

My 16-year-old daughter has left home. Before you report me to Human Services or start searching the streets for her, I should let you know she's safe. At her Mum's.

For eight years since my divorce from her Mum, Hannah has stayed overnight with me for between four and seven nights a fortnight. But a couple of weeks ago she decided she was too tired and stressed to do it anymore. She was rowing for her school every day. She had exams coming up. She was worn out from carrying her sausage bag of clothes from house to house. So she moved out. Of my place, at least. Two years earlier than expected.

People, even other parents, have been quick with their counsel.

*Oh well, she might come back and live with you again.* Possible, but unlikely. My house isn't going to get any closer to her Mum's. And she's not going to get *less* tired and stressed when she starts doing her VCE.

*You haven't lost her altogether.* Now there's some icy, almost morbid comfort. There's always Facetime and Facebook.

*Well, it's what she wants.* Of course, but she wants lots of things. Especially all her clothes in one place. And one house to live in, despite having two parents in different ones.

*She'll still visit you.* Great. I suppose I should book my bed at the nursing home?

Two women responded compassionately. I told them my news and they stuck their bottom lips out. And said nothing. Even after I rehearsed on them some of the advice I'd heard, they kept their silence and held those bottom lips out. Until I shut up and looked at the ground.

Divorced parents who've had to tell their young children that Mum and Dad won't be living together anymore know it's one of the hardest things they'll ever do. For years I'd get choked up remembering the day I did it. Hannah and her brother sitting on the couch and looking at me like I'd just told them I would have to cut off one of their limbs. And they wouldn't even get to choose which one.

It seems it's just as hard when kids have to return the favour. Or the lack of one. Hannah asked her Mum to ring me because she couldn't bear telling me herself. "There's no way he'll accept it," she told my ex. So it was left to her Mum to explain that Hannah's task of crossing town with her sausage bag of clothes, coupled with early morning rowing for the school, the academic pressure, her part-time job, and her general sense of being sick of swapping houses part-way through the week made it impossible now for her to stay with me regularly. And then she gave me the *It's what she wants and needs, she might come and live with you again, you haven't lost her completely* spiel, along with one last dispatch that choked me up.

*You've got a fabulous relationship with her, better than most Dads who live with their daughters full-time.*

So why's she moving out? I wanted to ask. But I didn't. I got off the phone before she realised how much I was hurting. And I couldn't do any more work for the rest of the day.

I know I'm not supposed to hurt. I know all the wise counselors are right. And I'm especially aware that some parents *do* lose a child forever. Their ability to survive – and even heal – stuns and humbles me. But my daughter has still moved out. And my bottom lip is on the ground.

No, that's not quite it: now and then I've been bawling uselessly. I can't stop

picturing the significant moments in Hannah's life. The day as a three-year-old she ran away from a picnic and I found her holding court and entertaining a group of adults. *She's a special kid*, they said, and I shrugged. *No, really, she is. She's talking to us as if she's an adult!* The day she walked up her primary school steps for the first time and told me, in as many words, *No further for you. I'm going into the classroom alone.* The night she was born. Her Mum had to go away for post-birth surgery and I was left with Hannah, staring into her dark eyes for hours, wondering who she was. Her eyes were so calm. It was like she'd been here before. I felt something deep open in me that I hope never closes. That I know will never close.

But Hannah has closed a chapter with me.

She and I and her Mum had a meeting at a café. We talked about ways Hannah could keep up her connection with me, and her relationship with her little half-brother. How about a regular dinner? A run in the park when Hannah hasn't got rowing? I nodded, knowing how hard it is to get her on the phone let alone in front of her diary, and acted all Daddish. "Whatever Hannah needs for her schooling," I said. "That's what's most important in all this." And blah and blah. Then it was time to go and I held her and blubbered like an idiot. But Hannah was fine. "It's okay Dad. I love you," she said. "I hope you know that will never change." And her Mum put the L-plates on the car and Hannah waved and drove away.