



The **LIE** of the empty nest

How do you feel when your children prepare to leave home: Weepy? Ecstatic? **Wendy Dennis** is distinctly unsentimental

wall of her daughter's bedroom and converting it to a quilting room of her own. When my friends sold their house, set both kids up in a city apartment, and made a beeline for a house by a lake, the ink wasn't even dry on their daughter's high-school diploma. "I'm not ready to go yet!" their daughter wailed as they stood amidst packed boxes, Vodka tonics aloft,

toasting their new life. Which is why I always smile at that Staples commercial where the father bids his college-bound son a stalwart farewell. The kid asks, "Where's mom?" and his dad gives him a look that says she's too choked up to say goodbye, and the kid drives away. The second he's out of sight, however, the dad races inside where his wife is gleefully measuring their son's room for a hot tub.

We already have a hot tub, so I'm thinking exercise room. Of course, there's always the possibility that we'll rent the place for a year, hit the road again, and render her homeless altogether. My daughter's not the only one in the household who can smell her freedom.

This notion that we moms — career, stay-at-home, what-have-you — fashion our entire identities around our children, and will therefore

need Zoloft once they've flown, is just one of the lies we're expected to swallow. Or at least expected to have the good grace to pretend that we do. My girlfriend calls it one of the many layers of bullshit that mothers have to deal with all the time. I call it the lie of the empty nest.

Here's the part I don't get: I spent the past 19 years nurturing my daughter's independence and, luckily, the plan worked. So why would I be weepy at the prospect of her departure?

Nest-leaving, I've discovered, is not a sudden event; it's the final closing of the door on a process that takes its toll in increments. It began at 11, for it was then, if I remember correctly, that she first began to view me as a piece of chewing gum stuck to the bottom of her shoe. Now, seven years later, I realize that my daughter has had one foot out the door for some time. I figured it was pretty much a done deal last year when she burst in the door with a slinky black DKNY number, strappy sandals, and a thong to wear to the formal. I knew it was game over this year when I dropped her at the airport to spend a weekend in Manhattan with a guy she met vacationing with her dad.

Nor let us forget, as conventional sentimentalists are wont to do, that somewhere between madly waving goodbye to a monkey-faced kid on the camp bus and gazing in awe as Her Majesty's statuesque self-assured self strode off on her first official foreign tryst, I have lived with A Teenager.

This explains why, as I contemplate her leaving, sadness is not the first response. That she's a Class A variety of the species — stellar grades, brilliant instincts, dazzling friends — may give far less cause to complain than many parents I know. But, bottom line, we're still talking Teenager. I am without guilt. I have earned my stripes. After eight years, you'd say uncle too.

Anyway, this isn't the end. We've been through babyhood, childhood and girlhood together. We've survived divorce, single parenthood, and the shared horror of violent mood swings — both hers and mine. Change has been constant, and part of my eagerness is sheer curiosity at wanting to see who she'll morph into next. And what role she'll ask me to play in the continuing drama. My daughter is a work in progress. As am I. As is our relationship.

We pore over her reading list for the foundation-year program at King's College in Halifax: Homer, Dante, Machiavelli, Dostoevsky, Eliot, DeLillo. The English lit graduate in me is deeply envious. I express this to the King's president at the welcome cocktail party at Massey College in Toronto, and he tells me that King's admits mature students. My eyes light up; my daughter rolls hers in disgust. We make a deal: I can go, but not (cringe) while she's there.

I assure her the idea had never crossed my mind.

*Wendy Dennis is author of **The Divorce from Hell: How the Justice System Failed a Family.***

My daughter, an only child, is leaving for college in the fall. When I report this news, invariably I get pitying looks followed by the assumption that her leaving will be hard on me. No, I reply, actually, I can't wait for her to go. This, I gather, is not the sort of thing mothers are supposed to say out loud. I get The Look: the what-kind-of-mother-are-you look.

An honest one, I suspect. Oh sure, the first time I sensed the rather large divide between what I was supposed to feel about my daughter's leaving and what I actually felt, I had a momentary twinge of motherly guilt.

But I got over it. And I'm guessing there are plenty more women who feel as I do. Twenty minutes after her daughter was out the door, one woman I know of was hammering pegs in the