

Packing toothbrush and toaster, Mum 'Brexit's' her home

Cluttered closets unveil a dusty pathway to past

By PATRICK WEBB
For The Daily Astorian

They say you cannot go home again. It's true. Next time, my key will not fit.

I am in England, moving Mum to an assisted-living apartment and clearing out her house, ready to sell it.

When she, Dad and my brother, aged 14 months, moved south from their native London to the Surrey countryside in 1954, Queen



Patrick Webb

Elizabeth II had been on the throne 448 days. Rationing, imposed during wartime, had only just ended, Winston Churchill was back as prime minister and a Briton had just run the first mile in under 4 minutes.

Their second son showed up three years later and stayed 18 years before beginning an

enjoyable career in newspapering that brought him to the North Coast.

Today, we are saying goodbye to that home I grew up in.

The good news is that Mum is happy to move, excited even.

Macular degeneration is robbing her of her eyesight. She cannot read, so she listens to talking books. Television is indistinct; the former nimble tennis player heard rather than watched Briton Andy Murray win Wimbledon last month. She's smart enough to realize that it's time to swap her three-bedroom duplex for a ground-floor studio apartment and learn its nooks and crannies in case her sight gets worse.

My Dad and my wife's father, deteriorating mentally and physically, left their longtime homes amid tearful pleading, creating stomach-churning guilt that lingers four and eight years later. Dad's pathetic, withered frame endured a disgusting, smelly nursing home for just short of a full year, a sentence with no remission for good conduct. It was a disgrace to dignity. I had never embraced that "death-is-a-relief" cliché until he died (on my wedding anniversary, so it's easy to remember).

This time, the patient is willing, the destination much brighter.

Half the size

Mum's new home is half the size of a volleyball court, though it appears to have everything she needs: a bathroom with sturdy safety rails in the shower, a compact kitchen alcove with spacious cupboards, her own front door and a glass rear door that opens onto a patio.

Except for the very wealthy, assisted-living facilities in England exist in rare public-private partnerships. The rent is not exorbitant, but government rules require tenants to sell their homes. Waiting lists are long, but Mum's age and infirmity boosted her to priority status.

After she fell ill during my visit in March (my cooking, perhaps?), Mum agreed to apply; I mailed her documentation en route to Heathrow Airport. Earlier this summer, our awkward weekly phone conversations — which had danced around the subject — morphed from "if" to "when." She realized she could no longer cope alone in the large house, even though paid caregivers visit her twice daily to fix light meals and make sure she takes her medications.

After being approved, Mum inspected her future home last month; the entire family held its breath. "I'm thrilled with it," she reported, and kept saying the same phrase each time I phoned. "I'm thrilled with it."

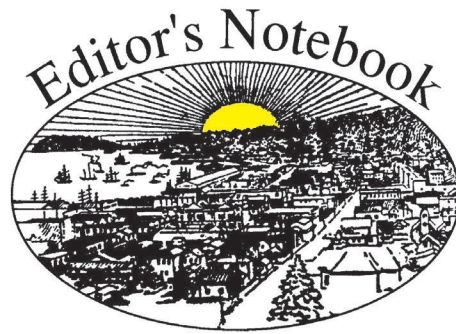
It became so like a mantra that I began to doubt. Did it signal that British "stiff upper-lip" she earned during her late teens in a London bomb shelter while the Luftwaffe repeatedly tried to kill her? When I arrived to coordinate her move earlier this month, the sparkle in her manner confirmed she truly felt joy at the prospect. She was embracing a new adventure — a positive one; I could have cried.

A practical list

Ever practical, Mum honed her list and put colored stickers on just eight pieces of furniture for the movers — nine if you add the pendulum wall clock her beloved brother Ollie had made.

Decades of accumulation were reduced to necessities, from toothbrush and toaster. One armchair to sit on, one for a guest. Bed, side table and cupboard. Carefully wrapped were a ceramic lamp Mum made in the 1970s and a framed black-and-white photo of the man to whom she was married for 65 years, Dad, looking younger than I ever knew him.

On moving day, I pressed her still-warm pajamas into a suitcase then lugged it down the stairs and loaded it into my tiny rental car. The trip to the next village was 2.6 miles, through



leafy lanes where I had ridden my bike and delivered newspapers for two summers. As we drove, I peeked sideways at my passenger, but detected no tears. Being Mum, she knew exactly what her son was checking on.

Younger friends from her lawn bowls club live in three of the 40 units. Medically credentialed staff are on hand 24/7, there's cheery lounge, a dining room for communal meals, plus a laundry where residents reserve machines in spindly cursive. Her room is bright, despite tall trees which shade the patio, and there is a bench handy to sit outside.

My job is to clear out what remains. Each day, I take a break from separating treasures from trash to share a meal or deliver some small items, mostly kitchen implements, cleaning supplies or plant pots.

At 5 foot 4 inches tall, with good wrists but no upper-arm strength, I am not built to lift heavy boxes or move anything larger than a dining room chair. I never have been, and these days my wobbly leg doesn't help. I'm miscast as the hands-on clearance site foreman, though the paperwork and logistics are my forte. Had I served in "M*A*S*H," I would have been Radar O'Reilly.

For a writer, this experience should be memorable, bittersweet, a cause for reflection, a life milestone, prompting clever words or images. It's not. Instead, it's one chore after another, dusty, dirty, wearing me out, taxing my patience. Just when I think I have made progress, I find something else that needs to be done, then rip another fingernail or bark my shins. Band-Aids adorn three limbs already.

A rush job

My deadline to fly back to the U.S. looms and there is a \$300 fee for changing my Air Canada ticket if I stay longer. I must hurry.

It doesn't help that the house is halfway up a narrow cul-de-sac, so there's no passing traffic for impromptu yard sales of books, costume jewelry or kitchenware. The day of Mum's move, the pantechnicon (that's what Britons call furniture vans) trapped neighbors for more than an hour.

Climbing into the attic makes me cough and sneeze. Even a mask doesn't filter out traces of the fiberglass insulation; two hours is all I can manage at one time before nasty coughing forces me to switch to lighter chores. Discarded memories emerge amid the dust. An HO-gauge electric train set brought joy to two brothers in the 1960s; now, the locomotive wheels are too rusted for any eBay profits. Dog-eared genealogical research papers compiled by Uncle Ollie inadvertently confirmed a skeleton in the family tree. They are crammed into two unfashionable blue suitcases; one rusty hinge flakes off when I open it.

There are spare curtains, a couple of working irons and a toy truck, still in its original box, to parcel out to relatives, neighbors and friends, but most items are beyond salvage; cords on most lamps and electric heaters are dangerously frayed. The helpful men at the municipal dump, where finicky British recyclers would make Oregon proud, grin when I drive up yet another time in my rented hatchback. "You again, Yank?" they tease, apparently hearing something that's infected my accent these past 36 years.

Some things cannot be dumped. A girl who was taught dress design by Norman Hartnell before he served regal clients, sewed a lifetime of bright-patterned dresses from material scraps called "remnants." Now Mum's creations — "exclusive" is her word for these one-of-a-kind designs — are being donated to thrift stores that prosper in Britain's depressed high streets (three, for the Red Cross, a hospice and a skin disease charity, coexist within 150 yards of her new home).

But Mum is happy; the family seems happy. I am exhausted, and trying to hide it.

Cup of tea?

On one midafternoon break, I drive the familiar 2.6 miles again. The millisecond I arrive at Mum's apartment, she plugs in her new kettle to brew a strong pot of Yorkshire tea. What else? She is settling into a new normalcy with remarkable efficiency.

"I hope I like it. I think I will," Mum said during our next-to-last phone chat before I left the North Coast for my transatlantic mission. "I just hope there's not a lot of old people there." She turns 91 on Sunday.

Patrick Webb, of Long Beach, Wash., is the former managing editor of The Daily Astorian.



Photos by Patrick Webb/For The Daily Astorian

May Webb of Surrey trims cuttings from a hydrangea for a friend as she prepares to leave her home of 62 years. She recalls moving into the newly built house and digging the bare yard in 1954, then planting potatoes to prepare the soil. Her new apartment home is in an assisted-living facility in the adjoining village.

'Mum is smart enough to realize that it's time to swap her duplex for a studio apartment and learn its nooks and crannies in case her sight gets worse.'



Favorite bears have played a key role in Webb family life. This bandana-wearing creature is pictured with some of the other "finds" in the attic, including a James Bond-style camera from a bygone era, still in its original box (2008 is the model number, not the year of issue), a bottle of French wine, an old British prayer book with Veterans' Day poppy, and a label maker, which may be recognizable to people who grew up in the 1970s.



Patrick Webb's mother moved out of her home on the exact day of the month that she moved in 62 years ago. The three-bedroom brick duplex was one of hundreds built after World War II for London commuters in villages, all clustered around train stations ensuring easy daily access to the capital.



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