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## the student migration

By Linda Tatelbaum



Linda Tatelbaum and son Noah.

I've been a college professor nearly 30 years. To me, the beginning of the academic year means stepping into a stuffy office whose windows have been shut since May. I say hello to a blank computer screen, change the phone message and fill my desk drawer with rice cakes and tea bags. Then it's on to meet the first class.

But until my son went off to college in Massachusetts, I hadn't a clue what ordeal those bleary-eyed, sweaty young freshmen have just been through. The fact of their presence at one o'clock in Lovejoy 207 was just part of the calendar's inexorable forward motion. Now I know—these are someone else's children, and they've come to me by way of a complex migratory ritual.

Because now I, too, have found myself in a stream of college-bound traffic on Route 495, parents in the front seat, child strapped in back surrounded by worldly goods. It's plain to see, with rear windows sporting college decals, that we're a generation of parents hauling our children off to the empty dormitories, curtailless

windows and bare bookshelves of their new life. We're all stuffed to the tailgate with pillows, computers, trunks, plants and winter coats. And we're packed to the brink of our lips, the edge of our eyelashes, with suppressed sighs and tears.

We ease groaning vehicles through the narrow lanes of various campuses and park every which way on green lawns. We climb too many stairs, with heavy loads no one beyond the age of 18 should ever attempt. We exchange smiles with other perspiring parents, marveling at the forces that brought us to this surreal frenzy. We'd thought the first day of the yellow school bus was bad. The clock ticked too slowly as we waited for the bus to disgorge our child only slightly marred by a new world. But, our conspiratorial glances seem to say, this ain't no yellow school bus. College presidents, standing on the podium in hundreds of chapels just like the one where we just sat dutifully in rows, assure us our young adults will return home safe and sound, but utterly changed. We wonder why we've agreed without protest to part with our life savings and our children.

Back in the dorm, the corridors resound with the murmur of mothers making beds and can-do dads with hammer and tape measure. A sub-migration to the local mall ensues. There, the aisles are crammed with anxious parents gripping a list, grumpy students sizing each other up, all in search of rugs, curtain rod, lamp, extension cord, picture hooks, hangers, detergent.

I'm as stunned as the rest of the parents even though I saw it coming better than most. I began teaching at Colby when Noah was 3. He could barely climb the stairs to Miller Library and couldn't reach the drinking fountain. At 10, he navigated my office computer better than I could. By 16, he could pass for a freshman as he waited for me in the library.

I'd spent years glancing with curiosity at prospective parents listening to their tour guide explain the Blue Light. I found their awkward insecurity somewhat amusing. We professors forget, or never realize, that the fresh crop of young faces we meet every year is delivered to us by parents. Since our students never pass the age of 21, we are eternally 35, and nothing like those tired-looking parents. We may notice our own graying hair in the restroom mirror, but

attribute it to the fluorescent lights. Clearly it's the weight of our briefcase that makes the stairs so strenuous. The desire to nap mid-afternoon is, of course, due to eye strain from the computer screen. Our own kids, whose faces we see at the kitchen table, have nothing in common with these large, semi-adult creatures who show up at office hours.

But suddenly, we've joined the cluster of parents trudging around on campus tours. We're asking silly questions. We're coaching the application process. We're awaiting the news. We're marking our child's name on a stack of new socks. We're packing the car. And now here we are, meeting the roommate's parents. Finally our denial is broken. We're as middle-aged as they are, and just as pathetic. We kiss our children goodbye in their half-unpacked rooms. Hauling nothing but grief and relief, a trail of empty cars returns the exhausted parental generation to altered lives.

I will walk, cool and professional, into the classroom on Day One as usual, to greet my newly nested, outfitted and shampooed freshmen. I represent the next step on their journey away from home. I'm the professor, no one's mom. I struggle to swallow past a lump in the throat. Let it remind me to treat them with tender care, so we parents can stop moping and get on with the rest of our life.

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