

## Liminal

We don't see gradual.

I looked up one day from college preparation and realized he was already gone. Our parent's generation doesn't seem to understand. Somehow my departure from the stage wasn't such a cataclysmic event.

I am trying not to be overly dramatic about the first one leaving the nest, but even the most hard-bitten friends have talked about the emptiness that comes when they do.

“It's like they cut a hole in your heart,” according to friend I would call, unemotional.

Nothing ages you like your children's passages. When you send them off to college and realize the clock really is ticking, not on them, but on you. It forces us to think about all we are in the midst of: Jobs, marriages, friendships, life.

In a much passed-around article, columnist Michael Gerson compared dropping his child off at college with the ending of the universe. He notes that Cosmologists, who I thought gave facials, “assure us, our sun and all suns will consume their fuel, violently explode and then become cold and dark. Matter itself will evaporate into the void and the universe will become desolate for the rest of time.”

Okay, that's dramatic, but only a little.

We started preparing early, at the start of senior year, a time everyone told us would be a disaster. But it wasn't. The college application process, the waiting, the pull and push of a teenager trying to escape childhood and parents trying to keep order.

Everything flew generally on time and according to plan.

And then one night a few weeks ago I headed upstairs to drop the new copy of *Sports Illustrated* on his bed and found myself in the center of his empty room. There were lots of days like this, with work, friends, and his own angst changing the household routine, I would leave before he was up and he was out when I went to bed. His job as an 18-year old waiter conflicted with my schedule as a human being. I could go days without seeing his face.

I hadn't been in his room in weeks. It used to be a regular hang out. At first to tuck him in, read a book, make sure he was asleep, then make sure he was home. It was a place where serious talks took place and stories were told in the confidence of darkness.

And now I stood in a foreign zone, duffle bags splayed open like patients on an operating table, packages of t-shirts and socks, various dorm room requirements, fresh toiletries still in

their packaging. Along the perimeter was his past. An outer ring of memorabilia that tracked his childhood:

A baseball glove, a collage of pictures with kids from another neighborhood, stacks of books from various years, *Narnia*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Road*. Some are dog eared, some un-cracked. Old bobble heads, long-forgotten ticket stubs, a sea shell, baseball caps of all sizes, a faded art project, a piggy bank stuffed with pennies, a replica of the Forum, an empty Coke bottle from Israel, a deconstructed science project.

A memory minefield.

These places that shake us with their history of a time that no longer exists.

I look for them in every room, every block of our neighborhood, every memento. The school, the restaurants, a dent on the couch, things from a different era, when the house had a different feel. Gerson said that parenthood is a lesson in humility: "The very best thing about your life is a short stage in someone else's story."

Hunting around these corners, preparing myself for these moments, I realized that while I was still on stage, he was already gone. Off on his new adventure, while I am here with the memories, a minefield for me, a past for him.

A year later the house is quieter as the second one prepares to exit.

"Make sure you write."

Those were the parting words my mother said to me as I left the family station wagon and headed into my college dorm for the first time thirty years before.

The moment was playing out perfectly: All three of us sitting in the front seat of the car, my mother crying, looking me in the eye as if I were going off to war. My father, focused forward, thinking of the traffic. And then that line which sticks in my head these 30-odd years later.

Even then it sounded strange to me. It was 1985 after all, telephones were plentiful, although it was cheaper to make long distance calls after 11. It was before cell phones and the ubiquity of connection, but our room had a phone, a push button one with a long cord so we could walk into the hall for privacy. So asking me to write seemed, well excessive.

I told her I would call.

Now I am in the driver's seat, of the car at least. But really of nothing else. We are sitting in the same spot preparing to drop off our own precious cargo into that same Ann Arbor dorm.

The child is going to exit the car, I will have no grand pronouncements about how to stay in touch ("Make sure you Snapchat me?") and our world will change.

Weeks before she leaves we feel the tectonic plates of our family shifting again.

When the first one went off to college it was like the world's first earthquake, unsure if the ground would ever stop moving. If we would ever regain our footing. And then they return home, and there are those nights when you have the chance to set the house alarm and everyone is home and in their beds and the world feels safe and right.

And then they go back out and you settle into a routine, albeit altered.

Now a second shift is taking place, a week before she leaves and it's different. Yes, we've been through it before, but every change is change, each child decides how they want to transition away. Some with a whimper, some with a roar.

This child always had a flair for the dramatic. There will be tears.

She barks demands from the kitchen telling my wife to order another case of her favorite beverage. We look at each other knowing that we only need a few more cans. This isn't a fall into each other's arms and cry moment, it's simply a realization that the fridge will be a little less full of certain things and the next time someone will want that drink is Thanksgiving.

Because the biggest lesson we learned from child one to child two is that it's not about the dropping off, it's about the coming home to the undisturbed bedroom, the quieter house, the emptier space.

In her brother's first year away we felt connected, but in a different way. It's weird not knowing their people, their universe, hearing names or seeing faces online, but rarely meeting them in person.

We learn about things that happened to him three months after the fact. He laughs about memories we don't share.

We stay connected through our own means, different with each child, each parent.

Years ago on a family vacation we were being shown to our room by a bellman who stopped to point out the location of the closest ice machine. My son and I looked at each other and laughed, finding it an odd point of interest as we walked between the sandy beaches and blue waters of the Caribbean.

Now whenever I travel, whether to London or Cleveland, I snap a picture of the closest ice machine and text it to him. No words are passed, no response necessary, just a connection from the life before he left.

So that's what my mom meant. In the mixed-up emotions of a time when my parents were on the cusp of their own empty-nest-hood, before I thought of them as people with lives outside of mine, they must have been wondering what their life would be like at the other end of that car ride. She was asking me to stay connected to her, this family, that life.

We arrive home and say goodnight to one child, instead of three. Our house is a Presidential Library to all the things they achieved in their first 18 years, their rooms museums to their school projects, the hallways are galleries of their artwork.

I check online for a posting to the world to see where she might be. There are more ways to stay connected, so many ways to watch them as we move from the center of their lives to the periphery.

But I do hope she calls.

Or writes.

