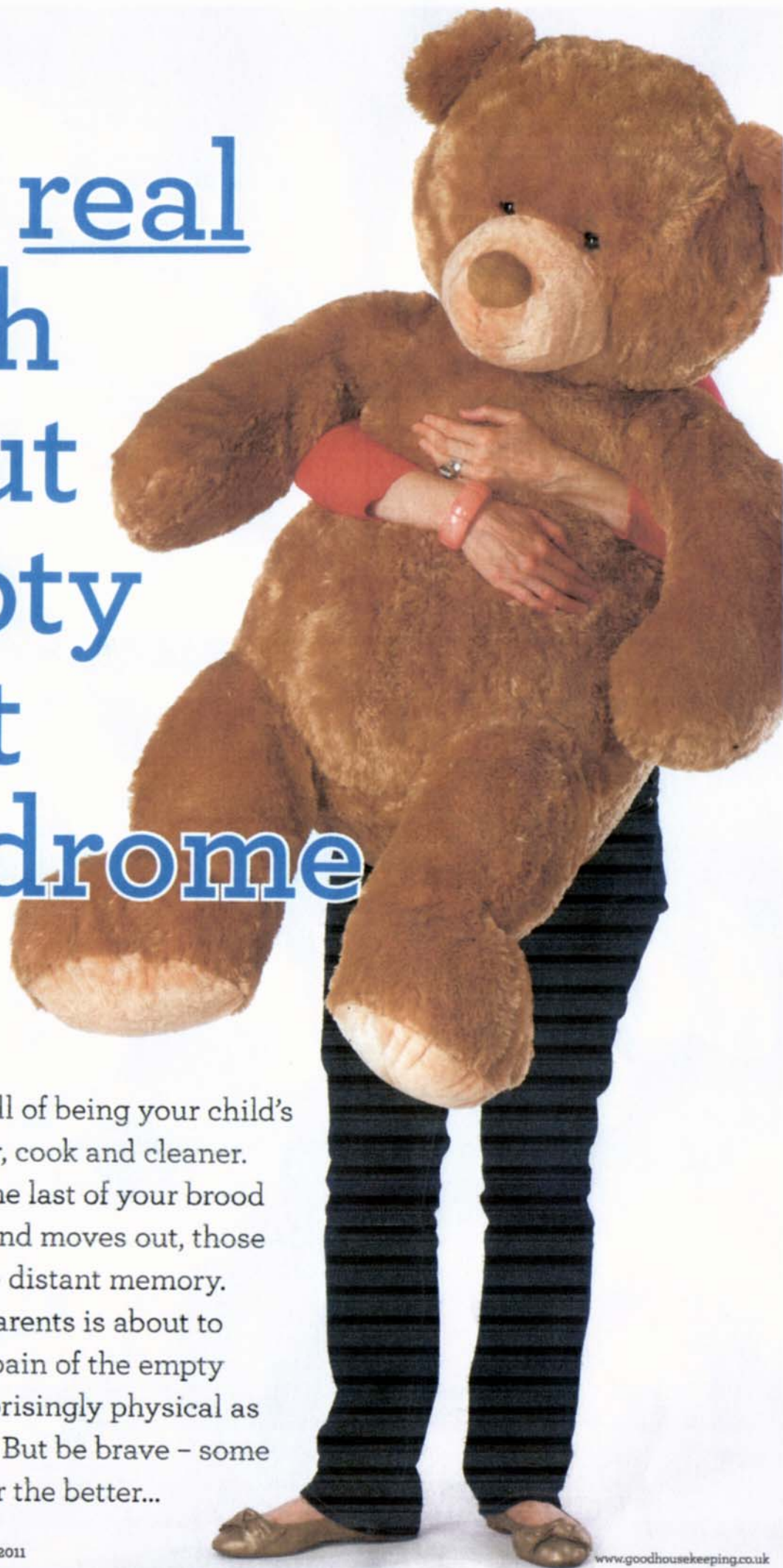
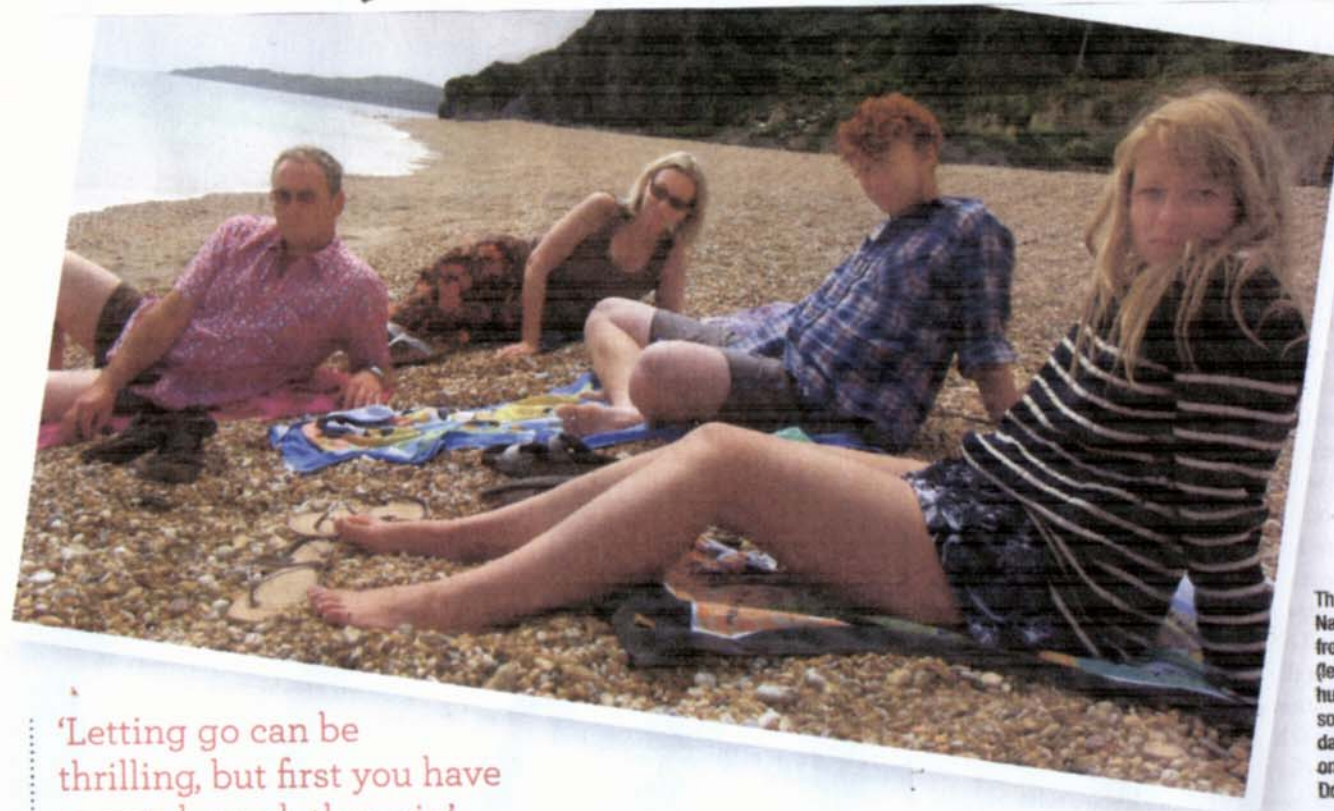


The real truth about Empty Nest Syndrome

You've had your fill of being your child's taxi driver, banker, cook and cleaner. But the moment the last of your brood packs their bags and moves out, those irritations become distant memory. A fresh batch of parents is about to discover that the pain of the empty nester can be surprisingly physical as well as emotional. But be brave – some changes can be for the better...



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The way we were: Natacha (second from left) with (left to right) husband Angus, son Oscar and daughter Georgia on holiday in Dorset in 2009

'Letting go can be thrilling, but first you have to get through the pain'

The agony of seeing her youngest child leave home hit Natacha Ledwidge much harder than she ever expected. But after the tears came a fresh start

If somebody had told me that the day my youngest left home I would stand alone in my kitchen and howl in pain like a she-wolf, I'm not sure I would have believed them. I never saw myself as one of those mothers whose life revolved around their children's. I was even looking forward to having a bit of extra time to myself.

But I couldn't have been more wrong. When the pain hit me that day it was a physical, animal thing – as powerful as if there had been a death in the family.

Georgia, our eldest, had left home several years earlier and Oscar, our baby, was heading off on a fabulous round-the-world gap-year trip with his best friend. As I stood waving the two boys off at Heathrow, I started weeping. "Don't cry, Mum," Oscar said, but I just couldn't switch off the tears.

My husband, Angus, was working away for a few days, so I returned to an empty house. I stood in the kitchen listening to the echoes and suddenly I felt a kind of terrible anguish. I'd never been the type to cry at the drop of a hat, but I could hear my own voice howling – it was very surreal. I was in a huge amount of grief and pain. I'd just managed to compose myself when I went into Oscar's bedroom, with the aftermath of his packing still spread all over the floor, and the smell of him set me off again.

That night, the only thing that helped me was the thought that Oscar was still on the same earth. Ridiculous as it sounds, I told myself we shared the same planet and that he hadn't gone completely, and eventually I was able to sleep.

I tried to make myself come to terms with the situation, but even my relationship with the house

seemed different. So many of the rooms in your home are taken up with the children and what you do with them there, and once Oscar had gone everywhere seemed empty. It felt like a cord had been cut.

Even after Angus came home I was still very sad. Over the next few weeks he was incredibly supportive, though a little worried when I couldn't stop crying. I can see why so many marriages break up when the kids aren't around to keep you together, but we made sure we kept talking about what was going on. And of course, Angus was affected too, in his own way.

Oscar was away for five months in all, and for the entire time I felt echoes of that initial grief. But as the weeks went by I told myself that the pain I was feeling was entirely normal and that I shouldn't worry – nothing awful was going to happen to him. We brought the kids up to be independent, and Oscar is a sensible boy – I knew he'd be safe and have a fabulous time. The irony is that I didn't bring myself up to be independent once he had gone.

At the end of summer he returned safely and then, as I always knew he would, left home for university. Again I felt the same pang of grief, but it wasn't quite so bad this time. In those first few months, I'd learned I needed to nurture myself and find a way forward. I realised the pain was to do with my loss and with the mother in me feeling empty. It also dawned on me that all this was happening at the same time as the menopause, so my hormones were up in the air, which didn't help.

I started looking at the second half of my life as a transition period and realised there was a whole lot of living yet to do. After spending so many years listening to my inner clock telling me it was time to collect or feed the children, finally I had an opportunity to enrich myself – it was very exciting.

I rediscovered a love of singing and a friend,

'It requires nerves of steel to allow children to make their own mistakes'



Sarah Warwick, started running a group from my home. It's called Singing Hearts, and every Thursday evening 20 people come to my house and make fabulous music. I've started writing my own songs and even taught myself to play the guitar!

I also became involved in a creativity group called Visual Medicine, which helps many different groups of women, including some who have spent time in prison. It was an absolute joy to go in with my paints and paper and see the women being creative and playing with colour.

These new interests have helped me redirect my nurturing instinct. On top of that I keep busy with my own illustration work, which I do from home.

Through all of this, Angus has been great. When it's just the two of you, the focus shifts back on to the relationship and it's important to be very honest with each other. We've made sure we've been open about what we want and have found projects to share – like buying a place by the sea,

'I started seeing this second half of my life as a transition, and realised there was a whole lot of living to do'

something we've always longed to do. We found a tiny cottage on the Isle of Sheppey in Kent, and it has been a place where Angus and I can be together, away from the home where we raised our family. It's a fresh start for us and really helped get us through those trickier moments – it's proved tremendously healing. Who knows, one day we may even let the children come to stay!

I've learned to love my new life. I still have the occasional pang about Georgia and Oscar and wonder why they haven't contacted me lately, but I know it's okay. It's healthy for them to leave – we raised them to have their own lives and so this is what they must do.

Letting go of my children was worse than I ever expected, and it took a while to get through the pain. But once I did, I discovered a wonderful life waiting for me on the other side.'

Learning to let go and love your new life

THE CHAOS OF THEIR TEENAGE YEARS may have been driving you crazy, but the moment your children go you'll be met with a whole new host of fears and challenges. What if your son is ill and no-one thinks to check on him? What if your relationship with your husband can't survive the seismic shift of your daughter's absence? Why are the feelings of loss so devastating when, after all, your grown-up child spent more time with their friends than with you?

Celia Dodd, author of self-help guide *The Empty Nest: How To Survive And Stay Close To Your Adult Child*, has interviewed scores of women who are learning to live without their children – and also recently waved off her own brood. Here, she tells us how to tackle our most common fears...

The fear: What if they're unhappy?

HOW TO FIGHT IT: With only a few texts and their voice on the phone to act as clues, it can be hard for your parental radar to figure out if something's wrong. Your instinct is to invite them home, but it's best not to encourage them to flee their new situation at the first sign of trouble. Help them realise they're not the only ones feeling lonely and, above all, listen.

The fear: They won't be able to cope without me

HOW TO FIGHT IT: It requires nerves of steel to allow children to make their own mistakes, and parents tread a fine line between interference and support. Ruth Caleb of the Association for University and College Counselling advises: 'Help your children to believe that they can cope as adults. They are often more capable than you think.' Make sure they know they can always turn to you.

The fear: What if they never call or visit?

HOW TO FIGHT IT: Guilt trips will only turn them off, so try to take it as a sign that they're getting on with life. But don't assume they don't want to hear from you. Rebecca, one of the young adults Celia interviewed, says: 'Parents shouldn't take it personally when their kids don't call back, because at university you're running around so much. When my parents called I was always really chuffed.' So yes, unfortunately it's up to you to stay in touch!

The fear: What if we have nothing to talk about?

HOW TO FIGHT IT: You won't be steeped in each other's lives any more, but

every time you're together again your relationship inches towards a more equal, adult companionship. It may be a rocky road, but take comfort from university counsellor Ruth Caleb: 'Love is not about seeing people all the time; it is about knowing you have a place in someone's heart, and they have a place in yours.'

The fear: Is my marriage strong enough to survive?

HOW TO FIGHT IT: 'Often the focus in families is all on helping children become independent, and parents tend to ignore that they are changing, too,' says relationship counsellor, Denise Knowles. 'But this is potentially an exciting growing phase for your relationship – as long as you have maintained some sense of being a couple throughout your parenting phase. Sit down with your partner and talk together creatively about what you share between you, and what you both want in the future,' she advises. □

