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**FLOWN**  
**Reflections from a nest newly emptied.**  
 BY SUSAN HODARA

*Illustration by Steve Bates*



**There is a silence in our house** that bespeaks absence: stillness made physical, molecules undisturbed by human breath, the imperceptible hum of air unshared. When I return home from various outings, I know without question that nothing will have changed since my departure. No dirty dishes will have appeared on the counter, no sweater strewn across a chair, no shoes abandoned haphazardly and inevitably beneath my feet.

Of these things I don't complain. For weeks leading up to my younger daughter Ariel's departure for college this fall to begin her freshman year—followed days later by her sister Sofie's return to start her junior year—I ticked off the changes I could anticipate in a house emptied of children. Far less laundry. Cleared surfaces that remained clear. Bedrooms whose beds stayed made and whose floors stayed free of relentless clutter. A refrigerator whose contents wouldn't disappear overnight while my husband, Paul, and I slept.

Twenty years ago, becoming a mother had brought with it an immediate and definitive sense of purpose, peace, and happiness that had eluded me for decades. I bid my coworkers good-bye and never looked back. I gazed at my newborn and knew I was where I belonged. When older women mentioned their grown children, I assured myself that it would be another lifetime before that happened to mine.

But somehow it has. Since then, my priority has been to parent. At first, that meant round-the-clock demands; more recently, physical requirements gave way to the more frightening challenges posed by adolescents anxious to test the choppy waters of independence. Through it all, I was there, and so were my daughters, even if sometimes just to sleep.

And now they're not. Their bedroom doors are closed, dimming the upstairs landing even in the midday light. I sit at my desk, trying to value the stretches of uninterrupted time that I yearned for so often in the past. Our cat, Eve, leaps onto my lap, then just as suddenly pounces to the floor and scampers downstairs.

A few months have passed since Sofie and Ariel left Paul and me to live here on our own. They call often, send e-mails and text messages, and have lots of questions for me to answer. And I am reminded that this is how it works: I am still and will forever be their mother.

Yet while I appreciate my lightened load of daily upkeep, the chance for Paul and me to be alone together again, and the increased opportunity I have to pursue my professional and creative work, there are some days that feel a little too long and a bit too unstructured, and hours that edge precariously close to emptiness.

It's not that I miss the girls unbearably or wish them back. It's just that sometimes it's difficult to convince myself that the best years of my life aren't over. 🏠

Submissions to Back Porch may be sent to [jandrews@housemedianetwork.com](mailto:jandrews@housemedianetwork.com).

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