel compelled to put our children's needs first, doing whatever we can to ensure that they are the recipients of the best educations and experiences we can provide. For thirteen years, my husband and I had shared a common sense of purpose, a commitment to spend whatever time it took and whatever money we had

in order to give our two sons the best lives possible. If there was another agenda there, an unconscious one, it went without saying: ~~Of course we also dreamed of happy, productive futures for our sons, and we would give them every advantage we could, in the hope that they would go on to live the good, satisfying lives we envisioned for them.~~ It is human nature, after all, to want the best for our young.

The question we now had to ask ourselves was, What exactly did we mean by “the best”? Was it the life our children had always known, in a house we had never planned to leave, in an affluent suburban town where “the best” is generally assumed to mean a full load of honors classes in the high school, a varsity sport or two, and a part in the school play? For some, even for many, that might very well be the ideal. But when it came to our older son, we had long since realized that “the best” was not always the obvious; it was usually something we had to figure out for ourselves.

As the parents of two very different boys, we’d also learned early on that a good choice for one might be exactly the wrong choice for the other. A vision of what’s “best” isn’t the best at all if it doesn’t support a particular child’s growth or fit his temperament. One of the greatest challenges I’ve faced as a mother—especially in these anxious, winner-takes-all times—is the need to resist the urge to accept someone else’s definition of success and to try to figure out, instead, what really is best for my own children, what unique combination of structure and freedom, nurturing and challenge, education and exploration, each of them needs in order to grow and bloom.

It’s not easy. I’ve watched my sons come of age in a world in which they often feel that their worth is measured by what they have and by what they do, who they hang out with, how they dress, talk, and perform in classrooms and on athletic fields—external yardsticks that don’t even begin to reflect the inner life of the soul, imagination, curiosity, character, and desire.

As the mother of boys with temperaments that often seem in direct opposition to each other, I sometimes feel as if I’m trying to grow a fern and a cactus in the same small pot, so different are the ways and needs and gifts. Yet with each of my sons I find myself walking a fine and precarious line between encouraging them to strive for excellence, to work hard and do their best, and also allowing them the space and time to grow up at their own pace and in their own way.

Watching my own two boys respond to the world, I’m continually reminded that a real education is not just a simple transfer of information, not a competition, but a gradual and at times unfathomable process of awakening compassion, deepening understanding, and fostering the development of imagination, curiosity, and will. Learning well doesn’t always mean scoring high. It also means acquiring the tools necessary to take on the most challenging work of all—becoming the person you are meant to be.

I know, of course, that there are young people coming of age today who are destined to lead, to write the great stories of their generation, to break old records, to chart the courses of companies and countries, to leave bold marks upon the culture and big changes in the world. And they will find their way and answer their callings, as the great leaders and innovators always do. But I also suspect that in all likelihood, my own two children will walk less visible paths. My greatest hope, for both of them, is that they will also lead deeply meaningful lives of no less importance or artistry. But in either case, it will surely not be money or talent, prestige or power, that brings them true contentment.

What my husband and I began to realize, as our son neared the end of his eighth-grade year, was that no matter where we ended up living, or where our children went to school, we owed both of them this: the willingness, on our part, to refine and redefine our own idea of what “the best” might really mean.

Rather than try to project who our older son might or might not one day turn out to be, we needed to try to appreciate and understand who he was right now. And then we needed to meet him there,

loving and accepting him just as he was, supporting his journey of self-discovery, crooked and long though his path might turn out to be. When we began to see it this way, our own path suddenly seemed clearer.

“Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you,” writes Quaker minister Parker Palmer. There was no single compelling reason for us to move at all, but the more attentively we listened, and the more we opened ourselves to the possibility of change, the more we sensed that it really was time to go. Perhaps life did intend something different for us from what we knew, and perhaps we could figure out what that was by heading in the direction of what seemed best for our son.

As one of my friends, whose daughter chose to homeschool herself after ninth grade, points out, “The definition of the ‘best’ is pretty limiting in our culture, and it doesn’t seem to take into account the fact that every kid is different.” Her older daughter had homeschooled and then gone on to graduate with honors from Stanford; her younger wanted to sing, study advanced math, and track wolves in the wilderness.

“I’ve had to make decisions with my daughter that made her feel happy and fulfilled now,” my friend explained one afternoon on the phone, “instead of pushing her to do things just because they’d look good someday on a college application.”

My husband and I, both products of conventional middle-class upbringings and public schools, have followed predictable paths; both of us are, by nature, quick to speak and learn and do. Parenthood has changed us, though, gradually, irrevocably opening our eyes to other ways. I remember a lecture by the spiritual teacher Jon Kabat-Zinn that we attended years ago, when our first son was just a toddler.

“Our children drop into our neat, tightly governed lives like small, rowdy Buddhist masters,” he suggested, “each of them sent to teach us the hard lessons we most need to learn.” Certainly our son had been doing his job since birth, blessed as he was with a constitution and a temperament that continually challenged us to slow down and to reconsider our own assumptions about what the best might really mean.

At thirteen, he was just waking up intellectually, yet he was also possessed of a deep emotional intelligence and a wisdom that belied his age. A musician, a dreamer, a loner, he knew he wasn’t ready for the social and academic pressures of the fast lane. He would not thrive in the crowded classes in our town’s public school. His test scores, astonishingly low, would no doubt exclude him from the local private schools that might have been viable alternatives. But he had never taken such a test before; his mind didn’t work that way. So those numbers, I knew, reflected neither his intellect nor his potential. They did not begin to define his spirit or to describe his character. But they did remind us that, as always, our son needed to be allowed to forge his own way. The fact that we were already poised to move seemed, then, to be a sign.

For over a year, my husband and I had tried to summon the courage to give up the life we had in favor of a life we could only imagine, trying to picture ourselves elsewhere as we looked at towns and schools and houses, always wondering how we’d know, in the end, if we were really meant to go and where we were really meant to be. The fact that we couldn’t fully explain our impulse to move made it hard to justify. But in the end, it came down to this: We outgrow phases of life as inevitably as children outgrow favorite toys and last year’s winter jacket.

Painful as it was to acknowledge, the good suburban life that had suited us so well for so long didn’t quite fit anymore, for all sorts of reasons. The social and academic pressures to compete and to excel, to live and act and dress a certain way, would surely intensify in the years ahead, and we found

ourselves wanting an alternative to that for both our sons. Perhaps, we reasoned, a little more space, a little more freedom, and a little less scrutiny would be good for all of us. We began to realize that choosing a place to live, choosing a high school, and choosing a way of life that felt right and true and financially manageable were, in fact, all part of the same choice. It really was time to go.

We did not put most of our furniture into storage and take up residence in my parents' house without grief for what we were giving up. But a few things came into clearer focus as we began the work of bringing one long life chapter to a close and embarking on a new one. We could love the home we'd had and leave it anyway, leave it without knowing what would replace it. Really, we had no choice. But we also came to see that a gift can only be received with an open hand, and in order to find out what life was about to offer us, we would first have to release our hold on what was already over. That in itself proved to be quite a challenge and certainly a good lesson for our sons to learn.

"All journeys have a secret destination," writes philosopher and theologian Martin Buber, "of which the traveler is unaware." My husband and I couldn't claim to understand all of the forces that combined to loosen our hold on one life and propel us headlong into another, but we shared a sense that we wanted both our sons to grow up knowing there are alternatives to our culture's prevailing definitions of success and to the unspoken assumptions that had been an undeniable part of all our lives in our comfortable suburban town. Fortunate as we'd been to have that life, we were ready to relinquish some of its advantages in favor of new possibilities.

Perhaps, away from some of the expectations they had absorbed since childhood, our sons would in time discover their own best selves. Perhaps we two middle-aged parents would discover ours as well.

solstice

When all's said and done, all roads lead to the same end. So it's not so much which road you take, as how you take it.

—CHARLES DE LINT

I am driving home from a much needed summer vacation, my sons sound asleep in the backseat. Alone with my thoughts, I allow my mind to drift back to a moment just a month ago, when I stood stock-still, weeping, outside the coffee shop in our old hometown, a moment when the reality, the enormity, of what we were about to do hit me so hard that I wasn't sure I could take even one more step in the direction we'd already decided to go.

I knew every store on the street; the people walking by were people I'd seen before. All over town in houses I knew as well as my own, my friends were waking up, making breakfast, starting the day with husbands and children, children my own two sons had grown up with. It was all so familiar, so dear, so much a part of me.

Home wasn't just our dark green house on a dead-end street, it wasn't just our hammock in the backyard, my tomato plants sprawling through their metal cages, the kitchen sink where I'd done the dishes for thousands of meals. Home was this whole perfectly contained universe—town, friends, acquaintances, the streets we traveled every day, the restaurant where our two-year-old had once pitched backward in a high chair and knocked himself out cold, the baseball diamonds where our son had learned to throw curves, the library where we'd borrowed and returned hundreds of books, the church where Henry let himself in with his own key to practice the organ after school.

And we were about to leave it all. Panic stopped me in my tracks, heart hammering in my chest and eyes filling with tears, as if I'd just walked head-on into a wall. Our sons were enrolled in their new schools, my parents were busy clearing out bedrooms for us, but beyond that, whatever it was that we were going to was still an unanswerable question. I could touch and taste and smell every nook and cranny of what we were about to give up, but none of us had a very clear vision of what would ultimately take its place, and the fear of not knowing had me in its grip.

I had grown accustomed to these black moments, sort of, for as the day of our move approached, I was having to talk myself off the ledge every couple of hours: Check the to-do list again, empty another closet, donate more books to the rummage sale, keep packing. Breathe.

Once the job was finally done, once we'd said our last good-byes, unloaded all our earthly possessions into a rented storage space, put sheets on the beds at my parents' house and clothes into dresser drawers, release and exhaustion set in. School would start in a couple of weeks. Meanwhile, we'd given ourselves a week in neutral territory, a small rented cabin in Maine, where we could rest and recover.

Now, coming back, my husband and I are in separate cars, each of us, surely, lost in our separate reveries as well, wondering just how we'll start composing this new life chapter, what words we'll

inscribe on the bright, empty pages of next week, next month, next year. Driving home—home, amazingly enough, for now being the all too familiar red Cape where I grew up—I can only marvel at the big, looping circle of life that has somehow brought me, at age forty-five, right back to where I started from.

If someone had told me on the day I graduated from college, full of big plans and intent on a career in book publishing, that the road to New York City, Cambridge, and suburban Boston would ultimately lead me all the way back to my own parents' dinner table—balding husband, two sons, and family dog in tow—I'd have thought it a bad joke, not at all funny. As it is, I'm utterly torn in this moment between laughter and despair, so strange does it feel to be driving our old Toyota minivan along the very stretch of interstate I traveled countless times in high school.

Back then, I'd have been cruising in my best friend's blue Chevy Nova, riding shotgun home from the beach, salt-crusted and sunburned. Windows down, lemon-streaked hair blowing in the wind, sharing Newportts and comparing tan lines with Barbara and Joanne, singing along to Neil Diamond's "Sweet Caroline" on the radio as Barb's bare brown foot nudged the gas pedal to the brink of eighty. That scene is so close and real in my mind's eye that it might have been yesterday.

It is almost unfathomable that more than a quarter of a century separates me now from that teenage girl and her half-formed dreams. Harder still to believe that she's grown up to be me, a middle-aged mother of two, trying to fit back into the rooms and unspoken rules and family dynamics I thought I'd left for good the day I headed off to New Haven, a first husband (both of us way too young to be married to anyone), a first job as an editorial assistant (my dream come true), and a first apartment, furnished with flea market treasures that seemed to me the cutting edge of thrift.

Since that long-ago day when I launched myself so wholeheartedly into my adult life, I've never really come home again, except for the occasional overnight visit, holiday gatherings, family dinners. No wonder my husband and I have found it so difficult, over these last months, to explain to our friends and families our decision to give up everything we'd worked so hard to establish, to move away from "the good life" to, well, a stopgap life in which everything is temporary and unformed. Moving in with my parents, because we sold our own house without knowing where we were going? At times, we can barely explain it to ourselves.

Fear, excitement, sadness, loss—it is as if all the emotions I've stuffed away for months, in order to get the job of packing and moving accomplished, are rising up in me now at once. I pop in the Grateful Dead CD my brother gave me as a tongue-firmly-in-cheek "housewarming" gift. ("So," he'd said, laughing, "I hear you guys are moving back in with the parents—guess that means you'll be cranking up Neil Young and the Dead and reliving your lost youth.") And all of a sudden, there are a whole lot of people in the car with me—self-conscious, hair-flipping teenage self; current middle-aged, wrinkle-fighting self; seventeen-year-old best friends; two nearly grown boys of my own flesh and blood; forgotten high school crushes; beloved, long-suffering husband.

I glance back at my two sons—completely conked, heads lolling, mouths open, just the way they slept as toddlers—and it is as if all the years and chapters of my life, past and present, are colliding, surging up and blending into one another right here on the highway, to the strains of Jerry Garcia and the band. The song is "Sugar Magnolia," and it is in my blood. I know every note, every lyric, so well so completely, that thirty years evaporate in an instant. I shut off the air-conditioning, put down all the windows, and begin to sing along.

Releasing my grip on everything—our dear house, our old life, my old image of the way life should be—has brought me face-to-face with my own greatest fear: the loss of control. But for better or for worse, I remind myself now, we have already let go. Our sons' childhood bedrooms—seemingly

sacrosanct, unchanged for years—are no more. The spaces we created, furnished, and tended for so long are dismantled and in an instant have vanished from the face of the earth. Overnight, a new family has moved in and laid claim to the house that once seemed like a living, breathing extension of us. I *am* terrified—what if we’ve made a huge mistake and there’s no going back?

But at last, hurtling down the highway with my old high school music turned up loud, I’m feeling just the smallest stir of excitement as well. Uprooted as our family is, we are also suddenly and completely unfettered, and there is an undeniable freedom in that. Looking back, I see that the choices I’ve made over the years actually do make some sense now. Marriage, divorce, New York City apartments, career, second husband, moves, homes, children, friends, activities—all of these decisions, big and small, add up to something, a life that appears in retrospect not random at all but, rather, pretty coherent. Even the mistakes, from this vantage point, appear to have been part of some larger plan.

Looking ahead, however, I can discern no such pattern, no trail with an arrow on it pointing the way. All I can really do is give in to the moment at hand—then pause, consider, and take one more step forward into the unknown. In the meantime, though, this is it: life in all its weird messiness, three generations about to try living together under one roof, sharing a refrigerator, divvying up the newspaper, figuring out bathroom protocol, quiet time, and computer rules.

Can we rise to this task we’ve set ourselves—start fresh, find a home, and create a life with some balance and meaning—even while parenting two sons through the demanding years of adolescence and high school? I’m still not sure. But the reality, or so I tell myself, is that I’ve never really been in control anyway. I glimpse the perfection of my own life only in retrospect, rarely in the moment, when I can barely see beyond the end of my nose. And try as I might to hold on or to avoid change, the best I can hope to do is make my way through all these ups and downs one day at a time, viewing the inevitable seasons of transition and transformation as opportunities to relinquish the old beliefs and possessions that no longer serve me all that well anyway.

Our sons are as different in their needs and desires as two boys could possibly be. Right now, one is eager to get on with the challenges of high school, while the other cries himself to sleep most nights, furious at us and desolate for all he’s lost. My husband, who made the best case for staying put, is making a valiant effort now, for my sake, to put a good spin on changes he never sought. And I, who set all this upheaval in motion in the first place, feel the weight of that responsibility. Yet all of us yearn to reweave and strengthen the fabric of our life as a family. In our own ways, we must each begin to shift attention away from the life that was, so that we may allow ourselves to open to the life that is.

As this long, hard summer of moving and upheaval turns at last to fall, I realize that, with a little care and attention, the mundane details of life do have a way of falling into place. Our sons start school and take relief in the order prescribed by schedules and homework. My husband settles into our newly rented office space and begins to expand his business beyond its old guest bedroom limitations. My mother and I figure out how to share not only housework but a house. I learn—though not without some strain—how to be a mother and a wife in this house where I am still, first and foremost, a daughter. Day by day, we begin to piece together new routines as the old ones fade just slightly into memory.

Jack enters sixth grade and has to learn French, secure himself a place on the basketball court at recess and in the rigid pecking order of middle school boys. Henry assimilates quietly into high

school, taking his time, as usual, to make friends. He plays keyboard in a jazz ensemble, grows his hair long and nurtures the new beard sprouting on his chin, withholds judgment on everything—the move, the school, his new classmates. My parents dust off the Ping-Pong table in the basement, stack extra drinking glasses in the kitchen cupboards, and adjust to a household that's suddenly noisier, messier, and more crowded than most seventy-year-olds would willingly put up with.

Even so, we are under no illusions. Our makeshift living situation works because we all understand that it is not meant to last. A month after we move into my parents' guest bedroom, and in defiance of my own promise to put a moratorium on all big decisions for a while—especially those involving down payments—I slip away one afternoon and go house hunting.

When Jack once asked me to describe my dream house, I conjured, to his horror, a cottage with sloping wooden floors, a screen door that would bang shut and fasten with a hook, daisies in a mason jar on a big screened porch table, walls that could be whispered through, beds covered with faded quilts, afternoon light filtered through pines.

To a boy who favors wall-to-wall carpeting, overstuffed sectional couches, and digital everything, my rustic vision was cause for grave concern. My husband, on the other hand, is dubious but not altogether surprised when I phone him out of the blue from a New Hampshire hilltop and tell him I think I've found our new home—a two-hundred-year-old summer cottage that satisfies all my romantic longings. Here, on a narrow country road, is a solitary place that seems to embody the kind of space and timeless peace I've been dreaming of.

The small red-shingled saltbox is empty on the afternoon I see it first, silent, as if waiting in the hushed stillness for human life to return. Outside, in the slanting light of a late September afternoon, the touch of a long-ago gardener is everywhere in evidence. Peonies sprawl along the stone wall, ancient lilac bushes frame the driveway, mint and thyme multiply at the kitchen door beneath a rampant vine of lacy clematis climbing to the rooftop in full ivory bloom.

Tall ferns sway gently in the breeze, softening every edge, filling each neglected garden bed alongside scraggly, toppled roses and spikes of goldenrod. A black, three-foot-long snake dozes, still as stone, on a wedge of granite by the barn. On the narrow screened porch there is a jumble of wicker chairs, an old metal glider, its cushions faded from decades of afternoon sun, and a small square table set, as if for all time, with binoculars, notebook and pen, a reading lamp, and a well-thumbed copy of Peterson's *A Field Guide to the Birds*.

Beyond the windows there, a grassy lawn gives way to a steep decline, fields, stone walls, and a wide-open view of mountains, two gentle peaks looking like nothing so much as a pair of softly rounded breasts. There is not another house in sight, just a dilapidated gray cottage far across the field and an old shed on the other side of the road. There is something eternal here, ancient and quiet and still.

Two days later, my husband walks through the tiny, crooked rooms, peers into the dank, hand-dug cellar hole, and shakes his head. He wants me to be happy. He thinks I've lost my mind. His response sobers me, but my own attraction to the place only intensifies.

Again and again in the days that follow, I find myself returning to the house, to see how the mountains look at different times of day, to find my way along the trails in the woods across the road to linger at the pond, or to steal glimpses of the empty porch, so inviting on these luminous autumn afternoons. It is far from practical, this dilapidated old cottage. And given the work to be done, it will be no bargain at any price. Yet try as I might, I can't make myself stay away, can't stop shaking my reluctant, sleepy husband awake in the middle of the night to point out yet another attribute I'm sure he, in his pragmatism, has overlooked.

- [download Hitler's Empire: Nazi Rule In Occupied Europe](#)
- [read Improvisation: It's Nature and Practice in Music pdf, azw \(kindle\), epub, doc, mobi](#)
- [read **One Last Strike: Fifty Years in Baseball, Ten and a Half Games Back, and One Final Championship Season**](#)
- [Forbidden Forward: The Justin Fashanu Story pdf, azw \(kindle\), epub](#)
- [Eye Pathology: An Illustrated Guide for free](#)

- <http://creativebeard.ru/freebooks/Flying-Without-a-Net--Turn-Fear-of-Change-into-Fuel-for-Success.pdf>
- <http://deltaphenomics.nl/?library/The-Complete-Jewelry-Making-Course--Principles--Practice-and-Techniques--A-Beginner-s-Course-for-Aspiring-Jewe>
- <http://diy-chirol.com/lib/A-Kiss-Remembered.pdf>
- <http://twilightblogs.com/library/Boutique-Knits--20--Must-Have-Accessories.pdf>
- <http://yachtwebsitedemo.com/books/Historical-Dictionary-of-Nepal.pdf>