

How to mend a BROKEN DREAM

Not all of life's stories end with a happy ever after. But it's what we do after the crushing loss or disappointment that really matters. GH asked five writers to share the lessons they wrought from learning how to dream again...

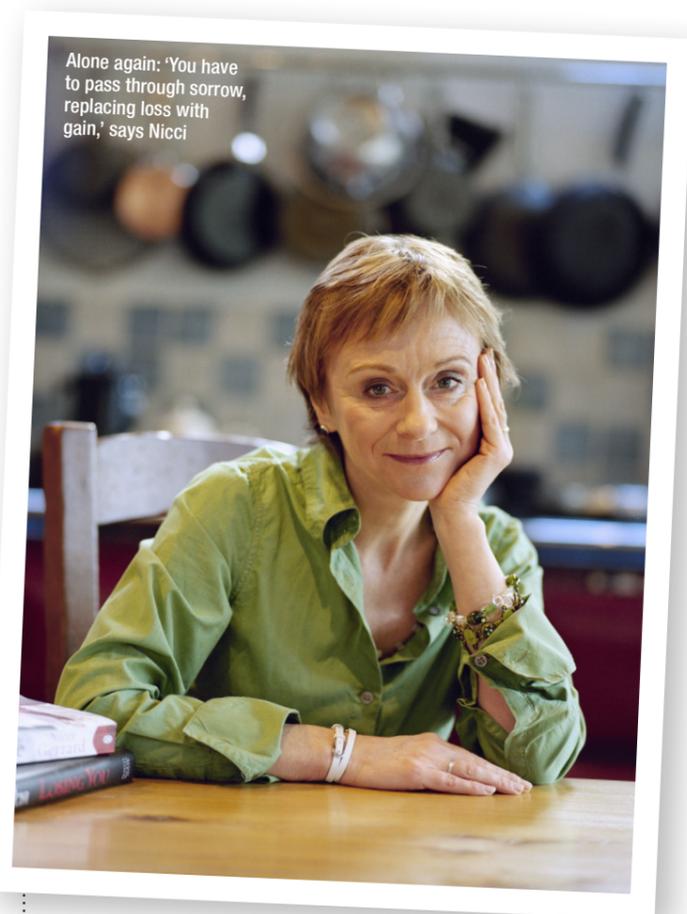
On finding fullness in an empty nest

By **Nicci Gerrard**, novelist

A few years ago, I found myself quite undone by an unaccountable sadness. Driving, I would have to pull over because I was sobbing so hard I could barely see. I felt I was drowning in myself. Once, on a run, I had to stop in a field to fold myself into a tight ball, arms around my knees, face pressed into the blades of grass, rocking slightly while I waited for the feeling – what was this ghastly feeling I was hiding from? – to abate. At night I would wake with a hammering heart, mouth dry with dread. I hurt.

I knew the cause of my grief, of course. It was the exodus. One by one, my children were leaving. In the space of six years, all four of them had gone. The house, once so full, so messy, so noisy, now stood empty and quiet; hangers rattled in the wardrobes. I'd come home to find that windows that used to be lit up were dark. But I couldn't understand why the grief was so intense, so acutely physical. Children should leave home. And I remained very close to all four of them. I held them in my heart and felt proud of the adults they'd become. My partner, Sean, and I had made many plans for this new phase – we'd met when I had two tiny children from my first marriage, and this was the first time that it was just us.

What was happening to me? I have always worked, but for more than two rich and brimful decades, I arranged my life around my children's. When they left, I was like scaffolding with no house behind it. I felt hollow, meaningless, bereft. I didn't know what I was for. I didn't know what I was. Their childhoods were over and that part of my life had gone, never to return. Had I done it well enough? I felt I'd swallowed my own anchor. I think many women go through this painful rite of passage, from plenitude to emptiness, purposeful to adrift. The tide comes in and then the tide goes out; you feel left on the foaming shore. It can feel like bereavement or acute homesickness for the past. I have learnt that much sorrow passes, an ill wind blowing itself



Alone again: 'You have to pass through sorrow, replacing loss with gain,' says Nicci

out, and you have to be patient and endure. But waiting isn't enough; you have to pass through sorrow step by step, replacing loss with gain, having adventures, behaving the way you want to be, and gradually your heart, and dreams, will follow. Sean and I went on walking holidays. We discovered new sides to each other. I spent time with friends. I trained to be a humanist celebrant. I wrote my new novel, *The Twilight Hour*, and holding the book in my hands reminded me that life is a journey – it doesn't stop when children go, though it can feel that way for a while. You travel on. So now when we all meet, sit round a table raising a glass, my heart fills with gladness. What were they about, I wonder, those sad years? It was about time passing; it was about love.



Back to basics: 'We are here to be sandpapered down until what's left is who we truly are,' says Arianna

Finding gratitude and grace after tragic loss

By **Arianna Huffington**, founder of The Huffington Post and author of *Thrive*

It's important to remind ourselves not only about all the blessings in our lives, but also to feel gratitude for all that hasn't happened – for all those close shaves with disaster of some kind or another, all the bad things that almost hit us, but didn't. The distance between them happening and not happening is grace.

But of course, there are the disasters that did happen, that leave us broken and in pain. For me, losing my first baby was such a moment. I was 36 and ecstatic at the prospect of becoming a mother. But night after night, I had restless dreams. Night after night, I could see that the baby – a boy – was growing within me, but his eyes would not open. Days became weeks, and weeks turned into months. Early one morning, barely awake myself, I asked out loud, 'Why

won't they open?' I knew then what was only later confirmed by the doctors. The baby's eyes were not meant to open; he died before he was born.

Women know that we do not carry our unborn babies only in our wombs. We carry them in our dreams, and in our souls, and in our every cell. Miscarriage brings up so many unspoken fears: will I ever be able to carry a baby to term? Will I ever be able to become a mother? Everything felt broken inside. As I lay awake during the many sleepless nights that followed, I began to sift through the shards and splinters, hoping to find reasons for my baby's stillbirth. Staggering through a minefield of hard questions and partial answers, I began to make my way toward healing.

Dreams of my baby gradually faded, but for a time it seemed as if the grief itself would never lift. My mother had once given me a quotation from the

Ancient Greek playwrite Aeschylus that spoke directly to these hours: 'And even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, and in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God.' At some point, I accepted the pain falling drop by drop, and prayed for the wisdom to come.

I had known pain before. Relationships had broken, illnesses had come, and death had taken people I loved. But I had never known a pain like this. What I learnt through it is that we are not on this earth to accumulate victories, or trophies, or experiences, or even to avoid failures, but to be whittled and sandpapered down until what's left is who we truly are. This is the only way we can find purpose in pain and loss, the only way to begin to mend a broken dream, and the only way to keep returning to gratitude and grace.

When a door closes, a window opens

By **Malorie Blackman**, the Children's Laureate

From the time I was a child of seven or eight, I knew what I wanted to be when I grew up – an English teacher. A love of reading, of stories, of books left me in no doubt that teaching was not just an appropriate career path, but my only career path. It was as right, as inevitable, as day following night. I was a teenager who read Shakespeare plays for fun. I devoured contemporary novels, classics, myths and legends, science fiction – anything and everything that challenged and entertained me, and allowed me to see through the eyes of others.

Having passed my 11 Plus, I attended a grammar school. I obtained 9 O levels, and at the age of 17 I was on track to pass my three A levels, including my favourite subject,

English. But then I had my careers interview – and my long-held plans skidded to an abrupt halt. My careers teacher wrote all the university entrance references, so discussing future study plans with her was mandatory. After being told of my lifetime ambition to become an English teacher, my careers teacher told me in no uncertain terms that, 'Black people don't become teachers. Why don't you be a secretary instead?' She refused to give me a good reference for university, and just like that, the future that I thought I held so firmly in my hands trickled through my fingers like water, leaving me empty-handed and heartbroken. That was the end of that – or so I thought.

For more than one reason, I ended up in computing – as a glorified filing clerk to begin with, then a junior programmer, systems programmer, project manager, and finally a database manager. I made regular trips abroad, I had my company car, private health insurance, money in the bank... and I was utterly miserable, to the point that it was affecting my health, both mentally and physically. Where was the creative, fulfilling career I'd promised myself? From age eight I loved to write stories and poems for my own amusement, but it was only in my mid-20s that it occurred to me that maybe, just maybe, I could become a published writer.

So after eight or nine books and 82 rejection letters, a publisher finally said yes to one of my stories. Over two decades later, I may not be an English teacher, but I'm the author of 60 books, and I try to enthuse all the children and teens I meet to become readers themselves. I couldn't ask for more than that. *Love Hurts*, an anthology for young adults of love found and love lost, will hopefully highlight some of the life lessons that I, and the other authors in the book, have learnt along the way.

Why didn't I give up when I was getting all those rejection letters? Because my careers teacher taught me something very valuable. She taught me that if I want something, I should work hard for it, and I shouldn't let anyone stand in my way. She taught me that broken hearts have the capacity to heal and become more resilient as a result. She taught me never to give up. And for that, I thank her. She may have closed the door on my ambitions, but a window opened in its stead. A window which changed my life for the better in ways I could never have imagined.

'Broken hearts have the capacity to heal'

Career crisis: 'Just like that, the future I thought I held so firmly trickled through my fingers,' says Malorie



Home truths: 'A home is defined by the way it feels to live there, not the way it looks,' says Kate

Learning that perfection doesn't bring happiness

By **Kate Glanville**, novelist

We stumbled across the old cottage by chance. We were driving past when we spotted the For Sale sign outside, and stopped the car to have a look. In the foothills of the Brecon Beacons, surrounded by rolling hills and sparkling little streams, it had four and a half acres of land. Best of all, there was a huge kitchen, flooded with light from windows blessed with dramatic views of an Iron Age fort. It was the kitchen that won me over, really. I could picture myself there so clearly, cooking and reading peacefully, in our dream rural retreat.

Finding a run-down house in the country and doing it up ourselves had been a fantasy for my husband, Nick,* and I. We'd buy magazines and pour over the photos of houses. After years of living in grim rented flats, the idea of creating a rural idyll grew

ever more alluring. This one would need a lot of work, but Nick was confident he could do the repairs, and we planned to live in a caravan in the garden until it was ready.

But the problems started before we'd even moved in. The roof of the caravan blew off and its floor collapsed, meaning we would have to live in the house while doing it up. When we took up the carpets, we found layers of plastic carrier bags, and whenever it rained, water would come up through the mud floor. There was no central heating, no hot water, and when we lit the wood-burning stove, it set the chimney on fire. Three months after our move, Winter blew in, and it was the coldest in years. We found ourselves wearing two bobble hats each and sleeping in our day clothes because it was too cold to get undressed.

Nick worked incredibly hard on the house, putting in extremely long hours with a builder. I worked full-time on my business as a potter, making and selling more pots than ever to fund the work. The house became our monster. It needed constant feeding with money, hard work and attention, and we haemorrhaged savings and anxiety.

But we soldiered on, and four years later, it was done. I loved it, and Nick was so proud when professional photographers came round to shoot our house for the same glamorous interior magazines we had read together. But after pouring all our energy into our home, we had neglected our

marriage. As our house was becoming more perfect, our relationship was cracking up. We'd been drifting further apart, becoming two completely different people.

After spending 16 years and £110,000 on the house, our marriage finally collapsed, and Nick moved out. It was the idea of wallpapering over the cracks of damaged relationships that gave me the idea for my novel, *A Perfect Home*, about a woman whose husband is obsessed with home improvements, to the extent that she believes he loves the house more than he loves her.

My ex and I became fixated on a pile of stone and slate, and we lost sight of the fact that it's the people in it who matter. It now looks as if the house will have to be sold, and that the children and I will need to find somewhere else to make our home. I must admit, 1980s new builds look a lot more attractive now than they ever have before! But I am hopeful for the future, because I have learnt a very important lesson from my broken dream. I now know that just because a house looks beautiful, it doesn't mean it is happy inside, as a home is defined by the way it feels to live there, not the way it looks when you walk through the door. I have great faith that although our new place will not be as beautiful, I can make it a relaxed, warm space for us to live, full of cheer and love. Wherever my children and I end up, I know we'll be aiming for happy, not perfect.

Turning an ending into a new beginning

By **Jennifer Nadel**, novelist

The Summer I met D, I'd just finished my A levels. I was visiting an island off the coast of Maine, where my mother had spent her childhood. The air was sweet with the scent of pine trees, and I spent my days playing tennis and swimming off the dock with a group of friendly teens. Enter D.

He had thick, wavy hair tied into a ponytail, drove a green 1950s convertible MG (his mother's) and was the best tennis player I'd ever seen. He took me island hopping on his father's motorboat. I was smitten.

I was shy and gawky. D was a couple of years older than me and totally confident. As he showed me all the island's secret haunts and beaches, we talked and laughed and fell in love. On our last evening together, we hiked up his favourite mountain in the moonlight. At the top there was a perfectly still, clear lake. He dived in and I followed. The water was mountain cold but the air was still warm from the day's sun, and when we kissed, it felt as if time had stopped. I realised there was nothing I wanted more than to be with this man.

When I got back to England, D rang every day. We talked about our future, the home we'd build on the island, the children we'd have. We decided to spend our gap year travelling together, and I took three jobs to pay for the trip. But when I met D in India the following February, I barely recognised him. He'd cut his hair short and wore a striped button-down shirt. The love I'd spent so long dreaming about simply wasn't there. It couldn't survive outside the island where it was born. I realise now I'd spent so much time thinking and dreaming about him, that no one could have lived up to the fantasy I'd created. I didn't want to accept it had just evaporated, so precious weeks drifted by before I

plucked up the courage to leave and trek through the Himalayas alone. I berated myself every step of the way for not being able to make it work.

Over the years that followed I thought of D, but our paths never crossed. I heard he'd married and lived in a tax haven somewhere hot. I married as well, had two sons, divorced, and eventually married again. I took my sons and new husband to visit my mother's childhood home, and pretty soon the boys were off swimming and playing tennis just as I had been that Summer on the same island. My second son fell head-over-heels for a blonde girl who played tennis like a demon, and had a

smile that made us all melt. One day, I spotted her with her father in an old-fashioned, green convertible. I recognised him instantly. It was D.

When we spoke, I found myself shy and awkward, much as I had been when we'd first met all those years ago. To me, he still looked exactly the same, despite the passage of time - nearly three decades. I could see in the adult D both the person I'd fallen in love with and also the person I'd left, and I understood how first love had blinded me to the bits I hadn't liked, because I had so badly wanted it to work.

I was in shock that our children had somehow found each other. D's

daughter was very like him, I realised. Carefree, good-looking, smart, fun. I hoped passionately that their relationship would work, that they would provide the happy ending to our story. Sadly, distance and youth got in their way, but what sprang from the ashes was a real friendship between our two families. Now we time our island visits so we can have an annual reunion, and the passion we felt all those years ago has transmuted into something tender, kind and long-lasting, and those powerful, crazy feelings of first love inspired my first novel, *Pretty Thing*. I'm now a firm believer that if dreams don't turn out as you want them to, they still often turn out for the best. □

Passage of time: 'No one could have lived up to the fantasy,' says Jennifer



'Now we time our visits so we can have a reunion'

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