

## ***Shut Up, Mom***

By Heather Meyers

I remember what it is to be a teenager. Back in my day, it was *Shut up, Mother*. There was something more respectful about using her proper name. *Where have you been young lady? Did you do your homework? Why are all the lights on in your bedroom? Did you wash the dishes? Why do you smell like smoke? Is this towel crumpled up in a heap in the corner WET??*

*Shut up, Mother.*

I didn't say it out loud. But I thought it. Really hard. Several times.

And then I became one. A mother. I loved my daughter before anyone else could. The very first flutter of her deep within my tummy one late afternoon while washing dishes. A tiny heartbeat emerging from a monitor strapped on my goopy abdomen. Feeling her tiny feet glide across my ribcage one week past her due date. She didn't want to leave. I remember wanting her out. Like *get-a-crowbar* out. My enormous belly hung heavily in the furnace of an unexpected early heat wave. Sleep wouldn't come. She nestled closer into my belly. Despite being terrified of the unknown waters of childbirth- I took long walks, bounced for hours on my birthing ball, ate spicy food. Anything I could think of to bring her out of me and into the world.

Eventually she arrived after a very long, unmedicated birth. And I wouldn't let her out of my sight. Exhausted already- I fumbled my way through the first months of breastfeeding, diaper changes, colic, and mountains of endless laundry. I had no idea what I was doing. It was terrifying. But oh she was beautiful. Her tiny head smelled like what I imagined to be the scent of perfect moments, first dances, and laughter. Happiness. Her tiny head smelled like happiness.

Soon she became her own little person. Growing out of shoes before I could get them on her feet. She was curious and full of smiles. Crawling. Standing. Walking. Running. Pulling herself up on things I never imagined would need to be baby proofed. Mistakes were made. Eventually I got smarter. I started trusting my gut and feeling like someone's mother. We jumped in mud puddles. Wandered around museums. Caught snowflakes on our tongues. And ate ice cream for breakfast on birthday mornings. I was hers and she was mine.

Soon time became an issue. Preschool. Kindergarten. Play dates and parties at homes I didn't know. One bright morning when she was 3 while playing at the park another child hit her. I turned to the child and said *We don't hit*. The child blinked at me as if I was speaking a foreign language. My own child looked at me and I swear I saw the look. *Shut up, Mom*. In the next moment the other child cried and we were surrounded by unfamiliar mothers and nannies. Despite the apology from the offending child and a round of shared snacks- I couldn't lose the feeling of what I swear I caught a glimpse of.

She was growing, I was parenting. There was a healthy balance of discovery while still within reach of the safety of my arms. But that distance, that perimeter, steadily grew. People talk all the time about wishing they had known it would be the last time they rocked their baby to sleep. Or fed her slippery bananas with a tiny spoon while wiping her chunky cheek with a soft bib with Elmo printed on the front. It was her favorite. I don't even know where that bib is now. Late night dance parties with popcorn and Hannah Montana eventually turned into only seeing the top of her head while she was slouched over, texting. There comes a time when friends become more important than parents. It is simply a fact of life. It started slowly at first- at a concert in the town square. She awkwardly scanned the crowd, spotted a group of kids from her class and ran off. I watched from the perimeter, shouting after her to stay with her friends and out of the street, check in with us in an hour and for goodness sake don't get into a car with a stranger. My child turned and looked at me. *Shut up, Mom.*

I found new friends, too. I started recognizing familiar faces in pick up car lanes, elementary school sing-a-longs, dance recitals. And by middle school band concerts- I searched a few out. We'd giggle like schoolgirls in the back rows of the bleachers- relieved to be out together and yet terrified for our kids because they looked so damn nervous. We'd cheer for them and snap photos as they walked by stiffly holding their instruments, filing into their seats arching behind the conductor. *Shut up, Mom* with a bit of an eye roll added in for good measure. She stopped asking me how things worked sometime in the middle of 6<sup>th</sup> grade. I overheard a hushed Facetime conversation about shaving legs that prompted me to accept that I was no longer the lone expert in my child's life. And at times, even my Mom friends knew more about my own child than I did. *I hear your girl thinks Timmy is cute!* Who the heck is Timmy? Still- there were moments when I caught a glimpse of my little girl, especially after preteen conflicts when she would still curl up in my arms and tell me about her heartbreak. Tissues. Hugs. Getting our favorite Starbucks order to help the smile come back to her face while cruising with the windows down listening to Taylor Swift.

The summer before her freshman year we attended the annual 4<sup>th</sup> of July parade in our town. She was well beyond needing to stick with us. In fact- an early morning car honk alerted us that she was being picked up. We saw her briefly later at the Kiwanis pancake breakfast where she asked for some money. My heart sank just a little as she skipped off dressed in her high school team uniform and cute braids that someone else had done. The parade stepped off not long after and the whole town came out to watch. My kid waved from the street as she passed by while her Dad and I sat on the curb. I remembered in that moment how this parade was the first real adventure away from home years ago when she was just a month old. She slept through the whole thing- even the fire trucks blaring down the street didn't wake her. A few years later she was riding her tricycle in the kids' parade while her Dad navigated from behind. A cute photo ended up in the newspaper of her triumphant smile but a very concerned look on my husband's face as he swerved the shiny red

trike to avoid running over another kid. Over the years we'd ridden on floats together, marched with various clubs, tossed candy to eager kids. Now I was sidelined. Merely an observer. Suddenly I stood up- all I wanted to do was shout *I love you* like Buddy in the Elf movie. Instead I heard a tiny voice in my head. *Shut up, Mom*. So I simply waved as the parade passed by. I don't remember the rest of the day or marching bands or politicians shaking hands in the heat of the day. I spent the remainder of the time explaining to myself that this was my new reality and I better get on board or I'd probably lose my kid entirely. After the school year began, I sat in the stands at football and basketball games, clapping with all the other parents who might have also been suppressing their own Buddy the Elf moments just like me.

She started eyeing our car the next year. By then she had grown taller than me. But her skirts were shorter. She'd roll her eyes when I made her touch her toes to make sure nothing showed that wasn't supposed to. (And I'd like to have a discussion with the manufacturers of shorts about adding a few inches to ensure no butt cheeks would hang out. I would gladly pay extra for the fabric.) I felt like I was simply working as a tollbooth operator- handing out money and allowing her to exit our home as often as she possibly could. There was the added challenge of staying awake to make sure she made it home by curfew. I missed her. And so I nagged her, like mothers do. *Did you do your homework? Why are all the light on in your bedroom? Good lord- where is the floor of your bathroom under all these clothes? How old is this open bag of chips I just pulled out from under your bed? Who are you going to be with and where are you going? Where are all my forks?* I could practically hear the angelic choruses of *Shut Up, Mom* as she pulled her bedroom door closed.

Things get far more complicated in high school. Nobody tells you that. Parenting shifts from simply meeting milestones to playing long ball. Somewhere around sophomore year shit got real as the guidance counselor reached out to discuss ACT tests and inquiries on what your child's plan might be after graduation. Seriously? She can't remember to throw away her take out container so how the hell is she supposed to know what she wants to do with the rest of her life?

And that's when it hit me. Wait a damn minute. She's leaving. I ran to the calendar and calculated that we only had 2 more summer vacations left together. I remembered that summer between 3<sup>rd</sup> & 4<sup>th</sup> grade when the beginning of the school year couldn't come fast enough. And here I was panicking like some bumbling idiot because I'd lost track of time. There weren't enough days left. There never would be again. And I started longing for things that just couldn't be anymore- catching her at the bottom of the slide, slumber parties in my bed, catching fireflies down at the Dairy Queen as ice cream melted down our arms.

By fall of senior year we'd already visited several college campuses- during which she didn't really take any notes to help her remember her impressions of her potential new school (*shut up, Mom*). Now she was in the middle of trying to decide on a major, filling out college applications, writing essays, navigating school work-

all while keeping up with her extra circular activities. My kid was so tired and under so much pressure; it became clear something was going to explode. So when the discussion came up about her potentially taking a campus visit on her own- I was skeptical. She works hard, makes good grades, and is trustworthy. Justifying saying no to the request was difficult. To say the least. She offered to drive herself there and stay with a friend who was a freshman on campus- I knew the kid and her family. My daughter was flush with excitement as she negotiated the trip with her Dad and me. She just finished a slew of exams and was gearing up for an intense, final sports season. This was a rare weekend with nothing scheduled. She could use a break. This was the only weekend it could work. Her only chance. I was thinking that sleeping & binging some TV would be a better break. I remember what it is to be a teenager. Without her telling me- I knew what the trip would be: a long drive, finding parking, eating fast food, going to off-campus parties and sleeping on the floor of a dorm room, if they slept at all. At it's simplest. And then my brain starting flooding itself with all the possibilities of what could go wrong. I was terrified. The negotiations started to get more intense as she sensed I was going to say no. Both logical thinkers squared off for round after round of some variation of *why not?* and *because I said so*. Until the final climatic moments came roaring from my daughter's mouth: *Shut up. Shut Up, Mom.*

Her words stung. During the silence that followed, we could barely look at each other. Time moved slowly as we shuffled our feet trying to figure out what to say. I wished I could be pregnant again with her nestled safely inside me. Not wanting to leave.

But that's not how this works.

I remembered sitting on the curb during the 4<sup>th</sup> of July parade- telling myself to get with the program or lose out on my kid. Who is really no longer a kid now. She never did make that solo campus trip. But the tone between us began to change. We looked at each other differently after that.

*I don't know where you left it, but I'm sure you'll find it after you look again. Text me when you get there. I don't know- maybe you can make a call and find out. Let me know when you'll be home. Have fun. Call me if you need me.*

My daughter turns 18 the same day she graduates from high school. I like to call it the *Double Whammy Day*. I'm only half kidding. She has grown into a woman. No longer a child. But always my baby whose head smells like happiness. A deposit has been issued to her university for this fall's semester. She took my breath away in a baby blue Prom dress as I snapped photos standing beside my Mom friends. I have every confidence she will be successful after she walks across the stage to accept her diploma a few days from now. Because we have been preparing each other for this since the day she was born. I will sit in the stands and resist the urge to stand up amid the crowd and yell out to her *I love you* in a Buddy the Elf moment. *Shut up, Mom*. But then again, if I did do it- I bet she would let me get away with it.