

The Goodbye Boy

My new life as an empty nester (emphasis on “empty”).



So there I was, waiting for Meryl either to tell me that I was the dancing queen— young and sweet, only seventeen, et cetera, et cetera—or to deliver that puzzling message to the equally enigmatic Fernando about something in the air that night and stars being bright. But instead of allowing as to how I can dance, I can jive, having the time of my life, she began singing, as her daughter was dressing for her wedding, about time slipping through her fingers and “an odd melancholy feeling and a sense of guilt I can’t deny.” As Meryl crooned that she was losing forever the little girl with a schoolbag in her hand, the margarita merriment drained away. All I could think about was my only-begotten leaving in less than a week for a college that’s 2,400 miles away. By the time Meryl asked what had happened to all the wonderful adventures she had planned and admitted, “Well, some of that we did, but most we didn’t,” I was blubbering and grieving for Family Game Night. I had fully intended to make Family Game Night a tradition but hadn’t, and now it was too late to drag out the Chutes and Ladders.

Until that moment, I believed I had successfully inoculated myself against empty-nest syndrome. As a POTA (Parent Older Than Average), I already knew that time doesn’t slip, odd and melancholic, through your fingers. It gushes in undammable, hemorrhagic torrents. Consequently, from the get-go I had consciously clung to as many drops as I could. I had also been careful not to bake so much of my identity into the cupcakes I took to school that I would end up bleating out the question I’d heard other mothers of col- |CONTINUED ON PAGE 281

The last place I expected to have a full-blown existential crisis was in the middle of the sing-along version of *Mamma Mia!* I mean, how seriously is anyone supposed to take a movie in which Meryl Streep, dressed in white Keds and bib overalls, bounces around like a toddler on a sugar high? *Mamma Mia!* is all about sneaking thermoses of margaritas into the theater to share with the G Friends, singing along to “Dancing Queen,” and pretending that any one of us could have blown off Colin Firth, Pierce Brosnan, and that Scandinavian guy with the potbelly and owned an adorable little B&B on a sun-splashed Greek island that the colorful locals love to clean for us. And that the world would find it irresistibly intoxicating if we kicked off our shoes and danced like trained bears. All fine in a campy, no-wire-hangers, *Mommie Dearest* sort of way.

GONE, BABY, GONE: Who am I if I’m not his mom?

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lege-bound kids ask: Who am I if I'm not Jason/Sophie/Caitlyn's mom? And I was certain I'd delivered a decisive preemptive strike on the empty nest by getting a puppy—an adorable puppy that didn't mind appearing with me in public and never missed curfew. So there would still be messes to clean up and a dependent being to bend to my implacable will. What was my problem?

A few days after the ABBA-activated meltdown, however, I once again started leaking the salty wet ones. This time the trigger was a lone can of Cherry Vanilla Dr Pepper and the realization that it would be the last one ever to grace my refrigerator. Now, had I seen a woman sobbing over a soft drink, I'd have advised her to get a life. One that included some topflight professional help. With special attention to nutritional counseling on exactly how evil Cherry Vanilla Dr Pepper is.

Then, like everyone else looking for the big answers to the big questions, I turned to my Spirit Guide, that ultimate repository of all human wisdom: Shri Googlenami. I tried typing in “empty nest,” but Mr. Left Ring Finger, that maverick, kept hitting an *x* instead of an *s*. I finally got the spelling right and found Shri G to be teeming with expert reports about empty-nest syndrome being a myth and with parents blogging about the joys of the child-free house: less laundry, fewer groceries, being able to have sex anywhere, anytime. And, they all pointed out, the kid comes back, you never stop being a parent, he still needs you, yada, yada. All right, maybe Life After Boy *was* going to be an unwashed, low-cal key party, but it still felt as if I'd gotten it right the first time, when I typed in “empty next.”

Though I enjoy a moment of maudlin self-indulgence as much as the next person with an Internet connection, it was time to snap out of this. What I needed was a Black Ops team that could parachute in and scrub my house of all evidence of Boy. I was certain that I could handle this empty-nest thing swimmingly if the nest were truly empty. The team could start by removing that Wallace and Gromit tape we watched when he had chicken pox. Also on the seek-and-destroy list would be the mutant collection he created by snipping toys in half with bolt cutters and glue-gunning Polly Pocket heads to Tyrannosaurus rex bodies and Power Ranger bodies to Inspector Gadget heads. They should also vaporize the possum skeleton, deer horns, sand dollars, ninja sword, cool rocks, arrowheads, and dagger-shaped icicle saved in a jam jar in our freezer for the past nine years.

If the team could scour off the green glitter-glue rectangles on the coffee table, those

ghostly frames of crafts projects past, that would be useful as well. It would also be great if they'd eliminate the particular sunbeam that slants into the kitchen window and hits the spot where his supergroovy blue plastic high chair used to sit as he chased bits of pear, slippery as goldfish, around the tray, giving me toothless, drooly grins of triumph whenever he got one into his mouth. And his smell. Yes, I'm certain that this emptying nest would not have to become a syndrome if the nest didn't still smell so much like Boy. Should the team want to widen their sweep, they might also consider ensuring that I don't have to see a

skinny boy shivering at the edge of a pool, his hands tucked into his armpits, yelling, “Mom. Mom! Watch me dive, Mom!”

I know that what everyone tells me is true: The kid comes back, you never stop being a parent, he still needs you. And I know that when he returns, he'll be brighter, funnier, and kinder than when he left. And I'll put on white Keds and bib overalls and dance almost as well as a trained bear. But for just this moment, just right now, I'm going to be a little sad. Then I'm going to go out and teach that new dog to take 45-minute showers and drink Cherry Vanilla Dr Pepper. ♣