Sailing Solo

Kids of single parents are stuffed, right? More likely to do drugs, drop out of school, generally lead miserable lives… *North & South* writer Matt Philp, himself newly separated, went on a mission to find out whether the outlook was as dire as most of us believe. He found some excellent advice, some hard truths and a few glimmers of positive news for the thousands of Kiwi parents who are going it alone.

MATT PHILP IS A *NORTH & SOUTH* SENIOR WRITER. PHOTOGRAPHY BY KEN DOWNIE AND GUY FREDERICK.

This is where your mind goes when you are the newly separated parent of young children. You become an anxious sailor, reading the constantly shifting weather of early childhood with sharper eyes: is that new pattern of behaviour normal, or an early warning? You never stop watching the weather.

You take perverse comfort from reports of a "soaring rate" of single parenting — a third of New Zealand families are headed by a sole parent, triple the rate of the mid 1970s. You think maybe by now someone has figured out a way to make this work.

You feel guilt.

You read headlines like "Could Single Parents Be to Blame?" and fresh pronouncements of a link between being brought up by Mum or Dad alone and "poorer lifetime outcomes" — by which you know they mean crime, addiction and depression — and you scan again for thunderheads.

Your daughter has her first nightmare.

You read about the importance of talking. You wonder if you should take your four-year-old son to talk all this over with a counsellor.

You never stop watching the weather.

But maybe you need to ease off. Half of New Zealand children will have lived in a single-parent household by the time they're 20. And the news from those fractured families is not all bad.

In September, new research published by the University of Otago's long-running Christchurch-based health and development study found virtually no association between single parenthood per se and long-term health outcomes. The researchers looked at how the children of divorce and separation were faring several years on when in their 20s and concluded that it isn't the number of parents sitting at the dinner table that makes the difference, but how a family functions.

Add that insight to work by American academic Peggy Drexler, whose 2005 book *Raising Boys Without Men* contended that boys brought up without a man in the house in many respects outshine boys from two-parent homes, and you begin to wonder if conventional wisdom hasn't overstated the risks of raising kids alone.

Says Professor David Fergusson, who leads the Christchurch study, "The phrase 'single-parent family' gets used as shorthand for 'dysfunctional family'. But among this co-

KEN DOWNIE

Naeri Nicholls and son Tague, eight, represent everything that's good and hopeful about solo parenting.

"We're a strong team, the two of us," says Nicholls, who rents a house in Leigh, near Warkworth, and is completing her first year of a bachelor of architecture course at Unitec in Auckland. She commutes two or three days a week during the university year; friends, family and after-school care kick in when she's not home in time to pick up Tague from school. An unplanned pregnancy at 32 set Nicholls on a solo-parenting course. She doesn't say it's been easy — trying to find work and accommodation in Auckland three years ago was "prohibitive" — and she admits she sometimes feels the stigma of being a solo mother. "I've slipped on a wedding ring a few times just to avoid the disapproval of others." But Nicholls has read all the parenting books, and says Tague has two wonderful male role models in his grandfathers, "who are always trying to take him off me for weekends. And surely good role models, good parenting, are what's important?"

hort, 40 per cent had spent some time in a single-parent family. It's not something rare or aberrant. It's almost a common experience of childhood."

But while that's true, it also needs a rider. For all those reports of the death of the nuclear family, at any one time 70-odd per cent of New Zealand households where there are children contain two parents. The point is that households are subject to churn, and children get churned with them.

There's no getting away, either, from the harsh facts of life faced by many sole-parent families. According to a Ministry of Social Development Living Standards report released in 2002, they are substantially worse off than their two-parent counterparts. Half are in hardship. Two-thirds are reliant on income-tested benefits.

Sole parents suffer more depression and other mental illness, smoke and drink more. Their children do worse on a range of outcomes.

Fergusson doesn't deny any of this. His argument is those who highlight single parenting as a social menace miss the point, that it's the context in which it tends to occur that's risky.

"When you talk about childhood experience, there are so many factors involved, and if you take one out of the mix, and say, 'Here is the problem', you will always be wrong.

"The first thing we found was there were indeed associations between how long you had been in a single-parent family and how you turned out. There were higher rates of crime and unemployment, lower rates of income and greater welfare dependence. But those associations weren't particularly strong. And single-parent families aren't a random sampling of the population. They're formed by selection processes, and when we took into account socio-economic factors, family problems and so on, there was virtually no association between single parenting and how people turned out."

Similarly, the Otago study belied the common understanding of how such families eventuate.

"People think immediately of young women who have got pregnant and have to bring up children alone, but nearly all of the single-parent families we had were as a result of marital breakdown."

But single parenthood evokes strong opinions. Fergusson was motivated to do the research by assertions made by the Business Roundtable at a parliamentary talkfest.

"They said, 'Well, we all know that single parenthood is the biggest problem we are facing'. I said, 'I don't think that is the case, but I'll go away and look at these kids and the destinations they arrive at'."

"What's clear to me is that as a policy lever, the idea of changing the number of single-parent families up or down is not going to make a great deal of difference to most of our statistics. The bottom-line message is: Don't worry about counting the number of parents; worry about asking how is the family functioning."

Nine years ago, Sue Reid was a kindergarten teacher in Nelson when she separated from the father of her son Caleb and brought the six-month-old home to Christchurch.

Reid, 34, who works as a part-time administrator for the Christchurch Single Mums Support Service, isn't celebrating the growth of single parenthood, even if it means that arguably the stigma attached to her status is fading.

"I'd never want single parenthood to be so widely accepted that it becomes 'this is just what we do now'. It's very difficult — at times, excruciatingly hard — to get through."

Despite the fact she ended the relationship, Reid says the predominant feeling is grief.

"Grief for the loss of this person I loved, and the idea that we would be a family."

Recently, as Caleb has more obviously seemed to be in need of a father figure, the grief has been solely for her son. Dad lives in Kaikoura and sees him when work allows, but often only twice a year for a week at a time. "I would never have wanted that for Caleb," Reid says.

Her concerns about being a mother raising a son without a man in the house?

"It's more the fact that raising one child on your own is really intense. I worry I might put more expectation on him, because it's only me and him."

And it's not as though Caleb doesn't have adult males in his daily life. Her father has been supportive and her brother has been involved in disciplining Caleb "in a really lovely, guy way that I'd never have thought of". This year, too, Caleb has had a male school teacher — his mother couldn't be more pleased.

But, yes, she often feels she needs to compensate.

"He said the other day, 'I wish Dad was here to go bike riding with'. I said, 'I'll go biking with you'. He looked at me, 'Yeah but it's not the same is it?' He said, 'First of all you're not going to let me take my bike where Dad goes because you're really not allowed bikes where we go'. I said, 'I can't do those things but we can still ride', and I did buy myself a bike and we will.

"I try really hard not to be too 'mumsy'. I take him out to a friend's farm at Oxford, drop him off and just not look. I know he's a city kid in an environment he doesn't know, but I also know he needs it."

Reid expects the absence of a dad in the house to bite more as Caleb gets older. "Being a single mum to a teenager, I think, will be a lot harder.

"But I have to be careful not to think of all the things he might be missing, because he wouldn't get all those things from one guy anyway.

"In the end," she says, "there are two-parent families out there who are struggling and who aren't being great parents. I can't make up for everything and certainly he will lack for things, but I can at least do the right thing in my parenting to give him a head-start in life."

The tide of research and rhetoric on the subject of fatherlessness would trouble the sleep of any solo mum.

The message is: Dads count. When the Business Roundtable brought American social scientist Dr Charles Murray to New Zealand a few years ago, he described the high number of children growing up without fathers as a social disaster.

"All the social trends you look at — crime, drug abuse, chronic unemployment, unwanted pregnancies — tend to grow when you have a generation who grow up without fathers."

Murray included girls in that statement, but it's the phenomenon of boys being raised by mum alone that provokes the most angst.

Peggy Drexler in *Raising Boys Without Men* writes: "Society's guardians have declared that single mothers are sending violent, drug-using hellions out into the world, all due to the combination of Mom's presence and Dad's absence."

Drexler, a former gender scholar, now assistant professor of psychology at Cornell University in New York and a married mother of two, argues that it is poverty and other disadvantages associated with single parenthood that explain all those worrisome stats.

"But the 16-year-old raising children without any support system and the middle-class mothers who have thought long and hard about having kids all get lumped together,"

she told *North & South*.

In the US, the number of families headed by single mothers increased 25 per cent in the 1990s to more than 7.5 million.

"There has been a fear that a boy left alone with Mom is going to be undermined, made into a sissy, that she won't be able to discipline him.

"The conventional wisdom I was trying to challenge [in *Raising Boys*] is a boy needs a man in the mother's bedroom to become a man, and that boys can't grow into good, solid men without that."

Drexler tracked 32 boys over several years, some of whom were parented by a mother and father, some by solo mums and others by lesbian couples: "When I looked at single-mom and two-mom families, what I saw were boys who were very sophisticated psychologically, who had a lot of empathy for others, who understood they came from 'special families' and were really versed in how to deal with the sometime-unsympathetic environment. Yes, they had a lot of challenges, but those helped them to be very strong boys.

"Whether they were doing better [than boys raised conventionally] wasn't the issue for me, it was that they were doing well in what was considered a compromising situation. And they were able to do that because of the parenting of their mothers."

Those mums, according to Drexler, were accepting, but also pushed their sons to pull their weight in the house. They talked often and creatively with their boys, drew them out. And they stayed engaged, defying the deeply inculcated notion, from Freud to Celia Lashlie, that as boys age their mothers need to "cut the cord".

A criticism levelled at Drexler is her sample group were women with all sorts of advantages. But she retorts: "These were not rich women. They were educated, older women who had thought about having children. But they weren't so privileged that they stood out."

Drexler also rejects the assumption she is anti-male or keen to cast fathers in a negative light.

"I think it's very important for single mothers to go out of their way to find men in the community or in the family who their boys can connect with on an ongoing basis. Boys do need men. The point is those men don't have to be sleeping in the mother's bedroom.

"The number of times you eat dinner with your kids is more important than the number of parents at the table, or the gender or sexual orientation of the parent," she says. "It's about the quality of the parenting, how the boy is treated, whether his sense of masculinity is endorsed and his sense of adventure is valued, the kind of emotional actions and reactions that go on in the family."

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Tom Dowie has been sweating over such considerations for the past seven years, but from the other side of the gender divide. Dowie, a Christchurch union organiser, took on sole custody of sons Billy, now 15, and Alex, 14, after his wife left.

In the years that followed, Dowie's greatest fear was that without the softening influence of a woman, his boys would become hard lads.

"I had to be the shoulder to cry on, all that sort of stuff, and I had to be the authoritarian as well. It's been hard at times to balance those two. But when I look at the boys now, they can be quite soft; they can get tearful and emotional."

For most of their post-separation lives he has been a stay-at-home dad. It was no picnic. Dowie often felt isolated. Solo mothers, he discovered, tend to have much better networks than solo dads.

"And I got a hard time from my father, real old-school stuff. 'How long are you going to be doing this? Why aren't you working?'

"I think those attitudes are changing for the better, though. I've had a few people recently say, 'Good on you'. Before, it used to be 'How come?'"

New Zealand has one of the world's highest rates of single fatherhood — 17 per cent of sole parents. But you wouldn't know it.

"You never hear about them, or about the teenaged dads, who make up 8.8 per cent of sole teenage parents," says Harald Breiding-Buss, co-ordinator of Christchurch's Father & Child Trust.

"The system is so focused on women that it's not responsive to these men at all. I've been doing some work recently with single dads of young children, and one thing I've noticed is there is often a bit of a developmental delay in language with these kids, maybe because it doesn't come as naturally for us guys to talk. There is a clear need there, but unless it gets picked up by people like us it doesn't get addressed at all."

Much else about single parenthood is hidden or half known. Even the phrase "single parenthood" doesn't reflect the reality of childcare arrangements being made by parents who split.

A 2006 Victoria University report, *One Child, Two Homes*, pointed out, for example, that very little is known officially about how much time children spend with their non-custodial parents, or about money transfers between households. About the best we have to go on is Australian data that found a third of children see the non-resident parent daily or weekly, a quarter rarely or never.

But on the basis of what he sees in his rooms, Christchurch family counsellor Don Rowlands believes today's fathers tend to stay more involved in their children's lives after a breakup. "And I believe that's happening because children want to be connected to their father and his family."

Each day the bloody mess of marital breakup and divorce troops up the stairs, past the Raj Mahal restaurant and a clutch of artists' studios, to Rowlands' downtown office.

He sees it all, and he worries that David Fergusson's conclusions send out a message that minimises the potential harm done to children when families fall apart. Likewise, the "father hunger" he sees among so many boys casts doubt on the optimistic note struck by Drexler.

"As a generalisation, the idea that the quality of parenting is more important than the type of family is a good one to bear in mind. Statistically, however, it's a different story."

Common sense dictates that risks are reduced if there are more caring parents involved, says Rowlands, adding that when Dad disappears, "that can also mean the loss of a whole extended family and support system from their lives".

But increasingly he is seeing estranged couples make arrangements for shared care of the kids. And for all the criticism of the Family Court, Rowlands believes its decisions are often helpful.

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"In terms of location orders, for example, the court is certainly taking the attitude that it's important for fathers to stay involved in the life of a child."

The evidence of the benefits for children of shared parenting? A 1993 Stanford University project that followed families of divorce concluded adolescents did "at least as well" in joint custody — hardly a ringing endorsement.

But Rowlands cites emotional and financial benefits for children, a more secure sense of self-worth, the "safety valve" effect of having another place to go in times of stress.

According to University of Maryland research, when non-custodial fathers are actively involved in their children's lives it even helps to develop better language and cognitive skills.

Says Dr Jan Pryor, director of Victoria University's Roy McKenzie Centre for the Study of Families, "No doubt about it, kids thrive with two parents. But those two parents don't necessarily need to be in the same household."

The amount of contact between kids and the non-custodial parent doesn't predict good outcomes. Nor, even, does the degree of emotional closeness. Both Pryor and Rowlands say what counts is that each parent is actively engaged and sharing the gritty, sleeves-rolled-up stuff of parenting — the overnight stays, getting up in the night, cooking regular meals — not Mum doing the hard yards through the week and Dad parachuting in for fun-time weekends.

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Peggy Drexler, assistant professor of psychology at Cornell University, New York

"I like the term 'two-home families' and I think we need to start talking about it that way," says Rowlands. "It has to be a total home environment, with a sense that both adults are equally empowered to parent. Because it's when you get hierarchical parenting and begin to marginalise one parent, then it gets risky for children."

Lesley Max sees plenty of risk in the growth of single-parent families. Max, CEO of the Auckland-based child welfare organisation Great Potentials Foundation, doesn't want to be painted as the voice of reaction. But she believes that worrying aspects of the trend have been downplayed.

She cites a 2006 report from the left-leaning British Institute for Public Policy on the subject. "Almost through gritted teeth, it wrote, 'The research clearly showed that children who grow up with both biological parents do better on a wide range of outcomes... While this research may be instinctively difficult for those on the left to accept, the British evidence seems to support it... Changes to families, such as more parents working, rising rates of divorce and single parenthood, have undermined the ability of families to effectively socialise young people.'

Jan Pryor, who has done extensive research on the effect of family change on children, says kids from stable single-parent homes do very well — and far better than popular wisdom would have it. But stability is the key.

"It says, 'Single parents can be less emotionally supportive, have fewer rules, dispense harsher discipline, are often more inconsistent in dispensing discipline, provide less supervision and are more engaged in conflict with their children'."

Max says she isn't trying to demonise or stigmatise. "But raising children is an all-consuming mission. It's important a message is available in the ether for young people that helps them understand it's hard to replicate the benefits of a stable, married family situation."

Challenging the Fergusson research, Max questions how it is possible to separate out the difficult socio-economic circumstances that characterise single-parent families — the poor educational achievement, the poverty and all the other strikes against them — to argue that, all things being equal, single parenthood has no ill-effects.

"I think the difficulty lies in that phrase 'all things being equal', because how do you make things equal? It seems to me it depends on our ability as a society to support sole-parent households, economically and personally, so they more closely resemble married households — and I just don't see how that's feasible.

"And what about the emotional support? This is where you get the vulnerability of single-parent families to that most dangerous of all family structures, the churning household."

That's another thing about single-parent families: they don't stay single for long. But the news on that score is hardly encouraging. According to British research, 25 per cent of new step-families break up within a year.

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"The more often they go from two parents, to one, to two again, and on through that cycle, the more at risk they become of a whole range of negative things."

Lesley Max says such instability is widely destructive. In a recent Unicef report on child wellbeing in developed countries, New Zealand came out looking like one of the last countries on Earth you'd want to raise children.

"It shows very clearly that New Zealand, the UK and the US cluster at the bottom on many measures. What do we have in common? We have in common high rates of sole-parent households."

And a host of other things, too, of course. Max concedes that making the link is fraught. The subject defies easy generalisations. Sweden, for example, has a higher proportion of its children living in lone-parent families than the US or UK, but a far lower child poverty rate than either.

She isn't blaming single-parent families for all social ills. "I'm more inclined to say as a society we are culpable of having glossed over some of the realities of creating families and rearing children. In Wellington social policy circles people are very reluctant to talk about it. Look at the Family Violence Taskforce. As far as I can detect, there's no recognition at all of the greater risk of family violence when you have these shifting and unstable families. It's that kind of reluctance we need to confront. Not by reintroducing stigma, but by being more clear-eyed."

Pryor argues for more help for couples before relationships break down irrevocably — interventions along the lines of the "One Plus One" project in the UK, where mums taking their baby for a six-week check-up are given a screening questionnaire about their relationship and, if things appear rocky, are offered help.

"It's one thing we don't do well in New Zealand, to support that relationship between parents. There's enormous emphasis placed on parenting courses, which are great, but if your relationship is in difficulty it's very hard to be a good parent."

It was the loneliness that got Susan Bellett.

"There are huge decisions to make, and you make them on your own," she says of the early period raising Sam, then aged five, and Katie,

Making two homes work

If living under one roof with happy, harmonious parents is not possible, "the next best scenario for children is the one where parents are able to separate, resolve their differences and have a co-parenting arrangement where they are both sharing substantial care", according to Christchurch family counsellor Don Rowlands. Operating the "two-home model" has its difficulties, but it can be made to work for everyone. Rowlands advises:

* Kids need a space for themselves. "If they share a room with a step-sibling they will need their own bookshelf or wardrobe. Creating a sense of belonging is very important."
* Ensure both homes have age-appropriate toys.
* Negotiate in advance a fair sharing of recreational and school costs.
* Stick to similar rules and routines in both homes, where possible — although Rowlands adds, "Children are resilient and able to understand different rules and parenting styles in different homes."
* Make transitions positive. Prepare the children for the change and help them to look forward to it. Never put down the other parent. When picking the kids up or dropping them off, keep the chat with the other parent light and leave any important issues for a phone call or email after the kids are in bed.
* Always keep the children separate from any ongoing adult conflict. "The key thing is to have adult issues in one box and co-parenting or child issues in another."
* Use counselling or mediation if you reach an impasse. The Family Court pays for six free sessions.

seven, after her husband walked out.

That was in Napier, years ago.

"We got on with life. It was hard. You were in shock ... But I decided I wasn't going to make it worse by feeling sorry for myself or becoming bitter and twisted. I made a decision to make the best. I come from a mother-father relationship, five of us in the family, a healthy 'pot', so the choices I was able to make in bringing up the kids were healthy choices. A lot of people don't have that start and it makes it hard for them — and hard for the children."

Bellett sees those kinds of struggles every day as a family worker with Christchurch Single Mums' Support, the service based in Spreydon that Bellett conceived of six years ago when working across the road at the Baptist Church pre-school.

"I was seeing single mums walking in who didn't seem to have a lot of belief in themselves. And I knew what that was like," she says.

"A lot of these women go from one broken relationship to another very quickly. I try to encourage them to discover who they are, what they believe, so when they go into a new relationship, it is as a full person."

It's a hard road at times, and easy to feel you've failed. "The media will tell you your children aren't going to succeed."

Bellett made the best. She dealt with the fallout. She moved south to be able to draw on her own family. She was on the sideline for Sam, who is now aged 20. She guided Katie. She took the domestic purposes benefit for a time, but was too proud to tell them.

"The kids never knew we were on a benefit. I felt they didn't need to know."

She studied early childhood education and took a fulltime job at the preschool. She even fostered other children.

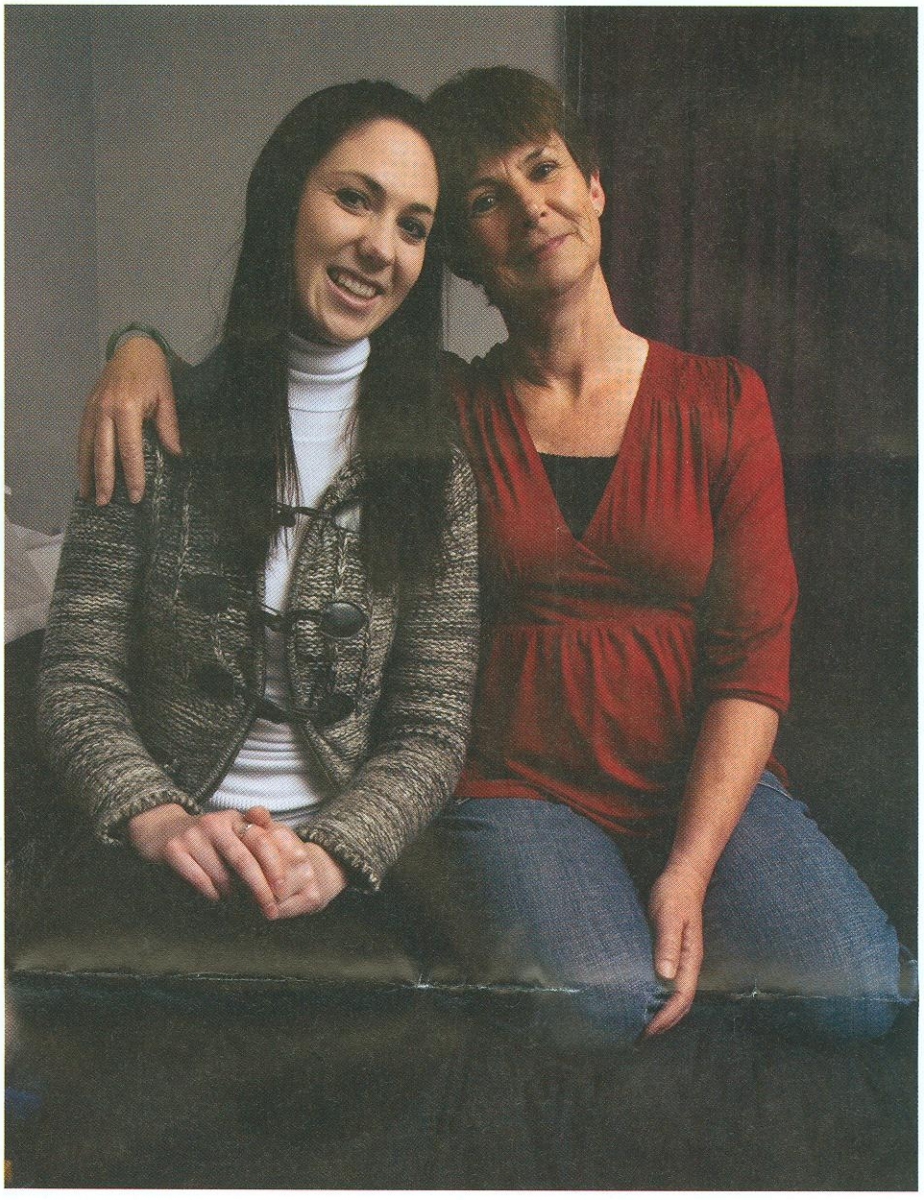
"Some people, even my mum, thought single mums shouldn't foster, but I loved being a mum and felt we had something to give."

She felt a sense of stigma, but believes much of the time that was just her. She felt — seems still to feel — regretful and anxious. "I never wanted it for our guys to be brought up with just me."

Ideally, Bellett says, having two parents in the home is better. Her daughter, typically — happily — won't agree. Katie Bellett, now 22, says she and her brother don't feel they missed out on a thing.

There were regular holiday visits to their father's place. "Whenever I needed Dad, he was there, whether by a phone call or an email.

"I'm not in the gutter or high on P. I've got a house, a good job, a partner, a puppy, a good relationship with my family. We grew up in a single-parent home, but we had family values, the idea that family matters."



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She smiles. "It was kind of old fashioned, the way we grew up."

> A sad fact, of course, about adult life, is that you see the very things you'll never adapt to coming toward you on the horizon."

These lines — from the 1995 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Independence Day*, by Richard Ford — could describe the end of a marriage.

You worry like hell, but somehow too late, because maybe "the thing you see coming from far away is not the real thing, the thing that scares you, but its aftermath".

You adapt to the aftermath as best you can, because the way you both adapt defines your children's lives.

You work out a way of parenting where both of you are fully engaged, the two-home approach, like the experts advise. You count your blessings that your circumstances make that possible. You admire anyone who, out of necessity, raises their children alone and makes a good fist of it. You never stop watching the weather, but everything tells you that if you get it right, or as close to right as you both can possibly make it, your children will do better than survive. You never stop worrying, but then what parent ever does? +