

Empty-Nesters

-Danny Plunkett

For eighteen years, parents devote to their lives to a singular purpose: raising their children. They agonize over every little detail of their offspring's lives, sometimes to the point of obsession. There are ups and downs, to be sure, but through it all parents never stop caring, never stop worrying, and never stop loving.

That is, until college.

Every spring, seniors graduate from high school, and the following autumn those graduates are ferried off across the country to their respective places of higher learning. It is around this time that parents start going crazy. I started noticing the signs when my sister went away three years ago... and now it's happening all over again. The nest is about to be emptied, and the mother and father birds are getting worried.

As the younger child, the empty nest phenomenon was obvious to me from the start. The moment my sister left the house I became twice as important. I was the new baby, and my parents practically created imaginary problems for me so that they could solve them. However, I was still in the house. The nest was not yet empty. That absolute condition had not been reached. The last child is finally leaving though, and the strain is beginning to show.

Mothers twinge every time college is brought up at the dinner table and fathers just avoid the topic altogether. Families spend twice as much time at that same dinner table as parents scramble to have as many meals together as possible in the "remaining time together."

New projects spring up in abundance as parents try to fill the emptiness they feel enveloping them. Dads starts building things for no reason at all, just to pass the time. Moms take up cross-stitch or knitting, even though they hate it. When the family falls apart, so too do the minds of its leaders. It's insanity, really. I have been lucky so far, and my parents have maintained some semblance of composure, but I know full well what will come in the future.

Arbitrary pets will start popping up around the house soon enough: snakes and rabbits and turtles and cats and dogs, running around, filling the emptiness. When my sister went to college, my parents got a flock of chickens. It was an obvious result of the E.N.S. (Empty Nest Syndrome). With my own graduation approaching, they almost doubled the number of chickens.

Pets are not the only additions though. Vacation homes become one of the only solaces for newly isolated parents as they attempt to flee the homes that hold all the memories of their kids. "Mid-life crises" spring up like weeds, and sports cars appear in the driveway almost as frequently as designer purses on mothers' arms.

Eighteen years is a very long time, made even longer by the trials and tribulations of raising children, and it is almost like emerging from a long prison sentence into the outside world. Not that I'm implying that having children is anything like prison... but the simple truth is that some parents cannot adjust to the new lifestyle.

When college students come home for a weekend, parents try to resurrect what used to be... but to no avail. The E.N.S. is more a mentality than anything else, and cannot be defeated by a hug and a nice dinner.

Parents recover with time and new hobbies finally fill the void, but it is a long, painstaking process. The vacuum that is created when a child goes off to school does not last forever, but neither does it truly ever go away. I'll miss my parents, and I'm fairly certain they already miss me.

Is the E.N.S. a joke, a theory, a medical condition? Nope, it's just nature, and I know I'll treasure my remaining time in my nest.

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