

# different address, same hearth

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ILLUSTRATION BY BRIGITTE WEST

**I**t would be the sixth move in my eight-year-old daughter's life.

We had arrived in Montana in the teeth of winter, and now, six months later, the lease for our rental house was about to expire. We were preparing to move.

Again.

This nomadic movement, which began in my childhood, used to be a point of pride for me, a way of declaring that I was interesting and special. I didn't need roots. I was worldly, you know.

I do not feel this way anymore. I am somewhat embarrassed by my constant moving. As if it reveals a softness in my character—an inability to stay, to build something, to weather the storms of one place.

This move, my family's shortest in terms of distance—simply across town—was shaping up to be the most wrenching. I felt on the verge of shattering, as if this move would be the one that would finally and completely break me.

Regular moving had forced me—through great, sustained effort—to try to make myself, my own body, into my home. (The results have been mixed.)

But every home, no matter how shabby, needs a hearth—a place to soothe and gather yourself. A safe place to present your most vulnerable self. Sometimes, it's an actual hearth. Sometimes, it's a bed or a kitchen table.

And so, two weeks before moving day, some bit of subterranean knowledge surfaced, and I reached for my favorite book: *My Friend Flicka* by Mary

O'Hara. If a book can be a person's hearth, this one is mine.

At naptime and bedtime, my kids and I lay crossways on my bed. One child tucked on each side, the fan in the window blowing gently on our faces, I would open the threadbare, cloth-bound book and carefully turn the velvety paper.

Before I could begin reading, my four-year-old would press his nose into its pages and inhale deeply. "I love the smell of books," he'd say.

He does not do this with other books. Just this one. I think what he means is, "I love the smell of *this* book." This book. This hearth. This place.

Some days, we read only one chapter. Others, we read three. Always, I'd pause to reread the most beautiful passages, the most poignant scenes. I'd read as slowly as I could, savoring each word.

While we read, we were transported to Wyoming at the beginning of the twentieth century, and our friends Ken, Nell, Rob, and Howard. We never wanted to stop reading, never wanted to leave the story. We didn't want to face the crushing reality of our move. We didn't want to fill boxes, scrub toilets, say goodbye to dear neighbors.

This book became a safe, comforting place for my family to gather during those summer days.

On the last night in our rental house, we once again piled onto my bed, read a chapter, and fell asleep with words from the book echoing in our ears.

The next day we moved.

That evening, as we collapsed onto our creaky, comfortless cots, I read the next chapter. As I read, my family was wholly carried from one place to the next. From There to Here. Different address, same hearth.

I first read *My Friend Flicka* when I was a horse-crazy child, and I had deeply felt Ken's emotions. As I've reread this book over the years, my sympathies have expanded. This year, I am, for the first time, older than Ken's mother, Nell, and I understand her heart well.

When I read this story aloud to my children, I am also reading aloud to all my younger selves. This summer's reading was a homecoming for me, a reunion.

Recently, my friend Michelle took a long train ride with her three children across her native England. As they traveled, she read aloud from *James and the Giant Peach* by Roald Dahl. It did not take long until the neighboring passengers set down their devices, leaned close to listen, and warmed themselves at that hearth.

Aren't we all on a long train ride? Trying to discern the threads of our story? Trying to be good companions to ourselves and others?

My family gathers and we read to create a place—not a geographical place, but a cherished place we each carry within us, wherever we may go. ✨