

THE ROAR OF THE ENGINE; THE POUNDING OF MY HEART

By Joni M. Fisher

Parenting is not for the faint of heart. Strapped into the passenger seat of my car I remembered other uncomfortable firsts of parenting to distract myself.

When my 1-year-old daughter Jessica reached that greet-the-world stage, she enjoyed a trip to the grocery where she could shout "HI" to everyone we passed. Through the aisles we traveled while kind strangers returned her greeting. I could tell from their reactions that these mothers and grandmothers had been through this before. Jessica was my only child, so it was new territory for me. I gave her a bottle and she drank for a while. In the aisle with the paper goods, I stopped to find paper towels.

Jessica sat up in the cart and shouted "Hi" to the back of a gray-haired man.

The man did not respond. In typical fashion, Jessica repeated it louder. As I tossed the paper towels into the cart, the man turned around.

He had a high collar with a microphone device hanging around his neck. He raised the device to his throat near his tracheotomy tube, then a deep vibrating robotic voice said, "Hello, little girl."

Jessica's eyes widened and she held out her bottle.

"Any little girl who would give her bottle to a stranger can't be all bad," he rasped in his mechanical voice.

She stared and blinked.

The dear gentleman smiled and said, "Bye-bye."

He had walked to the far end of the aisle when Jessica rose up in the cart, grabbed her throat and growled, "BYE-BYE."

The man turned, laughing silently then disappeared around the end of the aisle.

In another incident, my daughter, then six, pointed to the tattooed forearm of the giant man in front of us in line at McDonalds, addressing him in her usual loud voice.

"Does your mom know you draw on your arm?"

His leather clothing squeaked as he turned and looked down.

I held my breath.

He answered in a deep growl, "Yeah. And she was really mad."

Then there was that first hockey game. My husband was supposed to go. Our daughter, at age nine, was excited about going to a grown-up game with him. An hour before the game he called to tell me he'd been called to the emergency room to treat a dear friend of ours. I was clearly the second choice, but she agreed to go. We were enjoying the game with confused interest as the padded men skated from one side of the rink to the other. They often slammed one another against the high Plexi-glass walls in their fight for the puck. It was a lively crowd. The couple behind us appeared to be season ticket holders. They wore the team colors from head to toe. They shouted advice to the players. Then my daughter started asking questions I couldn't answer, so I suggested she watch and listen. Soon after that she elbowed me.

“Hey, mom. I know what they call that guy at the net.”

“Oh?”

“He’s the pucker,” she shouted.

I felt beer spray on my neck. “Um, I don’t think so.”

“He is too. That man at the end of our row called him that.”

So long ago she was my little girl. Then life sped in fast-forward mode until she was driving my 4Runner on suddenly narrow streets. She skidded to her first stop sign.

“Whoops.”

“Let’s try it slower next time.”

Punctuated with eye-rolling she said, “Yeah, okay.”

At 15, my daughter was driving for the first time since she got her learner’s permit. No longer on the vacant roads of new housing developments, we were on the real streets with real traffic and I was having a real rough time staying calm. Memories raced by, leaving me in awe of the changes in my little girl. We were going to pick up her friend to spend the night. She searched for a different radio station while she strayed over the yellow line. We were alone on the road, but I needed to alert her.

“Look up at the road.”

She looked up and swerved back into the right lane. “Whoops.”

“If another car had been coming you would have known it by the loud crunching sound of metal on metal. Leave the radio alone. You steer, okay?”

A dramatic sigh blew from her clenched teeth. “You’re making me nervous.”

“And you’re scaring me. Is this your best driving?”

“Nooooooooowa.”

“Show me your best.”

“Can’t I listen to the radio?”

“Nooooooooowa,” I mocked.

She snorted.

Yes. This was my beloved baby girl. Is it my imagination or does each major first in her life accelerate her more? As soon as she could crawl she headed off to stick a wet finger in an electrical socket. As soon as she could walk she took off and dared us to catch her. Then there came roller skating on four wheels. When she finally mastered her two-wheeler she demanded the training wheels come off. Faster and faster. Once she tried to outrace me on her two-wheeler and screamed in shock when I caught her. Back then I could keep pace with her. Then in-line skating. She learned how to ski on water and snow, faster and faster leaving me behind. This, my stubborn, athletic, smart child was driving. New speeds. New dangers. I was imagining how she was accelerating out of my sight when we reached her friend’s house. My baby was in high school and too soon she’d go off to college.

She turned off the car and handed me the keys.

“What? You don’t want to drive home and show her how well you’re doing?”

“Can I?”

“Sure. Just keep doing your best.”

“Thanks, mom.” She kissed me on the cheek and hopped out of the car. It was the first spontaneous act of kindness from her in weeks. I nearly cried.

Parenting isn't for the faint of heart, that's for sure. Something at each stage scared the breath out of me, but this sweet girl has met all the challenges so far. I could only hope my car and my heart would hold up for the next few years. That night I could hardly hear the roar of the engine over the pounding of my heart. Parenting is the most difficult job in the world, because you have to teach your beloved child how to live without you. Cherish the ride.

#