

Stacy Rummel

### **An Empty Nest**

In the kitchen, an egg-timer goes off after fifteen minutes of what seemed to be to the brink of starvation, while Hannah, the family mutt circles around my feet, reminding me of our walks that I now ignore. I open the oven to find browning chicken—baking at a normal temperature. I go to find something to rotate the bird, but when I open the utility drawer, I find my son's spoon labeled Stephen in faded red letters surrounded barely noticeable outlines of red and blue balloons. I cringe, take a deep breath, quickly grab the something to stab the bird with, and slam the drawer shut hoping the emptiness is only temporary.

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“Guess who's a big boy and no longer needs the baby spoon,” I asked my son Stephen, the pride and joy of Dave's and my life. About a week ago, Stephen graduated from the highchair to a booster seat and wanted him to feel extra special in his new chair. Dave and I have been looking for a personalized place setting for months now with no such luck. After weeks of searching we found a set at the local Children's Learning Store, where we stopped in to get potty training videos.

Stephen jumped up and down in excitement asking if it was “Time eat? Time eat?”, as he paraded around and pounded his personal miniature fork and spoon together while I began to prepare supper.

“Would you like to help Mommy fix—”.

It was too late. Stephen was already running in full toddler speed to find Dave and show off his new utensils. He found Dave twenty baby steps away in the living area of the small efficiency apartment figuring out the directions to Stephen's new toddler bed.

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The pot on the stove is boiling over as I'm absent mindedly poking at the chicken, causing me to quickly gather my thoughts and turn down the stove. Checking the contents of the pan wondering if they are still edible, I notice for the first time since I've started cooking that I am fixing green beans and the majority of them are burned dry on the bottom of the pan. I try to scrape at them with a wooden spoon, but the green beans have become a permanent fixture on the pan.

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It was a Christmas Eve. Dave grew up with four brothers, so there was always a houseful. He really made sure Stephen was surrounded by family at all times—especially the Holiday Season. Dave had invited his parents over this year for Christmas Eve, even though for the past two years, we have always gone to my parent's house. Instead of going to his parent's house on Christmas Day, the new plan was to have them stay the whole week and that we'd have to take Stephen to my side of the family either the week before or

after.

When everything was said and done, I found myself surrounded with random family members on my husband's side opening up presents and cramming themselves into the living room and seeping into the dining room. Dave got socks and his second drill that even though my mother-in-law knew I was also getting him one, while Stephen sat content on a mountain of toys next to his dad. I was dreading to open any of my gifts from anyone, so I saved the best one (from my in-laws) for last so everyone can marvel at the lavish gift his mother got me. I wasn't expecting to find the nicest set of pans I would ever own to be underneath the fancy gift store wrapping. Instead of wasting time wondering if my mother-in-law was mocking me for my lack of culinary skills, I took the gesture as a compliment and that we are finally considered "equals". For once in my life, I went over to Dave's mother and gave her a hug followed by a genuine thank you.

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As I probe the bottom the non-stick pan now with a metal fork, I give up on the green beans and pitch the entire pan into the trash. I then venture over to the cupboard and lay out the remaining pans from that memorable Christmas long ago with my mother-in-law, and toss them into the trash. I dig deep into my cupboard. In the very back I pull out one of my original pots that I had since I first moved out. It was covered with stubborn liquid rings, dents for when I let Stephen play drums, and just worn from age. I carefully place the deformed pot on the burner and open a can of cream-style corn and pour the contents out.

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"He will be here in ten minutes and nothing's ready," I scream aloud, scolding myself. I have been dating Dave for only a couple of weeks now. Tonight I said I would cook for him, but the only thing I know he likes is chicken and corn on the cob with scalloped potatoes. The only thing I have is the chicken and cream-style corn. This is going to be a disaster! I quickly put the corn on the stove, place the knob on high to make it cook faster, as I run to the bathroom to brush my hair—for the third time in a half hour! When I get done I am racing around my small efficiency apartment straightening up and fluffing couch cushions, pillows, anything I can get my hands on that might be out of place. As I light a single tea light, the doorbell rings and I open the door to the handsome David who is standing in the hallway with a single dandelion.

"I could tell you I wanted to get you flowers, but I waited until the last minute and the shops are all closed," he said embarrassed.

A deafening silence accompanied us between the four walls. Between me running around like an idiot constantly brushing my hair, I was sweating and maybe bald from excessive brushing, but I it was too late to care at this point.

"Um, but I ah, didn't want to come empty handed," he said, sounding more like a question to a test.

"It's beautiful," was all I could blurt out as I let him in, "Let's put it in water. It'd make a great centerpiece"

We are interrupted by the smoke alarm, which is my cue to run through the smoke-filled apartment and forgetting to take the dandelion. Dave meets me in the kitchenette to make sure everything is all right and offers to help set the table. The chicken is burnt. The corn is not so creamy, but caramelized. I am too embarrassed to hide the tears welling in my eyes.

"It'll be okay," he says as he begins to set the table with paper plates, while I'm still humiliated, and set out the pans on homemade potholders between the two place settings.

We both sit down, but something is missing besides the scalloped potatoes. Dave goes into the living area and brings back the dandelion and puts it in water, then places it in the center of the table. We begin the laugh as we pick at the burnt food on our plates.

"Sorry, it's supposed to be cream-style," I say as he is guessing what is in the pot.

"New meaning of caramel corn," he says and winks as he fills his plate.

"Are you sure you don't want to order a pizza or something," I ask still embarrassed he is actually going to eat this.

"This dinner is perfect. I have never had a dinner like this before," he said fighting with the chicken.

"I'll try not to make this a habit if you don't want me to," I said with my cheeks reddening.

"Are you kidding? This dinner is the best thing I've had all day," he ensured, reaching over to touch my hand.

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The egg timer dings again and the corn is simmering at medium heat. I open the oven to the succulent chicken and place it on the top rack, close the door, and set the egg timer once more. I turn the stove burner to high and put the lid on the pot and wait in the dining room and listen to the race between the egg timer versus the fire alarm and wonder which one will sound first. When the smoke alarm goes off, I go into the kitchen, turn everything off, and then make a plate of burnt chicken and caramelized corn. I head over to the utility drawer and grab the fork and knife labeled Stephen and sit down to eat at the dining room table.

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Shortly after we had Stephen, we decided to buy the house. We have a family now and an efficiency apartment was too small for the three of us. Out here was more room for all of us. Dave's parents believed a three bedrooms, two baths, living room, breakfast nook, kitchen, and three-car stall garage would make a great "starter" home. From Dave's garage for his project cars and collection of tools, to Stephen's plastic pool, to his tricycle, to eventually his first car, to my garden bench and area; the house served many purposes over the years.

At the breakfast nook in the kitchen, we would hold family game night on Fridays—until Stephen started having dates. The dining room used to be full of life during the holidays, now only collects dust and junk mail. The living room was for entertaining guests. The family room used for winding

down at the end of the day.

Now with Dave's position in the company and Stephen away at college, there is much more room in this house. Every Friday is now a reading night. Holidays are light years away from one another. My garden has been taken over by weeds. We have no guests stay over anymore. David practically lives out of a suitcase now, so whatever was once "ours" has now become "mine". I find myself now lying in my bed staring at the ceiling wondering when this house became so quiet. My thoughts are interfered by two headlights that linger up the driveway, and then disappear to the rumble of the garage door opening. A door is open, then shut. After forty minutes of shuffling downstairs, heavy footsteps trudge upstairs. I roll over and pretend to sleep even though I am fully clothed and it is barely dusk outside. The bedroom door gently opens and Dave leans over the bed, kisses my cheek and whispers, "That dinner was the best thing I had all day".

Brushing him off, I get up and head downstairs as he is left defeated sitting on the bed. I make my way towards the kitchen, but stop in the dining room to find another half-eaten plate next to mine followed by a single dandelion floating in water in an old sippy cup labeled Stephen.