

# coming home

One morning last January, I woke up in my fifth-floor walk-up rental apartment for the last time. It was a teeny two-bedroom with no closets, no tub or bathroom sink, and the kind of crumbling, mazelike layout you find only in New York City. My

15-month-old son stumbled around among precariously stacked boxes that seemed like they might crush him at any moment. “We gotta get out of here, Skuli,” I whispered to him. “And the good news is, we are!”


There have been a handful of moments when I felt my personal dial click from child to woman: the shared midnight cigarette on the roof of Plantz Hall just a few hours into my freshman year; my first apartment in Manhattan, where I felt like Marlo Thomas in *That Girl*, even though the shower was in the kitchen; and the trip home from the hospital with my new baby—I marveled that the nurses were just letting me leave with this vulnerable bundle. But today was poised to be the most mature moment of my life: I was becoming a homeowner.

I tallied that in a decade of living in New York, I had spent roughly \$120,000 on rent. There were many times when I thought I should buy a place, but that step was always linked to some far-off fantasy: when I got a six-figure book advance, when I got my own TV show, when I married Ethan Hawke. It never seemed like something I could just *do*. After Skuli was born, I had to face the fact that, while a chaotic housing arrangement might have been tolerable for

How do you know when you're a grown-up at last?

just me, now there was someone relying on me to provide a home. So I swallowed a huge price tag for a place in Brooklyn, faced down the mortgage and the reams of papers to be signed, and awaited the crush of responsibility.

The movers were late, of course, and it took them hours to lug my belongings down the long flights of stairs. It was dusk before we headed for the new place, and I felt a catatonic weariness creep in as I contemplated unloading and unpacking—and a life of debt. When we pulled up in front of my new building, my sister Andrea was already there, sitting on a bench outside. As the movers began to unload the van, Andrea zipped out for 20 minutes and returned with groceries, wine, and a cheese plate. It was when I saw food in my new, perfectly clean fridge that I felt the click: This home is mine. I did it. I am a grown-up.

Later that evening I sat with Andrea and Skuli on the floor of his new bedroom, feeding him strawberry cheesecake ice cream and laughing as he ran the length of the apartment. Our old place had required living like a penned veal calf, but now he ran like a drunken Olympian while we cheered. I went to bed that night with all but a few boxes unpacked, a full stomach, and a little son who would soon try out one of his first words: “home.” 

■ Jennifer Baumgardner is the author of the new book *Look Both Ways*.