

B. Scott Boring
Souvenirs

While rifling through a large, plastic, storage bin filled with important papers I know I would need the minute I discarded them, it drops to the floor in front of me — a laminated article from a local county newspaper. The emotion of nostalgia is powerful in the eve of my life, and when its wave hits me, it capsizes me temporarily. What brought me to my box of important papers is now forgotten; the article has my full attention. January 25, 2001, is the date on the yellowing relic. The fading color photo on the front page transfixes me — it is of my two sons and me. Having all been cast in parts of a local community theater production of Stephen Schwartz's Children of Eden, a local paper ran the story "Father, Sons Bond on Footlighters' Stage." My mind flashes back in time as it does so easily these days; big crocodile tears begin to form and roll down my cheeks.

I was never much of an emotional guy. While growing up, little made me cry save for spankings (and there were many); I just really don't remember crying too much. It all changed when I became a father; the stone-cold heart finally melted. My eyes began to tear a lot after I became a daddy. I even cried at the animated Disney film The Lion King when Mufasa was killed by the stampeding wildebeests. My younger son grabbed and patted my hand and said, "It's okay, Daddy; it's just a movie; it isn't real." He was parroting something I told him many times.

These days I gush at Hallmark commercials, inspirational movies, patriotic homecomings, heartfelt songs, and touching stories. Father and son moments are my real kryptonite. The final scene of Field of Dreams when Kevin Costner and his father have a catch slays me every time.

In my reverie I hear familiar words, "Those two are joined at the hip. You never see one without the other. Where is your shadow?" These were the common phrases used to describe my younger son, Tyler, and me when he was a boy. Our relationship in the present isn't what it was when he was a kid. I'm probably to blame. When I allowed alcohol to consume me, I did some things I would have never done had I been sober. I'm not sure he has ever forgiven me even though I made amends, and he said he was proud of me for battling and beating addiction. I've tried my best to regain hero status in his eyes as I live in sobriety, but perhaps hero worship is the stuff of boyhood. He's a man now, living his own life, but the melancholy will never leave my heart. Vanishing for periods of time, it always returns, and the ache resumes.

I guess it is inevitable a son spreads his wings and leaves the nest. The Bible even declares it — "A man shall leave his father and mother..." — I would have been happier had he lived with me forever, but it is not the way of the world, not the way one comes of age, not the way of men. I can't fault him. I did the very same thing, leaving the nest, spreading my wings, and soaring. I only returned home to visit. I am embarrassed to say I thought little of my parents during my single days. I was too busy having fun, fellowshipping, and frolicking.

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The day I left Tyler in Denver to begin his career with Southwest Airlines was the saddest day of my life; I wept, sobbed really. I couldn't control the sorrow my heart felt. Being a frugal guy, I lingered in Denver after setting him up in his apartment. I was waiting for his free flights for parents to begin before I returned to New Jersey. It was an excuse. I didn't want to leave. He called me when I was standing in line at the pharmacy refilling a prescription.

"Dad, book your flight home. My free flying perks won't kick in until my HR onboarding seminars conclude, and I begin training. It will be a week before that happens. You have to get back to work." He said it delicately, respectfully, the logic of it so sound. I read between the lines inferring what he was really saying, "Dad, it's time. You need to go home."

I sighed audibly and probably too loudly as I opened the Southwest Airlines app on my iPhone and booked my flight to Philadelphia. When I pressed the purchase button, the waterworks began, releasing my inconsolable sorrow. I have never been sadder. The only thing comparable was the death of my mother where I grieved privately. The aching in my heart was the same, but a parent's love outweighs a son's love for his mother; no one saw me shed a tear for Mom. My parental sadness leaving Tyler in Denver was very public. I was a wreck.

When I got to the counter to pay for my medicine, the pharmacy tech asked, "Are you all right?" She could see my "eyes were sweating" — what I call crying — and how upset I was.

"No," I blubbered, "I'm leaving my son in Denver and flying back to New Jersey." I gasped out the response. I couldn't catch my breath.

An elderly lady standing behind me heard me boo-hooing. She patted my back and said, "You poor baby." A complete stranger gave me a hug and consoled me, "Every father who adores his children goes through this when they leave home. You will be fine. They always come home, and you will love to see them come, and after a few days, you will love to see them go!" (On a side note, I am amazed how compelled we are to give hugs when we see someone bereft.) I was thankful for her words and comfort. I accepted them, a rare occurrence for me.

She was right. I eventually got over it and became accustomed to the empty nest. However, the grief in the moment of leaving my younger son alone in a strange city consumed me. I cried as I returned to my hotel to pack. I cried as I showered. I cried driving to the Southwest office building in Denver to collect him from human resources. I cried when I hugged him tightly goodbye at departing flights. I cried going through TSA Pre-check. Yes! I cried the entire flight home. The flight attendants, discovering my son worked for Southwest, provided free wine to console me. It only made it worse. Alcohol is a depressant. I needed no help in the depression department. I finally fell asleep from the exhaustion and probably the wine.

The flight attendants woke me to tell me we had landed in Philadelphia. My wife picked me up at the airport. She took one look at me and knew. Knew I was hurting badly. "How was your flight?" She asked.

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“Horrible!” My voice cracked as I said it. “I left our baby in Denver.” The tears flowed again; she returned to the cell phone waiting lot, parked, and she joined me in sorrow.

My heart ached for weeks, months probably, maybe I am still not over it. There is an old, adage, perhaps a cliché, which has made its rounds in literature, requiems, eulogies, and country music ballads. It was first used by ancient Greek, dramatist Menander... “Time heals all wounds.” I am not sure I agree with this because it seems our broken hearts never heal; they just stop stinging.

He is thirty now, ten years in Denver and thriving. I couldn't be prouder. My flashback remembers — play time in the pool, sharing the stage in local productions and duet performances, his first white-knuckled roller coaster ride, football games, performing arts events, Harry Potter and Star Wars premiers — we shared life together; I loved every minute, every second of it. God, I miss him.

I finished reading the news article and moved the laminated memory from the junk paper box to a large shoe box reserved for treasures — notes, cards, letters, things which are important to me — it deserves a more cherished spot rather than the messy storage container. The nameless lady in the pharmacy summarized it perfectly, “They always come home, and you will love to see them come ... and you will love to see them go!”

I know the hardest part of love is letting go, so as my sons chase their dreams, I reminisce of times well-lived, a cherished chapter from the novel of my life. These days, I am relegated to loving from afar. I tuck my mental mementos back into the footlocker of my mind until the next time a wave of nostalgia impacts me. When my heart aches. When my eyes sweat. When my memories are my souvenirs.