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CAITLIN SHETTERLY

When Birds Nest in the Doorway, Go Out the Window

An exercise in multi-family living

ON A DARK NIGHT LAST SPRING, I followed my thirteen-year-old son quietly around our house, climbed a wooden stepladder that straddled our trash barrels, and struggled up behind him through our kitchen window. I had none of his grace; rather, I looked like one of those burglars in the *Home Alone* movies—clumsy and absurd. Next, my husband, Dan, came around the corner carrying our sleeping seven-year-old wrapped in a green sleeping bag. Dan wobbled up the ladder and passed his large sack through the window and into my arms as I staggered backward, waking up the boy.

Our reason for these silly acrobatics was simple: both of our two doors, the only entrances into our home, were inhabited by mothers. At the front door was a house finch sitting on five eggs in a nest hidden inside the winter's Christmas wreath; at our side door was a mother robin, sitting on four eggs in the same nest she used last year. These birds chose to nest on our house, I assume, because they felt safety in our proximity.

It happened for the first time the year before, in mid-May. Dan had hung an old pair of olive green work pants from the light fixture on our side porch in case they had ticks on them. The next afternoon, when he went to shake them out, a robin shot out from behind the light and went squawking into our neighbor's arborvitae. It so startled Dan that he dropped the pants back onto the light fixture and retreated inside. For the next three weeks, while the baby robins incubated and then hatched, we used our front door. It was an adjustment because we had no vestibule in our front hall, no overhang to stand under when the rain was coming down. It was hard to keep mud from tracking inside, onto the floors, and up the carpeted stairs. But it seemed a small concession to reorient our lives; we could make room in our inn.



Once, our northside neighbor sent us an email listing our many faults: the pile of composted manure in our driveway we were taking too long to shovel into our gardens; our laundry line that was disturbing his “quality of life” when he looked out his window and saw it; the Christmas wreath that, in his words, we “left up until August.” Ah yes, we were guilty as charged on all three counts, especially that last one that made perfect sense to us, of course.

Every year, the house finches nest in our old wreaths, sometimes rearing three successively fluffy broods in a single season. Those young ones take their first flights into the old grandmother spruce that has been protecting our house—and all who have come to dwell in and on it—for a good two hundred-plus years. Lucky for us, our neighbor can't also see the smear of honey we put on our counter every spring to feed the ants that come marching along in the afternoons to drink like cows at a slough. Then, after nightfall, the ants head, one by one, back to whatever crevice they came out of.

Room can always be made.

So last April, we were thrilled to once again see a pair of house finches flitting from the spruce to the apple tree, peering into the old brown wreath and discussing its various merits and flaws until they finally decided to settle down. Thrilled until the morning we opened the side door to our porch and the robin shot off her old nest, scolding us as she went. “Oh geez,” Dan said. “They're supposed to do this in stages. Isn't she a bit early?”

We spent a good five days going in and out of the robin's door while vociferously explaining to her that this was not the ideal location. But in the early mornings or when we were inside eating dinner, she kept working on tidying up last year's nest, carrying beakfuls of mud and hay. Soon, she had an egg.

And so, it was decided: we would go in and out of the kitchen window by ladder until either set of babies, front or side door, had hatched, fledged, and left the nest for good.

Our children—even the older son who cares about his “flow” (that is, hair) and the tidiness of his Levi's jean jacket—didn't bat an eye at our window plan. Both sons just went in and out the window and down the ladder like it was perfectly normal, thank you very much. My older one always managed to somehow keep his outfit pristine. Eventually, he taught me that the key to some modicum of grace was to lean backward and throw my left leg into the house first. I succeeded 50 percent of the time. When I didn't, I teetered backward and screeched, “I'm falling,” and someone, a son or husband, grabbed my wrist through the window to haul me in.

I think both children remembered the Mo Willems book, *There Is a Bird on Your Head*, and thanked their lucky stars these birds were just nesting at our doorways.

A couple days after that first egg, a second, and then a third appeared in the robin's nest, bright blue against our yellow house. We anxiously watched for a fourth because we'd read that the clock doesn't start ticking in our favor until she has four to sit on. At four eggs, it's about two weeks of incubation.

We reminded each other that last year our robin taught her young to fly from the porch in two short mornings and then immediately took the entire family into the knotweed and apple trees on the side yard to finish the job. “That cut off some time,” Dan and I remembered optimistically. Or just foolishly.

Of course, there were a few irritations: our younger son banging on the window to come in; the older one locking the younger one out and then running upstairs. And, also, a bizarre feeling of imprisonment; one could not easily step outside and check on the garden or sit in the sun. To leave required a literal balancing act and lots of “handing things through.”

But I had at least one balm to these peccadilloes: I secretly hoped our grumpy neighbor would send us another email about what fools we are. I like it when the obvious is ratified.

[Read more about Caitlin's family encounters with animals here.](#)

One weekend, some friends were supposed to come for dinner. But asking anyone else to be as quirky as we are, to put it euphemistically, and crawl through the kitchen window seemed unfair, and maybe too odd. After all, that same day, my older son had vaulted through the window, closed it to keep our cat in, and come upstairs to tell me that our other neighbor, Bill, and his dog, Rosie, were on the porch. When I came wobbling down the ladder and around the house, I told them about the robin and that they might be “scaring her.” He smiled gamely and came to stand on the yard next to me. “You guys are weird,” he said with a grin.

“I know,” I said, grinning back.

Each day for that entire spring, we walked a wide circle around the porch to the car. Dan took to clucking at the robin and saying, like a mantra, over and over, “You're safe. You're safe.” He named her Gertie. When Gertie was in situ, she scrunched down and peered at us as we rounded the porch, her tail a dark smudge of smoke against a forest of peeling cedar clapboards.

The way Gertie followed us with her eyes gave us all joy. She looked grumpy but also somewhat accepting of, or perhaps just amused by, our humanity.

I like to tell my kids that these wild mothers were teaching our family that lives sometimes get rearranged by all sorts of things: illness, pandemics, job losses, the unpredictable natural world, family, artistic fervor, hunger, or thirst. And that room can always be made. Instead of diminishing our existence, these changes can actually afford us a deeper sense of how we must participate with other beings for the brief time we flit around this mortal coil.

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Caitlin Shetterly is the author of four books: The bestselling 'Fault Lines: Stories of Divorce', 'Made for You and Me', 'Modified', and, most recently, the novel 'Pete and Alice in Maine'. 'Pete and Alice in Maine' is the story of a New York City couple and their two daughters who come to a remote farmhouse in Maine during the pandemic. It was published this July by Harper Books. Shetterly was born and raised in Maine and lives on the Maine coast with her two sons, husband, and one indoor cat, Hemingway. You can find her on Instagram @caitlinssetterly.