College empties the nest
and single dad is lonely

BILL KLINE

Seventeen. Alone. Afraid. It was 1973, and I cried as my parents drove away after dropping me off at college for my freshman year.

Today, I expect to cry again as I drive away from the same college, Penn State, after helping my son move into his dormitory room for his freshman year. Thirty-four years later, again I am afraid of what lies ahead. I am not afraid for my son, whose life has paralleled mine in that he loves sports, likes to write and did just fine in high school. He will survive today, and I am certain he will survive Penn State, as I did. Selfishly, I am now afraid for myself.

This year and every year, millions of children leave home for college, marriage, military or just to get an apartment. It is their choice to go and they intrepidly move forward, taking what is often the big step in establishing their own lives. But, at the same time, they often create a childless home for their parents.

Parents recognize this is a necessary step for their children. And recent research shows that many times, a newly empty nest is a positive experience for parents, too — particularly ones with a strong relationship as a couple.

But other times, an empty nest triggers in parents a sense of loss and anguish. For single parents, this sorrow can be overwhelming, particularly for a parent, such as I, who is the primary caregiver for the child. And that is what scares me.

When a parent whose entire identity is dependent on his or her parental role and connection to a child, the parent's identity is challenged, says Avidan Milevsky, a developmental psychologist at Kutztown University.

"It could very well be a difficult transition for a single parent," he says about an empty nest.

There are 10 million households with children under 18 in America that are run by single parents. Many have only one child, creating a very strong parent-child bond. For years, the dynamic in such households was a two-person team of "you and me."

But when the child leaves, for the parent the household instantly becomes just "me." If a parent cannot fill that void, it could have long-term negative effects, Milevsky says.

He suggests the single parent take on new hobbies or revive relationships that may have fallen behind while raising the child. Look up an old friend or reconnect with a sibling, Milevsky says, to fill the emptiness. "The most long-lasting relationship that we have is with our siblings, sometimes 70 or 80 years," he says.

Sounds like a plan for us single parents — but it won't make it any easier today when I jump on Interstate 80 and drive home from State College. You might say I have some work to do. You see, I also want to hang onto the memories. So please indulge my attempt at catharsis — a letter to my son — as we begin new chapters in our lives.

"Dear Kevin:

"I will always remember our nightly dinners in the family room and rousting you from sleep every morning at 6:30 for school. How every time it snowed you would shovel our driveway and front steps by the time I returned from work. And how I would tell you stories of my college mischief and high-jinks and how that would make you laugh.

"I will always remember, when you were younger, playing football with you and taking you to movies. And how, when I would rake the autumn leaves in a big pile on an old sheet, you would jump into the pile and I would slide you and the leaves to the curb. And how that would make you laugh and laugh.

"I will always remember, when you were even younger, how you were a happy baby, always smiling. How I would sing you to sleep. How I would read books to you, especially "The Me Book," when I would tickle your tummy as I read the final passage in the book. And how that would make you laugh and laugh and laugh.

"And I will always remember, when you were a toddler, how you would jump from the stairs and I would catch you — a complete leap of faith on your part.

"Today, you are making another leap of faith, to college, as your first step toward independence. And I will no longer be able to catch you — physically.

"But I will always be there to catch you emotionally, spiritually and financially.

"Love, Dad."

(You see, the nest may now be empty, but parenting goes on and life goes on. And perhaps after a healthy cry — that will make me smile.)

Bill Kline of Stroudsburg is The Morning Call's sports editor.