

THE HOUSE IS QUIET.  
The fridge is pared down.  
The evenings no longer  
require your homework help.  
How to fill the void—  
and love your

# EMPTY NEST

THREE WRITERS SHARE THEIR STORIES



# REFEATHERING MY NEST

When the kids move out, redecorating becomes a whole new concept

By Elizabeth Fishel



A couple of weeks after our youngest son leaves for college, a friend drops off an empty nest—a real one—at the door. It's snugly put together with fuzzy bits of this and that, and inside she has tucked a flamingo-pink plastic egg and a note: "It's a love nest, of course, for your new life."

After 20-plus years of plastic trikes in the hallway, bulging backpacks in the kitchen, and soccer gear all over the bathroom floor, Bob and I finally have the place to ourselves. And we're feeling unmoored.

For those first few weeks after both boys are gone, our house feels less like a romantic hideaway and more like a hollow watermelon, as our oldest son used to call it before anyone got home. The phone's quiet, the rap music silenced, and the zone from front door to kitchen hauntingly clutter-free.

Setting just two places at the dinner table, Bob and I start to adjust to our coupled, not child-centered, household. Meals can be leftovers cobbled together without complaints. In the serene new calm of the dinner hour, I

learn a strange thing—my husband is rather chatty. He hasn't gotten a word in for two decades, and by now, he's saved up a few stories. He basks in the undivided attention and gives it back. Now, we can dash out of town whenever the spirit moves us—to a bed-and-breakfast or a cabin, to gaze at each other's navels, if not our own. But much as I love this gallivanting, I've always been something of a cocooner before the type was even named. When the kids were young, bliss was the living room filled with family or the

boys pillow-fighting in their rooms.

At first, the finality of a chapter closed is difficult to accept. But one morning I set a bunch of sunflowers on the living room mantel to catch the sun's soft autumn glow, and with it, my grief lightens, and my perspective shifts. The void takes on possibility. Bare walls turn into my artist's canvas, beckoning to be filled with reinvention and color. Newfound pockets of time set me tinkering with household projects that are equal parts

*continued on page 204*

## REFEATHERING

continued from page 154

makeover and start-over.

Soon I find myself in a flurry of nesting unlike anything I've experienced since I got ready for my babies' births. Back then I was in and out of baby-gear stores like a mother bear on the prowl, hunting for the sturdy crib, the soft blankets, the handmade quilts I would hang just so. Furnishing my boys' nurseries helped dream a new life stage into being. Now I'm birthing another era, decorating another interior.

At first I'm out of practice, and it's awkward looking for just what pleases me instead of what's boy-friendly or indestructible. But soon, I'm in and out of lighting stores, brightening up moody corners of our house with artful lamps, no longer fearing Nate's flying Frisbee or Will's winged Koosh

deadlines, I had to overlook my chair's frayed upholstery, my dingy carpet, and coffee-mug stains on the desk.

Now I begin to see how our emptied-out home could become a gift of time and space applied to catch up on deferred maintenance, refeather my own nest, and write the next chapter of my life. What will fill it is still unfolding. As I watch several of my newly empty-nested friends join choruses or book groups, study yoga or French, or do their small part to change the world for the better, I am tempted by the possibilities ahead.

First my private space needs to be revamped for the flurry of creativity I feel coming on. Released from Saturday-morning soccer games, I can wander weekend art fairs and flea markets, something I enjoyed in my footloose days but could never have done with the boys around. At night, I'm no longer checking homework,

fertilize friendships and flowers, both seem to be growing.

Getting the hang of things, I add a new bookshelf for the stacks of "one day I'll get to these" literary classics that I can now begin. And I resurrect my childhood doll collection from dusty storage and show off some of my favorites on turquoise shelves. Turquoise was the color of my very first bedroom, and I'm reclaiming it now, along with some hot pinks and sunny yellows to reflect this latest artistic burst.

As Bob and I start to travel more, I search for new dolls—a Yucatan mother with niños on her back, a taffeta-skirted Greek folk dancer. They're mementos of the places I've been, touchstones of my expanding world, and visual souvenirs that delight and energize me.

If the house is a symbol of the self, my season of refeathering the nest

## If the house is a symbol of the self, my season of refeathering the nest has been a face-lift without the pain of a nip and tuck

ball. I'm tearing down the dark "won't-show-chocolate-pudding" curtains dating back to the preschool years and ordering Roman shades in an ivory hue. They'll be a perfect backdrop for the adults-only dinner parties I plan to host, where no food will be thrown.

But it's in the room where I write that I make my strongest stand, getting ready for dreams to take hold. Because we burrowed through a closet to reach this wide-windowed, sunny, garden-gazing space, I dubbed it Narnia, imagining it could become my own magic wardrobe. Yet once I brought in a desk, a computer, and piles of files, it felt functional but soulless, not yet like a room of my own.

In the 24/7 buzz of family life, there were no extra hours to make it mine. The room became a way station for a few hours of frantic work shoehorned between carpools, meal prep, school sports, and meetings. Rushing to meet

but shelter magazines and Web sites for the small treasures that will become my totems of inspiration.

Like my friend who turned her college-age child's room into an art studio, I, too, can focus on my own passions. Each addition reflects a buried interest now given breathing room, and becomes a signpost to the territory ahead.

I bring home a kilim rug patterned in earthy rusts and teals that gives my room poetry and a color scheme. No one disputes my choice or teases me that the colors don't go when I add bright red and blue baskets to hide my towering files and an aqua, horse-shaped ceramic lamp whose attitude and kitschy charm buoy my spirits even if it's not exactly my husband's or sons' taste.

Then I find just the right spot for a friend's gift—a slim bud vase—to hold a lily or hydrangea, freshly cut from my garden. With more free time to

has been a face-lift without the pain of a nip and tuck. When I sit in my desk chair, reupholstered in vivid indigo, I can swivel around the room and take pleasure in my fresh start: my global treasures, the flashes of hot colors, the rug that somehow grounds yet lifts me. I've created both a sanctuary and a launching pad for my stories yet to be written, my adventurous tales yet to be told.

Still, I'm leaving the front door ajar. My latest domestic purchase is a plush chair for our bedroom. "What do we need that for?" my husband asks, eyebrow raised. He knows we both like reading propped up in bed.

"Oh, this? Just in case one of the boys is home and needs a place to sit and talk with us," I toss over my shoulder, as casual as I can be. ■

Elizabeth Fishel is the author of *Sisters and Reunion* and the coeditor of *Something That Matters*.