

THE WRITING ON THE WALL

I've lived in my house in Metuchen for the last 30 years. For the first five, I rented part of it from the owner Dr. Donald Akey. He made a deal to charge me an inexpensive rent if he could still use the kitchen that adjoined the office where he continued seeing patients.

It was a good deal for me except that I'd find myself sitting in the kitchen, in my pajamas, sipping coffee on a Saturday morning, listening through the thin door as Dr. Akey delivered catastrophically bad news to some patient I couldn't see. It was a sobering way to begin the weekend. The doctor would then join me for a coffee. He'd tell me stories of his world travels. And then, like all good doctors, he'd smoke half a pack of cigarettes.

When he retired, he sold me the house at a generous price. I remember when I returned from the closing, I walked down the basement steps, pulled out a ballpoint pen, and wrote on the plaster wall: "Robert Kaplow buys this house. August 2, 1993."

I wrote on the wall because, for the first time in my life, I actually *could* write on the wall. There were no parents to disapprove; no landlord to alarm. It was my wall. And today, 26 years later, that sentence is still there. The wall is a little more cracked and faded; I'm significantly more cracked and faded, but there it is.

I've been remembering all this because I'm about to move four minutes away to a larger, sunnier house near the library. Why exactly I'm doing this remains a little mysterious to me. I'm at the age ("Two seniors please") when I'm supposed to be downsizing my life: discarding books that have remained maddeningly unread for 20 years; throwing away warranties to appliances bought a dozen years earlier. Instead I'm sitting in my lawyer's office writing checks. Emailing a real estate agent. Hiring a home inspector. Arranging for the new property to be surveyed. Leaving two radon-testing tins in the basement....

"Are you sure you can handle this?" asks Lynn. "Maybe you should just keep your old house for awhile, in case this is all too much."

"I don't think this a really useful conversation to be having," I say, measuring my words against my rising tide of dread. "It's an adventure. It may be successful; it may not...."

"Well, excuse me for asking such a perfectly sensible question."

"If I don't do this now, I'm never going to do it; they're going to carry me out of this place in an empty snow-blower box."

This house is intended for Lynn and me to finally live together in our fashion — which means she'll mostly be in this new house with me and have her own space there. But she'll also keep her small house in Nyack for reasons that might be obvious from our exchange. We're both touchy loners.

I'm supposed to close on the new house on Friday. I imagine picking up the key — driving home alone — standing in that airy, light-filled place by myself for the first time as the owner. And what I'll hear in my head is the old Talking Heads song: *And you may say to yourself: My God, what have I done?*

It's a beautiful house, I say to myself. I've never lived in a beautiful house. That was somebody else's dream. A house with a stove so splendid it looks as if a chef should be attached. A photograph of my late father looks at me from my kitchen table. *Be good to yourself*, he tells me. I can physically hear his voice. The photograph of my late sister looks at me from the wall: *I'm so excited for you, Bobby. Can you be excited for once in your life?*

I walk around my old house—which Clayton Hollander had built in the 1930s — and I suddenly want to photograph every inch of it: my piano with “I Married an Angel” open on the stand; my framed movie poster of *The Maltese Bippy*; my pinball machine; my grandfather's grandfather clock. This house is a drafty, creaky antique whose kitchen contains an enormous white porcelain sink that weighs as much as a small automobile. Farewell, my lovely!

I take out my camera and start clicking away at every crack and stain and configuration, proving to myself that it's true. I'm really doing this. I'm moving.