

He's Leaving Home

Published in the *Litchfield County Times*.

By Marcia DeSanctis

When I was a kid, the late-August eruption of yellow in the sugar maples brought on spells of melancholy. It was a reminder that school was the price we paid for our sweet summer vacation, and that nature charges ahead even when the heart is reluctant. Since becoming a mother, this sensation grew even more profound. This time of year is a crucible for those conflated feelings of joy and sorrow as my children come of age. The sense of loss tugged at me familiarly when I dropped my son off at school right before Labor Day.

When he was thirteen, he announced that he wanted to go away for high school. My husband and I were ill-prepared for him to leave home, possibly for good. I still regularly dusted off his dinosaur puppet, Reptar piggy bank and the silver rattle given to him at birth - the various trinkets that composed a still-life of babyhood on his bookshelves. I could not imagine the empty space his absence would create, in the house and in me. It was too soon.

He was ready to bust out. Eight years ago, when we decamped Manhattan, he was a second grader. We walked past delis, the fish market and fetish boutiques on the way to school in Greenwich Village. We moved here, to our house surrounded by forest and patrolled by fox and coyote.

He adapted quickly to rural life, learned to drive his Dad's pickup truck, grew a zucchini that won second prize at the Bethlehem Fair. He reached 6'2" by eighth grade, spent hours out front with a basketball, and at thirteen, taught himself to dunk. The hoop in our driveway reminded me of the birch trees in Robert Frost's poem about the boy too far from town to play with other kids his age, who had to make-do in his own yard. Even the much-desired snow days were lonely vigils - just he, his younger sister, and a couple of Flexible Flyers on the hill out back. We often logged two hours a day in the Toyota, going to this practice or that, as he flipped between 95.7 and Hot 101.3 on the radio. Even when he grew quieter as he nudged toward adolescence, car time with him and his sister gave us long stretches of concentrated intimacy.

A certain degree of cabin fever forged an iron bond between the four of us. Country life gave him the space to study and think without urban distractions like Chinese take-out on every corner, or sidewalks swarming with girls. But now that he was a teenager, he craved the round-the-clock parade of people from his early childhood again, so he wrote away for applications.

He got accepted to the school he loved with enough aid to make going there possible, and spent the summer excited and unafraid. Fourteen years old, braces, size thirteen feet, a boy. Yes, he towered over me, and his room was carpeted with dirty gym shorts, size L. But I still woke up every night and tiptoed to his bedside, placed my hand under his nostrils to feel his breath, and did the same with his sister. Only then, could I go back to sleep. Even though his smooth upper lip had turned to prickly fuzz, the ritual was unchanged since he was a baby.

I tried to think of him as a man now, rather than my little boy. Alexander the Great had laid waste to Thrace by the time he turned sixteen. My own grandfather, like many immigrants,

strapped on his boots in Rosciolo dei Marzi, Italy when he was a teenager, boarded a boat in Naples and never went back – never even saw his mother again. His life from then on would be of his own making. Like the great-grandfather he never met, Ray's readiness was not in his age, but in the faith he had in it, and in the certainty that he could live day to day without us in the next room.

Some of our friends thought we were crazy. "How could you let him go away so young?" they'd ask us.

How could we not?

Like every mother in history, I realized that now, it was time for me to bear up. I'm happy that our son felt confident enough to go away, but nevertheless I feel duped by what this actually says about parenting. It's obvious, I suppose, what every parent of grown children knows: we can't hold on while we're helping them out the door. The moment our children are born, we gently plod them along, encourage them, await and applaud every milestone, not realizing that with every one, they need us less. Our son stood up and walked, went to school, then overnight camp, flew to California, and cooked an omelet without me. This child, so wanted, had earned the assurance to break loose and go it alone. We would still guide him, of course, and there are weekends and holidays and summers. But as parents we had made ourselves almost obsolete.

Last September, my husband and I dropped him at school, forty-five minutes but a world away. I made his bed up like the Ritz Carlton, organized toiletries on his dresser. In the duffel bag, I discovered the dinosaur puppet and Reptar bank. I wondered what our son had been thinking as he packed them in his luggage. I dusted them off and put them on a shelf.

When we left him, he was in the middle of a pack of boys, palming a basketball. My husband and I held hands on the car ride back. At home, I went to his empty room. Unlike many mothers in history, I knew he was in safe hands, thriving, not tossing around somewhere on the Atlantic. I would see him soon. I tried to give myself some credit – to reason that if a parent does their job, a child is able to leave home, and that is just what happens sooner or later.

But for the moment, I wanted to picture him as I had seen him the night before, my sleeping child breathing, breathing. I lay down on his bed, but there was no pillow left to cry on. He took it with him. Outside the window, there was the same sugar maple that has stood there for centuries; one side was a dark September gold. On his shelf, only the silver rattle remained. I could not decide whether to leave it there or take it with me.