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Seventeen Years Together

Alexis Wallman

She was scared. She didn't know why she was scared; she had had nine months to prepare for this moment. She had read every book and article there was— what to do before, after, and during. She took classes and talked to specialists. She wanted to be the mother she always wished she had. The mother she never got.

The drive to the hospital, one hand cradling her stomach, the other holding her husband's hand, felt like forever. Overwhelming thoughts crossed her mind. *Could she do this?* she thought. *Will she live up to her own expectations or fall short to her mother's upbringings?*

Her grip must've tightened on her husband's hand because, when stopped at a red light, he leans over to her ear and tells her to breathe. *In and out*, he says. *Just breathe in and out.*

This was their first child, and although they were excited to bring a young life into the world, they were equally nervous. She knew it was a large responsibility to raise a child, but, for her, it was an even larger responsibility to raise a child who knew what it was like to make a choice for his or herself. To feel safe enough to venture out and make his or her own opinions.

Eighteen hours later, her baby girl is placed in her awaiting arms. Exhausted and sweaty from labor, she holds her daughter as long as the nurse allows. This little girl, so small and so naive, is hers. Wrapped up in a swaddle of pink and white, her daughter stares up at her in awe.

She had thought you only fell in love once in your life, and she thought her one time was with her husband, but she was wrong. Looking at her daughter's little face, perfectly mixed with her husband's features and her own, she is in love. Irrevocably and unconditionally in love.

It wasn't until dark, did the nurse take her daughter away. Within seconds of her daughter's absence she knew she would never be able to let her go. She knew she would have to one day, but she hoped that day wouldn't come anytime soon.

She never took her eyes off her daughter. Not the whole ride back home from the hospital. Not when they walked into the house and laid her in her nursery. Not when her husband was telling her something about bottles and diapers. It's like she was compelled— drawn to this little person who had

lived inside her. She vowed to always have a good connection to her daughter, to never let them drift apart as so many mothers and daughters do.

When a year had gone by, and they were making her daughter's first birthday cake, she still could hardly take her eyes off her daughter. Every slight movement caught her attention, every little stumble made her worry.

At this point, she thought she got the whole parenting thing down. Her daughter went to bed easy every night, ate everything she fed her, and hardly cried or fussed. Even her daughter's first word was "mama." That had to be a sign she was doing something right, especially since her daughter would smile every time she said it. Her husband claimed their daughter smiled whenever she said anything, but she chose not to listen to that. She knew she and her daughter had a special bond. Even though she was only a year old, she knew they had something special.

She wasn't stupid, though. She knew it wasn't going to always be this way. *They call them the terrible twos for a reason*, her friends would say. But when it came time for her daughter to eat her first piece of cake, all the voices in her head of how it got harder went away. All she saw was her little girl stuffing her mouth, although, missing it half the time, with pink and yellow frosting. All she saw was the many, many years she had with her. All the years they had left together. All the time.

The first day of kindergarten was rough. *Terrible two's?* She thought. *More like Terrible fives.* The twos were a piece of cake compared to now. Her daughter fought her on almost anything she could— clothes, food, bedtime. She was no longer the only child, no longer the only one who had her and her husband's attention. It was now divided in half, and by a little brother, no less. She pushed him when he was in the way and yelled over him when he was talking. Still, she, even though her husband told her not to give in, would always give her daughter attention. Even when she didn't deserve it. Even when her son would cry because she's no longer looking at him.

She walks into her daughter's room after breakfast to help her pick out something to wear. Instead, she finds her daughter already dressed. She has everything on except her backpack.

"Oh," she says, "I thought you wanted me to help you pick out your outfit for today."

Her daughter, dressed in jeans, a yellow shirt, and Cinderella sneakers, turns and looks at her. "But I'm all ready."

"Yeah, I can see that," she says more to herself than to her daughter.

"Did you at least brush your teeth?" she asks her daughter.

Her daughter's eyes light up and runs to the bathroom.

Sighing, she cleans up her daughter's mess. It seems her daughter has taken everything she owns out of her closet and has thrown them on the floor.

She had been anticipating her daughter's first day of kindergarten for years. She thought they would eat her daughter's favorite breakfast, cereal, then get her all dressed and ready to go. She pictured her daughter wearing her long, wavy hair back in a headband with a cute skirt and matching shirt. She pictured them doing all this together, but her daughter seems to have other plans. She seems to want to do everything herself.

Letting your mother pick out your outfit on your first day of school is just one of those unwritten mother-daughter rules. Like, going prom dress shopping together or letting your mother make your bed one last time when you move into your college dorm. It breaks her heart to know she was left out of one of the rules.

Watching her daughter get on the bus is the hardest part. It seems too big, too grown-up. It seems like just yesterday she was watching her daughter blow out the candles on her first birthday cake. She remembers the pink and yellow frosting so vividly, something her daughter would only remember in pictures.

In the afternoon, as soon as she hears the front door of their apartment open, she picks her son up from the couch and runs to it. She only stops when she hears her daughter sniffing. She finds her daughter curled up in a corner by the door, crying.

"Honey, what's wrong?" she asks.

Her daughter only looks at her, then looks back down. She puts her son down and goes to sit by her daughter.

"What happened?"

"Some of the girls in my class laughed at me," her daughter says, wiping her nose with the palm of her hand.

"Why?"

"They said my shoes were stupid and only a *baby* would wear them."

"Well, that's...not true," she tells her daughter, pushing her dark hair away from her face. "Your shoes are the coolest shoes a kindergartener could ever wear."

Her daughter continues to cry. "That's not what my friends think."

"Well it doesn't really sound like they're good friends. Aren't there any other girls that could be your friends?"

"Maybe," her daughter murmurs, but tears still run down her face.

Her son, who was quietly playing with the rug by the front door runs over to his sister and puts his hands on her head.

"Why sissy cry?" He blurbs, looking at her, then squatting down to look his sister in the eye.

Her daughter goes to push him, but she quickly grabs her hands.

“Don’t,” she tells her daughter. “You’d just be doing the same thing to your brother as those girls did to you.”

Her son goes back to playing with the rug by the front door as if nothing happened.

Her daughter looks at her, confused. “But they didn’t push me.”

“No,” she tells her daughter, “but did their words feel like a push?”

Her daughter shrugs her shoulders, “I guess so.”

“So don’t you think pushing your brother would probably make him feel the same way you’re feeling right now?”

Her daughter just puts her head on her lap and closes her eyes. “I’m happy you’re my friend, mama.”

She just smiles and strokes her hair. The familiar smell of her apricot shampoo filling the air. She knew although her daughter might try to fight her on everything, she was always able to get through to her. She was always able to make her laugh or smile. She took that as a victory. Every single time.

She knew middle school was a hard time for everyone, but her daughter seemed to have an extra hard time. The past two years have been a nightmare. All her daughter wanted was to fit in, and no matter what she said, she could never reason with her.

“Mom, that’s not even cute,” her daughter informs her. “No one at my school would *ever* think of wearing that.”

She puts the striped shirt back on the rack. Picking out clothes was the worst. They could never agree on any of the clothes the other picked out. It was like speaking two completely different languages and expecting the other to know it fluently.

“These,” her daughter says, holding up a pair of jeans. “These are what I’ve been looking for.”

They hardly looked like anything she had ever seen her daughter wear before. They weren’t just jeans; they were jeans with holes and patches and weird seams.

“Do you just want those because those girls you always hang out with wear jeans like that?”

“What?” her daughter questions with a look of disgust on her face, then rolls her eyes. “You *always* think I get stuff just because someone else has them. No, I just think they would look good for the first day of school.”

She considers arguing but knows that wouldn’t get them anywhere. “Fine, put them in the cart and let’s go. Your brother has a game at four.”

In the car on the way to her son’s baseball game, she tries and fails to make conversation with her daughter. Everything she would say, her daughter would either give a one-word answer to or just grunt.

Thirteen years old, she thought. *Only a handful more years until she is on her own.*

Sometimes she wishes time would slow down, but honestly, and she hates to admit this, sometimes she can't wait until she is older and outgrows the phase of 'being too cool to be friends with your mother.'

It stings a little, remembering all the days her daughter would come home crying to her after school. They would sit down and talk out all her daughter's problems. Then, they would make cookies or brownies or some kind of sweet to cheer her up. It always worked, but one day it just stopped.

Now, if she asked her daughter how her day went, she would lie and say good, then go to her room and shut the door. She was always able to tell when her daughter didn't have a good day. One day she even made brownies and cookies for her daughter, hot and ready for her when she got home. That was the day her daughter claimed she didn't eat sweets anymore. She hasn't made brownies or cookies since. Not even when her hungry, fast-growing son would ask her to. It just hurt too much.

The last middle school dance was a couple months later. According to her daughter, all the girls were looking forward to this dance because, as eighth graders, they could finally dress up in fancy dresses. For the past two years, her daughter's dances consisted of wearing a jean skirt and a not-too-fancy-blouse.

One weekend before the dance, her daughter had, unknowingly to her, gone dress shopping with her friend and her friend's older sister. She had been so excited to go dress shopping with her daughter, because lately they were getting along again. There wasn't as much bickering between them, and her daughter even sat next to her on the coach and laid her head on her lap again like she used to. She thought it was looking up. So, when her daughter walked in with a blue sparkly dress, she was surprised.

"I didn't think it would be a big deal," her daughter says, standing in the kitchen with her dress in a garment bag slung over her forearm. "We didn't even plan on picking out dresses, we were just shopping and then saw two really pretty dresses we wanted for the dance."

"I told you I would take you dress shopping."

"No, you didn't."

"Yes, I did. Last week at dinner."

"I forgot," her daughter says. "You weren't there anyways, so I just bought it."

"Well, I would've gone back and taken you," she says, matter of factly.

"Sorry."

"Where'd you even get the money?" she asks her daughter, crossing her arms.

“Dad,” her daughter replies, then heads up to her room and shuts the door.

Later that night, she gets into a fight with her husband about the money. He claimed she asked for money and he just gave it to her without asking her for what. They go to bed angry that night, her thinking he ruined her and her daughter’s dress shopping experience, him thinking she’s overreacting. It wasn’t until later did she realize that she didn’t even ask her daughter to show her the dress. She was too busy focusing on being mad.

The dance is two weeks later, and her daughter lets her do her hair. It’s a simple braid down her back, something she could’ve easily done herself, but she sees it as a peace offering, as a way for her daughter to include her. The apricot smell of her creek-brown hair, now curly, brings her back to when she used to play with her daughter’s hair. She holds back her tears, but only because she knows her daughter would be mad if her friends came to the apartment and her mother was crying. She just wants this night to be perfect for her daughter.

Watching her daughter pile into her friends’ mom’s car with all her friends and drive away is equally as hard as watching her daughter walk onto the bus the first day of kindergarten. Long after the car is gone, she remains outside her small apartment, holding back her tears because she knows she needs to practice in order to get through the next dance. Prom.

By the time her daughter is well into high school, she’s outgrown the ‘being too cool to be friends with your mother’ stage. She isn’t sure exactly how, or why, it happened, but one day her daughter started paying attention to her. She started staying in on Saturday nights to watch movies with her and wouldn’t walk far away from her at the grocery store. One day her daughter even asked her to make her brownies again like she used to.

It was like they were making up for lost time— they did everything together. Sometimes she even had to remind her daughter to go out, to hang out with girls her own age, to go on dates. She would say this because she wanted her daughter to have friends, but mostly because she realized she was becoming too dependent on her daughter. So much so to where, one day when her and her husband were fighting, she told her daughter everything. Everything you’re supposed to tell a friend your own age, everything you’re *supposed* to keep your child from knowing, she told her 16-year-old daughter. She didn’t realize she made a mistake until her daughter claimed she would want to live with her if her and her husband were ever to separate.

It was a Friday afternoon and they were sitting at their kitchen table with the view overlooking the river across the street from their apartment. They were both eating cereal, both waiting for her husband to come home. Both wondering where he was.

“It’s just a small fight, honey,” she informed her daughter who was nervously biting her fingernails. “He’ll be back. I’m sure he just needed to cool off for a second.”

Her daughter looks up at her and she finds herself starting into the eyes of her husband. Her daughter has the exact same eyes as him, brown as the mourning cloak’s wings.

“He’s been gone all night, and we can’t keep lying to him,” she stands up and gestures to the living room where her 13-year-old son was asleep, waiting for his dad to come home from work.

“First of all, you don’t need to do anything,” she stands up and walks to her daughter. “I am your mother, I protect you. I don’t need you protecting me. All you need to worry about is filling out college applications.”

Her daughter opens her mouth, then decides against it. Instead, her daughter wraps her arms around her in full embrace. *This*, she thinks. *This is what she was waiting for during those years of neglect.*

“I’m happy you’re my friend, mama,” her daughter whispers in her ear, the exact same thing she told her all those years ago when those girls made fun of her in kindergarten. “But let *me* be *your* friend. Friends look out for each other.”

She smiles, not trusting her voice to be steady. She wishes she could stay in this moment forever. It was everything she saw the first time she held her daughter, and more. Her daughter’s pure depth of feeling fills the apartment, something she knows will be absent once she’s gone.

Her daughter releases her hold and starts walking toward her room, grabbing blank college applications on her way, leaving her door open.

Senior year prom was when it hit her. Her daughter is going off to college. Across the country. Every time she thinks about her daughter leaving, a knot forms in her stomach. She’s not sure she can live without her daughter. She’s not sure she will ever get used to her daughter not being there. Not sitting in the kitchen every morning eating cereal, not lying next to her while they watch the same movie for the sixth time, not being in the apartment.

“Mom,” her daughter yells, pulling her out of her thoughts.

She walks out of her room and finds her daughter with a brush in one hand and a panicked expression plastered on her face. She smiles, “What?”

Her daughter does not smile. “I’m glad you find this amusing, but I am having a problem. My hair is not cooperating with me.”

She isn’t wrong. Her brown hair, now cut to her shoulders, is as big as can be. The humidity isn’t friendly to her hair in the Spring.

“Don’t worry, honey. Just jump in the shower real fast and when you’re done, I’ll tone it down a bit.”

Her daughter sighs and walks to the bathroom, mumbling something about how taking a shower throws her off prom day schedule.

It isn't until a couple minutes after she hears the water start that her daughter yells there isn't any shampoo. Putting down the bread she was about to put in the toaster, she goes to get some shampoo from underneath her sink. She never thought shampoo would make her feel nostalgic, but when she pulls out the apricot shampoo bottle, she feels her eyes start to fill with tears. It takes her back to when she used to wash her daughter in the sink when she was a baby. It takes her back to when her daughter would lay her head on her lap, and she would play with her hair, the smell of apricots filling the room.

A half an hour later, she is straightening her daughter's hair. Her daughter is looking in the mirror, sitting in the exact same chair she did when she did her hair for the 8th grade dance. Last time it was hard to figure out what to talk about with her daughter. She tried so hard to say the right thing and tried extra hard to not say the wrong thing. Instead, this was the conversation she imagined. This is what she wanted, what she knew one day would happen. Her daughter laughs at what she says and carries the conversation past one syllable words.

When she's done pinning her daughter's hair back, she sighs. *Seventeen years old*, she thinks. *Where did the time go? I thought I had all this time with her. It feels like just yesterday I had all the time in the world with her.*

"He's going to be here soon," her daughter says, standing up. "I should go to my room and get dressed real fast, then I'll do my make-up."

She scurries out of the bathroom and down the hall to her bedroom and disappears behind her closed door.

Prom pictures take forever because she takes pictures of everything. Her husband tells her their daughter's prom group needs to get going, that the limo is going to arrive any second, but she's too busy taking pictures to notice or care.

They say the more you do things, the better you get at them; but each time she says goodbye to her daughter, it's harder. Only a couple more months until the fall, until she is across the country. She's not sure how she's going to say goodbye.

She hadn't realized until now, until this very moment, that she was in denial about her daughter going to college, about her daughter leaving her. It's not that she isn't proud of her daughter, she's just going to miss not seeing her everyday.

"I think everything's packed."

She looks around the room, all her daughter's belongings taken off the walls, stripped off the bed, and removed from the drawers. Her daughter lays her head on her shoulder.

“We have a good connection, right?” she asks her daughter. “You feel comfortable talking to me, don’t you?”

Her daughter lifts her head off her shoulder, “Yeah, why?”

She smiles and remembers walking into this room all those years ago, her daughter fussing in her arms. “Because 17 years ago, in this exact room I promised myself I would have a good relationship with you. Better than the relationship I have with my mother.”

Her daughter gives her a small smile. “Well, I think if it’s killing me to leave you, to leave this, in a couple of days, I think you did a good job.”

“And you know you can make your own decisions?” she asks. “You can tell me a list of everything you believe and everything you don’t, and it doesn’t have to be the same as mine.”

Her daughter lifts her head off her shoulder, “Stop worrying about everything. You’re a good mom, of course I know that.”

They stand there, her talking about how the room was set up 17 years ago, her daughter listening and claiming she remembers everything she is telling her. They talk and laugh and cry. They reminisce all night until there's nothing left to say, until they fall asleep on her daughter’s hard, bare ground with nothing but happy thoughts. Nothing but a mother-daughter bond.