

Chapter 1

SAYING GOODBYE



“What do you think? Will this be something I want in Florida?”

I looked at the light green sweater my eighteen-year-old daughter held up for my opinion.

“Probably,” I told her. “It will be nice to have light layers as options.”

It was late August. The days were drawing close to the time when our second daughter and fourth-oldest child, Juliette, would be leaving for college. She had chosen to attend the same school her older brother was attending, and though we loved this option for her, the school was in southern Florida, more than 1,500 miles away from our New Hampshire home. This was a big move, for her and for us.

Even if I wanted to distract myself from her imminent departure, it would have been impossible. The evidence of it was lying in piles all over my house: books stacked on the living room floor; laundry strewn in all directions, waiting to be sorted into piles of “taking” and “not taking”; lamps, rugs, and small appliances she had thoughtfully collected and stored throughout the summer.

There were piles of old things, too. She had pulled these forgotten items from the deepest innards of her bedroom as she gutted dressers, desks, and closets those late summer days—academic and athletic medals and trophies, a basketball mouth guard, bits and pieces of Halloween costumes, a broken snow globe, and ragged T-shirts from road races and cross-country meets.

Life, in pieces, lay all around us—on counters and cabinets, on floors and couches.

I watched Juliette sit among those piles in the living room the day before she left, sorting and storing, and then neatly packing chosen items into bags and boxes she would squeeze into every spare corner of her brother's Honda Civic in the driveway, and I wondered how on earth we got here.

It was a cliché mom moment if ever there was one. If two dozen years as a mother have taught me anything, though, it is that cliché mom moments are cliché for a reason. They are cliché because they are a necessary part of life, an important rite of passage, and we share these moments in common. Our details may differ, but we all have our own version of weeping at the sight of our children as they change and grow and prepare to leave us, wondering how on earth it all went by so fast.

I reveled in my cliché mom moment that day, allowing myself to sit down in it and remember a little, even though I knew I was breaking an unspoken rule of mothering adult children. Did you know that you are not supposed to recall your child's baby years when they are leaving for college, getting married, or otherwise beginning their own lives separate from you?

"Do not do that," an older, wiser friend once warned me. "Do not look at old pictures or think of them as toddlers, or you will never stop crying."

Yet this is just what we mothers do. When our second child, Eamon, prepared to live away at school years ago, I spent the entire summer before he left fighting off flashbacks of his chubby toddler hands reaching for my own. I remembered the tiny sneakers he wore, the toy dump truck he loved, and the lisping way he would ask us to read to him from his favorite “Toolbox Book.”

My friend was right. I did not stop crying.

I cried all summer long, sometimes alone in the shower, sometimes behind sunglasses at the baseball field, and sometimes, embarrassingly, while waiting in line at the post office. I cried because I couldn't always push away the memories of Eamon as a baby, as a toddler, as a seven-year-old, or as pre-teen. Actually, I didn't want to. Even if it hurt to recall what was gone and what had changed, and what was leaving and changing before my very eyes, I wanted to relive and remember every beautiful moment and detail that I could, because I saw that summer, more clearly than before, that family memories are beautiful; they are a gift.

You do not push away a gift. And so that day, I let myself remember Juliette as a baby.

We were building our house that year, and she was the infant in my belly and then in my arms as we cleared trees and brush, dug a foundation, and framed a tiny cape in the woods. It was a busy, stressful time for our young family, and Juliette was amiably along for the ride. She didn't care for slings, but she loved to be in my arms—with her fingers in my mouth. Yes, it was weird. It was a funny habit she had developed while nursing. As she nursed, her fingers would explore my face and wind up in my mouth. It was a cute quirk at first, one I absentmindedly accepted, but then it became an entrenched habit, one that soothed her and one she wanted to engage in whenever she could.

Baby fingers are cute. Sometimes we like to kiss them and we think that we could just “eat them up.” But baby fingers in your mouth? All the time? That was something different. I had never heard of a baby doing this kind of thing, and it seemed an odd and often embarrassing or annoying way for a baby to soothe herself. Yet here was baby Juliette, laying claim to her space in my arms, and even the space inside my mouth. All day, every day.

I always did savor that first year of their lives, when my babies were so very small and so very dependent upon me. Most of my babies spent their first year of life, that precious time when they are small enough to pack up and bring along anywhere, no more than an arm’s length away from me.

It was precious. And exhausting. Sometimes so exhausting that I would collapse in a puddle of tears the moment I got baby Juliette down to sleep at night. I would stretch my aching body out upon my bed, revel in the fact that no human being was presently touching me, and cry hot tears of depletion and frustration.

I had no time. I had no space. I was no one.

Sometimes, when a child is so small and spends his or her days so close to you, it is difficult to know where they end and you begin. We lose ourselves in them.

Of course, this is God’s plan, that each of us should lose ourselves for the sake of another. Motherhood is a great practice for this because our children are born wanting, and needing, and taking.

Children take our comforts. Have you ever tried to drink a cup of tea, only to find yourself distracted and forgetting it in all corners of the house, and then reheating it, and re-reheating it throughout your day? I think of those cold cups of tea, when I would find them on counters and windowsills at the end of my days, as badges of motherhood. I’m sure

other people forget cups of tea, but no one can do it quite like a mom can.

Children take our space. They crawl into our laps and our beds. They reach into our plates to help themselves. They cling to us like tiny monkeys sometimes, crying and putting fingers in our hair, in our eyes, and even in our mouths to soothe themselves.

Children take our identity. I was once Danielle, star student. I used to be Danielle, wife of Dan. I used to be Danielle, hard worker, organizer, creative thinker, baker, writer, and doer of all the things.

But then I became Mama. And Mama was bigger, but also much smaller, than anything else I had ever been. Mama was an enormous thing—the sun around which my small children’s worlds revolved. But Mama was also a hidden thing, a smaller thing, with so little to show for my efforts to the outside world.

I remember when my youngest was small, he used the word “Mama” for everything.

When he fell and hurt himself, “Mama” meant “Comfort me.”

When he couldn’t quite reach his ball that rolled under the couch, “Mama” meant, “Help me get what I want.”

When he was climbing into his high chair, “Mama” meant, “I’m hungry, feed me.”

When he was tired, whiny, and sniffly nosed, “Maaaaaa-maaaaaa” meant, “Make all the bad stuff go away now.”

Mama is everything to a baby. Mama is the whole world. It is flattering, and exhausting.

Mama is everything, but sometimes it feels like nothing. To a baby, Mama is all there is, but sometimes it can make us feel that we don’t exist.

On days when I was tired of the touching, the tantrums, the griping, the grabbing, the messes, and the mayhem, I

would think of old ladies who stopped me in the grocery store and told me to enjoy every minute because “it all goes by so fast,” and I knew that they were liars.

Those days did not go by fast. Some of them went by so painfully slowly that I was on the brink of a breakdown by the time my husband arrived home from work at 6 p.m. I would hand him the worst of the children and retreat to the bathroom to cry.

I once heard it said, “The days are long, but the years are short.” I certainly found that to be true on that last day, as I helped Juliette sort through a box of old papers to determine which were worth saving. I found it to be true when we stayed up late that night, singing along to favorite songs and dancing in the living room, being so tired but not yet going to bed, wanting to delay the inevitable.

Early that late August morning, as the beginnings of sunlight made their way across our field and into the corners of the house we built with a baby in tow, Juliette squeezed one last box into the car and then stood awkwardly in the kitchen, expecting some mom-tears, as we said goodbye.

I can’t remember when she stopped putting her fingers in my mouth, but it would appear that she did. I can’t remember the last time she came to my room, needing me, in the middle of the night, but that never happens anymore. I can’t remember the last time she needed help getting dressed or called for me from the potty, but those things also ceased.

I can close my eyes, and Juliette is tiny again, as if it were just this morning that I put her down for a nap in her crib with the pink sheets and stuffed bunny. I just dressed her in that ruffled dress and paused for a moment to take in the sweet softness of her skin, her dimpled elbows, and her tiny perfect body. I just now thought for a moment of the enormity of being “Mama” to this tiny, dependent creature, and wavered beneath the weight of it all.

I just did those things.

I don't remember if I had an elaborate speech planned for that morning, but I certainly didn't give one. "Be good and have fun," I told Juliette as I hugged her goodbye. "Remember . . ."

The rest was caught in my throat.

But that's OK, because I am not sure what I was saying anyway. Remember . . . what? That we love you? Remember who you are? Remember all the important lessons we taught you, and even the ones that maybe we forgot to teach you, and you had to learn the hard way? Remember to wash your hands, brush your teeth, eat salads, and say please and thank you? Remember that God loves you and has a special plan for your life?

It was all of these things and none of these things that I wanted Juliette to remember. There wasn't anything all that meaningful I could say while standing in the kitchen with my daughter, with a packed and running car waiting in the driveway. We had had eighteen years to talk.

This wasn't the end of all the things, but it was the end of many things, and in that moment I was left to wonder if all that I had said and done was enough. If during all those exhausting days where I was Mama to a tiny, needy Juliette, I had done enough, said enough, given enough, taught enough, loved enough.

In my exhaustion, did I fully appreciate the privilege of being the Mama she needed so very much, so very often, so very intensely?

Probably not. But in some moments, I surely did. And in some moments, I still do.

I think that is what I want Juliette to remember. I want her to know that in spite of loving her with all of my being, in the end, it wasn't perfect, and I wasn't enough. I came up short, as human beings always do.

I want her to know that she was made for more. She was made for God, who fills in every space where we are lacking. She was made for God, who rushes into the places where we find ourselves failing and completes the important work that we begin. The work that sometimes overwhelms us. The work that depletes us, exhausts us, and robs us of our identity sometimes.

I want her to remember grace. I want her to know that grace is real, and that without it, we can do nothing. This is what I want her to remember. That big things and small things can hurt us, disappoint us, and leave us aching and wanting, but God has an answer for all of that. That only in God can we find completion and perfection, even as we struggle through hard things.

I watched through the window as Juliette climbed into the car, fastened her seat belt, and looked ahead, smiling into the sun.

"Oh, Mama," my husband Dan said gently, pulling me into a hug as the car drove away. "It's going to be OK."

I sobbed into his chest, and I knew that he was right.