

Middle Passages

By Liza Carens Salerno



ur only child is away this week. It's a first for us, 11 busy years after we triumphantly carried our daughter home from the adoption agency. Sure, there was one weekend away to celebrate our tenth anniversary, filled with wine, romantic dinners, and worried phone calls home. And there have been sleepovers—next door, two doors down, across town. But this time, she is really away, 40 miles or so, for five days, with her sixth-grade classmates on an educational retreat.

It snuck up on me, this trip. When our niece returned from her retreat two years ago, our own girl's turn seemed a safe eon ahead of us. Even last year, as we sold wrapping paper and specialty meats to raise funds for the trip, it still felt forever ahead, in a fog-shrouded future. But the future emerged from my cloud of denial last Monday. I lugged my daughter's bulging bag onto a school bus, hugging and kissing her as discreetly as possible. "Bye, Mum. Oh, and by the way, no phone calls allowed."

As parents of an only child, contradictory emotions engulf us each time our child reaches a milestone—we are proud, but it's wrenching to see her grow up. Waiting to put her on the bus, I spoke with "experienced" parents, seeing off second and third children. But with no siblings trailing after her, each of our daughter's firsts is also a poignant last. For us, there will be no second time—only this strange first empty nest, where the house stays neat and I have to remember how to cook just for two. We've made the best of her absence, I must say, eating meals that she would fuss about and turning on the TV without a thought to incomplete homework or age-appropriateness. Still, I found myself sneaking into our daughter's bedroom last night to give her teddy bear a reassuring squeeze.

For the past 11 years, every conscious thought has centered on our daughter's health, safety, and happi-




ness. It took so many months of effort and unwavering hope to bring our daughter home that my husband and I are grateful every day that she's a part of our lives. But, when she first came home, she fit into our lives so effortlessly that it's hard for me to realize it won't always be this way. This school trip has been a reminder of life before we became parents, and I'm stunned to realize that we're already halfway through the journey.

Years ago, I met up with a friend for lunch. She had also recently adopted a newborn, but, with a three-month head start

on her, I naively considered myself experienced. I assured her that things would get easier: My daughter had just learned to hold her bottle, a remarkable accomplishment that allowed me valuable moments to clean up or pop in a load of laundry. Even as I was comforting my frazzled friend, I had the disconcerting realization that every stage, including the demanding first months, seems like it will last forever. Then, one day, you turn around and notice that "forever" has ended. My unsettling feelings were compounded by the knowledge that this was my only child.

Just as childless people can't quite conceptualize parenting until they have children of their own, those of us in the midst of raising families rarely have time to appreciate how quickly the years fly by. This week, I think I grasped an inkling of that concept. Too soon, my job will be to help my daughter develop into a teenager, and then an adult.

So when I pick my daughter up from the bus this afternoon, I'm going to hold her gaze a little longer, listen to her a little more carefully, and relax a little about the crumpled socks under the bed and the wet towels on the floor. And most of all, I will treasure the memory of this week as a reminder to embrace what is left of my parenting journey. 

LIZA CARENS SALERNO is the manager of recruitment for a national retailer. She lives with her husband and daughter in Massachusetts.

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