

The End of the Affair by Laurel Saville

What happens when it's time to leave a much-loved, much-remodeled home?

The worst moment of many bad moments renovating my 150-year-old farmhouse? The time I realized I could not get inside my home because every door and most windows were blocked by the detritus of bad remodeling decisions made by previous owners: beige vinyl siding, cheap storm windows, mocha colored carpet, vinyl flooring, the grey fluff of blown in insulation, endless asphalt shingles. Of course, I was supposed to be at a dinner party just then. With my husband. Who was on the roof. Covered with filth, happily adding to the piles below him.

More than 10 years later, I'm still with the house. Not so with the husband. We made it to that dinner party and through the stresses of renovation. We didn't make it through the more quotidian stuff. The house, on the other hand, has seen me through everything from my first days as a bride to deaths of that marriage, a few pets and a parent, half a dozen jobs, roommates wonderful and forgettable, boyfriends who came and went and one who stayed, the launching of my own business, storms of weather and emotion, dinner parties, holidays, a chimney fire, starting graduate school. Among other things.

In turn, I have taken what was a nondescript, somewhat ramshackle farmhouse suffering from various forms of neglect and insult and transformed it into a beautiful, Victorian home full of charm and comfort, surrounded by gardens that offer flowers and fragrance for much of the year. I have taken this house down to its bones, stripped to its sheathing, and built it back with improvements from wiring to windows. I have uncovered aspects of its original beauty, removed old chicken coops, sculpted carpet, and a mulch of white marble chips. I've added endless touches from compost to cabinetry and a claw foot tub.

And now, after 14 years, I am moving. I am trading the country for the city, a lawnmower for parks, dirt paths for concrete sidewalks and this old house for another old house. This place has become more than I envisioned and has repaid my foresight with emotional, physical and financial shelter. People ask me how I can leave, as if I'm forsaking a living thing, or worse, some essential part of myself.

This house is certainly the expression of a huge and ongoing creative act, and leaving is a bit like quitting a novel that has been years in the making. Don't they say that great art is never finished, simply abandoned? Perhaps. But in this case, I like to think that I am passing on a work in progress to another steward, perhaps even another creator. And I hope that the work I have done to date will set a precedent, a standard of quality that will be continued. Given how many people have fallen enough in love with this house to want to make it their home, I think my hopes for its ongoing improvement are not unfounded. It certainly makes the walking away feel more like a handing over.

There is a corner of this house that started as a bit of undifferentiated space in a kitchen/dining room addition. It became what one friend calls the "figure out your life nook", marked by piles of books and an oversized chair that looks out over the gardens, a place where you can watch the hummingbirds zip among the bee balm and the crabapples turn from green to red as the days get shorter. I have spent countless hours in that chair, working, reading, napping, and thinking about not just what I wanted to move away from, but what I wanted to move towards. When showing the house one day to prospective buyers, I pointed to that area and told them its name. The woman said, "Oh, does it work? Because I could really use that!" I am happy to report that my leaving that cozy spot is perhaps the greatest evidence that indeed it does.