

Empty nests, broken hearts

How today's ultra-engaged parents suffer when their children take flight

BY ANNE BOKMA

Last year, after snapping new striped sheets onto my daughter's dorm-room bed at McMaster University in our hometown of Hamilton, I barely made it down the hallway before dissolving into tears in the elevator. My husband and I squeezed hands on the drive home with a combination of parental pride and aching loss. Ruby was going to be a mere 10 minutes away, but I knew the distance between us was bound to widen. Never again would I experience the casual intimacy of day-to-day life with her bounding in the door after school, juggling textbooks and sharing news of her day. Her adult life was beginning, but a big part of mine felt like it was ending.

The first few weeks after she was gone, I fought the

urge to text her. I didn't want to be a meddling mom. I forbade myself from looking at baby pictures or the kindergarten drawings I still kept in a special box. Doing so would only release the floodgates. I shut her bedroom door so I wouldn't see the mint green and pink baby quilt spread out on her bed when I passed by. Mostly, I held it together. At least until the day I vacuumed her room and caught sight of the stuffed green Grinch high on a shelf. My daughter had loved that soft toy, purchased more than 15 years ago when I was on a business trip. It became her favoured snuggly





our conversation thin after more than 30 years of marriage and without the kids there to fill it out. Soon, it will just be the two of us, pushing our peas around the plate, the scrape of knife against china echoing through the emptiness of a four-bedroom house that will feel too big and a life that will feel too small.

Many midlife Canadians like me are saying “so long” to our kids. As they push off the safe shores of home to begin their adult lives, their parental cast-offs are waving goodbye long after they’re out of sight, demoted from being a constant booster to a mere bystander on the sidelines of their children’s lives. Some will breeze through the transition, turn their kid’s room into a den, plan a couple’s wine and cycling tour in France, take up curling and have friends over for midweek dinners. But others will keep their kid’s room as a shrine, fight back tears when they pass a certain brand of cereal in the grocery store, stalk their kids on Facebook, look forward to their visits with delirious anticipation and dread the prospect of drifting purposelessly into old age, the only bright spot the potential arrival of grandchildren.

“It can crash a lot of people. I see symptoms in parents like deep depression, immobilization and not eating,” says Natalie Caine, a Los Angeles life coach who offers specialized counselling for empty nesters. “People get angry when empty nesters feel sad, and they’ll say things like ‘Why don’t you just go volunteer?’ But their grief is real.”

These parents are turning to a slew of books such as *The Empty Nest: A Mother’s Hidden Grief*, as well as *My Nest Isn’t Empty, It Just Has More Closet Space* and *The Dog Stays in the Picture: How My Rescued Greyhound Helped Me Cope with My Empty Nest*. They also post their heartbreak on the many message boards and blogs devoted to the topic. “Letting go of my four adult children is the hardest thing I have ever had to face in my whole life. . . . Sometimes I wonder how I can keep living when it hurts so badly,” comments Jan on gypsynester.com. Then there’s this from Monica: “I sit in the bar and gamble on the slots once a week because I don’t want to stay in the empty house. . . . I want my children back.” And Barbara: “Don’t believe that it gets better. I’m 10 years out. They just drift further and further. . . . I have begun to wish that I had not raised such accomplished empowered children, but that they were listless losers who lived at home with me.”

This post-parting depression is hitting today’s parents harder than in the past. That’s because our generation has turned parenting into a religion with “the child as the new sacred object,” Toronto psychologist Alex Russell, co-author of *Drop the Worry Ball: Parenting in the Age of Entitlement*, says in an interview. “Helicopter parents have been given the message to step in and direct and guide and make sure their kids excel. But the moment they leave your house, you are expected to suddenly back off. And if you don’t, you are clearly a meddling parent, and you are ridiculed for that. It’s a harsh road for a lot of parents.”

I was certainly part of the cohort that professionalized parenting. We strapped our offspring to our backs, hired safety experts to childproof our homes, bought shelves of parenting manuals, arranged playdates,

bedtime companion. For a fleeting second, I actually considered driving it to her residence. Then I got a grip. Or thought I did. I held the little critter in my arms and watched my tears plop onto its matted fake green fur.

I’ve launched one daughter, so I have an inkling of what to expect when my next, Lucy, almost 17, leaves home. While I bounced back fairly quickly from Ruby’s leave-taking (it helps that she’s home most Sunday nights for dinner), when Lucy goes — bringing my intense mothering years to an official end — it may be a different story. I picture my husband and I at the dinner table,

schlepped our children to soccer games and laid awake at night wondering what else we could do to ensure they reached their peak potential. When they left for university, some of us followed, renting an apartment near our kid's campus or keeping them tied to a text-messaging tether. Barbara Hofer, Vermont psychology professor and co-author of *The iConnected Parent: Staying Close to Your Kids in College (and Beyond) While Letting Them Grow Up*, reports the number of weekly contacts between parents and their university kids is 22 times a week, up from 13 in 2007. It gets worse. In *How to Raise an Adult*, Julie Lythcott-Haims, a former dean at Stanford University, cites a study showing 23 percent of 725 major U.S. employers report seeing parents "sometimes" to "very often" when hiring a college senior. This included parents submitting job applications, negotiating a child's salary and even attending interviews.

Unlike our parents — who stuffed us into playpens, didn't help us with our homework (never mind spending an entire weekend constructing a truss bridge out of popsicle sticks for a Grade 4 project) and fully expected us to leave home at age 18 — we poured our supercharged ambition into our progeny in the hopes that they would succeed where we had failed. Now, the fallout of all that over-investment in our children's lives is coming home to roost.

"There is a huge difference between this generation and previous ones," Wendy Aronson, a Connecticut therapist and author of *Refeathering the Empty Nest*:

Life After the Children Leave, told the New York Times, noting the direct link between parents' involvement and the difficulty they have when their kids leave. In *Home Free: The Myth of the Empty Nest*, Canadian writer Marni Jackson questions whether "this era of over-invested parents, living vicariously through the achievements of their children, [has] bred an undermining dependency in the next generation." This dependency, coupled with the financial strains of student debt and underemployment, has resulted in large numbers of adult children still living at home — 42 percent of those aged 20 to 29, according to Statistics Canada. It's causing some to ask: "What empty nest?"

While empty-nest syndrome mostly happens to midlife women, the departure of children creates plenty of sad dads too, especially since their role has evolved from the absent working man of the 1950s to the modern doting dad. In his memoir *Love Life*, actor Rob Lowe writes of feeling the "same body-deadening weight of the condemned" when his son was about to leave for college and

has admitted to crying over his departure. Fathers often suffer in silence because they haven't cultivated the kinds of support networks many mothers enjoy. Research has found that women emotionally prepare for the grief they know they'll feel when the kids leave, whereas men are often blindsided.

The departure of children can signal the arrival of big problems, from late-life divorce to higher alcohol consumption (a U.K. survey found empty-nest mothers aged 45-64 are Britain's fastest growing group of problem drinkers) and long-term depression (affecting an estimated 10 percent of mothers, according to one survey).



The Starr family embraces before leaving first-year student, Miranda, at California's Pomona College.

The end of childrearing can also conflate with other endings typical to midlife, namely retirement, the death of parents and, for women, menopause.

For Katharine Harrison, a 52-year-old Toronto single mother who works in the IT industry, sending her only son Max off to Trent University in Peterborough, Ont., triggered the same feelings she experienced with other significant losses in her life, including the death of her parents and her divorce. "It felt like an abandonment. I was completely invested in parenting," says Harrison, whose son has a physical disability that requires him to use leg braces and a wheelchair. "I felt like I had such tremendous purpose in raising this child, and sometimes now I get stuck in this place where I feel like my life is just moving towards the grave."

Ann Dowsett Johnston, a former Maclean's editor, remembers feeling "absolutely shattered" after dropping off her son, Nicholas, at Queen's University in Kingston, Ont., 14 years ago. "This is the one big juncture in women's lives that nobody talks about, and it was one

of the biggest tragedies of my life,” she says. “I loved being a mother. After my son left, my house was so quiet. And my life shrunk.” The loneliness resulted in a drinking problem that eventually required a stay in a treatment centre, an experience she chronicles in her bestseller *Drink: The Intimate Relationship Between Women and Alcohol*. Today, Dowsett Johnston visits her now 32-year-old son in California six weeks a year and even talked him into taking her with him on a three-week road trip. “I’m probably some woman’s nightmare of a potential mother-in-law,” she jokes.

The empty-nest period can also destabilize marriages, weakened by years of pouring so much love and attention into offspring instead of a spouse. While the overall divorce rate has dropped 11 percent, it’s jumped 34 percent for those aged 50 to 54, 48 percent for 55- to 59-year-olds and 32 percent for those 60 to 64.

WHILE EMPTY-NEST SYNDROME MOSTLY HAPPENS TO MIDLIFE WOMEN, THE DEPARTURE OF CHILDREN CREATES PLENTY OF SAD DADS TOO.

Margaret and Glenn Squires, an Orillia, Ont., couple who have been married for 36 years, saw both their parents’ marriages end after the last child left home. Even with four kids, they made sure to have some weekends away by themselves and the occasional weeklong holiday. “We wanted to make sure our marriage survived raising children,” says Margaret. She

misses her kids — two of whom live far away — and tries to fight off sadness that overcomes her from time to time. “I keep reminding myself that they are happy. We talk on the phone; we Skype,” she says. “I have a gap in my life at the moment and am definitely feeling a lack of purpose, even though I have a part-time job, animals to look after and volunteer work.”

And yet, the Squires are finding contentment after kids, through weekend getaways, a shared love of antiquing or simply enjoying quiet time together at home. “It’s just the two of us now,” Margaret says. “My husband just acquired a twin La-Z-Boy set, and the other day we sat there together in the TV room. He had a nap, and I was knitting with a cat at my head and a dog at my feet. It was a lovely Sunday afternoon.” In fact, one study shows that marital satisfaction can actually improve when kids exit the picture.

Empy-nest syndrome is typically short lived, usually lasting a few months to a year, according to Natalie Caine. But some question whether it really even exists.

“It’s an invention of the media, who think that women are devastated when the kids leave home,” Carin Rubenstein, an Arizona psychology professor, told *The Sacramento Bee*. But even she admits to occasional pangs. In her book, *Beyond the Mommy Years: How to Live Happily Ever After . . . After the Kids Leave Home* she writes: “Some days . . . I long to restore my family system to the way it was 10 or 15 years ago, so I can do it all over again. Only better.”

In *The Empty Nest: 31 Parents Tell the Truth About Relationships, Love, and Freedom After the Kids Fly the Coop*, Ellen Goodman asks: “What do you do with the antennae of motherhood when they become obsolete?”

Grace Cirocco’s answer? Get a life.

A popular women’s retreat leader in St. Catharines, Ont., Cirocco says half her participants suffer from post-parenting angst: “They are completely lost. A lot of them have poured everything into their kids and ignored their husbands. When the kids leave, their marriages often end and they don’t know what to do with the rest of their lives.” An empty nest does not have to mean an empty life, she says. “Women need to take that same dedication they had when signing their kids up for foreign exchanges and science camp to ensure they’d be multifaceted — and apply it to themselves. Their kids are moving forward, and they need to do the same.”

As for me, I’m taking my cue from women like Cirocco and Christie Mellor, who, in her book *Fun Without Dick and Jane: Your Guide to a Delightfully Empty Nest*, encourages parents to consider “staying up late, joining the circus, interpretive nude dancing, and other ways to enjoy your newfound freedom.”

And I’m looking to friends like Anne Herbert Grouchy, a 60-year-old retired mom of three from Burlington, Ont., who began training for a half marathon when her last child left home eight years ago. She also joined skiing, cycling and kayaking clubs, multiplying her circle of friends in the process. “I’m embracing the freedom of this stage of life,” she says. “The job of a parent is to help your children fly off and live their own life.”

I caught a glimpse of what my empty nest years might look like when Herbert Grouchy invited me on a weekend cycling trip last summer, along with two dozen of her female friends, most with grown children. After a day of biking, we headed back to our motel and, instead of retiring to our rooms, one woman plugged a stereo system into her car while others popped the corks on a few bottles of wine. Right there on the motel’s asphalt parking lot, we danced wildly to the tunes of our youth — *Paradise by the Dashboard Light* and *Edge of Seventeen* — earning a few cheers from guests sitting in chairs outside their rooms. I closed my eyes and was 15 again. When I opened them and saw the happy faces of the middle-aged moms around me, I realized that as far as my children were concerned, I needed to look forward, not backward. I will need to let my kids fly. Who knows? Maybe when they do, I’ll soar a little too.

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