

Graduating and Gone: A Love Story for my Girl

By Dr. Lise DeGuire, Community Contributor

My oldest daughter, Julia, graduated from college this weekend. My work as her mother is not fully finished, but surely this graduation marks a major crossroads. She is 22, a fully-formed adult, and now a college graduate. I birthed her, fed her, raised her, taught her, protected her, and paid endlessly for her. My work is now...done?

Julia burst into my life like thunder. The first thing I witnessed was her beauty, her tiny features perfectly symmetrical. The second thing I saw was her surprising alertness. I have a photo of us taken on the day she was born. I am holding Julia and she is directly peering into the camera, blue eyes focused, smiling slightly. That photo told me everything I would need to know about her. She would be precocious, rarely tired, and always beguiled by the camera.

Julia was not the child I thought I would have. Like most of us, I assumed I would have a girl like myself. I imagined my daughter would be studious, love to read, and be easily compliant. Instead, Julia was indefatigable, brilliant but distracted, and always pushing every limit. She was not a hard child. She was loving and ethical. But she was also not an easy child. She wanted whatever she wanted fiercely and was incredibly difficult to dissuade from her wish. She never wanted to go to sleep. Every night, for years, she would spring up after bedtime, wander into the hall, and announce a new reason



why she needed to be up. Her creativity was boundless, her excuses always original. Her husky voice would call out over the banister: "I hear a train!" "I forgot to get a form signed." "Where is the cat?"

Mothering Julia was like training a race horse. She needed to understand the limits of the world, to know and respect boundaries. She needed to know how to say "please" and "thank you," and how to sit still during shows. And yet. And yet. I wanted her to hold onto her wild energy, her fierceness, and all that spirit. This world requires strong women, and we won't have them if we tame our girls too hard. For years I tried to rein in Julia, to socialize her just enough, but to keep that wild light aflame inside her, shining brightly.



Dr. DeGuire and her daughters, Julia (left) and Anna (right)
Photos by Michele Freiling Photography

I did the best I could. I consulted parenting books and asked friends for advice. I used behavioral tactics I learned in graduate school, developing positive reinforcements, earnestly deploying stickers. I tried to stay patient although I lost it occasionally, screaming myself hoarse when she lost her brand-new winter coat on the first day she wore it. I loved her dearly.

I was not a perfect parent. At times I was too anxious, other times too rigid, at other times a push-over. I can still be all of these things! But, I'm proud of the job I did. She was not like me in so many ways. But I could always spy that lively spirited soul, who just loved to play.

Our home videos are full of Julia, dancing to music, singing loudly, and yelling, "Watch me! Watch me!" This same little girl is now a 22-year-old trained actress, who sings, dances, and loves improv. She still adores the camera and she still captures the eyes of everyone in the room. She is the exact same person, only now more accomplished and refined, and happily able to set her own bedtime. Soon she will move far away from home, pursuing her craft, following her passion. She would not be dissuaded from this risky artistic path. I never even tried. She's too gifted to dissuade, and plus, she rarely wants my advice. I believe in her.

I don't know what I'm supposed to feel about my oldest child graduating. Pride? Sadness? Joy? I feel all those things. I feel loss too. For 22 years, my most important job was mothering this girl (and then mothering her sister). I approached parenting with diligence, gusto, and heart. Now it's over. Parenthood is a job that, when we've done it well, we put ourselves out of work. I made myself obsolete. I am no longer required. My girl has all the skills she needs to go on and build herself a full life. My job is done.

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