



October 2007

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Recommended Citation

Corbett, Christopher (2007) "The Last Page: Emptiness Is Bliss," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 96 : Iss. 2 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol96/iss2/11>

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EMPTINESS IS BLISS

By Christopher Corbett P'09

Roughly six months before our daughter was to go off to college last year, I began to hear the first rumblings, like rumors of war, like the distant growl of thunder on a warm summer evening. Doomsayers and earnest people—speaking in hushed tones reserved for someone who is a bit tetchéd—warned me I was about to experience a time of unbearable sadness, spiritual loss, and crippling loneliness. Lesser men faced with such a trauma were known to take up contradancing, yoga, and the study of reflexology. Anything might happen, they told me. I might start going to church! I could wind up in a sweat lodge!

I was about to experience what the pop psychologists call “empty nest syndrome,” that time of life when the child leaves hearth and home to move off into the big, bad world and the parents stare bleakly over the precipice.

I'd heard some pretty grim stories about the syndrome, things like impromptu recitations of *Goodnight Moon*, (some of these involved alcoholic beverages) or couples bursting into “The Itsy, Bitsy Spider” at dinner parties (followed by crying). A scrap of wrinkled construction paper with a child's name scrawled on it found at the back of a front hall chest of drawers might send an empty nester plummeting. You could wind up in bed with a blanket over your head.

I'd be lucky if I did not wind up in the fetal position, sucking my thumb. I should prepare for fits of weeping, bleak moments, dark nights of the soul. From now on, it would always be three o'clock in the morning.

From this, I gathered that my hair—if I had any left—would soon turn snow white. I'd look like Walt Whitman in a couple of months. King Lear. Methuselah. You know the “seven ages of man” speech from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*— ... sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything. Next stop, Broadmead. Roland Park Place. Meals on Wheels. Depends.

The end was near.

Well, none of these things happened. Once the nest emptied, I bought Shriver Hall concert series tickets. I started going to the Charles Theatre on weeknights. I went to hear the Folger Consort in Washington. Life was sweet.

Even our housekeeper was in seventh heaven. She'd been thinking about retiring, going home to Patagonia to see her sister, but she put that off. And, why not? There is a lot less to do at our house with the daughter gone. Experts estimate she generated between eight and 10 tons of laundry a week. The housekeeper no longer has to clean our daughter's room or bathroom, known affectionately as Swamp Land. With the extra time saved, the housekeeper is able to do other things—like tell me interesting secrets about her other clients.

My daughter has a cell phone, but we still fielded between 40 and 50 calls a day when she lived at home—it was like operating an answering service. With her gone, the telephone suddenly stopped ringing.

And other good things happened. The tuneful offerings of 50 Cent are now no longer heard on Beechdale Road. We have severed diplomatic relations with Blockbuster. Virtually no junk food enters the home. And no more charity gift-wrap, either.

I will never have to do another school project again. I will never have to attend another school charity gala, either. I'm happy to say I've been to my last Bryn Mawr School Gym Drill, an ancient rite of spring that encompasses elements of Leni Riefenstahl outtakes with bad folk dancing. Kumbaya-meets-Hitler Youth. Imagine, if you will, several hundred wasps (or those who wish to be) marching in the manner of the



Amazons or performing English country dances and the mating rites of the Trobriand Islands.

I will never have to attend another lacrosse game. I did not grow up in a part of the country where lacrosse is played and I neither understand the game nor find it very interesting. (A friend of mine who is not of the Caucasian persuasion believes that lacrosse exists to make white people think they still have some athletic prowess. But I leave that to the experts.)

As I see it, the only downside to the empty nest is that many things have fallen back upon me. My daughter did the grocery shopping, picked up the dry cleaning, went to the cobbler, post office, and CVS. Until she left, I had never been to Target. I didn't know how good I'd had it.

I do not think of myself as a sentimental person and life is not a Norman Rockwell illustration from the *Saturday Evening Post*. But each day when I walk up to Eddie's to make my visit to the center of the tiny world that I live in, I see the little girl who went off to Bryn Mawr School so long ago. The aisles are full of such girls in pale green jumpers with bright yellow ribbons in their hair. They stand in line like ducklings at The Children's Bookstore on Deepdene. Like Madeline, they walk in straight lines and hold hands. They don't know me. But I know them.

Christopher Corbett teaches journalism and chairs the English department at UMBC in Baltimore. He is the author of Orphans Preferred: The Twisted Truth and Lasting Legend of the Pony Express (2003, Random House/Broadway Books). His daughter, Molly, is a junior at Colby. "The Empty Nest," originally published in STYLE: Smart Living in Baltimore, won first prize, editorial, in the Maryland Excellence in Journalism Contest, sponsored by the Maryland Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists. Used with the author's permission.