

# LOSING HOME

---

What happens when we can no longer  
return to our childhood home?

*Words and images: Amy Souza*

January 2020, 8 a.m. Pacific time: My phone flashes my sister's name, calling from the East Coast. Still bleary from waking up and month two of slow surgical recovery, I answer.

"Hey, I'm at the lawyer's signing papers to sell the house. Is this price OK with you?"

"Wait, what?"

"The lawyer said he'd call you, but I told him it's fine, I'll do it."

*Wait, the house isn't for sale, I think.* My brain struggles to acknowledge my sister's words as a tiny pit forms in my gut. She's found a buyer for my childhood home on the Massachusetts coast and is signing papers right now. My stomach burns; my face and limbs go numb. The pit starts to spread warm, bright pain. This is the first I've heard about selling.

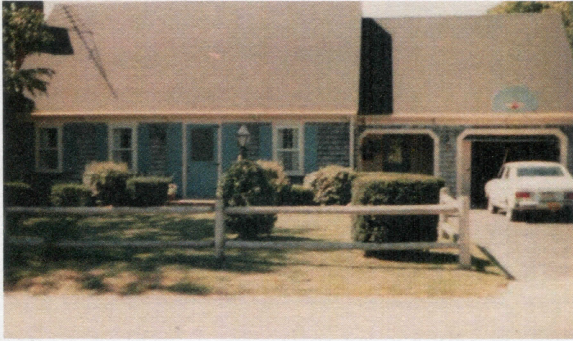
I am the house's part-owner, which should give me a say in its fate, but my sister and the family lawyer had earlier convinced me to remain off the

deed so my future ex-husband couldn't stake a claim. It never struck me to need protection from anyone else. I say something timid about not wanting to sell and my sister says the deal's decided; there's no going back. Since my mother moved into a nursing home three years ago, my sister has tended the house. Now she is done. 72 Middle Street will no longer belong to us.

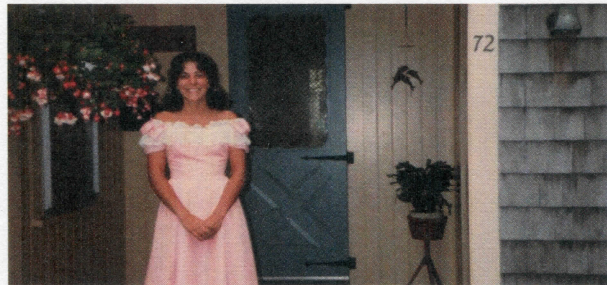
\*\*\*

Love, home and belonging have been my steady basic desires, yet I also carry a frenzied itch to see the next place. I've bounced from New England to California to New England, Pennsylvania, and Virginia, then to and from Oregon, all in the company of a mostly reluctant husband. In 2014 we ended up back in Virginia and spent a year arguing about where to live and whether to stay together. When summer arrived and our





Photos of Amy through the years and her childhood home in Massachusetts



temporary lease ended, we packed up the dog and moved to Middle Street. Because it was neither Virginia nor Oregon. Because it was my safe harbor whenever seas felt rough. Because I didn't know what else to do.

We sank into an indecisive summer that still had bright spots: seashore dog walks, beach days with my mother, a farm market across the street. I cooked for everyone and found my mother good new doctors. As September's air blew in, I felt almost settled and I threw an idea out to my husband: *What if we stayed here, just for now? Maybe five years. My mother could use our help. We could live rent-free.* The ocean ebbed and flowed just six blocks away and the dog loved it. (I loved it.) *We could eat our favorite pizza, get all our food from local growers.*

I'd hardly finished talking before he dismissed my suggestion, and I didn't argue. Back to Oregon we went, conflicted yet excited. I loved driving

across the country and missed my Portland board game shop and groups of friends. When we arrived in October, we threw a party in our rented house and nearly everyone I knew came. The house was full. A spread of Portland foods, local beer and wine, my favorite West Coast humans. One woman came over and hugged me. "You're surrounded by people who love you," she said, and it felt true.

By the time a month had passed, I would never see any of them again except on Facebook. I don't know why, but my guess says in the time I'd lived back East everyone had continued without me. Now when they hosted parties or went on hikes, they invited others instead. I sobbed to my husband. How could I live here, when none of my people wanted to spend time with me?

"You are never satisfied," my husband said. "I knew you'd do this."

\*\*\*



After my sister's call I tried to make sense of what happened. Was the house really gone? Yes, really gone. I sat with the shame of how weakly I'd fought her decision to sell. Over weeks and months, shock melted into a grief that took on a life of its own. Though I continued to progress through time in the only way possible, I dwelled squarely in the past. Daily mundane experiences, like a bird's chirp or light shining through a window, hurled me back in time four decades and literally took my breath away. I dreamed about the house almost every night. Steep-pitched roof, cedar shingles, blue slatted shutters. Our wild flowering dogwood that ruled the front yard. My mother's clothesline stretched from just above the house's bulkhead to a dilapidated fence that framed two Roses of Sharon.

Whenever I closed my eyes, I found myself in a hallway, the kitchen, or the backyard. From 3,000 miles away, I could hear the thermostat's metallic click, heat winding its way through baseboards, pipes knocking as the house settled into sleep. I cried every day.

It didn't help that I already felt unmoored. Over three years my life had reshaped itself in unpleasant ways. My favorite little dog died at 18 and my husband moved out after 25 years. I'd suffered a brain injury at the hands of a drunk driver and my recent surgery had rekindled a latent illness. My life remained involuntarily solitary. I regularly went days without talking to anyone, and I longed desperately for home. Middle Street was my safe harbor in a life of who knows. Without it, I felt at sea.

\*\*\*

All of my grandparents immigrated to Massachusetts from the Azores, a Portuguese archipelago in the mid-Atlantic. I've considered that their spirit might live through me in my own

wandering nature. But I drift. When they arrived, they settled. Dug roots into foreign soil and became the forebears of nearly a hundred so far. They couldn't read, write, or speak English. Only one became a citizen. According to the parlance of the US government, they remained aliens. They left their homeland and never returned, but I wonder what their hearts whispered when the day turned dark. Did they miss their village, or never look back? Did they settle so firmly because they had no choice?

In Portuguese, *saudade* roughly translates to longing. It's said to be part of the Portuguese blood. We are a people who understand melancholy and what it means to miss someone or something so much that it takes over our essence. Maybe that's how we keep what we love alive.

\*\*\*

The year 2020 proceeded in 2020 fashion—the pandemic prevented me from traveling home to Middle Street one last time. Family conflict grew. Grief rolled in and nearly drowned me. I saw even fewer people day to day. Early summer, my mother read about the house's sale in her local paper and called to ask what had happened to her stuff. I could hardly breathe for the part I played in breaking her heart. In September, forest fires kept Oregon enveloped in thick smoke and ash—and then, unexpectedly, my mother died.

It seems ironic that I've spent my life moving here and there, enjoying the sense of getting physically lost. As I float through days that blend together, now all I want is to feel found. But everyone I love is gone, whether dead or just out of my life, as is the place I felt most me. Nearly 18 months have passed since my sister's January call. Time moves forward and carries me with it, but I feel displaced and off course. I still dream about the house.