



I pack up my flat – then burst into tears

Bad memories binned and furniture safely stored, Katie bids a bittersweet farewell to the city

AFTER THE FAR west tip of Cornwall, where life feels relatively sane, London feels wrecked. In Soho, vibrant streets have collapsed into silence. Even Dalston, where hipsters don't care about Covid, is eerily still.

Most of my friends have left the city, swapping expensive rents for their parent's homes. Others had already been priced out. Now it seems madness to me that a young couple is willing to spend a fortune to drive each other crazy working from home in my cramped flat. Still, I'll take the cash.

Perhaps they will pull out? Then I could fantasise about moving to the country without actually having to do it.

I lie awake doing long-multiplication – juggling the cost of the mortgage and the bills; balancing the stamp-duty saving vs the expense of a short-term rental. Then catastrophising about what I'll do if house prices fall and I become a mortgage prisoner, sad and alone in the country with no central heating or realistic prospect of ever having sex again.

I try to stay positive, reminding myself this is an exciting adventure and not a punishment. I use the insomnia to pack. Taking books off shelves, emptying kitchen cupboards, folding clothes into suitcas-

es. Will I ever wear this stuff again? Who needs a Vivienne Westwood cocktail dress in a field?

In packing, I untangle my life from my ex's. It's disappointing, although not surprising, how easily our things fall apart. As if our lives never really mixed. In one corner there's my Tracy Chapman records, in the other his wide-screen TV. My Glastonbury rainbow candles; his

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copy of Tony Robbins' *Awaken the Giant Within*.

The things we got together are trickiest. The photograph we took when we stayed on a houseboat in Sausalito, blown-up for the wall; the children's book I bought him for Christmas ('for when we have children of our own' the message inside reads). I put them all in the bin.

Now the flat, once loud with parties, friends, fat paws and the first flush of an almost-married life, is just empty floorboards.

I loved this flat so much. Before I bought it, I'd moved between shared houses and bedsits almost every six months since I left home at 17. Here I'd finally made a home – painting the walls, paying to get the sash window fixed.

If things were normal, I'd cram my friends inside for one last drink. Instead I make cocktails from leftover holiday spirits and dismantle the bed. Later, drunk, I open the window leaning out to the cold, London night, breathing the city in. After 15 years, I still felt I was discovering it – finding strange old pubs and hidden cafés on long walks with Stringer Belle.

Only this year, exploring my father's Judaism, the city had opened up to me again, taking me to rabbis' houses and for Friday-night dinners. I can always come back, I think, falling asleep.

I wake up with a crashing hangover and an email from my solicitor telling me we're exchanging. The week is signing contracts, removal men, packing my life into a storage unit in Feltham.

On Friday I hand over the keys then drive to Hampstead Heath. I buy a fresh challah then burst into tears of exhaustion and relief. I can always come back, I think, climbing into the Honda and leaving London. ▀