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GENERATIONS

When Parents Leave the Nest

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TWO years ago, my baby boomer parents relocated from Westchester to Hong Kong with my 95-year-old grandmother and a 100-pound Newfoundland puppy that would be the size of a small horse by the next monsoon season. My dad and stepmother, Sue, both 60 that summer, left behind a house they had just finished renovating and a lot of bewildered friends and relatives, including their only daughter and their new son-in-law.

Marcellus Hall

“Everyone goes nuts at 60,” my husband, Jonathan, said after they announced their plans.

I didn’t buy the midlife-crisis theory. “Why do they have to move to the other side of the world? Couldn’t they just get a sports car?” I said, though in a few weeks that didn’t seem like such a good idea

either.

“Sorry I’m late! I backed into the Dumpster!” shouted Sue as she pulled up to the curb to pick us up for the going-away party.

Jonathan and I gingerly made our way around the back of the car for an inspection. There was no back window, just a big hole and a few chunks of glass attached by a thin plastic membrane at the very corners. The rest of the window was in the trunk.

Sue yelled: “Get in the car! We’ve got a lot to do!” Within 48 hours, my parents and my grandmother had to be on a plane to Hong Kong. The dog, Sue said, would be going on another plane with an overnight layover in Amsterdam. Naturally.

I slid into the back of the car slowly, checking for broken glass. Sue turned around to grin at me — maniacally. She looked disheveled, and her eyes were wide and excited.

This was unnerving. Sue was never like this. Sue was practical, and reliable. I always told people that if I got into a fix and had to make one phone call, I’d call Sue. Sue was a fixer extraordinaire. If I just needed reassurance and someone who would listen to me cry without getting impatient, I’d call Dad.

Back at the house in South Salem, Dad was packing up the last of their belongings, and he bounded up and down the stairs, his long legs and arms propelling his short and stocky torso forward. He, too, was in an uncharacteristically carefree mood, which was great but disorienting.

My father was never impulsive. This couldn't be the same Dad who once pulled me aside before Sue and I departed for a trip to Florida and told me he had to show me how to run from an alligator in case we encountered one on the golf course. (We don't golf.)

When I turned 30, seven years ago, I asked my father about getting older, figuring he'd have something wise to say. The conversation went something like this:

"It stinks," he said with a shrug. "Thirty wasn't so bad but 31 was awful. That's when you realize you can't go back, and you're headed for 40."

"Do you feel older?" I asked.

"No, I feel 19," he said.

"Why 19?"

"Maybe that is where my sense of self stopped," he said.

At 19, my father was a painter. That was the year he met my birth mother, so I'm not sure if his sense of himself is the "before" or the "after." Probably the before. At 19, there were still possibilities. Everyone in his generation was on the cusp of something. That was before he was drafted during the Vietnam War, before I was born, before he stopped painting and went back to college. That was before my mother left him with a 1-year-old girl to raise on his own. That was before he made a lot of choices, pragmatic choices. Then, 10 years ago, he returned to painting, Chinese painting.

Where did Sue's sense of herself stop? When she started working as

an idealistic intern forRobert F. Kennedy? When she entered Columbia Business School with the first class of women and believed that there were unlimited opportunities in the work force? What was the before? I knew the after involved some successes, but also many compromises. That was until two weeks before her 60th birthday, when my stepmom was offered the best job of her career — in Hong Kong, allowing my father to fulfill his dream at exactly the same time.

After the last items were sent off with the movers, we picked up the smoked fish platter from the caterer and Grandma from the neighbor's, and arrived three hours late at the going-away luncheon. We were greeted by relatives who looked as dazed as Grandma. No one knew quite what to say, so we ate.

At 11:30 a.m. on the day of my parents' departure, the Newfoundland was picked up by a pet travel service. I sat with my parents while they waited for their car to pick them up, and then drove with them as far as Grandma's 86th Street apartment.

The hugs were brief. My parents were impatient, already gone. I was tearful.

"The time will go by fast," Jonathan reassured me later. "It is like they are going off to college." It was.

When I went off to college, my dad lingered as long as possible at my Cornell dorm, coming up within increasingly ridiculous "tips" to share with me. Sue would tell me years later that he was inconsolable on the long ride home. Now I was the one left behind.

Grandma survived the flight. I knew she was alive only because I didn't hear otherwise. All I had to go on was the "no news is good news" rule that my parents used when I was away and just "too busy" to call.

The photographs came first: a glittering panoramic view from their window at night. It turned out the phone wasn't in yet, and when they did call, the connection was tinny. Grandma sounded excited, and was bubbly and talkative: Everyone in Hong Kong was so nice, so friendly. "It is beautiful here," she said. She sounded younger on the phone.

The next time they called, the connection was clearer but Dad still seemed far away. It would take a few more calls for me to realize that I wanted to know this new father, this old and young man with so many dreams before him still. With my parents on the other side of the world, I could, for the first time, see them as remarkable individuals.

After a year, Grandma Mary returned. Her enthusiasm had been short-lived. My parents remained — happily. Hong Kong is a home base for them to travel across Asia. It is not unusual for us to get an Auntie Mame-style postcard or phone call from some exotic locale, like an archery range in Bhutan.

We visit them at Christmastime and look out over those towering high rises crazily juxtaposed against a green mountainscape, and it still does not seem real. Jonathan and I often shake our heads in wonder at this peculiar realignment of our lives and theirs.

Like so many in their generation, my parents are remaking the rules

once again. Watching them has liberated us, too. Suddenly, our own lives seem less circumscribed, less finite. We can always go nuts at 60.