

## A Second Home

My mother moved to Williamstown last summer. This news would be unremarkable but for a few bothersome facts. 1) For most of her 30 years in the United States, she has lived on suburban Long Island, part of the large, bustling Korean-American community in the New York metropolitan area. 2) As a result, she never became fully fluent in English. 3) She does not know a soul in the entire Berkshires. So the Purple Valley, for all its many virtues, is not the first place I'd imagine my mother would end up.

Circumstances changed dramatically, however, when my father died unexpectedly in an accident indirectly caused by a debilitating neurological disease he had been diagnosed with several years before. It became clear that my mother should sell their house and get a smaller place. But when she brought up the idea of living in Williamstown, I immediately dismissed it as preposterous. Imagine: She's snowbound in a small house on a country road, without an Asian grocery store or Korean church in sight. I feared that my mother wasn't thinking clearly, still in the grips of shock and grief.

To her credit, she did make a good-faith effort to house hunt in and around New York. But given the tight market, the prospects were discouraging. Then she brought up Williamstown again. Thinking of the place made her happy, she said; she couldn't get the idea of living there out of her mind. "Let's think about it," I stalled.

My mother, however, charged ahead. She drove up with her cousin, just to see how it would feel to actually be there. She saw a listing for a one-bedroom condo in a large Victorian near campus and asked me to inquire about it. "If it's at least 1,000 square feet, I want to take a look at it," she said. I replied, in my know-it-all tone, "Oh please, Mom, there's no way a one-bedroom is going to

be that big!" But she insisted, and I called and found out it was 1,100 square feet! She went, she saw, she made a deposit on the spot.

Naturally, friends and family had their doubts. Why on earth would she want to go so far? Where's Williamstown? Even after the papers were signed and movers were hired, I worried. Is she making a big mistake? Should I have tried harder to discourage her? Then again, maybe my mother didn't need or want the same things as everybody else. She was sure this was right for her, and I wanted to be supportive.

Years ago my mother told me how she'd been torn between marrying my father and running away to Europe to pursue her art. As it turned out, in choosing the former, she hadn't had to entirely give up the latter. With my father's support, she continued to paint on and off over the years, exhibiting occasionally in New York and Korea. Over time, running a small business and raising two children in an adopted country soaked up most of her time, energy and resources. And after my father fell ill, the art was abandoned.

Now, in her early 60s, my mother was at another crossroads: She could stick with the distractions and comforts of the familiar or experiment with the life that remained to her. "Won't you be lonely?" I asked. "Oh no," she said, "it's much more lonely to be with people who don't really know me than to be alone with my thoughts." She wanted to paint full time, she wanted her cabin in the woods, her creative retreat. Still, why Williamstown? Why not an artsy community along the Hudson, say?

It wasn't just Williamstown but Williams itself that drew her. My brother Bo '92 and I both attended Williams, so for five years the school was our family's second home. My parents visited often; they got to know our friends, toured the museums, followed us to crew races and volleyball games,

and took us to Chopsticks, where the Korean proprietor brought us *kimchi* from the back.

My father, especially, had loved Williams, maybe even more than Bo or I ever did. Even before we graduated, my father was a devoted reader of the *Alumni Review*. His favorite weekend wear was an old yellow sweatshirt with "Williams College" in faded purple lettering that I had left behind, and he drank his morning coffee in a Williams mug from Bo. He loved bragging about the school to friends and acquaintances—to anyone, really. If they had never heard of Williams, so much the better—it was like letting his listeners in on a beautiful secret. He chided other Korean-American parents for their narrow fixation on Harvard and Yale, and the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings added fuel to his proselytizing fire.

I knew all this, and yet I was taken by surprise when my mother said that the years spent driving up the Taconic to visit my brother and me had been among the happiest in my father's life. I had never consciously considered that my parents, too, had a relationship to this place, independent of me and Bo, that they had their own charged connections to this small college nestled in mountains that reminded them of their native countryside. The three-hour drive must have seemed a part—perhaps the most rewarding or the most hopeful—of a much longer journey. That their children belonged to such a place, nurtured by books and trees, seemed a tangible measure of how far they'd come.

Leaving her old life was not an effort to erase or forget. At the threshold of her future, a stone's throw from the site of the new student center, my mother's new place pulses with memories.

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