

THE OTHER DAY MY SON COOKED breakfast, lunch and dinner, all in a single frying pan. Scrambled eggs, grilled cheese, shell steak. That last required my assistance, a shorthand recipe typed into my handheld in the middle of a drowsy late-day meeting. "High heat," it began. An hour later the meeting was still going on and a return message arrived: "Thanks for the help."

A friend whose children are just a little older than my own told me once that parents fool themselves, pulling away from the quad with an empty SUV and tears in their eyes, that sending a child to college constitutes the great separation. The real breach, she said, came after the car, full once more, left the quad with a mortarboard and a diploma tossed in the back seat.



Home Cooking

Sending the kids off to college is one rite of passage. But it's when they finally leave for real that the biggest breach begins.

During college there were those long winter breaks, the occasional weekend, the summers in which the high-school friends reappeared at the breakfast table, if pancakes at 1 p.m. counts as breakfast. But then, college over, real life began. The unfamiliar names of workplace acquaintances. The inconvenient or non-existent holidays that come with the bottom rungs of the employment ladder. The tiny apartment in the new neighborhood. The frying pan.

That frying pan used to be mine. It was in a box consigned to the basement, along with the crummiest cookie sheets, a dented stockpot, a saucepan, a couple of lids. The frying pan was the best of the bunch, a heavy stainless-steel omelet pan that my elegant Aunt Catherine gave me for my own college graduation. She believed that a girl who could make an omelet would never be at a loss, for food or friends.

"This is a great pan," Chris said. "You can use this pan for everything!"

First they are helpless. The rocking, the burping, the bathing, the nursing. The endless nursing. And then they learn to use a spoon, and then a knife, and chopsticks, and the oven, and a panini press. I don't believe food is love, precisely, but I believe everything looks better in the morning if there are eggs Benedict. I learned to cook from my mother, me at the stove, her in a wheelchair, when I was doing a college year abroad in the country of chemo. Her message was pretty clear: a full plate is what you will need to survive.

"Mama," Maria yelled over the phone with what sounded like a party in the background. "Can you make spaghetti carbonara with ham?"

This is the first generation of college students who often trad-

ed down when they went to school, traded queen beds and private bathrooms for the narrow twin and the communal showers. Yet they don't seem to mind much when they finally score a place of their own, perhaps because they are also the first generation to have homework-helping, soccer-coaching, essay-reading parents fluttering around them like moths with control issues.

Chris is living like a lonely guy, with a recliner chair and a standing lamp and a TV atop a chest of drawers and a fridge that freezes everything, even a jar of olives. The last time I went up to visit I obsessively rearranged some area rugs, although I've been made to understand that the words "window treatments" are verboten. Quin is luckier. He lives in Beijing. Foiled are my yearnings to provide a couch, some throw pillows, an occasional occasional table.

When we took our daughter to campus a dean passed out a palm card with these words: WHAT DO YOU WANT TO DO ABOUT THIS? It was supposed to be placed by the phone and read aloud when she called to complain about the dorms, the

food, the professors, the administration. That seems just right to me. Sara Delano Roosevelt is my anti-role model. The newly married Franklin and Eleanor moved into a town house in Manhattan that Sara had designed. She lived next door, and between the two houses there were doors on every floor so that she could pop in whenever she pleased.

First they are in your arms constantly, so that your joints go stiff and your back aches. Then they hold your hand, then tolerate an arm around the shoulder, then shrug and pull away. And finally there's that hug that always seems to vibrate with the adrenaline of near-escape. They recede into the distance, leaving vapor trails of memory and dinner for two, a culinary trick I cannot master. After my mother died we had a housekeeper who had been the house mother at a fraternity; she made smothered chicken and pork chops with onions and pepper steak in quantities so enormous that it looked as though Congress was expected to drop by. I merely make enough food for eight, which is what I always did when I was cooking for five. It is a good thing my husband likes leftovers.

Chris still comes for dinner sometimes, for the kinds of meals you can't make in a frying pan: beef stew, short ribs, spaghetti and meatballs. He eats the way you eat when you've been cooking for yourself, with a sigh and a smile. His room upstairs has not changed much, except that it echoes because some of the furniture is gone, and sometimes he goes up there to see if there's anything he's forgotten. But eventually he stands and says, "I think I'm going home now." How would he know how that feels to me? First the cradle, then the crib, the big-boy bed, the posters on the wall, the prom pictures on the desk. And then the U-Haul and the tiny kitchen with the lone pan. His home now is elsewhere.