



blessings

# Don't Forget to Click *Reply!*

The nest may have emptied, but my in-box never sleeps **By Elizabeth Fishel**

**I used to be a hands-on mother** of two very in-my-face sons. I birthed them, fed them, crawled on the floor playing with them, cheered them on, giggled with them, comforted them, eyeballed their homework, and carpooled them. But where once I'd feared I was just another name on their Gmail lists, now that both boys have launched, they—or rather we—have suddenly become...virtual.

*How r u doing? Can u talk? What r u working on?* If I see a tiny green light by Nate's or Will's name on my e-mail screen, one click and he's in the room; two clicks, and we're deep in conversation. I can pop him a quick reminder, a question about plans or logistics, or a *did you arrive safely?* Often we find an intimacy that might never have happened in real life. The other day, Will and I had a heart-to-heart Gchat about a key difference between his father and me (the upshot: Dad's more save-the-world, and I'm more family-first).

Our family first entered cyberspace when both boys crossed three time zones to college and arranging phone calls became trickier. As

slightly homesick and unsettled freshmen, Nate and Will were eager e-mailers, and I was happy to keep their in-boxes full. But the messages waned as their college lives took off, and I got used to clicking motherly missives into a void of silence. My fears of their benign neglect seemed to be realized. Things began to change when Nate graduated and took a "wander year" through Southeast Asia. We didn't see him for nine months, but he left us a trail of digital crumbs we avidly followed. He and two buddies created their own website (HugeInAsia), posted videos about their travels, and blogged two or three times a week. If I wanted to know whether Nate had left Vietnam for Laos, whether his hair was short or long, or if he had a girlfriend, I didn't have to will the phone to ring. I'd simply track him online and reassure myself that he was having the adventure of a lifetime.

The following year, Will spent his fall semester in Cape Town and he, too, left us for cyberspace. He began telling tales on the blogosphere about his rural homestay, his wild game-spotting treks, and local politics. Though northern California and South Africa felt like opposite ends of the planet, our digital chats bridged the distance. Compare this with my husband's yearlong stay in Uganda as a college student decades before the Internet, when letters to the States took three weeks and he never once phoned home.

Now that my sons are well into their 20s, I tread carefully between connection and distance, support and snooping. I don't lurk on Facebook, text them, or badger them for replies multiple times a day. So an instant message initiated by one of them is especially sweet, like a gift when it's not your birthday.

This morning, for instance, I settled at my computer and found a *Mom, r u up?* left over from late last night. Though my sons and I keep different hours both online and offline, knowing they are thinking of me makes my day. Nothing is better than seeing their faces across the breakfast table. But those digital hugs keep us close in between. ■

*Elizabeth Fishel is currently writing a book about parents and their 20-somethings.*

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