

As far as I can tell, there's not much to be said for the empty nest.

It's one of those inevitabilities that come with growing older; next thing I know my knees will ache, and before too long I'll hate my neck, too. People, even your very own little people, move on. The only thing as shocking as having your children leave home was having had them arrive in the first place. Postpartum redux. Well, you got used to that, so I suppose you'll get used to this.

I say "you" advisedly; for me, there is no hope. I'm never going to adjust to the empty nest. Since my younger son left, I've been traveling a great deal, thinking that by leaving I can negate his absence. (How can he be gone if I'm gone?) But I'm a homebody, and yearn for my hearth even as I lock the door to leave for the airport. Much as I love adventure, I'm overjoyed to come home. Once I unlock the door, though, a heavier yearning wraps around me. In a quick glance I see that everything is as I left it. No one has disturbed the music on the piano; no one has left a skateboard in the hall for me to trip over. It is a matter of time before I have to get rid of the house to avoid coming home.

This sounds terribly sad. It is; I am. Not depressed, but sad—a distinction we seem to have forgotten. I'm not going to pretend to have found a silver lining to this situation, or even bother to look for one. I could imagine having more time for a love affair or for myself. I could rhapsodize about having more time to waste, but I've never had trouble wasting time. Nothing can best the experience I had a few months ago just listening to my son breathe when I stole into his room to see if he was still alive at two in the afternoon, as he had shown no sign of waking up. I watched his chest rise and heard his breath, just as I had when he was a tiny infant in his crib and I was the anxious mother at the center—at the heart—of his life. Children leave, and a chapter closes—no, not a mere chapter: a volume thuds to a weighty close. Did you ever put a book down before the end because you couldn't bear the finality? Would that our lives were so easily manipulated.

But. But, we go on. I understand, all of a sudden, that I am living in one of those moments that I think of as a hinge: a door yawns open onto

a new vista of life. Nothing is the same after a hinge moment. (Childbirth is a hinge; so is divorce, and so is buying a house.) I understand, in a flash, that the tables have turned. I need my children more than they need me. One day, not too far away, if I am so lucky, it will be my sons who anxiously watch my breathing. The thought takes my breath away. We could argue about this: my sons still need me, of course, in the way that people who love one another need one another. But there is a tectonic shift in the balance—or nature—of our love. A few months ago I had the car keys, and the house keys, and the life keys. I gave permission; I bought the bread; I woke them and I said when enough was enough. I made a home for them. Now they have homes elsewhere—filthy ones, judging by a visit to the dorm. I have no idea what they are doing from one moment to the next, much less one night to the next; they aren't looking for permission to do anything. They aren't waiting for me to call. I'm waiting for them. They don't need to hear my voice before they drift off to sleep. But I need to—and long to—hear their voices.

When I sat down to write this column, I was thinking about how peaceful it is at home these days, and how different it is to live in a house in which nothing moves unless you move it. I've had a beautiful Saturday. I woke to heavy rainfall, made a pot of tea, laid a fire. I read the newspaper slowly, giving the world's sad affairs the hours of attention I can ill afford during the week, when my own affairs overwhelm. I sat at the piano, engrossed in Beethoven sonatas I had not played for 25 years, reading my way through Bach's Italian Concerto, delighting in the sheer effort to learn something new. I ate breakfast at lunchtime, and lunch at snack time, and, when the skies cleared, I called a friend and took a long, vigorous walk, in easy companionability.

I enjoy the peace, and the solitude. I just don't enjoy not having a choice about it.



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