

welcome

Baby Steps

I'M JUST GOING to have to admit it. I'm not taking the whole empty nest thing well, and it hasn't even happened yet. But it's about to, as my younger son reminds me daily.

"Time to separate, Mom. Just get used to it. Oh, and can I have twenty dollars for the mall?"

Whatever you want, darling.

Yesterday, while I was obsessively sorting through trunks in the attic, I found some of the children's baby clothes. It stopped me in my tracks, and the tears came fast; I wasn't prepared for the sight of the little white shoes, scuffed along the sides from those faltering first steps. Alongside the clothes were some of their first toys. I remember that they were favorites of ours, and I had put them away to give them to the grandchildren I hope I have as soon as possible.

I have begun a massive cleanout of closets. I'm looking for anything I can get rid of. I've decided that if I am selling this house, and moving on with my life, I have to spend a long time doing it. The less there is to move, I figure, the easier it will be.

Unfortunately, this kind of cleanup comes at a price: the wrenching of my heart. I have lived here 20 years, but suddenly it seems as if I had just arrived. Every room I walk into seems alive with ghosts of family moments—good and bad. I can see a baby bouncing in his crib, fists around the bars, chortling with pleasure to see me, in the middle of what is now a teenager's room. In the kitchen I can still hear the early morning groans of a child who cannot quite wake up for school. In what was once a toddler's bedroom I can see the stunned disbelief on a tiny face as I explain that his parents are not going to live together anymore; I can still feel the sick knot in my stomach at the realization that I have inflicted incomprehensible pain on the ones who are dearest to me in all the world. So what if it was for the best in the long run? It was the worst of moments.

Our relationships deepened and branched out in the days and years that followed; in this house I became the kind of mother I always wanted to be: madly in love with my children, and able to give them a place to live in this love. I can trace so much of our development—theirs, mine—through the rooms of this house, and along the paths of our garden as well. It is as if every single wall had penciled lines on it to mark our growth. There's the line for our first book together, over by that armchair. There's a line, at the kitchen table, for being big enough to have dinners together. There's the line for the first time a tooth was

slipped under a pillow. There's another line for the first report card, and yet another for the first graduation from high school. There's a line, at the piano, for the first time a chubby hand pawed at the keys, and another line for the mastery of a Beethoven sonata. I am definitely the sort of person who moves forward through life while looking backward; this is especially true now. I want time to stop! Every cliché is true! It all went too quickly! The boys grew up too soon!

I know, I know. Isn't it wonderful to have a son old enough to plan an itinerary for us to take a trip through Turkey together? Yes, of course. But that is a parallel joy; the current running under it is the sadness I feel at not having that child still need me to carry him against my heart. Or does he?

You would think with all these memories that I would want to stay in this house. I'm almost afraid to; I might start acting like an old, confused dog, wandering from room to room, sniffing forlornly at the carpets, snuffling my nose into the mattresses, howling. How on earth does anyone get over this?

But I'm afraid to leave, too. Afraid that if they don't have their bedrooms, exactly as they arranged them, they won't come back. Afraid that if I leave these rooms the past won't seem so alive. Afraid at how terrible I'll feel when a new family comes in and paints over our history, and builds its own. Well, I do believe in sitting with pain instead of denying it, thinking about it, going through it, seeing what I can learn from it; I can see that I'm in for a long meditation.

I should probably throw one last party, something big to commemorate our 20 years together in this house, a mother and her two sons. You see, I never thought I'd be able to do it, manage a house, tend a garden, raise these boys, do my work, do it all on my own in this house. There was a part of me that never gave up the idea that a house has to have a mommy and a daddy in it to be whole and happy—that always troubled me. I was so wrong, and I'm sorry I ever wasted a moment on the guilt. Now that I've got that settled, I'm going to have to get my head around the idea that a house can feel whole and happy just for me. I think I'll keep the baby shoes, wherever my new home is, to mark my own next steps—and to mark the hope that one day again I'll turn around and someone will be following in them.



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