

A fascinating new book uncovers one of the last taboos among men

# It's not only women who dread an empty nest . . .



Picture: GETTY

**L**ISTLESS, disgruntled and generally underpar. My husband, Tom, had been feeling like this for several months and neither of us could work out what was wrong.

When he consulted his GP, we were both surprised by the diagnosis. The doctor thought the cause of Tom's malaise might be empty nest syndrome. In other words, he was feeling desolate after the last of our three children flew the nest.

It is a syndrome widely associated with

by *Celia Dodd*

women, so it didn't even cross my mind that my husband, a molecular biologist, might be suffering from it.

At the time, I had been researching a book on this very topic. I had even included a chapter on fathers — and yet still I didn't realise Tom had been affected, right under my nose.

Nine months earlier, our youngest child, Alice, 19, had left home for university. I had

already suffered a huge sense of loss when our eldest child, Paul, now 26, left, closely followed by Adam, who is 24. But clearly I had been so caught up in my own feelings that I hadn't considered Tom's.

This was the first time he had confessed to them.

'I felt like my job was done after Alice left,' he told me. 'For years, it was "Dad! Dad!" all the time, but now the children don't need me any more.'

'When Alice left, there was a feeling of: "That's it."'

The fact that a GP suggested Tom might be suffering from the condition shows we have

made significant advances when it comes to acknowledging the void created by children who have left the family home.

And Tom is not alone. As fathers become more involved with the care of their children, they are increasingly likely to feel the pain of them leaving.

But where many women have a support network of friends and family, men are often in a lonelier position.

They also find it harder to open up about their feelings.

Tom agrees that some men are

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## Speed read: Boat shoes

NO LONGER the preserve of sea dogs and Sloane rangers, boat shoes — or deck shoes, in nautical circles — are experiencing a renaissance.

Similar to a loafer, but more casual, this no-frills footwear works perfectly with the season's pared-down fashions. On traditional boat shoes, the laces were made of leather or rope, but this summer's high-style varieties come in a dazzling array of jaunty hues and finishes.

And, best of all, as they were originally designed to be a non-slip shoe to sport dockside you can guarantee there won't be any embarrassing slip-ups during the unpredictable British summer in a sturdy pair of these.

Fashionable yet sensible? Sounds good to us.

KATE MELHUISE

### 1935

The year modern boat shoes were invented by Paul Sperry, whose company Sperry Top-Sider still creates shoes to this day.



### HOW TO WEAR

■ **KEEP** it casual — team your deck shoe with a pair of cotton shorts, T-shirt and a chunky knit to keep you warm in the evening.

■ **WEAR** them with a pretty floral dress for a tomboy take on a girly look.

■ **TEAM** with cropped trousers, rolled at the ankle, and a pretty blouse.



### SHOPPING LIST

Anticlockwise from top, Sperry Authentic Original 2 Eye Canvas in pink, £75, [asos.com](http://asos.com)  
Juicy Couture Trail Lace-Ups, £48, [juicycouture.com](http://juicycouture.com)  
Urban Outfitters Nubuck Pink Suede Shoes, £45, [urbanoutfitters.co.uk](http://urbanoutfitters.co.uk)  
Schuh Charlie Rope Boat Shoe, £36, [schuh.co.uk](http://schuh.co.uk)  
NDC Alithia Nubuck Boat Shoes, £165, [net-a-porter.com](http://net-a-porter.com)  
BC Milkshake Wedge, £65, [asos.com](http://asos.com)



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embarrassed about feeling sad when their children leave.

"There's a macho thing where some men say: 'Thank God, the kids have gone — I can get on with my life,'" he says. 'But I'm not ashamed to admit it's a big thing when your children grow up.'

Nonetheless, Tom doesn't want his children to know how he feels, as he thinks they should be able to get on with their lives.

He says: 'The last thing I thought about when I left home was my parents' feelings — and that's the way it should be. They might think about it later when they become parents, but not now.'

This is something food writer Richard Ehrlich can empathise with.

Last year, the youngest of his three daughters went to work in Paris during her gap year. He says: 'When Ruth left, it almost felt like a bereavement. The house seemed so empty. I was upset, perplexed and unsettled for about two months.'

Nineteen-year-old Ruth's departure hit Richard even harder than it did his wife, Emma. He thinks that may be because he works from home, while his wife — who works for a magazine company — goes out to an office every day.

The couple's older daughters, Rebecca, 25, and Alice, 23, had already left home.

Richard says: 'For Emma, empty nest syndrome takes a nine-to-six break while she is at work.'

'But suddenly I no longer had to do all the things I'd done every day for years, like making the girls a snack when they came home from school and listening to them talk about their day.'

'The worst time is the early evening; that was when I missed them most and felt upset.'

Now Richard makes sure he rings or emails his daughters several times a week.

**E**MMMA, who had anticipated that the empty nest would trouble Richard more than her, instigated a new ritual to try to cheer up the early evening.

As soon as she gets home, they watch a DVD together.

Richard says: 'It's something self-indulgent we could never have done when the girls were still at home.'

Clearly, the feelings experienced by men when their children flee the nest are different to those felt by women, but that doesn't mean the pain is any less intense.

The experience often prompts men to ask uncomfortable questions about their achievements, their purpose in life, the future of their marriage and their sense of themselves.

All the classic ingredients of the male mid-life crisis, in fact.

Charlie Rice, head of corporate development for think-tank the Fatherhood Institute, raised his two daughters, Bronnie and Elie, alone after his wife's death. The girls were five and three then.

He says: 'When they were born, my life changed completely; I knew who I was then. When they left, it was the opposite side of that — my babies were going.'

'It was a shock and it felt very significant. Despite having a good career, I didn't have a focus and I found it difficult to know what my role was.'

'Before, I had put all my energies into my children, working to support them and making sure they were doing well. There was an emptiness, which wasn't loneliness; I had lots of friends, but something was missing. It was about not being needed.'

Charlie coped by partying. 'I covered up the sadness and emptiness by having my second adolescence. I went wild, going out dancing all night and taking lots of holidays. It was several months before it dawned on me that my daughters weren't gone for ever and could still be very much in my life — just not in my home.'

'My friends were supportive, but it was my sister who really understood because her children



Daddy's girls: Terence Nolder with daughter Elise on her 21st birthday and, right, Dick Ehrlich and youngest child, Ruth

# I've never been so upset as when my daughter went to university. I had no idea other men felt the same way

had left home before mine.' It's easy to assume that only so-called 'new men' suffer a sense of loss when their children leave.

But psychologists were aware of this difficult transition back in the Seventies, when research published in the American Journal Of Marriage And The Family suggested that, on the whole, fathers were more likely than mothers to suffer psychologically when their children fled the nest.

There is also the literary evidence. Over the past 50 years, the most moving accounts of the empty nest come not, as you might expect, from mothers, but from fathers.

The late J.G. Ballard, award-winning author of *Empire Of The Sun*, wrote of his own empty nest: 'But childhood has gone and in the silence one stares at the empty whisky bottles in the pantry and wonders if any number of drinks will fill the void.'

Maureen Lipman's late husband, Jack Rosenthal, wrote two acclaimed plays drawing on his own sadness when his son and daughter left home, while the former Poet Laureate Cecil Day-Lewis's poem about his son, *Walking Away*, became a national favourite. And yet, for men at least, it remains something of a social taboo.

Terence Nolder, a photographer, has one daughter, Elise, 28. He says: 'I lost it when Elise went off to university. I don't think I've ever been so upset. But I've never talked to other fathers about it. The subject never comes up. A lot of men don't like talking about their feelings.'

Of course, there are good reasons why fathers want to appear brave about their children leaving. For

one thing, it sends an important message to their adolescent offspring that it's fine to take risks, to get out there and explore the world.

This provides an essential counterbalance to the cautious messages children generally receive from their mothers. When Terence's daughter recently announced her plan to travel and work abroad for a year, his wife Helene broke down in tears.

Terence was upset, too, but explains: 'I blanked out my emotions because I didn't want Elise to see me upset.'

'I wanted her to feel confident about going, not guilty about us.'

'At least when Elise was at university I could jump in the car if I wanted to see her. This feels more drastic. But I want her to be happy and if that means letting her go, so be it.'

Professor Charles Lewis, a psychologist, explains why men often appear to be unemotional.

'Within the family, they feel they can't be the person who breaks down and says: "This is a terrible change in our lives." Fathers feel responsible for keeping the family together.'

'I have spoken to men who express deep remorse. On the surface they may say: "It's great, we have time to travel or lounge around." But that's only a veneer — missing your children is not the sort of thing you talk about at work.'

As a result, women often assume that their husbands are emotionally untouched by their child's departure.

Such conflicting ways of coping can put strain on marriages already rocked by the empty nest, exposing cracks in even the most rock-solid partnerships.

For years children have been a unifying bond — but also the perfect excuse not to face up to difficulties. Their leaving the family home is a catalyst for couples who

have stayed together for the children's sake to reassess their marriage and in some cases to decide to call it a day.

Rob Clements, a teacher from Nottingham, had been happily married to Shona for more than 20 years. But the couple went through a difficult period when their daughter moved into her own flat and their son started university three years ago.

He says: 'I felt restless for months. I was conscious of how separate Shona and I had become, and I was very cold during that period.'

'Suddenly we found ourselves asking: "What do we have in common?" I talked it through with a psychotherapist, who helped me see that it's a question of finding a new common bond, a joint project.'

**H**OWEVER, there is some good news for couples.

Two years ago, research by the University of California found that marriages generally improve when children leave home.

The key, researchers concluded, was to start spending more quality time together before the children are gone.

For Tom and I, the suggestion of an empty-nest diagnosis has been a wake-up call. We have started to talk about our different reactions to our children leaving and we're trying to focus on the positives.

Rather than staying at home in case the children are around, I've just booked our first holiday on our own for many years.

From now on, the empty nest is something we'll face together.

■ *THE Empty Nest: How To Survive And Stay Close To Your Adult Child* is published by Piatkus, £12.99.

## Who knew?

About 25 per cent of men aged 25 to 29 live with their parents — compared to just 13 per cent of women in the same age group

## Carry-on Grooming

 Clinique Super balanced Powder, SPF 15, £27.50, [clinique.co.uk](http://clinique.co.uk)

 Travel Wash & Soap Leaves, £3.50, marks and [spencer.com](http://spencer.com)

 Bare Minerals SPF 30 sunscreen, £21, [qvcuk.com](http://qvcuk.com)

 Diptyque L'Ombre Dans Solid Perfume, £28, [Johnlewis.com](http://Johnlewis.com)

 Dr Andrew Weil Makeup Remover Pads, £21 for 60, [origins.co.uk](http://origins.co.uk)

 Solid Perfume, £5, [thebodyshop.co.uk](http://thebodyshop.co.uk)

 Lee Stafford Matt Fat Powder Puff Potions, £9.29, [boots.com](http://boots.com)

 Quickies Nail Varnish Remover, £2.03, [superdrug.com](http://superdrug.com)

 Salt Of The Earth Deodorant, £3.19, [hollandandbarrett.com](http://hollandandbarrett.com)

 Bare Minerals SPF 30 sunscreen powder, £21, [qvcuk.com](http://qvcuk.com)

 Lush Shampoo Bar, £4.85 and tin, £2.50, [lush.co.uk](http://lush.co.uk)

Styling: MANDY FRANCIS