

Attendance

On shoes, entropy, and the quiet good news of a floor you cannot keep clean.

BY CHRIS WYATT · 9 MINUTE READ · COLLECTED EDITION 2026

There are nine pairs of shoes on the floor by my door tonight. Not on the rack. The rack is four feet away. It was purchased in a spirit of optimism, it holds twelve pairs, and it is full. The nine on the floor are the overflow.

Take inventory. Black slides with three white stripes, the international uniform of a person who is done with the day. A second pair of slides, plain black, foam, the kind that look extruded rather than made. Grey flip-flops set down neatly, which is somehow worse. A bone-colored clog on its side. Navy running shoes with orange soles, laces still tied, meaning someone stepped out of them the way a man leaves a burning building. A black running shoe upside down, showing its sole to the ceiling like it has something to prove. Grey suede slippers, separated, one of them facing the wall in what appears to be a time-out.

And a rubber tray, purchased specifically to contain wet footwear, currently holding one sandal at a jaunty angle, the way a dinner plate holds a single olive.

This is not a household without a system. This is a household whose system has been overrun.

I have been looking at that floor for a while now, and I have decided it is not a mess. It is a document.

Here is what the floor can tell you that the rack cannot.

The rack tells you what a family owns. Anybody could learn that. The floor tells you who came home.

Every pair down there is an arrival. Somebody walked through that door in the last several hours and stopped caring about footwear at the precise instant they crossed the threshold, which is the highest compliment a building can be paid. Nobody kicks their shoes off in a place where they are still being careful. The pile is what happens when a person stops performing.

So the floor is not clutter. It is a roll call. I can stand in that doorway and know how many people are under this roof tonight without going upstairs to check. Nine pairs, adjusted for the ones who wore two, which is most of them. The floor takes attendance.

It keeps other records too, quietly, without being asked. There is a pair in that pile tonight that is larger than anything that was in it last year. Nobody marks the doorframe in pencil anymore. But the floor keeps the growth chart, in half sizes, and it only runs in one direction. Up. Which is, if you stop and look at it honestly, precisely what you asked for.

Now the honest part, because there is a whole genre of essay that would stop right here, and I want no part of it.

The genre goes: cherish the mess. Someday you will miss the small handprints on the glass. Blessed is the sticky floor. It is written in soft focus, set in a warm typeface, and it is almost always composed by somebody who is not the person currently picking it up. That is the tell. “Treasure the chaos” is very easy advice to dispense, and it is very unevenly priced.

In one UCLA study, researchers analyzed how 60 spouses described their homes and measured cortisol over three weekdays. Among the women, more stressful descriptions were associated with flatter daily cortisol curves. The study did not show that clutter caused those patterns. But the association is reason enough to take the burden seriously, and to notice who is carrying it.

So, no. The pile by the door is not secretly beautiful, and nobody should be instructed to find it charming. It is a chore, and unshared chores compound quietly into resentments, and the correct response is to pick it up, to notice carefully who has been doing that, and then to do considerably more of it yourself. Which is not a grim conclusion. It is the most available act of love in the whole house. It takes ninety seconds and it is sitting right there.

Stipulated. And yet.

Nobody has ever won the war on the shoes. Not one person in the recorded history of front halls. There is no version of this where you finally buy the right rack, install the right hooks, deliver the right speech at the right volume, and the problem is solved, and you stand in a clear foyer having beaten it.

What happens instead is that the war ends. Not because you win. Because the shoes leave.

We are told, constantly, that the universe trends toward disorder. Things fall apart. Entropy always collects. It is the one law everybody can quote at a dinner party. But that statement concerns an isolated system, and a house is anything but isolated. A house is fed. And here is the part that is much better news than it sounds: when you stop feeding a house, it does not get messier. It gets neater. Which

means the mess was never entropy winning. The mess was the energy you were putting in, showing up as evidence. Your hallway is one of the few places in the universe where disorder is a sign of life rather than decay.

The stranger part, the part nobody prints on a card, is that you caused it. The eighteen-year project, the whole expensive enterprise, everything you did deliberately and at real cost to your body and your career and your sleep, was designed from the outset to produce a person who takes their shoes somewhere else. That was always the specification. You spend two decades mildly irritated by the physical evidence of a person, and then you accomplish the departure of that person, and the accomplishment and the goodbye turn out to be the same event filed under two names.

Which sounds like a tragedy for about four seconds, until you look at it straight. It means the specification was met. The thing you set out to build, you built, and it works, and it runs independently of you, which is more than most people can say about most of what they make. There is a version of this story where the shoes never leave, and it is not the happy one.

The received wisdom about what comes next is also, cheerfully, wrong.

Empty nest syndrome has been in the culture since the 1970s and it holds up badly under measurement. A large German panel study of adults over forty found that having children living outside the household was not associated with parents' loneliness or depression at all. Researchers who looked closely have spent two decades dismantling it, and keep finding the opposite: less conflict between work and home, a marriage that gets some oxygen back, interests that were shelved in 2011 coming down off the shelf.

That is real news and it is good news. The weeping parent alone in the tidy hallway is mostly a story we tell each other.

The research does flag one thing worth carrying with you, and it is not the thing on the greeting card. In one study of 765 older adults in China, empty-nest status did not independently explain wellbeing once other differences were considered. Living without a spouse and living in a rural area were associated with lower wellbeing. The other consistent finding is architectural: the parents who struggle are the ones for whom the role was the whole architecture, with very little social world still standing once the role ends.

So the danger was never the quiet. The danger is having built exactly one thing in your life that makes noise. Which is a solvable problem, and a far more interesting one.

And here is what the sad version of this essay leaves out completely.

The shoes come back.

Not every night, and not the way they used to. But there is a Thursday in November when the floor floods again, with more pairs on it than there have been in years, and some of them unfamiliar. Shoes you did not buy. Shoes belonging to people you have not met yet and will end up loving a great deal. Small shoes, eventually, in a size you had forgotten existed.

That second pile is better than the first one. Not sentimentally better. Categorically better, and here is why.

For eighteen years, attendance was mandatory. Those shoes were on your floor because the people wearing them were minors without alternative housing arrangements. Compulsory affection is lovely, and it is not evidence of anything.

The second pile is a different instrument altogether. Every person standing in it had somewhere else to be. They had jobs, and partners with their own parents, and flights that cost real money, and a perfectly good couch four hundred miles away. Every pair on that floor belongs to somebody who ran the numbers and chose you.

The first pile proves you had a family. The second pile proves they like you.

All of which corrects the sentimental account of what chaos actually does for you.

The chaos did not strengthen you because chaos is virtuous. Chaos is not virtuous. It strengthened you because it was load, and load is the only thing that has ever built anything. Bone thickens along the lines of force applied to it. Muscle is torn on purpose. A family is not close because its members are agreeable. A family is close because it has metabolized a specific quantity of noise, negotiation, illness, apology, and somebody's other shoe going missing at 6:40 in the morning, and the metabolizing is the closeness. There is no premium version where you get the bond without the load.

Which means a system carrying no load is not a strong system. It is an untested one. A rack that is never full is not order. It is capacity nobody is using.

So here is where I think the Italians have it right, and the Greeks, and my friends who keep a standing Friday night, and every family anywhere that maintains a mandatory recurring anything.

They never tried to win the war. They scheduled the chaos instead.

Sunday lunch is disorder with a start time. It is loud, it runs three hours, there are too many people for the table, somebody's cousin has brought somebody, there is nowhere to put the coats, a child is under the table, and an argument about a road closure is being conducted at a volume that would alarm a

stranger. It is, feature for feature, the precise condition you would design a house to prevent. And they manufacture it on purpose, every week, forever, whether or not there are any children living in the building.

That is the move, and notice that it is available immediately, at any age, in any house, with or without a single relative involved. Not to cherish the mess, which is passive and slightly dishonest. To keep building things whose only function is to be overwhelmed.

Because the load is going to change. That is not a risk, it is a schedule. And the real question, the one with an answer you can act on this week, is whether you spend the years afterward admiring a clean foyer, or whether you keep setting a table slightly too large for the number of people currently in the house.

Order is not the reward for good parenting. It is the vacancy left behind by it. And a vacancy is not a wound. It is a seat.

So pick up the shoes. Genuinely, pick them up. Line them on the rack. Complain out loud and with feeling, because the complaint is honest and the labor is real and it should be shared more evenly than it usually is.

But take the count first.

Nine pairs tonight. A bad-looking thing that means a very good thing. It means that at some point today, several separate human beings crossed this threshold and immediately stopped being careful, which is the entire purpose of having a threshold.

The count will go down. That part was never up to you, and it is not a failure.

And then, if you have done this well and kept the table a little too large, it goes back up. Different shoes. Bigger sizes. A few pairs that were never yours to begin with. Every one of them chosen.

One day that floor will be clear. It will look wonderful. It will photograph beautifully.

And the work of that day will not be keeping it clean.

It will be filling it back up.

Sources. Saxbe and Repetti, "No Place Like Home," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (2010), from the UCLA Center on Everyday Lives of Families; the German Ageing Survey on the empty nest and parental loneliness (2021); Fingerman and colleagues on post-parental wellbeing, *American Psychological Association* (2003); and Zhang (2020), "Are Empty-Nest Elders Unhappy? Re-examining Chinese Empty-Nest Elders' Subjective Well-Being Considering Social Changes," *Frontiers in Psychology*.