

Petra Büskens

From Perfect Housewife to Fishnet Stockings and Not Quite Back Again

One Mother's Story of Leaving Home

First acquaintance: meeting Lillith.

Lillith is a gregarious yet softly spoken woman whose energy and enthusiasm belie her 70 years of living. She defies every imaginable stereotype I hold of an older person, let alone an older woman. She is active, articulate, and strong (I see her gym equipment in the corner of the room); she is opinionated and, to my complete astonishment, she is *sexy*. I notice that her eyes sparkle blue every time she throws her head back to laugh with an irresistible combination of wisdom and freedom. I have to admit it, this woman is utterly compelling.

Lillith is, however, a mother who has left her children and it is for this reason that I have come to interview her. I just never expected to encounter such a powerful, centred and sensuous woman. I am caught off guard with a reprimanding conscience (asking myself why I assumed an older woman wouldn't possess any or all of Lillith's traits) and seduced by the novelty of one who does. I am enamoured with the gift of Lillith's story and I am humanized by her extraordinariness. When I walk out of Lillith's tiny Tuscon cottage at the end of our interview I feel like a different person; I feel like I have glimpsed the future—maybe it is myself as an older woman.

Like the other 15 women I have thus far interviewed, Lillith found her conventional role in the family—a 1950s suburban Australian family—a stultifying one. She felt trapped, confined, dependent, exploited, unrealized and, ultimately, abused. Like the others, she too decided that conventional marriage and motherhood were unsustainable for her. Not content to accept her “lot,” Lillith took a highly transgressive path and chose to leave her family: both husband and children. While this is the route most men take after the dissolution of a marriage, it is certainly not an avenue many women consider.

The stigmatisation is simply too great. While we see statistics bursting at the seams with divorce, its main side effect remains that ever expanding category demographers call the “Mother Headed Household”(ABS, 2000; ABS, 1999[a]).¹ But how does the family change when it is the mother who leaves and not the father? More specifically, what happens to motherhood when it occurs outside the conventional nuclear or single-parent family? What happens to a mother who has left home?

I am interested to answer this question since it has remained largely unexplored in the feminist literature on motherhood, notwithstanding the new focus on “impossibility” (DiQuinzio, 1999) “contradiction” (Hayes, 1996) “ambivalence” (Hollway and Featherstone, 1997) and “deviance” (Ladd-Taylor and Umansky, 1998). From this research, among many others, we know mothers are struggling with the contradictory models of unencumbered individualism and self-sacrificing motherhood. What we know less of is how mothers are subverting and recreating this script. Thus while I accept the analyses offered by contemporary maternal theorists, my interest is, rather, to locate an instance of creative subversion. Methodologically, the focus shifts from oppression to resistance. I read the mother who leaves as a potent and challenging instance of precisely this kind of subversion and reinvention.

My empirical research² thus gathered the stories of fifteen women who identified as mothers who had left. These women selected themselves on the basis of advertisements placed in local newspapers. It was a requirement of the research that mothers perceived they had voluntarily left for a period of six months or more (thereby excluding issues pertaining to adoption or refuge status). Participants were interviewed for a period of approximately two hours in their own homes on two occasions. Interviews were tape recorded, transcribed and checked by participants before final inclusion in the project. Pseudonyms have been used through-out.

This paper will therefore cluster around the pivotal question: what happens when mother leaves home, with a particular emphasis on maternal sexuality. I claim no generalizability from these findings given that I am centering my analysis on the data gathered from only 15 cases, with Lillith as my paradigmatic example. This is merely an attempt to raise issues and provoke thoughts on the quiet reinvention of maternity enacted by this small group of Australian mothers who have left their families.

Madonna and whore or Lillith as mother and woman.

At the close of one of our interviews Lillith presents me with an anecdote which assures me of her peculiar relationship to motherhood. Her story is designed to elicit a contrast between herself and other presumably “good” mothers, yet her self imposed exclusion finds its root (no pun intended) in her sexuality, more precisely in her refusal to ascend to the restrictions of conjugal monogamy. Lillith invokes a familiar dualism and positions herself firmly to its right; she is the whore, not the Madonna. She recounts:

Yeah, it would have been in the '60s, 1965/66, I was shopping at the local grocery shop. I'd thrown over this very bright sleeveless thing I put over my swimsuit, or over nothing, probably I'd taken my swimsuit off and didn't have anything on [underneath]. And I remember eyeing this guy off in the grocery shop and he was an actor because channel 4 was up there at that time, and we ended up going to channel 4 and making love on the floor of the studio. And then I got my groceries [she says still laughing] and went home again. I mean I drove up there, I had the car, and I got in my car, came home again and unpacked the groceries. So I never felt like a mother, ever. [my emphasis]

This is the stuff that movies are made of so it seems fitting that Lillith's adventure would take place with an actor, whom she recalls later in fits of laughter was "revolting, absolutely revolting." This example is entertaining to listen to, and no doubt to deliver, but beyond this I think it tells us something fairly fundamental about motherhood itself; about the heterosexual monogamy implied in the term mother and about our intuitive, albeit ideological, sense that a good mother doesn't "fuck around." We assume mothers are prudent, tamed creatures who selflessly and, most importantly, *platonically* love others. This shared insight comes from the unspoken well-spring of common sense, or, following Gramsci (1971), what social theorists somewhat dryly refer to as "ideological hegemony." By this account, common sense is the process whereby consensus is achieved between dominant and subordinate groups in favour of the former. In western societies, we are structured by a dominant belief system promulgating an equation between maternity and selfless (or is that sexless?), devotion. (See, for example, Warner, 1976) This has a long history in religion, culture and art, while today it is preserved in the dual and interconnected institutions of marriage and motherhood. Maternity in this ideological context is inherently desexualizing. Lillith is herself bound by this commonsensical dualism as she explains her alienation from the institution of motherhood on the grounds of her libertine sexuality. That is, she views herself as an outlaw to motherhood *because* of her sexual adventurousness.

I would like to explore this dichotomy further and ultimately watch it implode as Lillith's story unfolds; because it seems to me that by leaving the family, Lillith manages, after all the pain and destruction, to innovatively synthesise "madonna" and "whore," or, in other words, I believe Lillith finds a novel way of being both a caregiver and a free agent. My reading suggests Lillith exhausts the dialectical hegemony of asexual maternity/sexualised freedom by altering the terms and spaces from which she mothers. In this way she repositions the whore within the madonna, or the woman within the mother, by finding an insulated geographic location for both. She insists on a simultaneity of her identifications (madonna and whore; freeagent and caregiver) whilst prising apart the spaces within which she enacts these different facets of her self. By leaving the familial home, Lillith opens up the space to be

something other than a mother; she quite literally has not merely a room of her own as Virginia Woolf suggested, but rather, a *home* of her own (Woolf, 1929). From this vantage point, Lillith can exercise her autonomy and she can, as she eventually does, mother from here too. Leaving, then, can be understood as one way of effectively resisting the totalising institution of self sacrificing/desexualising mothering, however much the stigma “bad mother” attaches itself to her actions. Indeed, we should use the intensity of the stigma as an index of the hegemony of institutionalised patriarchal motherhood. The fact that a mother who leaves is judged very differently from a father who leaves stands as a chilling reminder of the double-standard inherent in “parenting;” it stands as a reminder of the ideology of maternal self-sacrifice, and it neatly dovetails with the sexual double standard which calls a sexually adventurous woman a slut while a man who acts in this same way is a hero and a Don Juan. It is this double standard that Lillith pushes against first through her infidelities and then most powerfully through her leaving. Let us explore the particularities of her situation.

The ambivalence of feminine mystique

“This was the ’50s.” Lillith reminds me, “it was a time when you had to be the perfect wife and perfect mother.... And so I was absolutely perfect. I mean I was such a bloody martyr. You’ve got no idea ... I was so perfect and fiercely protective of the children.” While Lillith lived up to this ideal for a brief time she also resented the constraints it imposed on her life. Thus she tells me in almost the same breath how “bovine” she felt after giving birth to three children in quick succession. “I felt like a cow ... always pregnant, always feeding for years and years and years.... I felt trapped [and] suffocated, [like] the children were albatrosses around my neck.... I also felt that I’d been sucked dry, that my youth had been taken and quite resentful ... and the juxtaposition with that, of course, was this sort of fierce love.” Lillith’s ambivalence is honestly revealed in her struggle to come to terms with the dual and contradictory experience of caring for children under the hegemony of selfless/sexless mothering. It is a familiar account that most mothers feel but few will admit (Mousehart, 1997; LeBlanc, 1998). The constraints of isolated mothering place an impossible and historically unprecedented burden on modern mothers: one that sequesters them to the home and isolates them from others. As Lillith found, the need (and later the desire) to work did not change this basic structure of unequal parental demand.

For years she felt like the only available parent for her children and the strain wore at her. She says, “it was very difficult because I was both father and mother. I mean Adam was absent.” In spite of this uneven strain, Lillith worked in “odd jobs” and eventually developed a career in market research during her children’s middle school years. She was reasonably successful with this and it opened up important avenues for self-expression, financial independence, and autonomy (not to mention the odd “lifesaving” affair). However, it also

increased the pressures at home as Adam refused to share the load of domestic and childcare labour. Lillith says, “I mean he said that if I worked he would never pick up a tea-towel. So he did nothing, absolutely nothing. I felt very put upon.” Lillith’s experience is supported by sociological research, albeit more recent findings, indicating that women’s entry into the workplace has not been accompanied by a corresponding movement of men’s work in the home (Baxter, 1993; Bittman, 1995, Bttman and Pixley, 1997; Dempsey, 1997). This remains the case to varying degrees in all of the advanced capitalist countries (Pleck, 1985; Sanchez, 1994; Shelton, 1990; Steil, 1997; Zhang and Farley, 1995). In her classic study, *The Second Shift* Arlie Hochschild (1989) argues that the revolution of women out of the home and into the workforce has not been met with a parallel “revolution” of men entering the home and sharing the domestic load. This has amounted to a terrible burden for mothers who are now very often working two shifts: one at their paid job and then a second when they return home in the evening to find cooking, washing, shopping, cleaning and the less savoury aspects of parenting awaiting them. This pattern was certainly the case in Lillith’s home.

Thus Lillith and Adam’s marriage became more and more acrimonious escalating, in the end, to physical violence. Adam began beating Lillith very badly, sometimes in front of the children who were now in and approaching high school. This situation worsened finally leading to Lillith’s hospitalisation from a particularly severe beating and her subsequent suicide attempt. “Overdosing was the only way I felt I could leave” she recalls. Lillith’s perceived inability to escape this situation and her protective tie to her children became a source of profound resentment.

I felt if I didn't have the children I could have gone. I'd felt that for years. If the children weren't there, I would have left the marriage ... there was nowhere I could have taken the children.... And I don't think I wanted them.... I wanted out of motherhood and out of marriage.

Lillith clarifies the angst in this decision further,

I felt I was responsible for giving them stability in this dreadful marriage..... I felt as though I had no [rights]. I felt as though I wasn't even a person. You know ... it's a bit like mushrooms growing out of a dead person or something, you know? Like when I'm thinking of it now ... there's a carcass rotting and the other life forms grow up out of it. I felt like a rotting carcass and that's when I left. And it was dreadful. It was wonderful.

Lillith refers to her leaving as a “rebirth” where she guiltily sought a freedom beyond the painful limits of her violent marriage and the selfless monotony of child care. It would be tempting to think it was only Lillith’s marriage that she was leaving and keep intact our image of an otherwise devoted

mother, but in fact Lillith stresses several times that it was *both* husband and children she wanted to leave. It was in fact the problematic nexus of these two roles: wife and mother with their seemingly intractable stranglehold over her life, that Lillith wanted to escape. The one cannot be extricated successfully from the other for this is part of the institution of both (Rich, 1977; Johnson, 1988). Marriage equals motherhood and motherhood equals marriage. The disarticulation of one from the other immediately implies transgression, such is the ideology of femininity. For Lillith her freedom meant the withdrawal from both sides of the wife/mother coin. While initially Lillith frames her desire to leave the children in terms of the pragmatic difficulties of single parenting in the nineteen-sixties, she later qualifies this position by saying she didn't, "want them either." This is the point at which Lillith relinquishes not simply her children but also her socially sanctioned status of mother. It is a courageous act of destruction that will earn her a lifelong stigma. She says,

And I never thought of what was going to happen after. Never thought. It was just ... relief that I didn't have them and I didn't want responsibility for them.... I mean because honestly I didn't give a stuff. I mean I did, I did.

The morning after: Trading in love and resentment for guilt and freedom

Lillith reminded me that her claim to normal motherhood was merely a veneer. She was, after all, having clandestine affairs throughout the final turbulent years of her marriage. She claims this was the only time she felt "herself," a brief moment when she was—however superficially—appreciated and admired; but, perhaps more fundamentally, this was a moment when she could access that part of her which was *not* a wife or a mother. This was a part of her self Lillith craved to discover and cultivate. It was the self her familial role denied her and it was the self she pursued more ardently than any extra-marital affair. Indeed, it is likely that her relationship with her won freedom was the most subversive affair of all. This association between freedom and sexuality is made explicitly by Lillith who saw her leaving as simultaneously the loss of familial constraint as well as the acquisition of sexual autonomy. For Lillith this meant the return to a "lost youth" she felt had been "sucked dry." She says,

Look, I felt 16 years of age. It was the most wonderful feeling.... I mean, I was in my mid-30s to late 30s, but I would leap up on a street seat and run along the top of it. And I had a lover who was much younger than me and we weren't living together and just the freedom. It was exquisite. Absolutely exquisite ... [It was] this wonderful, wonderful going back to my teenage years. Just being so wild and being able to get drunk and go to the pub every night. Oh God, it was so wonderful. [I'd go] dancing at the ... and I'd look around to see if my daughter was there [first] ... [at] the "Stamping Sam" a disco, and wear short skirts, you know mini skirts and

net stockings. I was totally ... you know I didn't have kids. I didn't have to ... I didn't have to be a mother. And I was no longer somebody's wife or somebody's mother ... I was no longer that. I was me ... I was my own identity. Not having these encumbrances, you know, these anchors anymore. It was the most wonderful, wonderful freedom ... so for the first time I stood alone. I'd always been my father's daughter, my husband's wife, my children's mother, my sister's sister, my mother's daughter. For the first time I was me, with a career, and just me. [my emphasis]

This freedom obviously set alarm bells off in the heads of her male acquaintances who (also) construed her new freedom in explicitly sexual terms. She says at a different point in the interview,

Wives didn't leave children. If wives left, they went and lived with mum and took their children with them. And that was really bad. Wives did not leave. This was a terrible, terrible thing I did. Like Adam's friends, because of the work, they found out where I was, would ring me up and want to fuck me. I was a mother ... and then ... became a sexual being. My step-father, my brother-in-law ... and my husband's Lion's Club friends ... all rang me up and wanted to fuck me. I mean it was disgusting.

The madonna/whore dichotomy had not ceased to wield its influence in Lillith's life, now she was simply out on the "wrong" side of the equation. While Lillith's liberation from the familial role opened up new vistas for her autonomy and sexuality, it was also read as a clear sign of her sexual wantonness; her "loose" morals and carefree attitude. In other words, in a culture dominated by the ideological hegemony of selfless/sexless maternity, for a mother to act freely was and is read as sexual provocation *in itself*. A free woman is a "come on" partly because she personifies taboo, partly because she is perceived as "rebellious" or "feisty," and partly because it is assumed—rightly or wrongly—that she *doesn't have a man* (and presumably wants, needs or should have one). Culture at large finds it hard to cope with autonomy in a woman, even harder to cope with sexual autonomy in a woman and hardest of all to cope with sexual autonomy in a woman who is also a mother (Dinnerstein, 1976).

Lillith is right, then, the autonomy she wrestled from her family, was necessarily sexual and sexualising. There are two sides to this, however, which directly correlate to, on the one hand, Lillith's sense of liberation and awakening, and on the other hand, the objectification she encountered from the men in her husband's Lion's Club. These two poles are, it seems to me, interconnected phenomena; different ways of living, resisting and consolidating the hegemony of the selfless-sexless/selfish-sexual dichotomy. For Lillith, however, the simultaneous insistence on a sexed identity *as a mother* was a means to push past the limitations of the dualism. She sought to make synchronous claims on both sexuality and maternity thereby collapsing the dualism itself.

Whereas the men in the Lion's club simplistically read Lillith's departure as indication of her "free" (i.e., sexually "loose") attitude, Lillith had herself insisted on something far more complex. But before she could reach this level of complexity she had first to annihilate her former role. This took place, in the first instance, through an intense reclamation of freedom.

"So, yes" she says, "it was a great relief to be a sexual *being* when I left." In keeping with this newfound sexual identity, Lillith took up with a man ten years her junior. This was a highly charged and immensely enjoyable relationship for her. She recounts in bursts of laughter,

So I formed a relationship with him and although he didn't officially live with me he stayed several nights.... I mean the sex was amazing, we'd have sex before we went to work, we'd have sex as soon as we got home from work and ... I don't know how many times a day we'd hop into bed [laughing]. We'd be all dressed up ready to go to work and ... we'd fall back into bed again. So ... it was very exciting. [my own emphasis]

The hedonism and spontaneity of this relationship coupled with her new sense of personal mastery dramatically improved Lillith's quality of life. "It was the joyfulness of life when I'd left them" she says, "I got that back and I'd lost that ... being joyful in life." She elaborates more generally,

And just to be able to knock off work and have a beer, you know? I mean the things you can't do when you've got children. Or you couldn't do when I had children then anyway. You know I had to go home and cook meals. Now it didn't matter a stuff whether I cooked a meal, whether I had sardines on toast.... I didn't have to cook for anybody, I didn't have to wash for anybody, I didn't have to listen to bloody homework, I didn't have to take ... listen ... you know, cheer them on at swimming. It was just marvellous, it was just wonderful.... I really like to be in control of my own life and that was the first time that I've ever been in control of my own life.

When I asked Lillith why she had become a sexual being again (in the hope of getting closer to the now ubiquitous equation between freedom and sex) I met with the same equation: "Because I was free" she said. Lillith, it seems, was sexual because she was free and free because she was sexual. It was a circular logic with no external referents. It seems, therefore, that loosening the strictures of mothering, literally leaving home, was not merely a bold, unconventional or destructive act, it was a *sexual* act. Lillith had acted sexually in her own account and, somewhat differently, in the account she provides of those lecherous hopefuls at her husband's Lion's Club. As with the equation between maternity and selfless/sexless subjectivity, relinquishing conventional maternity similarly equated with selfish/sexual subjectivity. Lillith feels this to be true insofar as she genuinely indulged and expanded her sexual horizons, yet she was

also resistant of, and even a little perplexed by, her sexualisation by outsiders. It is an interesting contradiction at the heart of her story and possibly one she cannot avoid until she has returned to the problem of her mothering.

Thus after several months, the constant worry for and guilt over the children forced Lillith to return to her painful past and find more sustainable and personally satisfying solutions. To break out was one part, but reconstruction was the other, arguably more important task she still faced.

What about the children?

Lillith found that her guilt over the children who were now being taken care of by a combination of their oftentimes violent father and her own mother, was too great. While she cherished her new found freedom and the worlds it simultaneously opened and closed, Lillith found her feelings of responsibility for the children pushing through the exuberance. Again, this process was not straightforward as she found she was bedeviled with the same ambivalence characteristic of earlier phases in her mothering. For example, Lillith spent many months of those 12 without her children, staving off memories and images of them. “And so I was a workaholic” she says. “It was very easy to forget my children when I was at work.” More confrontingly, at another point in our interview, she recalls the following,

So I distanced myself from them that year. I really did not know/want to know about them. Look if a big box had've swallowed them up I would have been pleased at that stage. That's how I felt. I didn't even want to have them as part of my life.

There is an almost complete absence of maternal sentimentality in Lillith's account. Indeed, it is so transgressive as to be jarring, even on my sympathetic ears. She is clear, almost trenchant, about the fact that she had nothing left, no “inner core” as she puts it, from which to care for her children, or anyone else for that matter. But the ambivalence remained for she also felt a debilitating guilt. She says,

I didn't care.... I really didn't care. But mixed up in that was this dreadful, dreadful guilt and I mean that's dogged me all my life. It's shocking guilt. I mean women didn't do these sort of things.... I still had the freedom even though... I was really guilty about the children, but I didn't want to even know about them.

Nevertheless, her conscience prevailed and so at the end of her 12 months of being a childfree *sexed* mother, Lillith organized for her daughter, who was the eldest and then, at age 16 exempt from a custody dispute, to come and live with her. Anne's choice was to live with her mother and so it was. However, the two boys would remain with their father a little longer. As younger teenagers,

Lillith would have to apply for legal custody. Adam refused to let them go notwithstanding the boys' requests to live with their mother. Lillith took her case to court and was awarded custody of both boys. While her leaving was looked upon unfavourably, the combination of her admirable employment record with a reputable firm and Adam's failure to show up in court, determined her success. She recalls, however, having to carefully suppress information regarding her lovers, lest this render her ineligible for custody. Moving into a middle-class suburb and renting a cheap home from a friend, Lillith again set up house with her children. This time, however, her mothering changed.

Reclaiming motherhood: Trading in apron strings for equality

Like other stages in her mothering, Lillith found this one difficult also. It meant relinquishing some of the freedom she had grown accustomed to and it meant managing teenagers. This was not always easy and she found the guilt over her year apart initially clouded her sense of fairness. For a brief time she tried to "make it up" to the kids by resuming a martyr-like position in relation to them. She did all the housework, tolerated extreme rudeness from her middle son, and expected little from them in return for her care and provision. Having tasted another kind of life though, her martyrdom was short-lived. After a weekend away in deep reflection, Lillith decided to reorganize her household along lines more conducive to her own sense of self and quality of life. She now expected her near adult children to look after themselves to a much greater degree. She recounts a particularly dramatic anecdote to illustrate her point,

And I remember once when Graham didn't wash his dishes, I got all the dishes he was supposed to wash, I got everything: pots, pans, everything that was dirty, I put it in his bed and I put the doona over the top. So I think after that we probably had a more—I don't mean a list up on the fridge, I don't think I've ever done that—but more sharing of household chores.

Lillith encouraged her daughter to take up an opportunity to live in the nurses quarters and later also encouraged her sons to venture out, taking jobs in distant states and pursuing relationships elsewhere. Her household became a transitory space for her teenage children, one they could return to and live in, but not one for where they could expect domestic service. The expectation was one of equals living in a house cooperatively together. Lillith clarifies her feelings poignantly,

I never wanted children on apron strings. I never wanted that role ever. I felt that having children forced that role on me that I never wanted... [So] I didn't want to be "Mother" any longer. I didn't want to be a mother, I wanted to share a house with responsible adults who ... shared the living and contributed to it.

In view of this return to mothering, it is my contention that Lillith *did not leave her children, rather she left the hegemonic institution of mothering* which dictates that women relinquish their autonomy for the sake of familial others. Lillith creatively challenged this system, and the madonna/whore dualism inherent within it, by *actively breaking and ultimately reinventing her familial role*. This kind of trajectory is remarkably similar for the other eleven women I have thus far interviewed. Contrary to what I expected when I commenced my research on “mothers who leave,” I have discovered that every woman has returned to mothering some or all of her children after an initial period of separation. Most, however, tend to combine what becomes part-time mothering with the children’s father who is then, by necessity, drawn into a much more active parental role. Paradoxically, these mothers tend to be able share their children with male co-parents much more effectively as part-time single parents than was the case when they cohabited in marital relationships. This suggests that “leaving” is, rather, a *strategic process of withdrawal on the mother’s behalf geared to disrupt and reorganize the terms on which conventional parenting is organized*.

Given that both the gendered division of labour and the hegemony of ideologies equating maternity with a selfless-sexless subjectivity prove especially resistant to change, leaving as a mother may be one of the few avenues open to women to disrupt these profound gender inequalities. Having a “home of one’s own” simultaneously forces fathers to parent (in the broad sense of this term to include all the time consuming organizational tasks as well as the messy ones) and provides mothers with an insulated time-space for the production and cultivation of autonomy. It is my contention, therefore, that Lillith, as with the other women in my project, reinvented mothering along lines more conducive to the acquisition and propagation of autonomy whilst also eliciting, however reluctantly, much more active parenting from their former spouses. Moreover, by seeking to synthesise caregiving with autonomy, mothers who leave also present a noteworthy challenge to the individualism often associated with modern male subjectivity. Given the significant increase in recent years of mothers leaving in Anglo-American countries (Greif, 1997; Jackson, 1994; ABS, 1999[b]),³ this might very well be a quiet revolution in process.

¹Current figures in Australia show that almost one in two marriages now end in divorce. (ABS: 2000) However, consistent with the gendered division of labour inside the home, figures show that 88 per cent of lone-parent families are headed by women. (McDonald, 1995: 22). It transpires that single mothers share the care of their children with the father in only 3 per cent of cases. (ABS, 1999[a]) Moreover, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, “One-parent families are projected to increase from about 742,000 in 1996 to about 1.1 million in 2021, comprising 16 percent of all families” (ABS, 2001). In an interesting reverse of the aforementioned trends, however, single father families

are projected to increase more rapidly than single mother families (ABS, 1999[b]).

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³In a recent article on “noncustodial mothers” in the United States, Geoffrey Greif suggests that their number is now “close to three million.” He writes further that “we see no sign that this trend will reverse itself” (Greif, 1997: 46). Based on figures from the early nineties, Rosie Jackson also suggests that 15 per cent of mothers in Britain, about 150,000 women, are living away from their children (Jackson, 1994: 17). All data rely primarily on statistics pertaining to lone fathers. However, due to the trend of rapid repartnering amongst single fathers, figures were adjusted upwards. Australian Bureau of Statistics data support these findings indicating that the absolute number of lone fathers increased by 58 percent in the period 1989 to 1998 (ABS, 1999[b]).

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