

MOVING IN

I am shopping in Target for a small, table-top refrigerator for her when it hits me. Standing there surrounded by all the “Back to School” paraphernalia, I suddenly need a place to sit down.

We have been to see her suite already. Though microwaves and boiler plates are forbidden (fire hazards), she is allowed a small fridge for drinks and snacks. It is going to look pretty lonely sitting there in that sparsely furnished room. But, eventually we will move in some of her stuff. For now the mahogany bed and dresser, small desk and chair will suffice. The new beige carpeting is soft underfoot; the walls smell of fresh paint. There is ample closet space; a view of the parking lot and beyond. The beyond is sumptuous – a forest thick with trees hiding the outline of a house.

The first time we visit, she is quite nervous. We are supposed to have lunch in the dining room, but she isn't in the mood for it. So instead we are asked to have a seat in the “Bistro” where the smell of popcorn is overwhelming. Music popular with her generation can be heard all around. I recognize a song I've heard her singing or listening to. Our tour guide appears and we are led to the elevator. Riding up to the third floor, the guide tells us about the “Birthday Club”: on the last Friday of every month cake is served in the dining hall to commemorate that month's birthdays. I can't tell if she likes the idea or not. In any case, her birthday is not for several months, so she'll have time to decide.

On moving day, I allow myself some of the pleasures of “nesting.” I want her new home to be as cozy as possible. I've brought a few of her plants and a new African violet one that has just flowered. She is obviously pleased with my purchase and sets about finding the perfect spot for it. I won't be making up her bed, so instead I arrange the various photos and mementos we've brought from home: a statue of the Virgin Mary, a brightly colored pitcher vase, a mother of pearl inlaid wooden jewelry box from Morocco.

I've spent the last few days washing her favorite clothes which I now carefully fold and put away in the dresser or hang in the closet. Among the plain plastic hangers are the other kind she prefers; the ones covered with pastel knitting or Christmas-y embroidery.

We decide to go out for a late lunch. Walking down the hall, we pass one or two rooms with the television blaring and I'm glad we've chosen a private room. She won't have a roommate like some of the others have; like my two sons and I had our freshman year. Thank goodness she hasn't spent the last few weeks worrying whether she will be rooming with someone from the Adams Family. Or someone who doesn't share her penchant for reading but prefers watching cable until all hours.

At the restaurant, I choose a burger while she opts for shrimp, something she does not expect to be on the menu very often at her new digs (though she is wrong about that, I learn later). We both eat slowly, but she seems to be lingering purposely, ordering a rich

dessert (key lime pie with lots of whipped cream) and savoring every bite, long after I've paid the check. If I had let her, she would have had a cocktail too.

We get back a little before five. Dinner will soon be served and people are gathering near the dining hall in anticipation. She heads for the elevator, her stomach too full for even a cup of coffee. But, as I follow, I can't help thinking that this will allow her to put off, yet again, her first communal meal. I remember my own trepidation at the thought of walking into the dining hall alone for the first time, frantically searching for a familiar face. At least she won't have to go through that, because (we've been told) there is assigned seating. Still, as we walk through the crowd, I can sense the others are "checking her out" and this unnerves me.

So, here I am now in Target with all the parents of college students, many of them freshmen, shopping for refrigerators and other absolute necessities (in my day it was lava lamps and scented candles). I can't help thinking of the times I did this with each of my sons – of how the older one searched my basement for some of my old posters; and the younger one allowed me to make his bed with the new "long, twin" tee-shirt cotton sheets.

And I think back to when I was the petulant teenager, dawdling at the last meal I'd share with my mom for awhile. Half of me couldn't wait to break away and start my new life, and the other half wanted to climb back into the car and head home. Does she feel this way?

As I drive away, leaving my mom off for her first night in Assisted Living, I reflect once more on how life really does move in circles.

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