

ON MOTHERHOOD

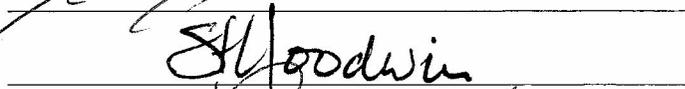
by

Maria A. Gupta
A Thesis
Submitted to the
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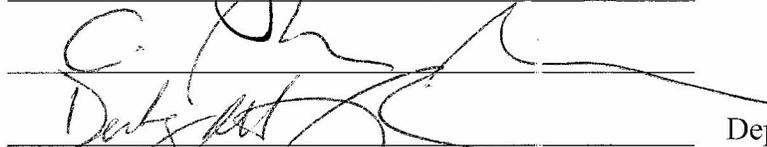
Committee:



Director



Department Chairperson



Dean, College of Humanities
and Social Sciences



Dean, College of Humanities
and Social Sciences

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Fairfax, VA

On Motherhood

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

By

Maria A. Gupta
Bachelor of Science
George Mason University, 1987
Bachelor of Science
American University, 1984

Director: Kyoko Mori, Professor
Department of English

Spring Semester 2014
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my children Rani, Leela, and Anil.

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I would like to thank my family for providing me with the content for this thesis. I am grateful to my MFA classmates and professors for their suggestions and support, especially my thesis director, Kyoko Mori, whose high standards and gentle guidance have helped me grow tremendously as a writer. I am grateful to Sally Evans from University Dissertation and Thesis Services for her patience and guidance in formatting my thesis.

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ABSTRACT

ON MOTHERHOOD

Maria A. Gupta, MFA

George Mason University, 2014

Thesis Director: Professor Kyoko Mori

This thesis is a collection of linked essays about motherhood – looking back, and letting go. The essays address the author's roles as mother, homemaker, wife, daughter, and nurse in taking care of others, and her attempt to put the pieces together into a coherent, meaningful life. She searches to find her own center - through the lens of faith, family (both the one she came from, and the one she made), and writing - in a life dedicated to caring for others. Some names and identifying characteristics have been changed to protect privacy.

PIETA

I walked into the solemn, dark, but familiar church and took my place in the middle of a pew near the back. Waves of mourners quietly filed into pews, eventually filling the church beyond the 1,100 person capacity for the funeral Mass. Luke, who at fifteen, had succumbed to bone cancer after a courageous two year battle, was the youngest of Dan and Trish's three boys.

I met the family about fifteen years ago in the Catholic elementary school our kids attended adjacent to the church. My son, the youngest of my three children (now 22, 20, and 17), was in Luke's older brother's grade. I nodded at the familiar faces of parents and kids I had seen the previous night at the wake. Everyone looked sad and pensive. An unfamiliar group of high school girls sat in front of me. Friends of Luke's oldest brother, I imagined.

The girls reminded me of the funeral Mass I attended three years earlier for my daughter's close friend who died from a brain aneurysm his senior year of high school. So many young people were at his funeral also. Young people shouldn't have to attend the funerals of their peers. The night before Michael passed away, I was at the hospital with my daughter. She'd wanted to see him one last time so my husband and I drove her and another friend of Michael's to the hospital. I hugged and held Michael's distraught mother. I felt helpless. I watched her as she lovingly stroked her swollen, comatose son

who had been over to my house so many times before. I could appreciate her love, but how could I know her unbearable pain when my own daughter stood next to me, tears streaming down her face, in good health.

I later wrote a poem about Michael's mother's sorrow and called it Pieta. I associated Michael's mother's sorrow with the image of Mary holding Jesus, her dead son, in Michaelangelo's Pieta. I've never seen the real marble statue in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, but I came across it in an art history class many years ago and its beauty and sorrow have stayed with me ever since.

In the Pieta, Mary holds a limp, lifeless Jesus on her lap. But she is not really holding him. He just rests there. She doesn't have the strength even though she appears sturdy. Pain and suffering have given way to sorrow and resignation. Her face reveals utter despair. Mary's sorrow resembles Michael's mother's sorrow and Luke's mother, Trish's, sorrow.

As the organist played the entrance hymn "Be Not Afraid", in which Jesus tells us he goes before us always, follow him and he will give you rest, tears flowed and my stomach knotted when I briefly glimpsed a haggard, hollow Trish and her family following Luke's coffin up the center aisle towards the altar above which hung a large wooden cross with a crucified Jesus.

At the wake the evening before, I had waited in a long line wondering what I would say, what I could possibly say to her when I reached her. What would I say to Luke's dad and two older brothers?

I read the inscription on the cards of multiple floral arrangements outside the chapel. I looked at the picture display of Luke and his family on a table: photos of joy, togetherness, promise, and health - how it used to be. How it still was for me and the other mourners. In one picture, the young, healthy, shy, red-headed Irish boy I remember, with the round face and wire-rimmed glasses, looked back at me. My eyes flooded with tears.

Stored memories returned of endless childhoods spent at school plays, parish picnics, team parties, Christmas mass, Kindergarten graduation, and eighth-grade graduation. I remembered standing next to Trish at the gym one day waiting for her husband Dan to arrive after she hurt her knee in a group exercise class. That afternoon, I picked up a birthday cake for one of the boys who was having a birthday party.

I recalled one night at their house, sipping white wine and eating hors d'oeuvres in the family room, while our energetic, noisy boys raced up and down the stairs and in and out of the backyard. Dan instructed his dog to open the door; proudly watching the dog stand on his hind legs and use his snout and paw to open the door to the back yard. We were all amazed. Everyone laughed when I said they didn't have to get up early in the morning to let the dog out. Back then we were the same: two stay-at-home moms raising children in the suburbs, making memories, and looking forward to bright futures for our children. We never thought about the possibility of our children dying. What parent of a

healthy child does? Children are not meant to die. They are supposed to outlive their parents.

Inching slowly through the winding line of mourners at the wake, I realized our lives were no longer parallel. My three children were alive and healthy. They had a future. Luke didn't. Everyone looked sad and teary-eyed. But like me, I supposed, most had not experienced the death of a child. My heart ached for the family's loss. But deep down I felt lucky and relieved my children had been spared such an untimely death. I don't share Trish's tragedy as a mother who has lost a child, and I hope I never will. I can only contemplate her pain and sorrow through the Pieta.

Death is unnatural no matter how old you are. But it seems more natural and acceptable in the elderly who've had a lifetime of moments and memories. The premature death of a child (or parent of a young child) is wrong, an unimaginable cruelty. While in the queue to the chapel where Dan, Trish, Jack, and Mick awaited the file of mourners, I stepped out and signed the guest book.

I don't know if Mary knew early on about her son's fate on the cross. She certainly knew he was the Son of God. But her special place as the mother of the Son of God did not exempt her from suffering. Mary's faith was about obedience to God's will. Still, it must have been difficult for her to know that Jesus was her son and yet *he* wasn't really hers to keep. He belonged more to God and humanity than to her. Hopefully, her faith gave her the strength to endure such a great sacrifice. I don't know if my faith would

sustain me if one of my children died. Still, I asked God, as I had for Michael's mother, to comfort and give strength to Trish and her family.

In the Pieta, I see a fully and solely human mother overcome by sorrow and despair. The profound sadness and grief captured in her image is gut-wrenchingly relatable. Jesus was thirty-three when he died. Luke was just fifteen. Neither was old. One was too young. Yet there is still sadness when an elderly parent or grandparent passes away. But somehow it seems more tolerable. I wish children never died. I believe in God, but I don't understand him.

I recall being at home when my son first told me Luke had cancer. After elementary school, the boys scattered to different high schools, but they stayed connected via social media. My son learned of Luke's diagnosis by text from a grade school classmate close to Luke's family. From that day on, I prayed daily, and with a certain desperation, that he would be cured and restored to complete health. The faith community rallied offering prayers, rosary, and special intentions. Luke had Ewing's sarcoma, Dan told my husband - a physician, when he called Dan to offer support after we learned Luke had cancer. We hadn't talked to them since the kids finished elementary school.

Ewing sarcoma is a rare, but painful cancer most commonly found in bone or soft tissue. Ewing sarcoma is more common in males and usually occurs between 10 – 20 years of age. There are cancers that affect and kill young people more than the old. Treatment includes chemotherapy and radiation. The overall survival rate is somewhere between 60 and 70%. Luke's remission was short-lived. I knew that wasn't good news. I

continued to pray on my own. But, this time, I asked God to grant Luke and his family solace and strength to cope. I cried.

Luke was dying. The flicker of hope that must have sustained them as they nursed their son through bouts of relentless pain, nausea, vomiting, sleeplessness, fear, anger, and depression was now gone forever, extinguished by the winds, the finality, of terminal illness. They were left watching and waiting for the day when their beloved son and brother would pass away. I can't imagine life without one of my children. And I can't imagine watching your child die and having to stay strong for him and your other anguished children. I wondered if knowing the end was coming, Luke and his family desired it sooner than later. It seems an awful thing to think. I felt guilty mostly because I wasn't in their position. My kids were all alive and well. But I remember being surprised many years ago when I worked as a nurse by the number of dying patients who accepted death and even welcomed it peacefully. I had adult patients tell me, on more than one occasion, they wouldn't be there the next time I came to work; they were right. It's as if they knew the end was near. They made the announcement, not in confusion, or anger, or fear, but with serenity and satisfaction. I wished Luke – though only a child – had also made his peace. And his family too.

Dressed in black suits and a black dress, Dan, Trish, Jack, and Mick stood inside the chapel doors. On the organ behind them lay empty, discarded water bottles. What a cruel ritual, I thought, to have to stand, in bereavement, for three hours greeting mourners. They must be exhausted and despondent. How odd it seemed that they should

have to stand there, with deference, for others. I wondered if this customary practice comforted them or did it feel more like an obligation. In this time of mourning, were they forced to repress their unbearable grief in order to entertain the sympathy of others?

“I’m sorry,” I said to Dan, then gave him a quick hug.

“Thanks. Thanks for coming,” he replied with a soft smile, looking directly into my eyes. He appeared composed and at ease. Trish stood next to him, stone-faced and still. My heart grew heavy when I saw her. She had carried Luke inside her for nine months, given birth to him, and nursed him. His joy was her joy; his suffering, hers. There is a special bond between a mother and child.

“I’m sorry,” I said to Trish. I saw the sadness and distance in her eyes. She didn’t say anything. She appeared to be in shock. I hugged her tightly. She was tense. I didn’t want to let go of her, as if my touch might somehow comfort her and absorb some of her sorrow. Moments later, on my way out of the chapel, I turned to check on her. Our eyes met. I blew her a kiss. She just stood there with a blank stare.

In his homily, the Irish priest spoke with enthusiasm and humor about Luke. He knew Luke and the family well. He had spent much time with them during Luke’s illness and was at Luke’s bedside at the time of his death. What a human, personable priest, I thought. The priest that had officiated at Michael’s funeral mass was dogmatic and distant. “Let us hope and pray,” he said to those gathered, “that Michael will enter the kingdom of heaven.” What a stupid, insensitive comment to make, I thought. He was making it sound like it was not going to be easy for Michael to enter heaven.

When Michael's distraught mother later asked me why he had said that, I replied, "I don't know... what does he know?"

"Won't Michael go to heaven?" she asked me.

"Of course, he will," I told her. "All children go to heaven. And they get to jump ahead in line."

I tried to sound reassuring. I don't know what heaven is or what it looks like, but I believe in the afterlife. It gives me comfort and security and grounds me in my temporary existence. I hope to be reunited with loved ones after I die. But more importantly, at this moment, Michael's mother needed hope to accompany her faith. And I wasn't about to deprive her of it.

The Irish priest addressed the young people in the audience, telling them not to be angry. To live and love as Luke had with an open heart. Then he spoke of Luke's pain and fear of death. How he fought until the end and trusted in God. What a powerful witness he was for faith. How he died a soldier for Christ. Now, this priest, too, was beginning to sound dogmatic. I'm sure that Trish, like Michael's mother, would rather have heard that her beloved son would soon be welcomed with open arms by a choir of angels into the heavenly kingdom. That's what I would want to hear and what I wanted to hear for her.

During Communion, I tried to sing one of my favorite hymns, "You Are Mine", but I couldn't. I felt drained from immense sadness and a constant stream of tears. I didn't hear the congregation singing. Around me people prayed or sniffled. Listening to Irish tenor Mark Forrest sing,

*I will come to you in the silence
I will lift you from all your fear
You will hear my voice
I claim you as my choice
Be still, and know I am near*

*I am hope for all who are hopeless
I am eyes for all who long to see
In the shadows of the night,
I will be your light
Come and rest in me*

Chorus:

*Do not be afraid, I am with you
I have called you each by name
Come and follow me
I will bring you home
I love you and you are mine*

I didn't feel the comfort I normally felt when I heard this hymn. I wondered if Trish felt the same. I prayed further, and harder, that God would give her strength and comfort. If she could not find solace in the lyrics, where would she find comfort?

From the moment of Jesus' birth, Mary knew he was the Son of God. But this knowledge didn't diminish her sorrow during his Passion or lessen her grief when he died on the cross. In Michaelangelo's *Pieta*, Mary's distant, vacuous stare is fully human, not divine. Both Jesus and Mary's divine nature did not protect them from suffering. And I suppose faith wasn't diminishing Trish and her family's sorrow either.

I wiped my tattered tissue over my cheeks. Other women did the same. The men stood there stoic and somber. My husband quickly wiped away a tear with his finger. I handed a tissue to a teenage girl in the pew in front of me who was wiping her mascara-streaked cheeks with her hands.

I spotted a Catholic high school classmate of mine, with three children of his own now, straining to hold up Luke's coffin in the recessional procession after the Mass. He was accompanying the family in their sorrow and shouldering their burden. We all were in our own way, as best we could. The sight of old friends and familiar faces comforted me. I hoped that this large gathering of the faith community consoled Trish and her family somewhat.

Dan and Jack (the oldest son) flanked a haggard Trish, holding her up by the elbows as they followed Luke's coffin down the aisle to the waiting hearse. Her downward gaze traced Luke's final journey. A tsunami of tears overcame me when I saw the despair on Trish's face.

Michael's mother was despondent after her son's death. She told me she wanted to die. I understood how she felt. I think I would feel the same way. I don't understand why children must die. In the natural course of life, children outlive their parents. Only as a forty-something adult does losing a parent seem possible, even natural. Michael's mother had dedicated her life to raising her two children, and now, Michael, her youngest and only son, was gone. The day Michael died, part of his mother died with him. Part of Trish accompanied Luke forever.

Even if Mary had known from the beginning that her son Jesus would be sacrificed for the salvation of man, she suffered deeply at his cruel death on the cross. But whether she knew or not does not matter. Mary's faith manifested itself in her obedience, submission, and devotion to God the Father. And yet faith wasn't enough to diminish her grief so beautifully captured in Michaelangelo's Pieta. Jesus' limp body rested on his mother's lap because she didn't have the energy to hold him. Part of her had died with him - their divine natures notwithstanding. Death never travels alone.

Faith is all Mary had. It is all any of us have. Contemplating the Pieta doesn't illuminate my understanding. It offers me solace in my faith. Much like the pall bearers and mourners at Luke's funeral, the Mary of the Pieta accompanies us in and empathizes with our suffering.

Watching the casket go by, I realized Luke was gone forever. All that remained were memories, the most vivid now of pain, suffering, and death. I had all my children's past, present, and future to look forward to. My family puzzle was intact. Trish and her family had to reconstruct their life from the remaining pieces. My sorrow seemed hollow, disingenuous. My empathy was not measured by any real personal loss. Everyone exited the church in silence. I didn't see Trish or her family anywhere. I wanted to hug and hold her again. Yet, I was also relieved I didn't see her. I didn't know what I would say to her beyond what I had already said at the wake. And I didn't want to see her grief any longer. It was unbearable.

For those of us gathered, the funeral was a final farewell to Luke. A sense of closure for a lost young life. Despite our immense sadness, we would resume the routine of our own lives. I wondered how Trish would get through the coming days, weeks, years... lots of tears, little laughter. She was grieving twice: for herself and for her other children. Would her faith sustain her? I didn't know. I hoped so. Michael's mother stopped going to church for a while after Michael passed away. She was too angry at God. Who can blame her? I'm sure the Blessed Mother Mary understood how she felt.

Outside the dimly lit church, streams of sunlight surrounded us. The black hearse idled. The family had disappeared. Brief chatter broke out among the mourners. In order to move on, none of us could dwell on this puzzling sorrow.

CAREER HOMEMAKER

In the mid-1980s when I was in nursing school, a female professor (they were all female instructors) told our first year class: “Nursing is a career. It’s not some temporary job women pursue before starting a family.” Her statement made me uneasy. I scanned my classmates’ faces (all women except for two men). I had chosen nursing as a profession because I liked it. My mom had been a nurse. But mostly I was attracted to nursing because it accommodated family life. I believed in education, but what I really wanted was to get married and stay home to raise kids. After that, I would only work part-time or not at all. That was my plan. Hearing this bold statement - that sounded more like a warning - from the professor, I felt vulnerable and deceptive, like a cheat about to get caught. I didn’t dare reveal my secret. I maintained a poker face and studied my classmates’ faces to see if they shared my perspective. I couldn’t gauge their opinions. The students, in their early twenties like me, and the older thirty and forty year-old ones with families, who came to nursing later in life, remained expressionless.

In my twenties, I didn’t think much about the difference between a career and a job. I studied nursing because I liked taking care of people and working with others. I would learn valuable skills, make decent money, have steady work, and exit without a fuss after starting a family. And if I missed working or needed the money, I knew I could always return to work as a nurse provided I maintained my certification.

That nursing professor actually had a family of her own and a nine to five Monday to Friday work week that did not require evening, night, weekend or holiday shifts typical for hospital-based nurses. I didn't know why she felt compelled to lecture us future nurses on nursing as a career as if there was something wrong, or disrespectful, with leaving the profession to raise a family. I thought she was hypocritical, but I said nothing.

Choosing to study nursing was natural, and practical, for me. Mom had stopped working as a nurse anesthetist in our native Spain after she had children. I knew friends in high school whose mothers had been nurses or teachers before having children. In the 1980s, as today, nursing, like elementary-school teaching, was still a traditional female occupation. I imagined many of my female nursing school classmates didn't think much about nursing as a career. They probably thought, as I did, that they could gain skills; find steady, well-paying jobs; support their families; or opt to leave and stay home and raise kids later. But my classmates and I never talked about the latter.

My husband and I began dating my freshman year in college. We were both pursuing biology degrees. After graduation, he went on to medical school and I moved on to nursing school. Thanks to transfer credits earned from my biology studies, I was able to finish my nursing course work in a short period of time. While we were both students, we couldn't afford to get married and start a family, but once I graduated and passed my nursing licensure exam, we got married. I found work and supported us financially while

my husband completed his medical training. My husband and I both wanted me to stay home once he was out of school and we had children.

For four years, I worked full time in a hospital setting in varied specialties from cardiac and orthopedic surgery, to obstetrics, and general medicine. I was in the first trimester of pregnancy with my first child when a young nurse who was not yet board certified as a registered nurse forgot to tell me her patient had chicken pox when she asked me to administer an intravenous medication. The Employee Health nurse would later tell me hospitals are the worst place to be when you're pregnant. My own obstetrician agreed, adding, "It's too late now. You can't worry about it." Except, I did worry. I quit working three weeks before my daughter was born by Caesarean section and never returned to work in a hospital again.

At first, I didn't have the time or energy to miss nursing work. I was so exhausted and busy recuperating from a C- section and taking care of a very fussy baby. I was so overwhelmed by motherhood, I often wondered if I was cut out to be a mother even though I had always wanted to be one. I had looked forward to being home full-time taking care of my daughter and playing with her, imagining sweet, happy-go-lucky days. But the reality was very different. Home life proved just as hectic as working in a hospital – a million things to do, constant interruptions, and not enough time to do them. My husband worked long hours. I had to manage cooking, cleaning, doing laundry, and grocery shopping around my daughter's schedule. I could never get to, or finish, what I started and it frustrated me.

In time, I slowly settled into motherhood and planning, organizing, and managing, birthday parties, doctors' appointments, school activities, sports, and the social lives of my three children, in addition to housework. Learning to give up control and be less task oriented was difficult. I reluctantly accepted incremental progress. I didn't miss nursing. I was happy as a stay-at-home mom. Homemaking became my full-time career.

Despite the busyness of life, I relished cuddling my children, listening to their laughter, or watching them sleep. I felt fulfilled at home with my family. I didn't regret leaving nursing or not working, even when a man who worked with my husband asked me at a work-related function, three weeks after the birth of my second child, if I worked (implying outside the home).

But in rare, still moments of my own, I thought about how isolated from the outside world my child and home-centered life had become. I thought about my days working as a nurse. I yearned for the intellectual stimulation of the work, though not the stress. But what I really missed were the adult conversations with coworkers.

I also missed reading and writing. Before having kids, I read a lot and wrote a few children's stories for a children's writing class I took by mail. I missed reading and writing, but I didn't have the time to pursue them seriously.

I raised my three kids in Vienna, Virginia – a well-to-do suburb outside Washington, D.C. Vienna - voted in the top ten most desirable small towns to live in the United States by Money magazine in 2013 – is popular for its unique shops, homespun eateries, yearly Halloween parade, and the 45 mile long W & O D bike path (built over an old railroad) that runs through town. But Vienna, with its highly-educated and

international population, is an expensive place to live. Most households have dual incomes.

I could have returned to work full-time and hired a nanny to care for my children like so many working mothers in my community did. My mother offered to babysit the kids if I returned to work. She never had that option after my brother and I were born. My traditional Spanish father expected her to stay at home full time. He was afraid people would assume he didn't make enough money to support us. My husband's sole income sufficiently provided for our family. He supported my desire to be a stay-at-home mom, though unlike my father, he would have agreed if I'd wanted to work outside the home. Instead of working for pay, I chose to volunteer at my kids' school.

Over the years, I supervised kids during recess; read in the classroom; baked cupcakes or cookies for Halloween and Christmas parties; chaperoned field trips and school dances; served as room mother; volunteered to teach Spanish twice a week for the entire school year; taught Family Life (the Catholic school equivalent of sex education) to fifth and sixth grade girls (mine included) for several years (including a stint with the boys one year – they were usually taught by a man); and regularly substituted for the school nurse.

I enjoyed practicing my nursing skills (though I wasn't as confident in my ability as I used to be after years away from working in a hospital) in the school clinic taking temperatures, monitoring blood sugars, administering prescribed medicines or OTC medicines for headaches, and listening to all manner of complaints (not all health related) from the stream of students that came into the clinic on any given day. But my duties also

included reviewing and filing the daily attendance report for each classroom - Kindergarten through 8th grade - in the entire school. I made peanut butter and jelly sandwiches from donated supplies for those kids who didn't have lunches. I looked forward to helping out in the school clinic, but not any more so than the classroom or the playground.

Outside of school, I organized snack schedules, ordered trophies, and collected money and purchased the coach(es) gift as team parent for my children's sports teams. I enjoyed being part of my children's lives. I was so busy and content, I didn't miss hospital nursing. But I did miss having my own paycheck even though I didn't need the money. Even though my husband was easy-going about money, I sometimes envied women who had their "own money" and didn't have to explain their purchases.

As the kids got older, I indulged in a photography class so I could take better photos of my family. I looked forward to getting away by myself with my 35mm Nikon camera twice a week and spending time with other adults learning about photography. I rarely indulged my desires. I didn't attend lunch time wine tastings like a well-to-do, glamorous, stay-at-home mother of three fashionably dressed young children at my gym did. I thought I deserved to treat myself once in a while, and learning something was more my style of self-indulgence. Yet, I missed most classes. Either my husband worked late or one of the kids was sick and I felt guilty leaving an ill child.

I found it difficult to pursue my interests, and felt guilty at times, for some unknown reason, for doing so. I had the discipline and the commitment; my unflinching

dedication to family life was my major constraint. No one encouraged me to continue taking classes, so I didn't do it more often.

I later studied French in adult education classes in my community. I had learned French as a child living in Montreal for four years and studied it in college as well. French classes proved more manageable than photography classes. I didn't miss any sessions, and I was able to complete the homework at home while the kids were in school. But in 2005, when I took a writing class at The Writer's Center in Bethesda, Maryland - a good forty minute drive in heavy traffic from my home in Northern Virginia, something in me changed.

The ambivalent feelings I had felt when I took the photography and French classes disappeared. I didn't care for the long drive in rush-hour traffic, but I couldn't wait to get there. That long, simmering interest I had harbored for creative writing suddenly awakened in me. I made sure either my husband or my mother could babysit so I didn't miss class. By then, my oldest daughter was in high school and able to help out as well.

I couldn't wait to read my fellow students' stories and to write my own. The stories were interesting, and the writing was good, considering most students were lawyers, government employees, or technical writers who wrote for fun. I took one class after another, discovering a passion for writing along the way. But I wasn't satisfied. I was getting plenty of writing practice, but I didn't feel my writing was improving, no matter how many workshops I took. I didn't know the first thing about scenes, dialogue, characters, pace, or plot. The workshops were good, but they were informal – not in an

academic setting, so it was not possible for me to have a formal plan of study. If I was going to be a writer, I wanted to be a trained writer, like I had been as a nurse. I decided to take classes at the community college, entertaining the idea of maybe even going to graduate school one day. My only limitation would be my family. They had always been, and continued to be, my main priority. Only now, I was really driven to write and needed to find a balance between my desire to write and my family. For many years, I attended school part-time working my way through various creative writing and literature classes. I am now in my last year of grad school full-time pursuing an MFA in Creative Nonfiction. I have struggled in these three years of grad school to balance family life (which now includes caring for elderly parents) with my academic work load. But I don't want to slow down or give up like I did in the past. At 51, I'm afraid I won't return.

I imagine many of my nursing school classmates continued on to have long careers in nursing. Others, like myself, left nursing to stay home with children. Perhaps they returned to work as nurses later in life. I don't regret having chosen homemaking as a full-time career. Spending so much time with my children has brought me real joy and a sense of fulfillment. If I had it to do all over once more, I would study nursing again and stop working after having children.

But now that my children are grown and I feel comfortable, and free, to pursue my own interests, I don't want to go back to nursing. I know a few stay-at-home moms who have returned to school, or work, or embarked on new careers once their children have grown up. My friend, Julie, who studied finance in college, then stayed home full

time and raised six children, took up yoga and is now a certified yoga instructor. It's not that I don't like nursing. I just never had a passion for it like my nursing school classmate, Veronica, who had two daughters in middle school when she attended nursing school. When the last of my children leaves for college and I'm ready to leave my home-making career behind, I want to dedicate my time to writing.

THIRTEEN MOVES

Thirteen. That's the number of times my husband and I have moved Rani, the oldest of our three children, in and out of housing during her four years at a university in Boston. We have dragged, lifted, and carried her belongings up and down stairs, elevators, and city sidewalks in scorching summer sun and humidity, and in pouring rain. What loving parent wouldn't?

It's a small sacrifice to endure considering the promise a college education holds for her future. We ought to know. My husband spent over ten years in higher education. I spent close to seven. We met as undergrads studying biology at American University in Washington, D.C. (where he had transferred after spending three years studying finance at the College of William and Mary) during my freshman year. Two years later, he moved on to medical school for four years, followed by three years of residency, and a fourth year fellowship. After earning my bachelor's degree, I continued on to nursing school where I spent an additional five semesters to earn another Bachelor of Science degree. Rani was born during my husband's residency.

Time passes quickly. It's hard to believe our daughter is now in college. The excitement, anticipation, and silent fear (hers and ours) of that first move into her thirteenth floor campus dorm room freshman year seems, now, solely sentimental: the ten hour drive in the loaded SUV from our home in Northern Virginia - outside Washington,

D.C. - to Boston; the futile attempt to rearrange bed, desk, and dresser – college dorm room staples – into a cozy, feng shui layout in a cinder-block lined rectangle; the art of college bed making (mattress cover over blue, plastic, university-issued mattress; mattress pad; egg-crate mattress; fitted sheet); and the decorating that makes every August such a profitable month for Target and Bed, Bath, and Beyond.

I never thought Rani would go away to college. My tall thin girl with the black-rimmed eyeglasses that matched her short black hair spent so much time at home during high school reading, playing her guitar, or watching SpongeBob with her thirteen year-old brother and giggling at every silly line. She is not athletic and never attended any high school sporting events. She had few friends in high school and was content with that. “Rani was born mature,” her younger sister said often. “She’s a little adult.” But Rani fell in love with the city of Boston when we visited for college tours. She loved the youthful energy, diversity, sense of community, and intellectual life there. Rani had done well in high school. She was disciplined and responsible. My husband and I agreed (and could afford) to let her study in Boston. She deserved the opportunity. The quiet drive back home in the empty SUV felt laden with sadness and longing. But knowing she would return home for the summer gave me renewed comfort and joy.

The next year, the move into another similar dorm room on the eleventh floor of an adjacent residence hall for her sophomore year went smoothly. Rani, her dad, and I knew what to expect now. She had adapted well to college life and we were happy. Once again, I made her bed. But this time around she declined, resisted, really, any further assistance from me: no reshuffling of furniture, no decorating, no unpacking. She would

do it herself later. She handed me some throw pillow and other items she deemed frivolous, like her parents. Rani has always been practical and unsentimental. She kept the necessary clothes - mostly black, her guitar, and a framed photo of Toby, our Golden Retriever, and another with her sister and brother on a summer vacation on her dresser. Two or three posters of her favorite indie rock bands would line a similar space on the wall next to her bed as they had the year before. This was not our home. Her actions made clear this space was hers alone. And she was setting boundaries.

Rani moved into a first floor room of a four-level coed brownstone on this city campus in the fall of junior year. She had gotten along with her first two roommates and Gaby was no exception. At the end of the semester, Rani decided to move out of that brownstone. Gaby was going to Australia to study abroad for the spring semester and Rani didn't want a new, unknown roommate. Besides, her fellow housemates were inconsiderate, congregating in the hall outside her room late at night laughing and talking loudly. Rani couldn't sleep or study.

Rani showed no interest in studying abroad, though her dad and I encouraged it. She didn't see the point of taking courses that were available at her current school in a foreign university. The opportunity to see and meet new people and places did not interest her. Rani chose to move into an old, two bedroom, university-owned apartment with a friend of a friend who would be studying abroad during the spring semester. She told us she didn't need our help moving. No need to fly up. She would use a blue university cart to roll her belongings to the new apartment six blocks away in a Boston winter. Yes, we insisted. She needed help making multiple trips. What if it rained or

snowed? What if the sidewalks were icy? She said she'd manage. Her father and I didn't think she was being practical. She was naïve and inexperienced. We felt it our duty to help her, so we flew up and lent a hand anyway. Rani never acknowledged the difference our help made, but she thanked us for our help.

The summer after her junior year Rani did not return home as she had the previous two summers. She chose to stay in Boston and work for a social justice nonprofit. My little girl was no longer a little girl. She was making her own decisions without consulting her parents. I felt happy for her, proud. And yet I felt a little sad.

During her first three years of college, my currently twenty-one year old idealistic, vegetarian, non-drinking daughter whose dark hair now flowed down her back, rarely called us or returned our calls in a timely fashion. "I'm busy," she'd say each time. And she was. School work, club activities, and broadcasting a radio show. She had always been the quietest of my three kids. Still, I longed to know about her life – her thoughts, her feelings about things.

"How's it going?" I'd ask when she finally returned my call two days later.

"Good," she'd say. Just like in high school, I got one-word responses.

"How was your weekend?"

"Okay."

"What did you do?"

"Not much. I went to a show." By show she meant small music venues with local bands. Rani spent her (and our) money frugally even though we didn't encourage that – laudable and unusual for a kid from Fairfax County, Virginia, where the median

household income is one of the highest in the country. She didn't go to movies. She thought they were overpriced. She only bought second hand clothing. Designer labels were out of the question. So was anything made from leather. She disdained corporations, empathized with sweat shop workers, and railed against the lack of healthy grocery stores in poor neighborhoods. I spotted a couple of books by Barbara Ehrenreich - a familiar author whose work I admired - while helping her move. My daughter seemed to share my same worldview regarding the economically disenfranchised in our society. I guess she had heard my comments growing up regarding news stories. I was glad she had grown up to be a conscientious and empathetic adult. But she was too idealistic, too absolute in her views. This concerned me.

My husband worked hard and we live a privileged life but when I was her age, I went to a local university and lived at home. My parents took out a loan to help pay for my college education. I believe in hard work and not having things handed down. I raised my children accordingly. Growing up, they received reasonable gifts for their birthdays and Christmas despite criticism from family members who considered me to be cheap. To their credit, they rarely asked. From a young age, I discouraged capricious purchases. But Rani seemed to have taken the lesson a bit too far: in her pursuit of independence, she was rejecting her own privilege.

“Who did you go with?”

“Friends.”

“Who are they?”

“You don't know them, except for Livia.”

“Well, tell me their names. Tell me something about them. Where did you meet them?”

“They’re just friends from school.”

I stopped trying. The conversation felt forced. Her younger sister, by two years, would later tell me they were classmates and friends of friends Rani had met. She also said, “Mom, you know Rani, she doesn’t talk much.”

For the summer between her junior and senior year, Rani found a room in a detached house with grad students from a nearby university. Her friend, Livia, (the one whose apartment Rani had lived in the previous semester) took another room in the same house. Rani was asserting her independence, by choosing her room without consulting us in any way. I accepted it, not begrudgingly, but with a sense of loss. Her dad and I flew up to Boston that spring and helped her move out of her university-owned apartment and into this house. This time she didn’t tell us not to come. We would return again three months later to move her out, and into a three bedroom apartment she had settled on for her senior year.

In looking for housing, Rani, who rebuffed any advice from her father, demonstrated a level of leadership and motivation I hadn’t witnessed before. She found a realtor and took into consideration cost and proximity to campus and the “T” - Boston’s public rail system. She wanted to live with her friends and didn’t want to spend a lot to do so.

My husband and I first saw the third floor apartment she settled on when we flew up in late August to help her move in. We couldn’t believe our eyes. Hanging from the

ceiling of the narrow hall leading to Rani's bedroom was a dangling light bulb connected to exposed electrical wiring. The smoke alarm in the small kitchen was not connected. The shower head was wrapped with plastic tape. A wooden bar held the small bathroom window open. The musty, hot, not air-conditioned apartment was conveniently located but in a decrepit war-era apartment building. I later learned from a middle-aged Boston resident that Allston, Rani's neighborhood, was referred to as "student slums".

"What is this, Rani?" my husband said, pointing to the light fixture. "Make a list for your landlord. This is unacceptable."

Rani just stood there quietly. My husband was right. What was Rani thinking when she agreed to rent this dump? He had let her take charge and signed the lease without seeing the apartment. Some of the apartments we passed while moving her in on that busy and sweltering weekend looked updated and fresh.

While Rani and her two roommates, Livia and Andrew, set up their rooms, I offered to organize the kitchen for them. A cleaning service had come in, but in my experience refrigerators and kitchen cabinets are not included (that's why I always come prepared with cleaning supplies). I scrubbed multiple food stains and spills from the refrigerator. In the freezer I found putrid-smelling frozen meat left behind by the previous tenants. I started my own list: baking soda.

I moved to the cabinets. In one cabinet I found a large wok along with a set of sharp, professional knives in an adjacent drawer. The previous tenants had been Chinese male international students. Wiping down the sagging shelves of the remaining cabinets I chased multiple cockroaches to their death. I added cockroach killer and shelf liner to my

list. I would later add mouse poison to my list after learning that Andrew's mother had discovered a dead mouse behind the stove. Silently, I wondered where Rani's good sense had gone.

"Didn't you see this place before renting it?" my husband asked her while wiping sweat from his forehead.

"Yes. But it didn't seem so bad then." Her voice seemed hollow. I took my husband aside and told him to back off. I understood this was not the standard of living we were accustomed to and one neither one of us wanted for our daughter, but she had decided to live here, so we had to be supportive. He said it was the last time he would agree to sign a lease without seeing the apartment first. Fair enough, I told him. I added kitchen towels and an oven mitt to my list, making a mental note to buy brightly colored ones. I also added room freshener.

My husband and I never mentioned the condition of the apartment to Rani again, though it was a frequent topic of discussion between the two of us that often initiated speculation about young adults and maturity. He repeated his promise not to sign any lease again without first seeing the property. When we did talk to her, she told us about all the walking she did to school, restaurants, book stores, frozen yogurt shops, and thrift stores in her heavily populated, youthful, energetic, economically thriving neighborhood. Despite living in a dumpy apartment, Rani was having a great senior year. She enjoyed hanging out with her friends on weekends. That made me happy.

Rani's experiences senior year only increased her affection for this city that had so appealed to her when we had first visited for a college tour in high school. That she

wanted to remain in Boston to live and work after graduation didn't come as a surprise to our family.

Rani graduated with a degree in journalism in May 2013. That trip to Boston was exciting, and a welcome relief from another move for my husband and me. Spotting Rani on stage, sporting a red cap and gown; black patent heels; and red-fuchsia lipstick with black eyeliner, accepting her degree, filled me with pride and nostalgia. Rani's year-long lease wasn't up until August, so she decided to stay in Boston for the summer looking for a job and a new place to live in the fall.

Once again, her dad and I flew back to Boston Labor Day weekend to help her move out of her apartment and into a new one further away from the center of the city. Like so many college grads today, Rani did not find a job in her field of study. She works thirty hours per week for a non-profit that serves the blind. She planned on working an evening or night shift at another job to make more money.

This time we knew what to expect. Rani did all the leg work herself over the summer working with a realtor and checking out apartments with her friend, and roommate-to-be, Michelle. She had sent us pictures of this two-level, three-bedroom, updated apartment in a brownstone before my husband agreed to sign the lease. I liked the granite countertops, cherry cabinets, and stainless steel appliances in the kitchen. I liked the earth tone, tile-lined walls with the pedestal bath tub and large cherry vanity in the upstairs bathroom. I liked the practical and clean half bath next to the kitchen. I liked the large, open living/dining area. I liked the spacious bedrooms. I wasn't so sure about

the gaudy blue and green painted bedroom walls and their original 1920's, uneven, wood floors. But I didn't have to live with them.

"This is a really nice apartment, honey," I said to Rani on the phone after seeing the pictures she had sent us via email.

"Yeah. Great job, baby," my husband chimed in from another phone.

"Thanks. It's really nice. I really like it," she said.

"Big difference from the last one," her dad said.

"Yeah, and for the same money we get a washer and drier too."

"I'm surprised it's not more expensive," I said, only to be told not to be so negative. I couldn't understand how such a nice, large apartment, albeit further from downtown, was not more expensive. Everything is expensive in Boston. D.C. is expensive also, but at least the housing isn't all old and decrepit. I like Boston, and I like its proud and tough, sports-obsessed residents. But Boston is an old city whose charm remains rooted in a bygone era marked by century-old apartment buildings and brownstones. New condos and apartments are scarce and very expensive.

I assumed that, perhaps, living further out from the city center, in Jamaica Plain, you got more for your money. Still, I had my doubts. But I kept them to myself. I didn't want to stifle the will and enthusiasm of my independent-minded daughter, who was just now transitioning to real life after graduation.

As it turned out, Michelle would not be one of Rani's roommates after all. Rani called us shortly after signing the lease to tell us Michelle dropped out of the lease. It

seems Michelle was having a crisis. She didn't know what she wanted. Rani sounded sad and dejected.

"I'm sorry, baby," I said. "I know you worked hard to find this place and you were looking forward to living with Michelle and Livia. You'll find somebody."

"I'm looking through ads now."

"What's Michelle gonna do?"

"She doesn't know yet."

"It's hard to know what you want to do at twenty-two even with a college degree," I said, for my daughter's benefit. In my mind, Rani was no different than Michelle in trying to find a foothold in life after graduation. I had met Michelle and her family at graduation. She's a nice, pretty girl with a loving and supportive family.

"Michelle should go back home until she figures out what she wants to do. The stability, safety, and comfort of home life will be good for her." I was also letting Rani know this option existed for her as well if she ever found herself feeling overwhelmed.

"I don't know what she's going to do."

Later, Rani would tell me Michelle had found a room in an apartment in their old Allston neighborhood and was working part time somewhere. I asked her if they still talked. She said she hadn't talked to her. "I hope it works out for her," I said. "She's a nice girl."

On the drive to Rani's new apartment on move-in day, we passed the Lebanese café in a gentrified area of Jamaica Plain where Rani had taken us for lunch on a previous

visit to Boston. I assumed her neighborhood would be similar. When Rani first told us this apartment was in Jamaica Plain, I recalled a college friend telling me twenty-five years ago how her newly-married sister and husband regretted buying an old house in depressed, crime-ridden Jamaica Plain. But things had changed, Rani assured me. By the looks of the neighborhood where we had lunch, I could see she was right. Parking was difficult. All the metered spaces on Center Street were occupied. The sidewalk overflowed with young people pushing strollers or walking pets in and out of cafes, coffee shops, and specialty stores. What a great neighborhood, I thought. Rani's kinda place.

We had no problem finding parking on a holiday weekend right in front of Rani's brownstone on Washington Street. Rani's two roommates, Livia and Char – a teacher at a charter school in the area – would move in later that day. For the next few hours I helped unpack the rental truck and settle her into this new apartment, I grew increasingly anxious and worried. I didn't have a good feeling about this neighborhood. Save for a Walgreen's on the corner, there were no stores on her block. The Walgreen's and a low-rise, fenced-in condo complex two blocks down contained the only patches of green grass visible in the vicinity. Rani had traded a dumpy apartment in a decent area for a lovely apartment in a sketchy one. No wonder the rent was so reasonable.

I greeted a forty-something African-American man with a Redskins cap sitting with an older gentleman on his stoop two doors down from Rani with a hearty "Go Skins! We're from D.C."

"Das muh team," he replied, baring a toothless grin.

While unpacking kitchen boxes I heard loud music. I looked out the kitchen window out back and saw people at the corner house across the alley sitting under a makeshift tent listening to Latin music blaring from an old car radio. I noticed a service truck loaded with supplies next door and the surrounding junkyard filled with rusted out bikes and tires. Suddenly, I heard a woman yelling. I rushed to look out the bay window facing the front to see an old, agitated, African-American woman pacing back and forth berating an elderly Asian woman - who was sitting alone at the edge of the bench - for taking up all the space at the bus stop directly across the street from Rani's apartment. Later, I spotted a drunk down the street and an older woman with a cane mumbling to herself while digging through the residential garbage out on the curb for pick up the following day.

"There are four young guys sitting on their stoop watching me unload the truck," my husband whispered to me on one of his trips. "I don't like it. Do you hear all the sirens constantly?"

"Rani said there's a fire station behind them."

"I don't know why she picked this neighborhood."

"I'm not happy about it either." But I did know why Rani chose this neighborhood: inexperience combined with youthful optimism and idealism. And, a fierce desire to be independent. Rani insisted on being as self-sufficient as possible, taking only the necessary financial assistance from us. She didn't want my husband to pay more for a nicer apartment. She wanted to live with her friends. On her terms. Up to this point we had respected her wishes and supported her decisions and kept our mouths

shut. But we felt, with this move, she had put her safety in jeopardy. There was no sense of community here. The folks who sat on their stoops and watched us didn't seem friendly or neighborly to each other or to us. They lived out their isolated lives, stuck in this economically depressed neighborhood.

I imagined my young, vulnerable daughter walking home alone in the dark after work, and I feared for her safety. What if she encountered a drunk, or a mentally ill person, or worse – a group of bored, unsupervised boys hanging out on the street? Rani was independent but she was still a girl who had grown up in a safe upscale suburb. She wouldn't know what to do if a real danger presented itself to her. She didn't belong here.

At the Cheesecake Factory later that night, while sitting on a bench with Rani waiting to be seated for dinner (her dad was standing in the distance), I asserted the parental authority I had shelved.

“You can't take a job working evenings or nights,” I said. “I don't want you walking in that neighborhood alone at night.”

“I know,” she said. “I was thinking about that.” To my surprise, and relief, she agreed.

“Didn't you notice the neighborhood when you looked at the apartment?” I asked softly. I treaded carefully. We were having an important discussion and Rani was listening.

“Not really.”

“There’s nothing there. Not even the T is close by. People who grow up in those kinds of neighborhoods strive to leave them. Those that don’t, can’t. You don’t belong there. You stand out too much. I know you want to be independent. I respect that. But there are no degrees of independence. You are either independent or you are not. At this young age, you can’t be. You just started out.” Rani looked at me in silence. “You’re so much further from work now and you have to constantly be aware of your surroundings. I know you don’t like talking to us every day, but you are going to have to text me every day when you get home from work or I won’t be able to sleep.”

“I will,” she said, barely audible.

I stopped there. I had said enough for now. I didn’t want to push so hard that she pulled away. We had all started out the day energetic and enthusiastic. Now, we were tired, sweaty, and uneasy.

I thought about Michelle and how she was probably living in an old apartment in Allston. I envied her. She lived in a busy area, surrounded by her peers, with easy access to the T and taxis. I wished Rani still lived there. A dumpier apartment in a vibrant neighborhood was better than a nice apartment in a sketchy one. I think Rani realized this, but I didn’t dare say it.

At the dinner table I told Rani that if she felt uncomfortable and unsafe living there at any time, to call us, whether it was a week or five months later. We would move her out. She needed to know her options. I didn’t want her to feel trapped by her choices. She continued to listen, and nodded.

Her dad agreed to continue paying the rent here and a new place if she chose to move. This was one move we would welcome. I pushed it a little and suggested she could also move back home, knowing this was an option she didn't want to consider. She looked at me sternly and didn't nod. Rani would be willing to move to a better neighborhood, but coming home was out of the question.

In 2012, 21.6 million of the nation's young adults ages 18-31 (known as the Millennial generation), unable to find work or make enough money to live on their own, lived with their parents according to a Pew Research Center analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data - the highest number in four decades. My daughter wasn't one of them. I had suggested she move home so she could live rent free and save money. She wasn't interested. For now, despite a low paying job without the possibility of upward mobility, Rani clung to her independence by living thriftily and accepting the barest of financial assistance from us. I wanted her to listen, and agree with me, that rejecting privilege and scrounging to live wasn't being independent. Living at home and saving money would help her gain real economic independence in the future. But I didn't dare tell her this or insist she move home and risk alienating her completely. For years I made decisions for her. When she went to college, I supported her decisions. Now, after college, it's hard to know when and what to say.

FIGUREHEAD

Moving out of her freshman dorm room is new for her, not for me. Leela, at 18, is my second child to go away to college. Stepping off the elevator I recall the stagnant heat, dust film, and cardboard boxes filled with her older sister's belongings which I helped pack and lug out of her dorm rooms over the years, and which I will do again in just a few weeks when her junior year ends. It's a tedious job, but one I pour myself into because I am a devoted mother. My oldest daughter is in Boston. This one is in Pittsburgh. It's spring and she's just completed her final exams.

I've just driven four hours from our home in Northern Virginia to take Leela home for the summer. I will move her into a new residence when she returns for her sophomore year at summer's end. It is late afternoon and the thick dark Pittsburgh clouds taunt me. I had discussed the plans with Leela on the phone before leaving for Pittsburgh. We would empty out her dorm room completely. Pack the SUV before the forecasted rain erupted. Go back to the hotel to shower, have dinner together and go to sleep in the hotel room I had reserved with two double beds. The following morning, right after breakfast, we would head back home. While I went over the plan, Leela had interjected "okay, okay".

Save for the occasional discarded flyers, paper clips, and candy wrappers scattered on the floor, the corridor is empty. The sound of laughter, like the cackle of

migrating Canadian geese, emanates from open doors where base-amplified pop music thumps. Doors decorated with Harry Potter themed stationary announce Laura and Jennie's room in black cursive. A white board wishes Molly a happy birthday in red marker and a heart. Clothes spill from open suitcases. Decorative pillows and framed photographs outnumber books. Festooned bulletin boards announcing a past sorority food drive, mandatory floor meeting, and chemistry tutor services line the hallway's wan cinder block walls.

I haven't been back here since moving her into the building in the fall. I hope she's packed most of her stuff like I told her. Moving days are my least favorite part of the college process.

Outside Leela's room a sober flyer listing the signs of depression with a referral number hangs on a simple wood-framed bulletin board. Depression is common among college students, so I'm glad to see the flyer, though I'm not concerned about Leela being depressed. She's an energetic chatter bug. Next to this flyer hangs another admonishing those under twenty-one against the possession and consumption of alcoholic beverages. That's the flyer more appropriate for Leela, my tall, skinny, carefree middle child full of joie de vivre. I hope she read this flyer. I knock on the door, and Leela opens.

I'm surprised and relieved to see that Leela has packed most of her belongings. She listened to me. Maybe she's even excited about coming home. After a quick hug and an acknowledgment of Leela's effort, I get right to work. I empty her snacks and the cleaning supplies I purchased at the start of the school year from the closet. I toss the unsealed bags of chips and cookies into a trash bag. I put the unused, cellophane-wrapped

Clorox wipes into a paper bag. She sandwiches folded piles of clothes covering her bed between her hands and fills the suitcases. The clothes could stock a small boutique, and she has several pairs of boots. Her introverted, practical-minded sister required only one suitcase, but the two suitcases I brought might not be enough for Leela.

I don't recognize a lot of the things I'm loading into the university- issued blue rolling cart outside her door: a string of Christmas lights; shiny red beaded necklaces, the kind you see during Mardi Gras; sorority labeled stemware, T-shirt, and coffee mug. I wasn't thrilled about her joining a sorority. I had told her I didn't care for the excessive drinking and partying associated with Greek life. She knew I did not participate in Greek life when I was in college and how I disapproved of it then and still do now. I grew up with an alcoholic father, though I didn't know it at the time. I know what it's like to watch someone drink excessively.

My father grew up in Spain, but my family moved to Northern Virginia when I was a child. During summer vacations visiting relatives in Spain, I remember dad growing increasingly impatient and rude after each glass of wine he poured himself, from the wine bottle placed strategically in front of him, during long lunches with family. He'd empty the bottle before slipping into a *siesta*.

Now, as an adult, I see his drinking wasn't all fun and leisure. I long ago stopped calling my parents' house in the evenings. I didn't want to hear the criticisms hurled at me through slurred speech. I'd heard them often enough growing up. Dad wasn't tender and funny when he drank. Mom told me how verbally abusive he became after drinking his whiskey and Rioja. I became a mild and careful drinker, and sometimes I worry that

one of my children might inherit my father's drinking problem. And Leela is the one I worry about the most.

Where did she find the space in this cube of a room to store all this useless paraphernalia? I don't want this junk going home to join the stack of unopened high school graduation gifts already on her bedroom floor.

As the floor begins to clear, dust balls, loose change, and other miscellaneous items surface. I look over to the black microwave and mini fridge unit covered in dust. You could spell your name on it. I'd cleaned her room when she moved in. I hoped she would maintain it. But it doesn't look like she ever used the duster I'd bought for her. Now, we are only required to empty the room. She warns me about the exposed nails on the broken collage frame of her high school friends.

We have filled the cart and emptied the room. The only thing left are the sheets on the bed.

"Leela, don't forget your bed sheets," I remind her.

"I'm leaving those on. I want to spend my last night in my dorm room," she announces eagerly.

"I thought we agreed you'd stay with me in the hotel. I got two double beds."

"I know. But I really want to stay with my friends one last time. I'm not going to see them all summer."

I don't know what to say. I understand how she feels about her friends. So I don't say anything except, "I want to leave right after breakfast tomorrow."

"Okay."

As Leela rolls out the bulging suitcases into the hallway, I announce I'll go through all the drawers to make sure nothing is left behind. I start with her closet on the left, and work my way clockwise around the room checking under the bed and corners, and finally desk and dresser drawers.

In the bottom drawer of Nicole's dresser – the last place I look – I find a cache of booze: a nearly full bottle of vodka, a nearly empty bottle of rum, an unopened box of cheap wine, and a half-empty mixer, arranged like sweaters. A well-stocked bar-in-a-drawer. I can't believe what I'm seeing. Didn't she see the flyer outside her door?

“Leela, what the hell is this?”

With a fixed look I can only describe as Oh, shit. I forgot that was there, Leela hesitates, and says, “It's Nicole's.”

“Don't lie to me.” Nicole has already moved out. Besides, I met Nicole at the beginning of the school year and know she is shy and quiet. Leela has told me Nicole would rather stay in and watch a movie than go to a party. The liquor can't possibly belong to Nicole. I know Leela drinks. She's never denied it. My daughter is an independent thinker who likes to have fun. Leela, more than any of my other children, shares her maternal grandfather's adventurous, care-free, and rowdy personality. I'm sure Leela hid the booze in Nicole's dresser thinking I'd never look there (I wouldn't have if Nicole was still living there). “You're eighteen, not twenty-one. You could get expelled for having this in your room,” I scream, waving the bottle of vodka in her face. “There's a warning about this on the bulletin board right outside your room, for God's sake. Didn't you learn your lesson in high school?” I'm sweating.

“No one can come in here. It’s my room,” she shouts back. Both our voices now raised despite the wide open door.

“It’s not your room. It’s university property. That’s magical thinking on your part.” I’m annoyed at having to remind her of the obvious. “You think because you’re eighteen, you’re an adult. You’re not. You’re too irresponsible and immature to be an adult.”

I look at the drawer full of alcohol and feel like a failure. I wonder if my daughter drinks too much. What if she ends up an alcoholic like her grandfather? My father doesn’t recognize he has a drinking problem. I’m the one who told my mother and brother years ago that he was an alcoholic. I recognized the signs and symptoms. In nursing school many years ago, I did a clinical rotation in a detox unit for alcoholics and learned a lot about this disease. The patients I cared for appeared disheveled and depressed. Many had no family or home to return to. Now, although I recognize that drinking is not uncommon in college students, I want to protect my daughter from inheriting this dreadful disease.

I’ve told her how her grandfather began drinking as a teenager – never giving it a second thought, and how over the years he built up a tolerance and drank more each time. We’ve talked about George Hugueley V, the University of Virginia lacrosse player who killed his ex-girlfriend in a drunken rage and his long history of alcohol abuse that went unchallenged. Though his was an extreme case, it served to illustrate the slow and insidious nature of alcohol abuse. But I deemed the scary lessons necessary. Leela has already gotten into trouble once for alcohol.

A year earlier, during her senior year of high school, Leela showed up at a basketball game with an inebriated friend, and her group was pulled aside by school security. She had been at her boyfriend's house before the game, helping him fill out college applications while her boyfriend's buddy, Nick, and another classmate drank Captain Morgan in an adjacent room. Her boyfriend - the driver - never drank. Leela later told me she and Sofia only had a sip. Nick's unsteady gait in the high school gym drew attention. Both girls admitted to drinking a little bit and were asked by school officials if they would be willing to take a breathalyzer test. Feeling she had nothing to hide, Leela agreed. Her blood alcohol content (BAC) was 0.03.

In the state of Virginia, an adult with a BAC of 0.08 is considered to be legally intoxicated. Still, it is against the law to consume alcohol under the age of twenty-one in Virginia, so even the 0.03 reading, for a teenager, was over the legal limit. The flyer outside Leela's room was a reminder that the same law applied in Pennsylvania. Leela knew this. Did her new found independence blur her common sense?

Leela's predicament with alcohol in high school surprised me because I always voiced my concerns to her (and my other two children) when she would sit next to me after a night out with friends and tell me about the evening. On one particular night she was so upset at seeing her best friend from grade school (who vomited all over the car when Leela drove her home from a party) stumbling and incoherent after binge drinking on tequila, she listened patiently and nodded when I pointed out the dangers of binge drinking. I praised her for having the presence of mind to take her friend home.

Somehow, that presence of mind failed her the night of the basketball game. Leela was suspended from school for two days and required to attend counseling and be evaluated for alcohol dependency. Since she was a minor, I had to accompany her.

Studies have shown that 82.6% of 18-20 year olds consume alcohol in the company of friends, so of course I knew that teenagers drank. But I hoped my children would recall my admonitions and make sensible decisions. I guess I never thought one of my own children would get into trouble with alcohol because I spoke so openly about it, telling them about their grandfather's alcoholism instead of keeping it a secret. They saw me enjoy a glass of wine with meals or at a party without drinking excessively. I never told them that all drinking was bad – but that they had to exercise good judgment about it. I supported my daughter through that high school incident, because I knew she was telling the truth (she only had a sip) and because I knew she exercised bad judgment but did not, at this point, have a drinking problem. But I also made it clear she was responsible for her behavior and the resulting consequences.

Now I couldn't comprehend how she could forget how scared she was her college acceptances would be withdrawn because of the suspension. Or the formal letter with the results of the evaluation which we both worried would become part of her permanent record. She couldn't have forgotten all that.

I ask her how she obtained the liquor in the drawer. She doesn't respond. I give up this line of questioning. It doesn't really matter anyway. I know how easy access to alcohol is in college. I'm more concerned about how often and how much she drinks. Does she drink to the point of drunkenness? What is her attitude about drinking?

“It’s not all mine,” is all she says about the liquor. She mutters something about her sorority.

“I don’t care whose it is. It’s in your room and you’re the one who’ll get in trouble. Do you really think your friends will take the blame? I can’t believe you did this.”

“Can we go now?” she sighs, rolling her eyes.

“I’m not leaving this stuff in here. I’m dumping it in the bathroom.”

“Don’t touch my stash,” she yells. “I’ll give it away,” she continues, her voice softer this time.

“These kids are studying for finals. They shouldn’t be drinking. Don’t encourage them.”

I reluctantly leave the liquor in the drawer. On some level I realize this is not my house; I have no authority here. Besides, if I dumped what is in the drawer, Leela would just get more anyway. She probably got it from older frat brothers or sorority sisters. I imagine Leela in high heels and a short skirt at some loud, ramshackle frat house party on a Saturday night sipping some spirit in a red plastic tumbler. I quickly dismiss this disturbing image of the skinny jeans and fitted V-neck Tee-shirted girl standing in front of me.

Leela closes the door and leads the way as we lug her belongings with us. There’s an unfamiliar tension and silence between us. I know quizzing her is not helping, but I can’t stop. Like the Queen of England, I am only a beloved (though not at the moment) figurehead with a title – Mother, and no authority.

Later, at dinner with her two friends at an Italian restaurant nearby (I thought it would be just Leela and I), the silence remains. No doubt the conversation would flow freely if I wasn't around. But I am. I'm her mom, not her friend. I'm sure Leela told her friends what happened as I had told my husband when I called him from my hotel room, angry and upset, after loading the car in the steady rain. He wasn't surprised. "Leela learns by the school of hard knocks," he said. He was right.

Sitting across from Leela and me in a booth, I catch her friends studying me and darting their eyes back to Leela. The conversation is short, trivial, with long pauses. I'm polite but not my usual talkative self. Leela's also restrained. There is no edge in her voice when she talks to me. Maybe she feels bad for upsetting me. I wish she'd considered my feelings before buying and hiding that liquor, but it's too late for that. I'd just be happy if she paused to consider the consequences of her actions on her own well-being. But there is nothing I can do to prevent her from making bad decisions when I'm not there with her, and I can't force her to reflect on or regret her careless behavior until she is ready to do so on her own.

After dinner, Leela and I are alone on the sidewalk outside the restaurant. The rain has stopped for now. The city traffic streams before us. Her friends have already left and thanked me for dinner but not before giving Leela that Good luck with your Mom glance and telling her they'll see her later. Leela confirms she is spending the final night of her freshman year in her dorm room. I now realize that she did not pack her bed sheets for a

reason: she planned to stay in her dorm room all along. I am too sapped to argue, so I say again, “Get rid of the alcohol,” knowing it is futile.

I wonder if she will celebrate the end of her freshman year by drinking that alcohol. Part of me is relieved she isn’t staying in the hotel room with me. I am too angry at her to be around her, especially in such a small space. Even though the hotel is less than a mile from her dorm, I might as well be in Virginia.

Studies show 80% of college students drink alcohol. Almost half report binge drinking – a pattern of drinking that elevates the blood alcohol concentration to 0.08g/dL and usually occurs after four drinks for women, and five drinks for men. Underage drinkers drink less often than adults, but, when they drink, they drink more than adults. According to a Centers for Disease Control fact sheet on underage drinking, alcohol is the most commonly used and abused drug among youth in the United States, more than tobacco and illegal drugs.

“Do you drink every day?” I ask. I know I’m only making Leela more defensive, but I can’t just turn off a strong and constant maternal urge to protect and guide that’s been active for twenty years. My mother tells me you never stop worrying. She’s right. But when do I stop intervening? And should I?

She looks at me with a here-she-goes-again gaze. “What?”

Leela heard the question. She isn’t interested in answering it. She’s eighteen and she doesn’t feel the need to justify her behavior to me anymore.

“You heard me,” I fire back, in one last attempt to redeem my parental authority; though inside, I know my power has been significantly diminished. “Do you drink every day?” I can’t help but ask, again.

“No.” Ambulance sirens rush nearby drowning our voices.

“How often do you drink?”

“I don’t drink every day, Mom...on weekends. At parties.” Her voice is soft and accommodating. She wants me to know that she’s being honest. But she looks down at her cell phone. Time is running out. I need to wrap up this inquiry. She wants to get back to her friends.

“How many drinks do you have at these parties?”

“I don’t know...What’s wrong with you? Why are you going on about this?”

“I worry about you. If you don’t know how much you’re drinking, how do you know when you’ve had enough? You’re tall, thin, and very petite. It doesn’t take much alcohol to affect your senses. If you put yourself in that position you could be date raped and you wouldn’t even realize it until it was too late.” A constant stream of college students pass by oblivious to our discussion.

“Don’t worry, Mom. I know. Can you stop talking about this?”

I can’t. I don’t have an out of control problem with drinking, but I have a hard time stopping my questioning. I am still pretty sure that Leela doesn’t have a drinking problem – only, I cannot be rational about this worry. It drives me crazy that she won’t answer my questions with specifics. “I need to know that you hear me and understand what I’m saying.”

“I hear you. I hear you. Can you just stop?”

Leela has reached her limit and is no longer receptive. But I have to inject one final admonition. “Just remember alcoholism runs in your family. And it doesn’t occur overnight.”

She nods. She knows who I am referring to even though she has never seen her grandfather angry or drunk.

“I gotta go, Mom. I’ll see you tomorrow,” she says. We both lean in for a customary hug, albeit brief and stiff this time.

I watch my daughter walk hurriedly away, fixed on her cell phone, her fingers tapping the screen.

I didn’t tell Leela not to drink at all even though she’s underage. I just want her to drink moderately. I’m being reasonable. My expectations are realistic and yet a part of me feels this terrible urge to control and protect her. The least she could do is tell me specifically how much she drinks. But she didn’t. There’s no point in asking her again.

RED LIGHT

“What the hell did you just do?” I yelled. “You know better than that. You were fully stopped. Why did you go?”

He shrugged his shoulders and said nothing.

Why he went, I can't explain, nor can I forget. Stationed at the red light in the left turn lane of a busy intersection, my son decided to go anyway.

“If you drive like that you shouldn't be driving. You're lucky no one hit us.”

He remained silent during my rare outburst. I reacted, I realize now, more out of fear than anger. My son didn't argue with me or try to defend his actions. He had a fixed, distant expression on his face, as if he was replaying the scene over-and-over in his mind trying to make sense of it. I certainly couldn't. Since obtaining his learner's permit nine months earlier, he had been driving safely with me in the passenger seat next to him. I told him if he drove so recklessly with the official driving instructor, he wouldn't pass his driving test. He was so excited about getting his driver's license and gaining his independence, I hoped my admonition might jolt him back to his senses.

“Stop! Don't go,” I'd said, before we reached the intersection where the green left turn arrow light had just converted to yellow before settling on red. He wasn't distracted by the radio, a cell phone, or conversation. That's what scared me. What if he

drove so impulsively when he was by himself? He could be killed or he could kill someone else and have to live with the guilt the rest of his life.

“I know, Mom. I know,” he’d said, as he braked. “You don’t need to keep on telling me,” he added. Teaching him was my job I told him. I wouldn’t be next to him forever and I wanted him to be safe. I’d experienced the same know it all attitude from his two older sisters - whom I’d also taught to drive - once they, too, grew confident in their driving.

We live in Northern Virginia, a highly congested metropolitan area with long commutes and impatient drivers. I taught my son to drive the same way I had taught his sisters. Before I allowed my kids access to streets, I had to be sure they knew the basics. In the parking lot of their elementary school, where they first got behind the wheel, we adjusted seat and side and rearview mirrors. We practiced turning on the windshield wipers, headlights, and turn signals. But most important for me was mastery of pedals: I would repeatedly say “gas” or “brake” in varying arrangements and each child would switch back-and-forth between the pedals until I was satisfied they wouldn’t confuse them. No child of mine would ever crash through the front door of a 7-11 or Starbuck’s because he or she confused the pedals.

I assumed that since I had taught each child in the same manner, each one would drive competently and equally. I was wrong. I later learned that personality influences driving. My eldest daughter, bookish and reserved, wasn’t interested in learning to drive in high school. I had to encourage her. Driving didn’t come naturally for her. But she

persevered. She prefers public transportation and walking to commute to work where she now lives. On the rare occasion she drives, she is a slow and careful driver. She has never been ticketed, unlike her younger sister.

My younger, adventurous, and extroverted daughter couldn't wait to drive. She learned quickly thanks to eagerness and instinct. But her overconfidence and impatience early on earned her multiple traffic infractions with added penalty points for speeding and rolling through stop signs which required her to attend remedial driving classes twice. She knew better. I'd taught her well, yet my instruction didn't prevent her from driving impulsively. She's gained lots of experience driving to the beach with friends or back and forth from college over the years, but each time she drives long distances I remind her to drive safely. I can't say it enough. I'm an experienced and secure driver, but over the years, I've found more traffic, less patience, and increasingly distracted drivers sharing the roadway. I worry about her until she calls me telling me she's arrived.

My son appeared to be somewhere between the two. Like his sisters, he made unnecessarily wide right turns at first. He frequently drifted to the inside or outside border of the lane. He sometimes accelerated quickly and braked suddenly, unsettling my stomach. And like his older sister, he, on occasion, yielded at stop signs. But his driving, like his personality, was steady and relaxed. He didn't text, speed, tailgate, or fumble with the radio while driving with me. He was a competent and safe driver. My hope was that by the time he was behind the wheel by himself, caution would be habitual. He knew that once he got his driver's license I expected him to be just as responsible. I warned him (as I'd warned his sisters) that my fellow village mommas – my network of school,

church, and neighborhood spies – would report back to me about his driving. He'd be like a truck driver who must be cognizant of driving safely lest another motorist heed the How's my driving? inquiry on the truck's rear.

After many months of driving practice, I realized my son, despite all my effort, was not immune to risky, impulsive driving. I feared once he drove on his own, he might succumb to impulsiveness. I would never know. He didn't even know himself. I worried about him and I wasn't sure I was ready for him to drive on his own.

I recall that day now, about a month after that disquieting incident, as I sit at my kitchen table sipping tea and staring out the window watching the rain bounce off the deck. My son, who's just received his official driver's license, wants to drive alone for the first time to a friend's house about three miles away. It's early evening on a wet Friday in early June. I would rather he didn't go. The weather conditions concern me, but I understand his enthusiasm. Besides, it's his friend's birthday and my son has been invited over for dinner.

"If I let you go," I tell him, "you have to be patient. It's gonna take a while. It's rush hour and it's raining." I'm still considering, and hoping he reconsiders.

"I know," he replies, eagerly attaching the car keys to a lanyard dangling from his neck. He is determined to go. I decide not to restrict him despite my anxiety and desire to protect him forever.

"Text me when you get to James' house."

My husband walks into the kitchen. “You’re not driving in this. It took me almost an hour to get home from work. The traffic is awful,” he says to our son. Turning to me, my husband continues, “He shouldn’t be driving in this. I can’t believe you’re letting him go.”

“It’s James’ birthday. He’s excited about going.”

“It’s not safe for him to drive in hurricane conditions.” My son rolls his eyes then looks towards me.

“You’re exaggerating. This is far from a hurricane. There’s no wind. It’s only heavy rain.”

“Tonight is not a good night for him to drive.”

“There will never be a right time.”

“Obviously it’s safer when it’s not dark and pouring outside,” he says, pointing to the rain-spotted window.

He doesn’t know his son recently ran through a red light on a clear and sunny afternoon. I agreed the conditions were not ideal. “He’s had lots of practice,” I tell him. “He’s been looking forward to this moment for a long time. Besides, accidents can happen anytime. Even in good weather.” Don’t I know it. My husband doesn’t need to know it. Hopefully, now, my son realizes it.

My husband shakes his head, turns to look at our son before browsing through the stack of mail he’s holding, and says, “Call when you get there.”

“I’ll text Mom.”

When my son walks away, I follow him to the front door. To reach his friend's house, he must drive through long stretches of curvy roads in a densely wooded and hilly area prone to flooding. I remind him to drive slowly. Forecasters have issued flashflood watches for the area. I tell him to look out for the deer, so prevalent in that part of town. He listens attentively, then says, "Okay, Mom."

I close the door behind him and say a little prayer for his safety. Then I quickly go get my cell phone.

OUT OF PLACE

The pediatrician's office waiting area remained unchanged from the early years when I frequently visited with an ill child. They still had the low-hanging blackboard, the bucket of blocks, various toys, and scattered books my three children had played with. The place hadn't changed a bit. But I had.

At 50, I was the oldest parent in the room. My seventeen year-old son, Anil - there for a physical he needed to try out for his high school soccer team - was the oldest child present. A dad with a toddler playing at his feet sat to my right. Next to him a young mother cradled a sleeping baby. Across from me a dad held an infant while his wife rummaged through a baby bag. I watched the toddler yell Vrrrooom, Vrrrooom as he rolled the yellow Tonka truck towards his attentive and quiet father. Nudging my son gently with my elbow, I whispered, "He reminds me of you. You used to do that." My tall and fit son shifted away from me and continued tapping and scrolling his iPhone. The parents of the infants talked about how their child slept and ate. Nobody looked over at me or talked to me.

When my son and his two older sisters, now 22 and 20, were little, I remember swapping stories at the doctor's office with other mothers. Back then, I rarely saw dads with their kids at the pediatrician's office (or the grocery store, or playground). My

husband never accompanied me to the doctor with them. Occasionally, my mother would accompany me or stay home watching the other children while I took the sick child in. My husband worked long hours as a physician. I was a stay-at-home mom, as my mother had been. It was part of my job to take the kids to the doctor, go to the grocery store, cook, and do laundry. It never occurred to me to ask my husband for help with any of these chores.

It wasn't easy dressing three restless small children, packing the diaper bag with snacks and books, loading the stroller into the car, and strapping three kids into car seats, even without a feverish, crying child. When one was sick, the routines I'd carefully set up collapsed, and everyone – including me – was in a volatile mood. Still, life moved forward like rolling tumbleweed. I assumed I could only count on myself. In fact, my goal was to get everything and everyone under control before my husband returned from work so he would not have to come home to utter chaos. He appreciated coming home to a quiet house after a long day at work.

My mother never depended on my father for child care either. Dad never accompanied mom to the doctor when my brother and I were little. I grew up in a traditional Spanish (my family is originally from Spain) home in which gender roles were strictly delineated. My father expected my mother to stay home full time raising us and keeping house.

My husband's parents, both immigrants from India, met in the United States while in college. My mother-in-law stayed at home when her three kids were little, but chose to work part-time outside the home selling houses on and off over the years once they began

school. My in-laws were untraditional for an Indian couple of their generation: they didn't have an arranged marriage, and the wife worked.

When my first child was born in 1991, I chose to stay at home with her; though my husband did not insist I do so. Maybe, he was relieved I did. We both strongly believed having a stay-at-home mother contributed to the emotional well-being of a baby. I dedicated myself to being a full-time homemaker and did not return to working as a nurse. My husband committed himself to his work and providing for his family.

As a new mom, I struggled to find my footing. When I worked at the hospital taking care of very sick patients, I had assistance from other nurses, technicians, or nursing assistants. In addition, the hospital had its own very structured schedule and procedures. I could perform my job perfectly. At home, I was alone, and lacked the built-in framework. The transition was difficult for me, but I managed to get by on my own, slowly building a routine. Nursing had taught me valuable organization and time management skills. Except, when a sick child disrupted my schedule, I grew frustrated. I was task-oriented and craved order. And I enjoyed being my own boss. In time, I learned to be flexible when illness disrupted my plans. Yet I never considered what my life might be like if my husband accompanied me to the doctor and helped with child care.

The young mother pulled out a baby bottle from the diaper bag and handed it to her husband. They continued their conversation with the other mother as the dad competently and easily fed his infant son. I could see this interaction was routine for both of them. Both were utterly used to and comfortable with their part of the job.

I found it unsettling watching these dads be so involved in the day-to-day care of their children. Just as I find watching toddler-toting dads with grocery lists pushing carts in the grocery store awkward. Maybe I'm old-fashioned, but a part of me believes that men and women are suited to different kinds of work. I go to the grocery store so often, I don't make a list. Frequently, the dinner menu is established while I peruse through the aisles. When my husband offers to go to the grocery store on occasion, I give him a list. But even with a list, the poor man can't get it right: inevitably, he brings back the wrong type of milk; more toilet paper than I have room for ("It was on sale, so I bought it. You can never have enough toilet paper."); or six boxes of apple and cinnamon oatmeal - because it, too, was on sale, even though I already have two boxes in the pantry. Sometimes, he brings me back a bouquet medley of flowers.

When my husband had offered to feed one of our children, I watched him anxiously. He seemed so ill-at-ease with the process. Unlike the dad in the doctor's office, my accomplished physician husband hesitated and maneuvered awkwardly like a tourist in a foreign country. He held the baby tensely, fixed his gaze on the bottle, not the baby's face. I didn't trust him. Even though I admire the young couple's attempt to share the job, I took pride in how much better I was at these jobs than my husband. I realize now, maybe my watching made him even more nervous than he already was, but I can't say I'm sorry about it. Homemaking was my job and my domain. I found my husband's help more intrusive than helpful.

Unlike the young mother at the doctor's office, I didn't want to share child care duties with my husband. I had grown accustomed to doing things my way and doing them alone. I imagined the wife of the young dad watching his son playing on the floor was at work. I figured the young mom holding the diaper bag shared home and child care duties with her husband because both parties had jobs outside the home that they were also committed to. At least, that would be the only way I could imagine sharing the work in the home - if I had a job outside the house equal to my husband's in the commitment it demanded from me and the respect or the fulfillment that came with it. I didn't have that, but I found homemaking to be, for me, what the physician's career was for my husband.

I guess I was more influenced by my upbringing than I realized. I chose to stay at home full time and raise kids. But, maybe, on some level, I considered it a duty just as my father had with my mother. But, I made the choice for myself, and I don't regret it. Still, seeing those dads at the pediatrician's office seemed out of place to me, but maybe I'm the one who's out of place now. Soon, my son will move on to his own general practitioner instead of the pediatrician I take him to. Who knows, eventually he may even grow up to be a father who cradles and feeds his baby the bottle. I can't picture him that grown up yet, and maybe I don't want to – not for a while longer.

HOW ABOUT A HUG?

“Good night, Mom,” my teenaged son says as he passes me by on the way to his bedroom.

“Hold it,” I say, pausing from stacking the clean towels in the linen closet. “How about a hug?”

“Uh... no.”

I hear no a lot. He doesn't hug me when he leaves for school in the morning or when he returns in the afternoon. He doesn't let me hug him when he's sitting on the sofa in the family room watching ESPN. When I try to sneak a hug in from behind the sofa, he swings his powerful arms in the air, as if I was an annoying fly. I back off. I don't want to get swatted.

I don't know why I long for my kids' hugs, but, I do. His two older sisters are no longer home: one is away in college, and the other is living and working in the city where she attended college. I like it when they come home for the holidays or a visit. When we greet, we embrace and exchange a quick kiss on the cheek. When they leave, we do the same. In between, they seldom hug me.

When they were little, the hugs abounded - spontaneous, clingy, lingering embraces that delighted me. Now, their hugs are awkward, rushed, and self-conscious, with a formal and obligatory quality to them. Speech is spare also. “Good” is all my son

replies when I ask him how school was on any given day. One-word conversations, except when I go into his bedroom and ask him to put away his clean clothes or do his homework, then I catch “Get out of my room.”

When my girls are home, they simply say “Bye, Mom” like their brother, when they go out shopping, or to meet friends at Starbuck’s or the mall. My seventeen year-old son will be going to college soon; then, I will have no more children left to hug.

I think often about home life without any children at home. I first glimpsed it a few years ago when my oldest daughter went away to college: cooking for four people instead of five, less laundry, less clutter. I didn’t miss the extra housework, but I missed my daughter, especially around the dinner table. The family felt incomplete without her. A little pit of emptiness developed. Later, when her sister left for college, we were down to three. The pit grew larger.

I’ve dedicated my life to raising my kids. Being a mom has infused my life with joy, purpose, and meaning. Soon, it will be just my husband and me at the kitchen table. While my son is still home, I want to hug him. But he turns away, runs away, or shoos me away.

In young children, touch, a form of sensory stimulation, helps facilitate normal growth and development, and promotes social bonds between individuals. Children deprived of touch, for example, orphaned children in eastern European institutions, according to researchers, “exhibited impaired growth and cognitive development, as well

as an elevated incidence of serious infections and attachment disorders.” All my children are healthy and reasonably social despite their very different personalities.

“Human touch is important for all ages” according to the University of Miami’s Touch Research Institute (TRI), “but by the time children reach their teen years, they receive only half as much touching as they did in the early part of their lives. Adults touch each other even less.”

As a stay-at-home mom, I have had the opportunity, and privilege, to hug my children. But the moments I most remember are the times they spontaneously hugged me. I remember my toddler son sitting with me in a back pew of our Catholic Church as I watched one of his sisters participate in the weekly school Mass. I knew he would get bored, so I brought a book for him to peruse and Cheerios in a small zip lock bag. I didn’t allow him to talk out loud or run around, so when he grew tired of the book and the Cheerios, I let him explore my watch and run his fingers through my shoulder-length hair. He stood still and looked straight ahead when I pointed to his sister, standing behind the podium next to the altar, and said, “Look, there is Rani.”

He pointed back at her with his tiny hand, yelling, “Wani. Das Wani up dare.”

“Yes,” I whispered, and shushed him with finger on lip.

He wandered the length of the wooden pew looking back at me repeatedly. When he returned, he wrapped his arm around my neck and squeezed me. Then, he pecked me with a kiss on the cheek. That moment - fifteen years ago - is seared in my mind and heart.

Before he was born, I would sit with his two sisters on my lap in a rocking chair in the bedroom they shared, and read and sing lullabies to them before bedtime. I could sit for hours rocking and cuddling them, inhaling their powdery scent, and caressing the soft arms wrapped around my waist. I can't describe the immeasurable joy and sense of well-being I experienced in these carefree moments with all my children. These memories highlight the joy of motherhood.

When we are hugged by others – spouses, siblings, parents, or friends - we feel comforted, safe, loved, and accepted. “Hugging is therapeutic for not only children, but adults as well,” says health writer Lisa J. Lehr in her article “A Hug: The Miracle Drug.” “It fulfills the deep physical and emotional need for touch that all humans have.” There’s even a National Hug Day observed on January 21st in the United States and several other countries each year. Its purpose, according to Lehr, is to teach people about the benefits of hugging. Events in schools, nursing homes, hospitals, and libraries have been held to recognize National Hug Day.

I don't need a National Hug Day to remind me of the value of hugging. I am a hugger by nature. My mother, 81, is also; although, her generation of mothers was not aware of the comforting effect of touch. Mothers of my mother's generation would have been warned not to spoil us by cuddling us too much. To let us cry ourselves to sleep so we wouldn't get the idea that we could get attention by crying. This practice persisted even into the 1980s and 1990s. When my oldest child was born in 1991, I let her cry

herself to sleep because Dr. Spock recommended doing so. It was the hardest thing to do. It finally worked after three long nights, but the guilt I felt was worse than her crying.

Before 1986, when the Reverend Kevin Zaborney of Michigan created National Hug Day, the importance of hugs was not recognized. Though in the 1970s, people became aware of the importance of touch in early childhood development after the results of monkey experiments in the 1960s became widely known. The monkeys in those early experiments gravitated to a cloth mother rather than a wire mother, proving that touch mattered in the interaction between mother and child. According to some studies today, hugging is also believed to help lower blood pressure, decrease heart disease, and reduce stress and depression. Things were changing, however, when we ourselves had children.

My mother, and many women of her generation, believed that bottle-feeding us with formula was healthier than breast feeding. But in the early 1990s when my children were born, breast feeding was gaining popularity thanks to the targeted campaign of La Leche League, a nonprofit organization that promotes breastfeeding. I had trouble nursing all my children so I bottle-fed them. From the first moment a mother cradles her child at birth, a bond forms between them. What matters is touch, not whether a baby is breast fed or bottle fed. My generation of mothers understood the need for touch. Deep down inside I always knew that touch was really important. It was counter-intuitive to let children cry themselves to sleep.

I miss those tender moments when my little ones ran to me after school and grasped my legs. I miss those times when I would invite them to sit on my lap at the

kitchen table after dinner and they would fight for positioning on my lap like nursing puppies. Sure, I get that my son is a teenager (and his sisters are young adults), and that it is normal and natural to move away from Mom and her protective, nurturing embrace. I know I am no longer their most significant relationship and the center of their world, though they are still mine. But, I long to hug them and be hugged by them. Beyond the emotional benefits, my children's hugs represent a purpose and meaning in my life that will soon fade. As long as my son is still living at home, I matter.

A friend of mine, a stay-at-home mom like me, whose children are out of the house, recently said to me, "I'm out of business." When I asked her what she meant, she replied, "The children are grown up; I don't have anything to do."

Once my son goes away to college, I won't miss the almost two decades of preparing school lunches, or the countless hours spent driving them back and forth to school and sports. I look forward to having more time to read, write, walk, and try new recipes. But the need for human touch never wears off no matter how old we are. And though I can count on hugs from my husband and friends, my kids' hugs mean more to me. Hugs between mothers and their children are fundamentally different and more important. I miss those long, loving embraces. What makes me sad is that now that my children are grown, they only hug me like they hug anyone else – obligatory, or even friendly but in a way that doesn't single me out as the most important person in their world. But I'll settle for a quick, obligatory squeeze even if only available at bedtime.

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CONFIDENCE

They grow up so quickly. I hear that a lot lately from other middle-aged mothers, like myself, with one or no children left at home. Looking back is always bittersweet. My son, the youngest of my three children – 22, 20, and 17 – plays on a youth basketball team with many of his grade school classmates. At weekend games, the dads coach from the sidelines or criticize the refs, while we moms reminisce about the early years, how the kids have changed, or the status of our other grown children. I miss their tiny hands and feet; their knee-high hugs; their innocence, curiosity, and, yes, even their boundless energy. But I don't miss the work – the exhausting, never-ending, 24/7 schedule – but, I wouldn't mind turning back the clock, in a time-machine type scenario, and reliving moments from those early childhood years, one child at a time, before returning to present day anew.

I watch my son now and savor the little time I have left with him before he heads off to college and my husband and I become empty nesters. And yet I can't help constantly thinking about my life over the past twenty plus years - how far I've come, and how much I have grown as well, especially, my confidence as a mom. But I didn't start out so self-assured.

I couldn't wait to be a mom, so I quit my nursing job after working full-time for four years and chose to stay at home after the birth of my first child. When I brought her home, my beautiful newborn daughter cried nonstop from early evening through the night. Her piercing cry and tense muscles unnerved and scared me. I cradled her and rocked her to soothe her colic. But nothing I did seemed to work. She'd stop crying momentarily and then begin the cycle again. I was lucky to have mom living nearby and willing to help. Despite her assistance, I cried easily and for no reason. Mom noticed. Nothing gets by my mother. She has excellent observational skills. I was exhausted and felt overwhelmed by this new bawling baby whose arrival I had been looking so forward to. Maybe I wasn't cut out to be a mom, I thought. At 28, I felt like a failure. I was an experienced, competent nurse, but motherhood was too much for me.

As it turned out, I had post-partum depression, but nobody except my mother seemed concerned. The obstetrician, and my busy physician husband, assumed because I was a nurse I would be okay. But being a nurse only helped me recognize my depression not avoid it. I struggled in my new role as a mom. Feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, combined with exhaustion, and the sense of isolation I felt from being at home all the time, contributed to my lack of confidence in my ability to be a good mother. Fortunately for me, my post-partum depression was relatively mild compared to what many women suffer. Within a few weeks, my spontaneous crying ended and mom returned to her house. Mom's aid and companionship helped me find my way. Mom, a former nurse, had also stayed home full time to raise my younger brother and me. As a new mom, I was fortunate to have her support and encouragement.

I slowly settled into my role as a mother. I read Goodnight Moon (her favorite book) and Beatrix Potter stories to my daughter, Rani, because I had read how important reading to children was. I fed Rani - a picky and light eater - and wondered if I should insist she eat more when she turned her head after only a couple of bites. She was a strong but slim baby. She lacked the chubby cheeks and folds in her thighs commonly associated with well-fed babies in my Spanish mother and Indian mother-in-law's generation. So, when either grandmother reminded me how skinny Rani was, as they often did, it made me very anxious and angry. But I didn't show it. I didn't believe in myself and questioned my competence, yet I was doing the best I could. I didn't want to force Rani to eat when she didn't want to. It felt counterintuitive. Despite feeling pressured by both grandmothers, I decided to trust Rani to guide me. I encouraged her to try one more bite, and if she refused - which she usually did - I stopped feeding her. This was very hard for me. She ate so little, I frequently wondered how she survived.

I also talked to her while I cooked dinner, inquiring about the stacked wooden blocks on the kitchen floor; or the flowers, birds and squirrels in the park; or the rainbow in the sky when I took her out in the stroller daily. I noticed she was shy and didn't talk as much as other kids her age, or seek out playmates in the playground. I worried about Rani's behavior and what to do about it.

I was also fearful. One evening as she sat strapped in her high chair I turned away to stir the rice cooking on the stove. Suddenly, I heard a thump. I turned to find her on the linoleum floor crying. She was thirteen months old. I had turned around for only an instant when my slim baby managed to slip out of her fastened seat belt. My heart

pounded as I held her tightly and cried, apologizing to her repeatedly while examining her for any injuries. I could not find any, but I knew she had to be seen by a doctor. What if she had broken something or had internal bleeding? I didn't want to take her to the emergency room. I recalled a story I had recently heard in the news about a mother who had lost custody of her daughter after an accident because emergency room personnel suspected child abuse and called child protective services. I panicked. I called my husband at work and told him what had just happened and my fear of losing our daughter. He was flying out early the following morning for a medical conference. I didn't want him to go.

I called our pediatrician and told her what had happened. How I had examined Rani but couldn't find any signs of bleeding or broken bones. I told her I moved each of her arms and legs and how Rani cried when I elevated her right arm above her shoulder.

"Is that the only time she cries?" she asked.

"Yes, but she really cries a lot when I do that."

"Is she calm otherwise?"

"Yes."

"I think she may have a broken clavicle."

I told her how I really wanted to take Rani to the hospital but I feared she would be taken from me. She assured me, by law, the hospital staff was required to investigate suspicious injuries for child abuse. There was nothing to do for a broken collar bone. It would heal on its own in time.

"Did she lose consciousness when she fell?" she asked.

“No, not at all.”

“Then why don’t you bring her into my office first thing in the morning.”

The following morning, after a long, sleepless night spent watching Rani sleep and listening to her breathing, I took her to the pediatrician’s office. An x-ray revealed a broken clavicle (collar bone). Everything else looked fine. I didn’t trust myself as a mother, so I was grateful to have my nursing skills to fall back on (even though I had feared Rani might have internal bleeding from the fall, and how was I to know).

But time does seem to afford a certain level of adaptation. Later, as a toddler, Rani hit her face on a rounded-off corner of a wooden table while playing at home and sustained a big bruise under her eye. She cried. I comforted her. But this time I didn’t panic or call the pediatrician. I could handle this latest development, although I felt uneasy when I took her to the grocery store and I got evil stares from older women. I looked away and continued on my way. By then I knew accidents can happen even with a vigilant parent.

Rani had all my attention before her sister was born. Cooking, laundry, bed making, grocery shopping, and doctor’s appointments were scheduled around her needs. Rarely did I accomplish any household duty without some interruption – spilled milk, end of Sesame Street episode, playmate duty. It was frustrating. I took the control I had had over my daily life before I had kids for granted. After Rani was born, I had to learn to accept incremental progress. I was patient with her; not myself. I continued to be task oriented. It was hard giving up control.

When Rani was two years old, we welcomed another daughter. Mom came to help me out again but didn't stay as long. I didn't have a Caesarian this time so I recuperated faster. I didn't have post-partum depression again. Leela hardly fussed. But with two children, there was a noticeable difference both physically and mentally. Adjusting to one child was hard enough, but with two, the workload doubled.

Besides maintaining the house, I had to supervise and nurture two very different personalities. As she grew older, Rani continued to be quiet and shy. Her younger sister talked constantly and walked, skipped, or ran all the time. Rani awoke by 5:30AM daily and never napped. Leela woke up about 7:00AM, and took a midday nap. I learned to sleep with interruptions. If Rani wanted to sit and read, Leela wanted to go outside. I couldn't be in two places at once, so I built a routine. Along with a regular bedtime and nutritional meal schedule, I incorporated rest, reading, inside and outside play time into the day. If Leela preferred to ride her tricycle outside instead of reading, she had to wait until outside time and sit quietly and listen. If Rani wanted to stay inside and read in the afternoon instead of going to the park, she could bring her book along to the park but she had to go. I gave them choices and allowed them to share their feelings, but I did not tolerate the occasional whining. I wanted my children to learn the difference between expressing their opinions freely and being self-absorbed.

I recall so much detail about Rani's childhood, perhaps because I had only her for two years. But also because, as my oldest, everything she did - from learning to walk; riding a bike; learning to read; or beginning school - was something I had never

experienced before. The details of Leela's childhood are murkier. By the time I had my third child, nothing was really new.

My son spent a lot of time in a car seat as I drove his sisters to and from school, birthday parties, and sports. I watched him but not with the same level of vigilance I had had with his sisters. I was outnumbered three to one. When my husband would ask me where our toddler son was, I would tell him he was playing in the other room. "Why aren't you watching him?" he would ask me from his perch on the sofa in the family room.

"He knows where I am."

"What if he gets hurt?"

"He'll find me."

Familiarity yields confidence. I never really ever read parenting books. I didn't have the time or energy. But I kept a paperback copy of Dr. Spock's Baby and Child Care at my bedside table for referencing in those first years as a new mom. Rani cried so much when I put her to sleep at night in her crib that I finally decided to follow the famous doctor's advice. I put Rani to bed and affectionately whispered good night, walked out of the room, and didn't go back, just as Dr. Spock had recommended. But Rani didn't fall asleep after thirty minutes. She continued her frantic crying. My husband and I couldn't take it. I felt guilty letting her cry for so long. She was a colicky baby. Maybe she cried from distress, not stubbornness. I couldn't tell the difference. I picked her up and soothed her. Eventually she fell asleep from pure exhaustion. Rani continued to cry well after the third night. Dr. Spock's advice didn't work with her. Following Dr. Spock's advice only

served to reinforce my self-doubt, and question the normalcy of my daughter's behavior. I decided to stop consulting parenting books and trust myself, despite continued doubts. Still, for over twenty years, I have continued to read newspaper and magazine articles I come across on children's issues.

I'm proud of my children and how they've turned out. I'm glad I trusted my intuition. I treasure the time I spent with my children. There is something enchanting about stepping into a child's imagined world and living in the moment. Housework and the outside world seem diminished and inconsequential by comparison. Playing with my children pleased them. As for me, those fleeting moments in the midst of the busyness of life brought me immense joy and a sense of fulfillment. Of course, reality always resumed and so did picking up toys and returning them to the toy chest that only moments earlier had served as the queen's castle. I can't say I find any intrinsic value in tidying up, except I like neatness. In those still and simple moments of play, or snuggling in a warm bed with a feverish child, or singing lullabies to them at bedtime, I was making a home. Nothing mattered more to me.

My home will be child free soon. What will I do then? It took me years to gain confidence and find my way as a mother. Now, I must rediscover myself, both as the mother of adult children and as a middle-aged woman. I consider this new phase in my life challenging and scary. I lack confidence once again.

I've considered returning to nursing part time. But, recently, I watched the young nurses at work during my mother's hospitalization, and realized that, at my age, I lack the

energy required for this demanding profession. Honestly, I don't want to learn all the new technology and procedures in nursing practice today. My energy and motivation are reserved for writing now.

I've always been interested in writing, but never had the time once I had children. Before kids, I dabbled in writing children's stories. A few years ago, I began to write again. I am now in grad school and writing my thesis. The piece you are currently reading, dear reader, is part of my thesis.

One almost-empty nest middle-aged mom I know opened a chocolate shop in our hometown. I know a few moms who have returned to or become teachers. One mom returned to nursing part time. A dad on my son's basketball team retiring from the federal government after thirty years is considering teaching inner-city kids. I plan to write about motherhood. Writing about motherhood now seems like the right way to pursue something new and continue the work and interest I've had for decades about parenting, family life, and children.

INTUITION

At dinner, recently, our friends Brian and Tracy told my husband and me about their three-year-old son's troubles in the private pre-school he attends.

"Samuel uses both his left and right hand to write," said Brian, as the four of us sipped red wine and ate our meal at an upscale restaurant in Northern Virginia. I listened knowingly. My son, Anil, 17, had also alternated between his left and right hand at that age.

"The child development expert at the school recommended occupational therapy (OT) for him," Brian said, his voice strained with concern. Brian, an attorney, and his wife Tracy - a physician - oftentimes tell me about their children and seek my advice. Though they are less than a decade younger than my husband and me, they had their two boys much later than we did. I was twenty-eight when I had the first of my three children. Tracy was in her late thirties when she had her first son, and she's continued to work full-time as a radiologist. My kids, whom I have raised as a stay-at-home mother, are now 22, 20, and 17.

I understand why Brian and Tracy wanted my opinion. When my kids were little, I sometimes sought out my mother's advice or the counsel of an elderly neighbor who was a grandmother and mother of six grown children. As a former nurse, I felt confident in my ability to assess and care for my children when they were sick. If my kids had a

fever, I would medicate them and monitor them, evaluating day-to-day whether to take them to the pediatrician. But in dealing with a poor, picky eater, or a very shy child, I lacked confidence. I sought guidance and support from an experienced mother. I didn't trust my intuition.

* * *

When my son was two-years-old, I noticed how he switched crayons back and forth between hands as he scribbled in coloring books. His two older sisters had used their right hands exclusively to draw, color, and write. Later, in pre-school, he continued the same practice. His teacher never inquired about his apparent ambidextrous inclination.

My mother-in-law, a former nurse, did take note. "Looks like Anil is left-handed like Praveen." Her younger son wrote using his left hand. My husband and I use our right hand.

"He uses both," I responded.

"Shouldn't he decide on one?"

"He will eventually. I'm not worried about it," I said. I wasn't about to reveal any uncertainty or insecurity regarding my parenting to my confident mother-in-law, who often reminded me of her prestigious Harvard training and subsequent Master's degree in psychology.

I did wonder from time to time when my son would settle on one hand or the other. I may have discussed it with the pediatrician at a regularly scheduled appointment at some point. I can't remember. But I do recall that neither the pediatrician nor any of

his early teachers voiced any concern to me. My son was happy and developmentally successful for his age. I could see that he was well-adjusted even if he couldn't seem to decide which hand to use for everything. Looking back, I wonder if the pediatrician's and the teacher's lack of commentary unknowingly helped boost my confidence and reinforce my maternal intuition.

* * *

“Why does he need occupational therapy?” I asked.

“His inability to decide if he is left or right handed,” Brian replied.

“Are you serious?” I said. “That’s ridiculous,” my husband and I said simultaneously. “Anil did the same thing at that age. He would write and eat alternating between his left and right hand. His teachers never said anything to me,” I continued. “He eats and writes with his right hand now, but he kicks the soccer ball with his left foot and shoots baskets favoring his left arm.”

“Really?” Brian asked, shooting his wife a glance.

“Did you say no?” I asked, shifting my gaze from one to the other.

“No... we agreed,” said Tracy. “I didn’t think he needed it but I felt guilty saying no. What if I was wrong?”

“You know your son better than anyone else. You have to trust yourself.”

* * *

Looking back, I didn't trust myself either. Both my daughters weighed about six pounds at birth. Though they were not pre-mature babies, they appeared thin and fragile. In addition, they had very small appetites. Besides feeling tired and overwhelmed, I felt

guilty and inadequate. Why didn't my daughters nurse better? What was I doing wrong?

As a nurse, I should know better, I thought. But I didn't. Nursing came with a degree and training. Motherhood did not. Why didn't they eat more as toddlers, giving up after just a few morsels? Was it my cooking? I tried the strained peas for their nutritional value, but I held my breath each time I inserted the baby spoonful into their mouths hoping they would not spit it up. When I fed them vegetables, I let them watch Sesame Street or Mr. Roger's Neighborhood as a distraction. It helped. But it didn't always work. Feeding them pureed sweet potatoes, mac and cheese, or spaghetti with tomato sauce proved easier. Still, they ate so little, I always worried they didn't get enough calories from these carbohydrate-rich foods to support basic metabolic needs and weight gain.

Each time I took them to the pediatrician for a check-up, I hoped they had gained weight. The night before the appointment I was always so anxious, I didn't sleep well. But the story was always the same: 90th percentile in height, 10th percentile in weight compared to their peers on the standardized graphic scale used to measure growth. My girls were very tall for their age, but they were also quite thin. They lacked the chubby cheeks and baby fat visible in my baby pictures. No matter what I did to try to get them to eat more, they didn't.

I didn't need to be reminded of my daughters' small size. It was always on my mind. But I was. When my mother-in-law came to visit, she always pointed out how skinny they were. She asked me what I fed them and how often I fed them. I didn't dare reveal my fears that they didn't eat enough to survive despite their healthy and happy disposition, and that if they got sick and didn't eat at all, they wouldn't have any extra

weight to spare and could possibly die. I just pretended, in front of her, like there was no problem. I didn't care for her unsolicited opinion. My mother-in-law never changed a diaper or offered me a kind word of support like my mother and pediatrician had. My mother also pointed out how skinny the girls were. I didn't like hearing it from her either. But mom's tone seemed to come from a kinder, gentler place. Mom is the one who suggested feeding them while they watched television. And she oftentimes came over to help me. My wonderful pediatrician, Millie Barber, knew how I felt. She always made a point of emphasizing how happy and healthy the girls were despite their small size and appetites. She told me no one knew my kids better than I did, and nobody loved them more than I did. "Believe in yourself," she told me.

* * *

I struggled to believe in myself – to trust myself. As a young mother I lacked confidence, experience, and training. Unlike nursing or medicine or education, in motherhood, you learn as you go. That's probably why I asked my mom and elderly neighbor for advice.

I can't imagine how I would have felt if a child development expert embedded in my child's school had told me my little boy needed therapy for something as benign as ambidexterity. There was no child development expert in my son's (or daughters') Northern Virginia pre-school in the early 2000s to undermine my intuition and self-confidence. But that was then. Listening to Brian now, as an older, more experienced, and confident mom, I grew angry. How could vulnerable, loving, albeit anxious, parents like Brian and Tracy ever cultivate their intuition if a child development expert and the

school that hired her preyed on their insecurity, casting fear and doubt. Parents should have the option, as I did, to pursue professional advice, not have it thrust upon them in a school setting.

When my son was little, his pediatrician gently suggested during a check-up that I might want to consider speech therapy for him. The pediatrician thought he had a minor lisp and voiced concern about possible teasing and self-consciousness later, as an adolescent. I agreed he had a lisp and pursued her recommendation. Following my intuition sometimes involves taking the expert's advice – but that advice should be given in a kind, caring, and respectful manner.

* * *

I didn't make it a habit to give my opinion or offer unsolicited advice unless I was concerned for someone's well-being. My girls, despite having small appetites, turned out to be just fine – they eat reasonably as adults. As my daughters grew into adults, they did not have problems with obesity or eating disorders – eating has not turned out to be a problem for them either way. In fact, ironically, other people's children have problems.

When my daughter told me how one of her college roommates - a tall, thin, and friendly girl who has vacationed with my family - had stopped eating regular meals and taken to exercising excessively when she did eat, I listened. When she told me about the dietary comments that made eating in her presence uncomfortable, and about the frequent daily trips to the bathroom scale, I listened. I told my daughter I was concerned her roommate might have an eating disorder. My daughter agreed. Maybe she should express her concerns to her, I suggested. She never did. I asked her if the girl's parents (whom

I've met) knew. She didn't think so. When she later told me how her roommate had grown moody and referred to herself as "obese" after gaining six pounds during a binge-eating weekend in which one of the other roommates thought she heard her vomiting in the bathroom after eating, I told her I thought the situation had gotten worse and I felt she needed intervention. I was genuinely worried about her health. My daughter told me the girl had dropped three dress sizes in one semester and barely ate. I told my daughter I was going to call her parents. I felt I had to, though I dreaded doing so. If it were my daughter, I would want to know. Before speaking to the girl's mother, I made a list of references for support services (with telephone numbers) to offer her, just as I had for my brother years ago when his son had been repeatedly bullied throughout middle school. I imagined she would be upset and I wanted to offer her tangible hope and support like I had received from my mother and pediatrician.

I told the girl's mother everything my daughter had shared with me and how I was concerned, as were my daughter and the other roommates, that her daughter might have an eating disorder. She listened and calmly thanked me for letting her know and for the referrals. She told me that she and her husband were planning on driving up to visit her in school soon. Finally, she said, "Leela [my daughter] is a true friend." Later, my daughter told me that the girl had yelled at her for telling me and upset I had spoken to her parents because she didn't have a problem. Offering advice has mixed results.

I normally listened to Brian and Tracy without commenting when they told me about their bright-eyed, smiling children whom I've never met but seen in photos. But not this time. My friends' son was not the only one in his pre-school receiving occupational

therapy. Apparently, a classmate had also been referred by the school and the parents agreed to treatment. I wondered silently why these parents so easily agreed without questioning or seeking advice from their pediatricians.

I recalled a separate occasion in which Brian and Tracy had told my husband and me how a teacher at this pre-school had expressed concern about the same son after the boy had pinched her. Brian was so anxious about the incident that he couldn't sleep that night, even though it had only happened once. I'd asked him if he'd talked to his son about the incident. Neither parent had because the teacher told them not to discuss the incident. I was appalled that the teacher would cut off communication between parents and child. Thinking back on all these instances, I was angry at the school for undermining parents. The school seemed to assume that the teachers and "the experts", who saw the child for a few hours, knew better than the parents.

"I don't like this school. If it was my son, I'd pull him out as fast as possible. This child development expert sure seems to be drumming up a lot of business for the occupational therapist. I'm sure she's getting something in return," I blurted. Brian and Tracy looked at each other without responding. "Be careful of labels," I continued. "I wouldn't be surprised if they tell you he has ADHD next." Maybe I had spoken more angrily and alarmingly than I'd wanted to, but I was so mad, I couldn't help it.

I was surprised my friends hadn't questioned the teacher then nor when they were told their son displayed a lack of creativity because he played by himself lining toy cars in a single file. Didn't they feel they had the right - the duty - as parents? Where was

their intuition? They were too willing to accept the teacher's opinion only, when they had known their own child for all these years and spent every day with him.

I can see how much harder it is for parents of young children now, because the trend is to call in a specialist for everything that seems like an aberration rather than trusting the overall picture that a parent gets every day that would put these aberrations into context. I didn't see any harm in my son writing or eating with his left hand as long as he didn't struggle with the task. For professional and well-to-do parents in affluent, competitive, and highly-educated Northern Virginia, where I live, there is even stronger pressure to call in a specialist for everything, and this concerns and angers me.

I suppose it's harmless when little girls and their dolls go to the American Girl store at Tysons Corner Mall so the dolls can get manicures, or for parents to pay up to \$1,000 per hour for SAT tutoring. The commercialization of childhood play (or test preparation) doesn't hurt a child; but assuming that only a specialist – like an occupational therapist – can figure out how to deal with a child who is ambidextrous poses risks. A child, like Samuel, who is constantly singled out, may feel there is something wrong with him – that he is different from his peers in a negative way. Similarly, parents who always accept without questioning, or seek out specialists for advice, will never learn to trust their intuition and believe in themselves.

* * *

In his book, *Anatomy of an Epidemic: Magic Bullets, Psychiatric Drugs, and the Astonishing Rise of Mental Illness in America*, science writer Robert Whitaker looks at the contradiction between the continuing rise of mental illness in young people despite

treatment with psychiatric medications. Through close examination of scientific studies, Whitaker's conclusions challenge the conventional treatment of mental illness and shine a critical light on the motives of the pharmaceutical industry that promotes long term use of these mind altering medications. This is the rare book that dares to question the status quo in a marketplace where there are so many books that focus on what is wrong with our children.

In reading Whitaker's book, I thought about the parents of the children treated for ADHD or bipolar illness, and wondered how they came to seek treatment for their child. How does a parent know when to seek help? How does a parent decide to trust a doctor or a child development expert's advice or simply rely on his or her own intuition or instinct?

I don't have an answer. But I believe a parent must trust his or her intuition, practice common sense, and believe in themselves above all. Intuition (that sensory perception that does not involve reason) and common sense (the cognitive alternative to intuition that includes knowledge and understanding) must be cultivated by the individual, not left to others with no vested emotional interest. Of course, never trusting a doctor one sought out would also be a problem. Weighing the options and finding a balance between sound, professional advice and one's intuition and common sense is important. Brian and Tracy neither sought out the child development expert's counsel nor received sound advice. What kind of an expert discourages parent/child communication and intuition?

I don't regret having a speech therapist work with my son. There was no risk in that. I continued the sessions for a while, even though he resisted and progressed slowly. I decided to terminate them once I believed my son had gained all he could from the sessions.

* * *

"Maybe we should send him to another school," one parent said to the other.

"But this school has a great reputation," the other replied.

"You need to do what's good for your child," I said. "I worry he will think there is something wrong with him. Look ... you guys are already unsure of yourselves." Brian, Tracy, and my husband all nodded. Sending their son to another school wouldn't do any good, I thought, unless the parents changed their attitude. But, I didn't say anything.

"Can I put you on speed dial?" Brian asked me, in the parking lot, after dinner.

Putting me on speed dial would only be more of the same, I thought – he'd just be replacing his other "experts" with me. "You don't need to," I said. "You just need to go with your gut instinct and believe in yourself."

* * *

Being a parent is hard. Even with my nurse's training and the choice I could make to stay home with my children, I had to learn to trust my intuition in knowing when to seek help or intervention in raising my children. There is no easy answer or way for me to show people how to build their confidence. But this is what I'd like to see happen.

Having the support of my mother and excellent pediatrician – who offered advice, but also encouragement – helped me gain my confidence and learn to trust my intuition.

Their advice came from a kinder and gentler place, not the judgmental one of my mother-in-law, nor the alarming place of the child developmental expert in Brian and Tracy's son's pre-school. And while not all school officials and medical experts mean to be negative, Brian and Tracy's son's teacher was acting more like my mother-in-law: judgmental rather than helpful. Maybe the reason I trusted my own intuition and the advice of well-meaning and loving family and friends was because their advice came from that kinder, gentler place – they loved me and my child. They had nothing to gain or lose.

TOBY, MOM, AND ME

My parents' house looked worn and dated in the summer sun. It was a Friday in late July 2012 and I was taking mom on a six day cruise to Bermuda for her 80th birthday, even though my nine – plus year old Golden Retriever Toby was home dying from cancer. My mother and I would spend four days at sea and two days in Bermuda. Sail time was 4:30pm but we needed to be there at least ninety minutes prior to departure or risk being denied boarding. So I arrived at Mom's house with plenty of time to spare. Mom knew about the horrendous traffic in Northern Virginia. Her house was an hour away from the port on a good traffic day, and it was now one o'clock.

My short mother, dressed in white Capri pants, a blue T-shirt, and sneakers, stood by the kitchen door next to her purse, suitcase, and sweater. I loaded her heavy suitcase into the trunk of my car parked in her driveway. She scurried past me and across the neighbor's driveway to their front door. "I'll be right back," she said in Spanish. "I forgot to tell George and Conchita to pick up my mail."

We always speak in Spanish. My family is originally from Spain. We moved to the United States when I was ten and settled in Falls Church, Virginia. That was forty years ago. My parents still live in the same house. I live nearby in Vienna, Virginia with my husband and 21, 19, and 16 year-old children.

Mom is never on time for anything. She's on Spanish Standard Time – a ticking time-free universe. “Just call them from the car,” I told her. “We don't have time now.”

“It'll just take a moment. I'll give Conchita these *Hola* magazines I saved for her,” she said, holding up a pile of the popular Spanish celebrity gossip magazine.

“Why do you need to give her the magazines now? That can wait. Let's go.”

I backed the car out of the driveway and pulled up in front of her neighbor's house. The three of them stood on the front stoop talking. I honked, rolled down the passenger window and yelled to Mom, “Let's go, NOW.” I turned to her neighbors of forty years and said, “She knows we have to get going, but she continues to talk.”

Mom knew Toby was dying. She had taken care of him in the past, even performing the Heimlich maneuver on him when he choked on a dog toy buzzer. Toby loved her in return – just as our two dogs had growing up – always running to her and wagging his tail so fiercely that his rump swayed in unison. If I asked her she'd say that she loved him as much as I did, but she didn't even ask me about him.

I couldn't understand how she could compartmentalize his terminal illness so effectively. She should be just as anxious about leaving him (or my leaving him) as I was if she really loved him as much as I did. But she was ebullient about the cruise. She looked forward to getting away with me and not “have to think for myself” when she travelled with me. I had no choice but to please her. That was the whole point of the trip. Still, as I waited in the car, my thoughts were consumed by Toby. Not Mom, or the cruise.

“Maria’s always in a rush,” she told the neighbors, as she walked away. I was accustomed to having my concerns dismissed, but on this day it wasn’t acceptable. I’d spent good money to go on a trip I didn’t even want to go on. We had to make it on time, and mom had to have a great time. The last thing she needed to be doing, now, was dawdling in front of her neighbor’s house.

At 2:45, Mom and I walked up the rising, winding gangplank that deposited us onto the third deck of the mammoth *Enchantment of the Seas* in the Port of Baltimore. “Come on, Mom. It’s almost 3 o’clock,” I said, turning back to face her.

“I can only go so fast,” replied my mother, huffing, while adjusting her black eyeglasses as she leaned against the railing momentarily. Her thickset upper body rose and fell with each labored breath. Mom no longer walked with the speed and agility I was accustomed to. She moved slower now that she was older.

Mom loves cruises. She and dad have been on many in the past. But dad’s arthritis had flared up, preventing him from accompanying her this time around. Someone had to celebrate this landmark birthday. At eighty, Mom’s time was limited. As the oldest of two, and the only daughter in a traditional Spanish family, I felt it my duty. Nobody had to tell me to do it. Not my father, not my younger brother, not my husband, nor my children. I was the primary caregiver for my children and Toby. Now I was in charge of mom, too, it seemed.

We posed for the requisite, cheesy, pre-boarding photo – a memento of the great time that was still to come – before joining the giddy multitude happily roaming the decks with their colorful alcoholic concoctions in tow.

“Look, all these people are already having drinks,” she said to me. We could be slurping our own strawberry daiquiris or pina coladas too if we’d gotten here earlier, I thought. But I kept it to myself. This trip was all about mom having a great time now that she was in her golden years, and free to live without rules and responsibilities. I was determined to let her lead the way. I would try not to think about Toby. He had been diagnosed with cancer six months prior. I knew he didn’t have many weeks or months to live. I silently hoped and prayed he’d be okay until I got back home. I just wished I could control the timing of events in my life. But, I couldn’t. Besides, if I had stayed at home with Toby instead of taking mom on this cruise, I would’ve felt guilty. I couldn’t win either way. For six days, I would try to put Toby’s illness out of my mind and acquiesce to my mother’s every caprice with a smile on my face.

Cruise ships are large floating cities. Commissioned in 1997, the eighty-thousand seven-hundred ton, 990 foot long, eleven deck high *Enchantment of the Seas* boasts a variety of activities, eateries, and entertainment for its 2,446 passengers. Mom and I made our way to our stateroom located on the third deck at the bow of the ship along a narrow passageway in this floating city. Entering our narrow and rectangular stateroom, I was struck by the king size bed with the porthole-window-as-a-headboard before me.

No, No, it wasn't that type of relationship, I thought. We weren't on our honeymoon or celebrating a wedding anniversary. The king bed in our port side stateroom must be a mistake, but before I had the chance to contact anyone, a voice over the loud speaker summoned us to our assigned muster station for a mandatory safety drill.

"I've been to so many of these," said Mom. "They're a waste of time."

I reminded mom the *Costa Concordia* that ran aground off the coast of Italy earlier in the year never practiced any emergency procedures before sailing. This cruise line was being responsible. The least we could do was to be attentive.

Mom and I walked amid the throng of passengers to our assigned muster station on deck 2. The cruise had sold out. She and I stood in the back of a packed crowd. Mom noted how she was dwarfed by the young and middle-aged couples around her.

"I should be in the front. I can't see anything," she said, "I don't think there's enough room in that boat for all of us," she added, pointing to the life boat hanging over our heads.

"Don't worry, *mama*. I'll shove you in if I need to. Women and children first." She laughed. I liked making her laugh. And the lightness of the moment was a welcome and rare departure from my preoccupation with Toby.

The crewmember conducting the drill did not demonstrate how to wear the lifejacket. He simply told us to retrieve it from the closet in our stateroom, put it on, and proceed to our assigned muster station in case of an emergency.

Why do these safety procedures (like similar ones on airplanes) always feel like an exercise in futility, as if the unimaginable wouldn't dare materialize? Toby couldn't

possibly die while I was away from him. I recalled images of the shaken survivors of the *Costa Concordia* on the evening news.

Shortly thereafter, we were dismissed, and an announcement followed to tell us about some general rules and guidelines. One of them was that all minors had to be out of public areas after 1 a.m. The crowd let out a collective sneer of incredulousness. Until that late hour, adults would have to share our promenades with all the busy little bees and dawdling teens that swarmed the pool deck and eateries all day long.

On our first night at sea, Mom popped a sleeping pill and slept in the same position. Next to her, I tossed and turned – despite being gently rocked by the ship’s soft swaying motion - replaying over and over again how, a few hours earlier in the ship’s casino, some nice middle-aged man from New Jersey won \$32,000 on the slot machine I had only seconds earlier abandoned. I imagined what I would have done with the money.

My mother’s proximity was unnatural, uncomfortable, and suffocating. I imagined she could read my thoughts and sense my fear and anxiety about Toby. We were sharing a king bed that was actually two twin beds joined together. The bed could not be taken apart that first evening because the bedding was the wrong size. The following day I asked our stateroom attendant to make up the twin beds instead. Mom agreed we’d have more room.

Mom slept until 2pm every day. Ambien will do that when you don’t take it until two o’clock in the morning – her normal bedtime. Mom has been a night owl and an insomniac for many years now; taking a sleeping pill at that hour is normal for her. The

morning, when I could eat breakfast alone, exchanging pleasantries with strangers, became my favorite part of the day. Taking walks on the windy, rocking, tenth deck around the outdoor track circling the pools filled with active, noisy youngsters and chaise-laden supine sun worshipers sleeping or reading, I thought of Toby. Only then did my mind and emotions sail, like the ship, freely and privately on the high seas.

My pace and my thoughts slowed when I was with mom. She walked slowly and she forgot her thought in mid-sentence. Age had caught up with her in the last few years. No longer could she sustain the brisk pace she maintained after years of exercising. She got short of breath easily now. Stairs evoked fear of falling and hesitation. No longer could she recount conversations without mixing up people and dates, pausing and staring in the distance to sort her thoughts. “I’m not senile,” she’d declare with a trembling voice. She wasn’t really telling me. She was trying to convince herself that she was still in control of her clearly declining mental and physical faculties. I longed for the energetic and active mother of a couple of years ago whose quick wit and insight I always sought out. A mother who would have been more attuned to and supportive of my concern for my dying dog.

On our first full day at sea, we ate lunch at the glass-enclosed Windjammer Café on the ninth deck surrounded by the endless Atlantic Ocean. It was 3:30 in the afternoon.

“I have to have breakfast first before I can eat lunch,” she said. The Windjammer was a self-service, buffet style eatery and the main casual dining room for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Before us lay a vast spread of salads (green and pasta), sandwiches,

burgers, hot dogs, pizza, and desserts. Bottomless coffee, tea, iced tea, and water were provided.

“Breakfast ends at eleven o’clock in the morning. You’ll have to get up earlier if you want to eat it.”

“That’s so early. I’m not a morning person. Ask them if I can get some toast and jam.”

I didn’t mind asking. The staff was trained to be attentive and aimed to please.

Mom ate her wheat toast with strawberry jam. I had a chef’s salad. We talked about the abundant food and the girth of many of the passengers; the nationalities of the international crew - many of whom were from India and South America; and, we talked about our relatives in Spain, much like we did when we went out for lunch back home in Virginia.

At home, I spoke to mom every day and tried to take her to lunch once a week. I felt guilty if I didn’t. Our homes were only fifteen minutes from each other’s. I imagined her sitting at home alone, bored, and lonely. Although dad complained constantly about his aching body, he always kept busy doing what he enjoyed. If he wasn’t in the garage building something, he’d be off at Home Depot buying yet another much needed tool. He loved mom the way you love someone after fifty-one years of marriage, but he never considered her happiness from day to day. His generation of Spanish men expected their wives to stay home and raise children. The man’s only duty was to provide for his family. Dad had fulfilled his duty.

When I was a child, dad also expected me - not my brother - to help mom clean, cook, and serve meals. Men in traditional Spanish families are exempt, even prohibited, from any domestic duties. Caring for others was the primary role I ever saw women take part in. Not that mom, nor I, frowned upon other more liberated roles for women. To this day, mom still resents dad for not allowing her to return to her work as a nurse when my brother and I began school. Mom and I both feel women should have the choice to work outside the home or stay at home full time. We agree about a lot of things. I even became a nurse and a mother, just like her, but there is one big difference. Mom was happy to be distanced from the shackles of her mothers' and sisters' lives in Spain. Living in the United States, she was spared from the constant tug of expectation and guilt. I wasn't. When mom's mother got old and died, mom didn't have to take care of her day to day. In contrast, whether back home or on this cruise, I was tied to mom.

When I returned from the restroom on that first day of our cruise, mom was wolfing down the linguini alfredo.

"You need to eat protein, Mom," I said. "You're eating too many carbs. You complain about your weight, but you're eating the wrong foods." Mom had been careful to eat a balanced diet until recently. It bothered me that she was giving up on herself now, at age 80. I wanted her to take care of herself for her own good but it was for my own too. I was busy caring for my family and my dog whose death I couldn't prevent or predict. I didn't want to care for her too.

"*Aaay, hija*. It's very good. Here, try some," she said, extending a forkful in my direction. "It's nice not to have to cook. I could do this every day."

I smiled and nodded. Mom sacrificed a career as a nurse to stay home and raise a family. She deserved a break from the kitchen and the humdrum routine of domestic life she had so dutifully executed. Instead of nagging her on her vacation, I decided, I should take pleasure in watching her enjoy her food.

After eating, we walked through the outdoor pool area to the covered solarium - humid and quiet and devoid of children. This is where I'd be if I could, I thought. I turned around to see if mom was following behind me. She was treading close behind, careful not to slip on the wet pavement. We took the elevator down to the sixth deck and perused the boutiques. Mom debated between a T-shirt or a model of the ship for my brother's young son. She fingered through women's cruise wear comparing prices to similar purchases she'd made on past cruises. She considered the prices comparable. Her energy level rose. Mom liked shopping. She decided to buy the model of the ship for her youngest grandson.

Each night, during turndown service, the stateroom attendant left the daily *Compass* newsletter that listed the activities on board. Mom and I reviewed the weather and planned our activities for the following day. The first night of the cruise we went to the casino after dinner and spent a couple of hours. Mom loves the casino. She played the penny and nickel slots, settling in for the long haul at a machine she deemed "lucky". Around her, women her age shared winning strategies and encouraged each other. I stood behind mom watching her luck ebb and flow. I imagined the husbands of these other

senior ladies were somewhere else in the casino, perhaps playing blackjack or poker. I didn't see any other daughters traveling with their mothers.

On the second night after dinner, we chose to check out the Karaoke in the Boleros Lounge. We'd both been to Karaoke nights before on separate cruises and we looked forward to watching brave strangers transform into various musical personas. There's a lot of vocal talent out there and a lot of, well, entertaining wannabes. Both are fun to watch and talk about.

Sipping surprisingly good pina coladas at a corner table we watched - along with countless families, couples, and groups of single adults – a never-ending stream of youngsters and tweens lip-sync to country, rock, and Elvis music as their families egged them on. I felt we had stumbled into a kid's birthday party. This is where the "minors" came to while the night away when they weren't in the forbidden "public areas".

"It's almost midnight. These little kids should be sleeping by now," Mom declared. "I never let you and your brother stay up this late at that age."

"My kids didn't stay up past their bedtime at that age either."

"It's the parents' fault."

Mom spoke with the authority, clarity, and confidence I recalled from my youth. I enjoyed this glimpse of the strong, vibrant woman I fondly remember and now miss.

"You're right, Mom."

I didn't always agree with mom, but, at this moment, I felt a connection to her. I'd imitated her parenting style and raised my children with similar discipline. Mom and I

finished our drinks and left. Neither one of us could stomach any more of these syrupy American Idol wannabes and their discourteous parents.

At three o'clock in the afternoon on Day 2, a Sunday, we arrived in Bermuda. Neither mom nor I had ever been to this British colonial territory located 640 miles to the west-northwest of Cape Hatteras, North Carolina. I'd heard from a friend about the island's lovely pink sand beaches. I looked forward to going. We walked from the pier to a little shopping mall about a quarter of a mile from the ship. Above us, dark, ominous clouds gathered. The palm trees in our path swayed constantly. Small boats rocked in their slips. We'd been informed of an approaching thunderstorm, but we were only in Bermuda until Tuesday morning.

The exodus of people from the cruise ship descended upon the shops. I trailed mom as she wove her way through boutiques displaying resort wear and the requisite touristy trinquets such as shot glasses and T-shirts branded "Bermuda." Mom gravitated to the Capri pants. She'd gained weight and her clothes didn't fit.

"Do you like this?" she asked me, holding up coral Capri pants.

"*Si*, great fit, and color." The soft color, so prevalent on this island, suited her nicely. A smiling, older, Caucasian sales lady with a British accent asked us if we needed assistance. She showed mom a matching sea shell sequined top. Mom smiled fast and nodded. I insisted she try it on since it couldn't be returned. After purchasing the outfit, Mom enthusiastically considered where she might wear it. I noticed a newfound bounce in her step. I felt a sense of accomplishment: Mom was enjoying herself.

There were still a handful of stores left to explore. “*Mama*, stores close in less than two hours. You need to pick up your pace if you want to see everything.”

“Don’t rush me. If I don’t see everything, so what.”

“Okay.” I’d slipped. I was task oriented. I needed to reset my mindset to meet mom’s. She was relaxed now and having a good time – my goal for the cruise; I had better not blow it.

The hot and humid July air combined with the crowded, non-air-conditioned shopping mall made us thirsty and sweaty. We purchased cold water bottles (so much cheaper than on the ship) from a convenience store in the mall. The young, smiling, Afro-Bermudian ladies didn’t seem at all bothered by the heat and humidity. I suspect they were amused by the restless discomfort of so many of the spoiled American customers buying water.

After sitting on a park bench outside the mall resting and drinking our water - and studying a strange bird that looked like a cross between a pigeon and a rooster pass us by, we started walking back to the ship. Within minutes, lightning struck and thunder thwacked. I told mom to continue walking by herself because I needed to make a phone call. I’d noticed a Wifi area near the tourist information center on our way to the shopping center. From there, I could call home and check on Toby and talk to my kids. There was poor to no reception on the ship and the cost was exorbitant. This was my best opportunity to make a phone call alone.

Over the clap of thunder, torrential rain, and static, I could barely hear my husband tell me how he had taken Toby to the vet because he’d stopped eating. The

tumor was bleeding into his abdomen making him nauseous. The vet prescribed medicine for nausea and pain. I was the one who always took Toby to the vet but I was in Bermuda in a thunderstorm. I wanted to be with Toby as much as I'd needed to take mom on this cruise. While I ran back to the ship, I contemplated getting struck by lightning. At that moment, I didn't really care if I did. I was consumed by guilt. Toby wasn't just a dog. He was my youngest child. What kind of a mother abandons her dying child?

Mom was already aboard and dry. I was soaked. She knew Toby had cancer. I'd told her when he was first diagnosed earlier in the year. And yet she hadn't mentioned him once since the cruise started. She didn't ask how he was doing and I struggled to remind myself that I was here for her. I didn't want her to feel bad about keeping me away from Toby and my family. I didn't tell her about the current development. It was just as well. I tried to remember this trip was my idea, not hers. It wasn't her fault Toby had taken a turn for the worse at this particular time. Really, the whole thing was my own choice. I felt the need to please my mother, even as an almost fifty-year old woman. It wasn't fair for me to resent her now that I was 1,000 miles away from home on a remote island. Still, try as I might to control my thoughts, part of me resented my mother. Instead of being at home caring for my sick, helpless, older dog, I was entertaining my elderly, but spirited and clueless mother. I was no longer my mother's daughter. I had become her caregiver.

The following day I woke mom up at ten o'clock in the morning. If we were to visit and shop in Hamilton, the capital, we needed to set out early to catch the ferry there.

I took many photos of the typical Bermudian pastel yellow, peach, and green – colored cottages lining the bay during the forty minute ferry ride.

“These homes are so cute,” Mom said. “I need to bring your father here.”

“He’d like it.”

We browsed through boutiques, shoe stores, and jewelry stores until businesses closed for the day, before returning to the dock to catch the ferry back to the ship. Sitting with the gathering crowd under the early evening sun, we watched quite a few well-dressed Englishmen in knee-length pants and knee-high socks empty onto the street and proceed to their mopeds in the parking lot adjacent to us. *Oh...These are the real Bermuda shorts, I thought. So tailored and formal. Not the golf and beachwear versions I’m familiar with.*

“These British are so elegant,” Mom said.

“Indeed,” I replied, imitating a British accent, which made my mother smile. I was like my mother when it came to the Brits: we both considered them to be well-mannered, serious, and sophisticated. After all these years, we were still from Spain – we couldn’t help preferring the sophistication of the British to the casualness of the Americans we lived among.

We departed Bermuda at noon on the fourth day of the cruise. I knew there was no way we’d have enough time to sightsee before departure. I never did get to see the pink sand beaches.

We’d sail for two days before docking again in the Port of Baltimore. I couldn’t wait to get back to Toby and my family. By now, my anxiety had evolved into a sense of

urgency mixed with dread. I repeatedly recalled the conversation I had had on shore with my husband and I feared Toby would die before I got home. I craved time alone to contemplate...think...cry. But I didn't say anything to mom.

I remembered how, when we brought him home as a ten-week-old puppy in the winter, Toby peed on the snow mounds when I took him outside. I smile thinking about his confusion when the snow later melted, and he had to learn to mark the unfamiliar green grass. Or the time mom babysat during a severe thunderstorm and my young kids and Toby straddled her on the sofa, all trembling in fear. Mom would recount that story many times referring to Toby as Scooby-Doo.

“You know, you don't have to be with me every minute. Go do whatever you want,” Mom said after lunch (breakfast for her) later on the fourth day of the cruise.

I was surprised. I wondered if she sensed my frustration. If she did, I didn't want her to take it personally. “I don't mind, Mom,” I tried to reassure her.

“All right. Well, I'm going to go walk around the ship. I don't know where yet.”

Did mom want to have her alone time, too? I thought of all those ladies at the slot machine, enjoying their time away from their husbands. Mom didn't bring her husband on this cruise, but maybe that meant she needed to get away from me – the watchful daughter. Out at sea, unmoored from our accustomed relationship, I was her constant companion. Everyone needed privacy. “Okay,” I replied, relieved by the gift of solitude Mom had just unexpectedly handed me. I was now free to hide and cry if I wanted to. “I'm going to go finish reading my book,” I told her. She didn't need to know how I

really felt. I'd shared laughter, meals, and conversation with her; I didn't want to reveal my sorrow about Toby's impending death. Or my realization that I was protecting her – mothering my own mother instead of my beloved, dying pet.

On this densely populated city-on-the-sea, we only crossed paths twice. The second time, I watched her line dancing with a group of women on the dance floor in the cavernous Carousel lounge. She stood at the edge of the dance floor twirling and waving her arms in the air, oblivious to those surrounding her. She waved me over. I declined. I was happy to see her enjoying herself. I didn't have to force-feed her fun. Mom had shown initiative and taken responsibility for her own entertainment. She didn't need me 24 hours a day.

For the final two days of the cruise, we had lunch together and then went our separate ways until dinner time. Mom wanted me to enjoy myself and do the things I wanted to do. I went to a comedy show by myself one night because, while mom understands and speaks English fluently, albeit, with a thick Spanish accent, she admits to missing the nuances of the jokes. The comedian that night was a confident middle-aged man in a dark suit with a nervy manner. He turned to two college-aged girls in the front row who'd gotten up to go to the restroom during his act and teased them when they returned. The comedian pointed to the young women's boyfriends and said, "They went to the other side while you were gone." The packed theatre roared with laughter. For the first time on the cruise, I genuinely laughed. For that hour, I was distracted from my preoccupation with Toby's deterioration and imminent death.

Still, Toby was never far from my mind. Mom and I spent the last two nights of the cruise at Schooner's Lounge sipping wine and watching young and old couples in semi-formal wear dance before us to Sinatra tunes sung by an engaging pianist with a voice like old blue eyes himself. I imagined people thought mom was a widow and I was her spinster daughter. Why else would two grown women in sun dresses go sit in a piano lounge full of dancing couples? Mom tapped her feet and sang aloud with the amused crowd to Sinatra's "My Way" and "New York, New York," humming her way through parts of forgotten lyrics. I was glad she was having fun.

I struggled to lift my mood to match hers and my surroundings. But I couldn't. Knowing we'd dock back in Baltimore soon intensified my anticipation to get home to Toby and my family. I knew we didn't have much time together with Toby. I could no longer deny it. However, right now, I was still on the cruise, where an air of leisure and pleasure abounded. I fixed a smile and nodded – the same game face I display during Thanksgiving dinner with select relatives and in-laws – while my mind travelled back home. Toby would die soon and I thought about when and how the children would handle his death. Was Toby wondering where I, his mother, was?

As we walked back to our stateroom on the final night of the cruise, a voice over the loud speaker somewhere reminded us to proceed to the photo gallery to purchase the photographs we had taken during the cruise. I decided to buy the cheesy picture of mom and me we had taken when we first boarded as a memento of our cruise. I knew I'd inherit it someday. Who else would want it?

Back in our stateroom, I placed both our suitcases out in the hall for the porter to transport to the terminal early the following morning.

“I should keep mine here,” Mom said. “I’d cruise again tomorrow.”

“You could, Mom, if it’s not sold out. This ship leaves for Bermuda again tomorrow afternoon. I need to get home, though.” While I was relieved to be back, Mom was prepared to set sail again. She must’ve enjoyed herself because she wanted to keep on going.

When the cruise finally ended, I drove mom to her house. As we left the port, Mom thanked me for a wonderful time and the photograph and memories of the two of us. Mom’s mind was still on the cruise. For me, memories of the cruise were fading as fast as the ship in my rearview mirror. My only thoughts were of my poor dog whom I couldn’t wait to get home to. Barely containing my impatience, I pulled into her driveway and carried her suitcase inside the house. I kissed mom goodbye and anxiously headed back home to Toby and my family. A dutiful daughter, relieved of her duties.

BIOGRAPHY

Maria A. Gupta was born in Palma de Mallorca, Spain. As a child, she moved to Montreal, Canada before settling in Virginia. She received her Bachelor of Science in Biology from American University in Washington, D.C. in 1984. She went on to receive her Bachelor of Science in Nursing from George Mason University in 1987. She lives in Vienna, Virginia with her husband and the youngest of her three children.