

Chapter 1

What Do I Want to Be When They Grow Up?

I'm a planner. (Shocking, right, when you see that I have a whole chapter in this book dedicated to anxiety and perfectionism.) And in the summer of 2008, I had a plan for exactly how life was going to go. Glowing and pregnant with my first child, I was also on the cusp of a big change professionally. Not necessarily because of the baby who'd soon be joining our family, but because my husband and I were planning a move (from Wisconsin to Kansas) for his job. I was an English teacher at the time, so the summer months were the perfect time for me to visit Kansas, tour potential high schools, and meet some principals, hoping to make a connection and land a new job myself. And, while we were there, we checked out neighborhood options, as well.

I had it all mapped out. I'd get a new job as a teacher, be a working mom who brought her kid to daycare or had a nanny, and we'd likely live in a bungalow-style house, near Kansas City, where we could raise our little baby in an eclectic and vibrant community full of quaint bakeries, botanical gardens, and libraries we could walk to on Saturdays.

Boom. Plan.

Except none of that happened.

In reality, my story followed the path of so many women with lofty ambitions to do it all and have it all. And then, at some point, reality smacks them in the face with a sippy cup full of day-old milk and they realize they can't.

The Best Laid Plans ...

So, what happened? Why didn't I end up heading the English department at a high school in Kansas and walk my baby to the farmers market on Saturday mornings?

I MEAN, I HAD A PLAN.

Was it because I hated my job? Nope. I loved teaching. Absolutely loved it. Also, I had already earned my undergraduate and master's degrees in English and Secondary Teaching. Why wouldn't I continue working in a career I was passionate about? A career I was really freaking good at? A career I'd be paying for until I was in my 40s (because, you know, student loans and all)?

Why did I walk away? Why do so many of us women who love our careers—careers we worked our asses off for—walk away as we pivot into motherhood? And why is it usually us doing it and not the dads?



(You're probably expecting an answer here, but I don't have one.)

For me, there was no aha moment when a light switch flipped and I knew my teaching career was over. But sometime after my baby was born, my husband and I were standing in our tiny apartment kitchen, and he looked at me and said, "You're not going back to teaching, are you?"

He knew. He was right. And that was that.

Maybe it was due to the mom in me emerging and finding myself pulled to cul-de-sac neighborhoods with minivans rather than the urban downtown vibe I thought I wanted.

Maybe it was because almost immediately after starting his new job, my husband began traveling often, and I knew the only way I could teach high school English was if I dropped my tiny little baby off at a daycare at 6:30 in the morning.

Or maybe it was because I was, frankly, overwhelmed by motherhood and knew with my whole heart that I'd never again be able to give myself to teaching in the way I used to.

Honestly, it was likely a combination of all of these, but yes, that was the end. I never got my teaching license in Kansas and never went back to the classroom after we moved.

My first child was still an infant, and my teaching days were done.

Sixteen years later, I still refer to myself as a former teacher and I still treasure those seven years in the classroom as one of the most important times in my life.

But it's true—instead of teaching Shakespearean sonnets and the value of a good transition between paragraphs, I've spent the last decade and a half changing diapers, attending play dates, reading animal farm books, potty-training three kids, washing straws, lids, and endless tiny cups, building Lego sets, and sweeping crumbs off the floor.

It's been a beautiful, messy, exhausting ride, but the reality is that throughout parenthood, my two college degrees have merely collected dust while my husband's career flourished.

It was a choice I made—a choice I 100% do not regret and I fully believe was the best option for me at the time—but it changed

the entire trajectory of my life. I never imagined before becoming pregnant that the end of my time in the classroom was near, and then, suddenly it was.

The Default Parent Uber Driver Life

My youngest is now 12. The others are 14 and 16. They're in school all day long, which leaves lots of quiet hours for me and the dog. I've been freelancing as a writer and editor since the second baby arrived, so I've got something (a lot, actually) to show for myself when it comes to "work" and that awkward question SAHMs often get that makes us twitch with rage: "*So what do you DO all day?*"

But no, it's not a full-time job. There's no office holiday party or retirement fund or health insurance. I swap in one pair of sweats for another, throw in a load of laundry, do a little work, take the dog for a walk, make sure dinner is prepped for later, put the laundry in the dryer, run the dishwasher, register a kid for something, make an appointment for another, rinse and repeat. Day after day.

During the school year, the high schoolers arrive home at around 3:15, the tween at 4:25. By 5:00, I'm in the car almost every day, driving them all over town to practice, rehearsal, a game, or a friend's house and often don't come up for air until many hours later.

It's not a bad gig. In fact, I'm quite blessed to be the one there for everything, the one absorbing all the car ride convos where bits of information leak out, the one helping edit essays and quizzing them on vocab, the one helping them navigate friendship woes and cheering them on at every game, show, or competition they throw themselves into.

But now that I'm less than a decade from the last one moving on to a post-high-school life, I do wonder ... What do I want to be when they grow up? Is this it? Freelancing, still doing the laundry, and walking the dog every day at noon? Is that enough? Do *I* want a turn at a thriving, booming career like my

husband has had? Do I want a big retirement bash like he'll have someday? Do I want a justified reason to actually wear real pants once in a while?

Are these even options for me?

Knowing that, as the default parent, I'm endlessly on standby for:

"Mom, can you bring me _____ (insert book, computer, phone, charger, uniform, food, etc. etc., forever and ever, amen)" ...

Or *"Mom, I don't feel well. Can you pick me up?" ...*

Or *"Mom, my game is an hour away so we need to leave right after school to get there on time" ...*

I know that any steady "job" or career aspiration, at least for now, has to fit snugly between the 8:30 and 3:00 hours. And that I have to be able and willing to respond and possibly hop into my car on a moment's notice during those hours too.

Of course, kids with moms who work full-time survive and thrive even if their mother can't appear like a magician with whatever they forgot at home. But because my husband works long hours and sometimes travels, the after-school-driving-all-over-the-state part of my job ... that one's here to stay for a few more years, so I'd have to find a career that frees up when the kids do.

But wait! I do have those two degrees taking up space in the hall closet!

"What about teaching?" people sometimes ask. *"Why don't you return to the classroom?"* And to be honest, I don't fully know the answer to why that's a "No" for me, but I think it's a swirl of factors. Career fields go through monumental change in a decade's time, and that's how long it was until my third and last baby was in school. By 2018, the landscape of teaching looked completely different from anything I'd known. When I left the field in 2009, most of my students didn't even have cell phones yet. No one had a smartphone. I can't imagine time-hopping all these years and adjusting to what a classroom full of adolescents looks like now.

Also, I graded papers every night, every weekend, back in my pre-kid 20s. Those hours are gone now, entirely consumed with my own children. Sure, lots of moms do it—I have several friends who remained in the classroom, raised their own kids, and are badass teacher-moms who make it all work. For me, it's too much. I never gave myself the chance to evolve, to share the mental load with my husband, to learn what it looks like to manage mom life and teacher life simultaneously. Re-entering the teacher workforce today feels like diving head-first into a pit of lava.

I believe I'd be setting myself on a straight path to overwhelming failure—a path where as I'd feared all those years ago, I'd be doing two jobs, and neither of them well.

I've spent my children's entire lives as their default parent. I've been there for every need, every call from the nurse, every snow day, every school event. And any parent with older kids knows that even when they are big enough to go off to school all day long, the needs don't stop. How could I possibly make the shift to going back to work full-time? Our system has worked for the last 16 years because my husband cannot be on standby, whereas I can. I am the stable, stationary one who is always home. Always there. They rely on that—him and the kids. And, to be honest, I love being that person for all four of them.

And finally, I guess I just see those seven years as a wholly separate chapter in my story. I loved the teacher I was, and I want to preserve that memory. I can't ever be her again—completely and utterly devoted to her career and her career only. Those seven years are preserved, almost as if they are in a snow globe, untouchable, sitting on a shelf, bringing back memories and making me smile with pride at the time I taught *Hamlet* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* in another life.

Scared to Try, Scared to Not Try

What is next, then? I have six years until my last baby leaves for college. And as much as I want to chase my dreams and toss my

hat into the ring of ... something, if I'm being honest, I'm also terrified.

I'm scared to put myself out there: What does that other world full of "career people" even look like? Is there even a place for me anymore?

But if I don't try, then what? And that's the scariest question of all.

For now, here I am, in the middle. My kids are all in school full-time, but I'm still the default parent they call for everything. Every third Wednesday is a half-day of school, so I that's when I schedule orthodontist appointments and usually try to fit in another errand like haircuts, as well. Right now we're out of eggs and cheese, so I'm going to run to the grocery store real quick for a few things, and, while I'm out, I'll pop into Kohl's and grab new sneakers for my oldest, whose feet won't stop growing, and oh yeah, I need to refill the dog's medicine, too.

And that's why so many of us slog through the grueling baby and toddler days only to emerge on the other side when all the kids are in school, wondering what we should do with ourselves now. Except we're still the household managers with nine thousand tiny but very important tasks to manage daily, and we have to be at the front of the car line to get the youngest one to practice on time, so we actually have to leave the house at 2:45.

Teacher, writer, mom, wife. These are the various maps by which I've lived my life. For now, and for the past decade and a half, "*Mom*" tends to be the compass and everything else falls into place around it.

After another 16 years? I might have a different compass or a new map. Maybe I'll have real-life coworkers and a reason to wear pants that button. Or maybe this is it forever and I'm Team Sweatpants for life.

I don't know yet. For now, I guess I'll go throw in a load of towels while I keep wondering what comes next.

Notes on Chapter 1

If this story sounds familiar to you, you might also be wondering what you're going to be when they grow up. So, as you muddle through these middle years, remember these three things:

- First of all, (and most importantly), if you want your life to include more than motherhood, that's nothing to feel guilty about. You're a great mom and it's okay to want more because you deserve it. Write that on a Post-it and stick it to your mirror.
- Secondly, the time to start prioritizing yourself is now (like yesterday, actually). This way, when the house is actually quiet in a few years, you've already taken a few steps toward your new, well, "you." That means giving real, meaningful thought to what you're passionate about. What parts of you lay hidden all these years because motherhood consumed your every waking breath?
- Also, if you wonder if you're qualified to put yourself out there, remember that through motherhood, you've done a million jobs you had no training for, but you figured it out. As moms, we multitask, run a household, manage calendars and schedules for multiple people, meal-plan and cook to meet different dietary needs, and field punches on the daily in the form of emotional meltdowns, failed tests, and friendship drama, just to name a few. And that's just on a Tuesday.

There's nothing you can't do.

But if you're stuck, here are some ideas. I have lots of friends in the same boat as us—with older kids who have flown the coop or are about to—and here's what they're doing:

1. Going back to school. New degree, new me!
2. Starting their own small businesses, selling their own unique creations, like custom-made clothes.

3. Marketing their services—things they're good at—home organization, cleaning services, photography, personal assistant work.
4. Pivoting career paths entirely and putting themselves out there to do a job they've never done before. They just knew they'd be good at it, so they aimed high and landed the role.
5. Joining the real estate business and killing it.
6. Flipping houses. (Fingers crossed they'll help me redo mine.)
7. Dusting off that old degree, but taking it in a different direction. Former teachers are subbing, tutoring, and teaching online school. Friends who used to work in marketing are reaching out to local businesses to see who needs help getting the word out on social media.
8. Opening up their homes to in-home daycare for little ones.
9. Training to become foster parents as they know their home is meant to have kids running through it, and they felt a calling to help kids who need some love and stability.
10. And me? Well, looks like I'm writing a book.

The truth is, that next chapter is coming, whether you want it to or not. Someday they will all grow up. So what are you going to be?

