



Empty Nest Syndrome

Fledging day will come soon

We aren't an outdoorsy family by anybody's definition. We grill, but we don't camp. We walk, but we don't hike. I'm certainly no gardener. We like to hang out in our backyard, although when New Hampshire's mosquito crop gets too annoying, we happily head back into the house. But recently we had an experience that brought nature—almost literally—into our home.

There is an evergreen bush in our front yard that blocks the entire right side of the large bay window in our living room. My husband and I were planning to have it pulled out that spring, but we had to wait. A robin had taken up residence and was building a nest.

Early in April, my older son's teacher gave her second-grade class

an assignment to observe an animal and write about it in their class journals. Peter and his dad had recently put together a bat house and hung it up in the backyard—conveniently in view from the kitchen window. Peter set to work observing the bat house and wrote about building it in his journal (there weren't any actual bats).

That was the evening I first noticed the robin. There was a flurry of activity outside the window, and I peeked out in time to see her putting the finishing touches on the nest. She'd picked a great spot. The nest was deep inside the bush, well protected on all sides by tightly packed, spiky branches. The only real bare patch was the one facing the house, pressed up against the window.

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American robins often nest in backyard settings, giving careful watchers glimpses of nests and nestlings.

I called Peter in to take a look. I suggested perhaps he would like to write about the robin instead. He was charmed, but said he'd keep writing about bats, which are his favorite animal. That was OK—his assignment, his choice.

My younger son, Thomas, is a toddler. I tried to show him the bird as well, but he never seemed to see her. Frankly, if it doesn't have wheels, he's not that into it. My husband, too, had to look for a while before he could see the robin.

Every day Peter and I would check on the mother bird. All we had to do was open the wooden blinds in the living room and peer into the bush through the window. I had hoped to show him the classic robin's-egg-blue color of the eggs, but the nest was positioned so that

we couldn't see down into it.

We decided not to look at her too often, because we didn't want to make her nervous. When we did look, she would hold perfectly still for as long as we were at the window. In a burst of inspired creativity, we called her "Mrs. Robin."

In our living room, just inside the window near the nest, is a comfortable overstuffed recliner covered in light brown velour. It has wide, flat arms that my children love to sit on. We bought it to be "Daddy's chair" but—well, you know how it goes.

One of our family routines was

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INSET PHOTO: BILL THOMPSON, III

that after I got home from work and Thomas got home from daycare, we would sit together in the brown chair. I'd try to keep everything close by in case I needed it—the remote, the telephone, my book, his book, tissues for his perpetually runny nose. He'd watch an episode of *Thomas the Tank Engine* or *Blue's Clues* on tape while I read, either to him or to myself. Like the rest of the family, Thomas prefers to read and watch TV at the same time. We might have been “multitasking,” but it was still one of the few times in the day when we could just be quietly together.

One day, as I sat with him in the chair reading *Are You My Mother?* and watching Mrs. Robin coming and going, it dawned on me that I was in my nest. I liked the idea that Mrs. Robin and I were moms together, in our nests, on either side of the window. For a little while, time seemed to slow down.

I got attached to Mrs. Robin. If she wasn't sitting on her nest, I was a little disappointed. If she was, I was careful not to disturb her by looking for too long. After all, we moms need whatever privacy we can get.

Toward the end of May, I saw some gray fluff sticking up from under her body. My first absurd thought was that she had found some animal fur with which to line her nest. But the next time I looked she was off the nest and I could see the fur was moving. I called Peter to come quickly and quietly. There,

squirming helplessly in the nest, were four baby birds.

Suddenly, nature picked up the pace. Each day was like a snapshot of a different stage of development. One day the babies were a wriggling mass at the bottom of the nest. The next, they were lifting their heads slightly to raise their open bills. A couple of days later, as Mrs. Robin stood perfectly still on a branch, holding a caterpillar in her beak and waiting for us to stop looking at her, the baby birds reached their heads high in the air and waved their bills around for food. The next day, they had their big-kid feathers and, all facing the same direction, held perfectly still when they noticed me.

And the next day—they were gone.

That was it. While I wasn't looking, they had learned to fly. I thought it would take longer. Mrs. Robin no longer needed the nest, so she had flown away as well. My heart broke. I had missed the event.

For weeks, I would check every morning, just in case, but they didn't come back. I miss them, but I also know it isn't really the robins I'm missing. It's my children. We have had not just days and weeks, but months and years together. I pray we'll have the same for a long time. My husband and I try to savor every minute of this time while our boys are small. But, of course, we don't really. Not enough. Jobs and school and housekeeping are immediate and have that knack of pushing longer-term thoughts right out of our

heads. There is always the next thing to do or to plan, or the next place to be. Mrs. Robin and her four babies reminded me to appreciate things as they are, right now, because in what seems like about five minutes, my boys will be grown, off to college, and then off to build their own nests.

When I sit with my kids in the brown chair, I think about how quickly those baby robins learned to fly, and about all the things my own children learned that year. Peter had become a confident reader and mathematician while navigating the complexities of a second-grader's social life. He could swim, skate, and ride a bike, and he knew more about bats than I ever want to know (although there are still no bats eating our mosquitoes). Thomas had

learned to talk, as well as learning the alphabet, single-digit numbers, and lots and lots of songs. He'd get up and dance to any fragment of a tune, jumping like a kangaroo and smiling his wide, wide smile. They were happy and healthy and becoming more independent every day.

My husband and I look forward to the young men our boys will someday become. But we're glad to know that human children don't grow up as fast as robins. They won't be flying away just yet. 🐦

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