Within the past year, both my uncle and aunt passed away, leaving me owner of the small unproductive southern Illinois family farm, with its unpretentious seven-room house dating back to the mid-1800s. As income from the farm declined and medical bills escalated, my uncle and aunt were unable to keep up with needed improvements, and the house fell into disrepair. It will have to be razed. It is within this house that my family roots lie and in which my early life unfolded...

My grandparents came to the house as newlyweds in 1905. My mother was born in the house in 1907, as was my uncle in 1915, and I, too, was born here in 1931. My uncle lived out his life in the house, sharing it with his first wife until she passed away, and later with his second wife.

In 1925 and 1926, as a teenager, my father came from Missouri to Illinois to work for my grandparents during the March-November crop season, living in the house with the family. In August of 1926, he married their daughter, my mother.

My parents farmed nearby farms, and as an only child, I spent much of my youth in this house with my grandparents and uncle. Because my parents moved from farm to farm, this house came to be my emotional home.

It was, therefore, with a heavy heart, that I made the decision to sell the farm. It is not profitable, and I could not be the one to destroy the central essence of my life.

All personal possessions have been removed from the house and auctioned off. Only barren unlighted empty rooms remain.

Tomorrow the deed will be signed over to the new
The House in 1904 — Grandmother at age 14 stands in back, the year before her marriage. Her brothers stand on each side of her. Her father, stepmother, and stepsisters and brothers are in front.

The next time I come this way, the house will have disappeared.

Over the past fifty-six years, I have said goodbye to the family of this house — my grandfather (1948), father (1956), grandmother (1959), first aunt (1972), mother (1985), uncle (2004), and second aunt (2004). Seven goodbyes.

It is now time for the last goodbye.

I turn off the state highway and into the short driveway. Out of the car at the sidewalk leading to the back porch.

As I look at the house, my mind drifts back in time and the past becomes the present — The aluminum siding mysterically melts away, leaving the weather-worn wooden siding as I remember from my youth — The walls of the sun porch slowly dissipate, exposing the old open porch, with the swing at the end.

The house is now as it was then. The iron boot scraper is still embedded in the sidewalk. As before, I scrape my shoes, four long strides, a jump up onto the porch, my heel catching the edge, slowing me down for two short steps to the kitchen door. It feels so familiar. The wooden-framed screen door, with its coiled spring once again is in place.

Into the kitchen. In my mind’s eye, the empty rooms become furnished as I remember them. Behind the door are two rows of coat hooks on which hang dusty jackets. And, neatly lined up below, rubber boots and work shoes as if still there after all these years. On the wall to the right, the door to the closet. The odor of musty work clothes still registers in my mind. Next to the closet, the door to the basement.

Under the stairs I imagine the table piled high with potatoes from the garden. Along the walls, shelves upon
In 1940:

Grandfather and Grandmother, seated, Uncle and Mother, standing, next to the back porch.

shelves of neatly stacked jars of cold-packed sausage, canned tomatoes, blackberries, raspberries, peaches, peas, green beans, and, for my grandfather's favorite pie, gooseberries. I move through the door leading to the bedroom.

In the far corner, the old dresser appears with its large attached mirror. Next to it, a silent Minnesota treadle sewing machine. On the north wall, I discern the wardrobe in which hung the "good suits" and "Sunday dresses." To the right of the door, I imagine a bed, where it had always resided - It was to this bed my grandfather brought his 16-year-old bride and where they slept throughout their 43 years of married life, and, afterwards, as did my uncle and his two wives - It was in this bed my mother was born, my uncle was born, I came into the world, and where my grandfather died - The image fades - Now there is only a lonely empty space - Nothing remains to chronicle the intimacy and joy, the pain and sorrow, the lives that began, or the life that ended in this small now barren space.

I move on through the far door to steps leading upstairs and enter the room on the left, the "south bedroom." When I was a boy, this was the spare bedroom. Earlier, it had been my mother's room. I let my mind drift back even further in time.

I see school-girl decorations on the walls and pictures of her mom and dad, alongside her golden brush and hand-mirror set, atop the cherry dresser that had been her grandmother's. Here she cried alone when things went wrong. Here she giggled with her girlfriends on sleepovers. And in this room she spent her wedding night.

Across the hall to the "north bedroom."

This had been my uncle's room from when he was a boy until he married and moved downstairs. In this room I slept away the many nights as a small boy while staying with my grandparents. Now so desolate.
I move back down the stairs, my hand gliding ever so softly over the smooth wooden banister. How short it seems, but as a small boy it was a long slide to the bottom. On now into the living room.

This room was reserved for special guests. My eyes sense the uncomfortable wooden-back sofa and matching S-shaped love seat, two rocking chairs, and the large cast iron stove with mica windows on the door. In the far corner my grandfather’s coffin had rested for home visitation. It was through the door I just entered that a family friend, Mrs. Pointer, gently held me – seventeen-year-old – as we came into the room to say my first goodbye. The inconsolable emotions that wracked my body that rainy October afternoon are the same as I feel today – Fifty-six years of maturity allow me to keep them bottled up inside. The scent of flowers lingers in my mind as I look into the corner.

On into the dining room. Next to the door on the right was the table with the old RCA radio and its morning glory horn speaker. The image of my grandfather appears as he hunches over the radio lining up the five dials so as to tune in Major Bowes and his Amateur Hour.

In the corner, the icebox. The drain seemed always to plug, melting ice water running onto the floor. In the northwest corner is the door to the steep stairs to the “back bedroom.” There, the teenager from Missouri slept while living with my grandparents. In front of the door, I make out the worn wooden rocking chair where my grandfather held me in his lap as he read aloud comics in the Alton Evening Telegraph.

On the west wall had been the plastered-in fireplace, the mantle still protruding from the wall. On the mantle, a shed-shaped red crinkle-finished clock with a sliver of broken glass missing from the face. This same clock, complete with broken glass, now strikes the hours on our own fireplace mantle. In front of the old fireplace, the wood burning stove, with smooth silvery iron flanges around the sides, on which we warmed our feet on cold winter nights. My feet still feel the tingle of the hot iron flanges.

In the middle of the room, shrouded in an eerie haze, emerges the dining table. Oh, the family events this table bore witness to – Christmas dinners, with my grandmother’s pride and joy, steam-pudding with soft white sauce – Countless Sunday dinners with my parents and family friends, one of whom in later years became my second aunt – Evenings of playing pinochle and Chinese checkers with my grandparents to the light of a coal.
through my now misty eyes, as if it were still there, I see the kitchen table – the heart of the family for nearly a century.

It was around this table a sixteen-year-old bride and her husband started their life together. Soon a wooden highchair held a baby daughter. A few years later it held a baby son...Still later, came the teenage hired hand from Missouri. At first he watched with only passing interest the morning disarray of the high school girl at breakfast, her squabbles with her mom at supper over when she should be home from the evening’s date, and as she brought her boyfriends home for meals... One can only speculate when sly glances across the table foretold a differing relationship. They never said.

A myriad of past visions and sounds from around this small table rush by as if on fast forward. Two freeze in my mind: The day my grandfather came from the mailbox and dejectedly dropped the draft notice on the table in front of my uncle – Later he was bringing “V-mails” from somewhere in Germany. Then, there was the noontime when my grandfather, who had come across documents signed by his long dead father, told us how surprised he was that his father’s handwriting was almost identical to his own. This is my last recollection of my grandfather’s voice... The next evening he was dead.

One by one, the lives of those who illuminated this table – this house, were extinguished and I said my goodbyes.

Now, there is only a silent void in the middle of an empty, darkening room. It is time to say the final goodbye. Fifty-six years of acquired mental self-discipline since my first goodbye are insufficient to hold in check my emotions. Unabashed tears, as of that long ago rainy October afternoon, flood to the surface.

I do not want to leave. But I must. For the last time. I pass through the kitchen door, across the porch, and down the sidewalk. A touch of the boot scraper. Into the car. Slowly I back out of the driveway. As thousands of times before. The road is clear. I turn onto the hard road and slowly accelerate. The house receding in the distance. I do not look back.

I have said my last goodbye. ☞

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