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RELATIONSHIPS

Letting go

This summer she's not a baby anymore

By Sigrid Bathen

We are in the supermarket, arguing about whether I will let her buy a set of plastic fingernails, which come with a vial of glue and cost \$4.99.

"But I'll pay for them myself," she implores. "You said I could use my own money for things I want!"

"Reasonable things," I say. "Not for off-the-wall things like \$4.99 fingernails which are too expensive and not reasonable."

"Especially when you're only 8 years old," I add.

"But I'm almost 9," she says, "and you treat me like a baby!"

"Please, Mama," she says, "Please, Mama, please."

"No," I say with an effort at clear finality. "And if you don't knock it off, you can just forget about going to the beach for the summer."

She must know that this is largely an idle threat, since this summer of the beginning of her ninth year has been planned and organized and, finally, committed to and paid for.

Suddenly, in the middle of the market, in the aisle with the deodorant on one side and the cat litter on the other, I am struck with an overwhelming sense of loss.

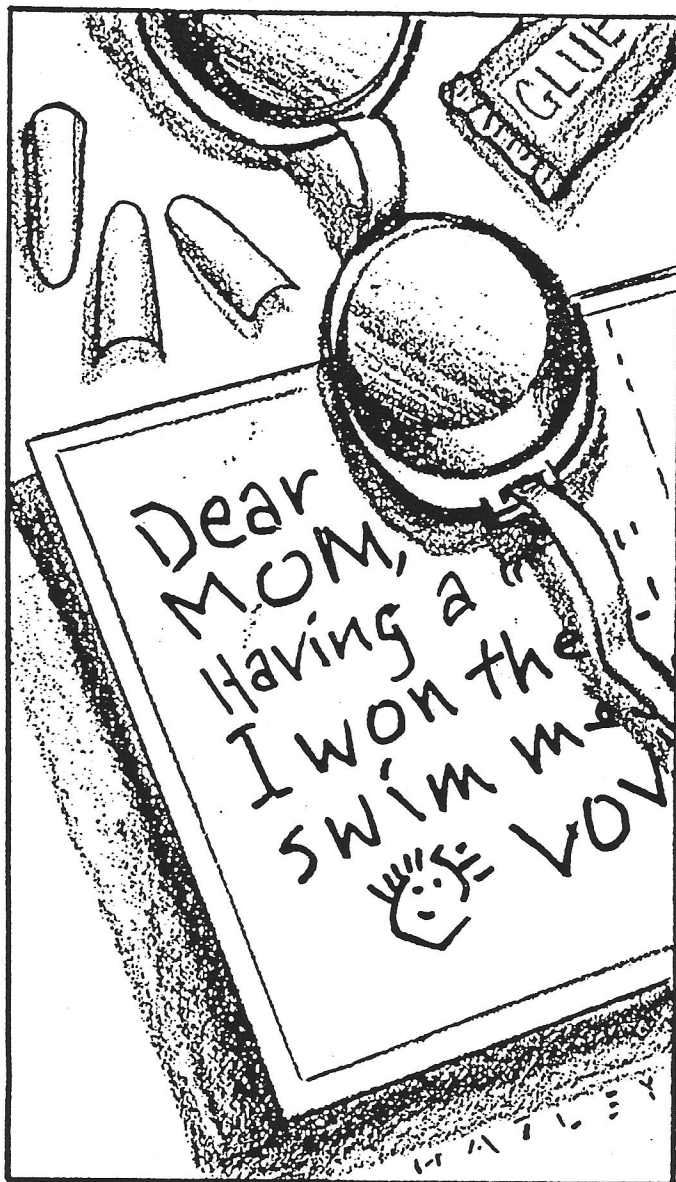
No more fights over plastic fingernails in the aisles at Lucky.

No more candy under the mattress in her bedroom, found by the ants six weeks later.

No more Punky Brewster. No more noisy Smurfs on peaceful Saturday mornings.

Saturday mornings are my favorite, signaling as they do the survival of yet another frenetic week. The time when her father has his one morning a week on the tennis courts and it's just her and me and the cats at home.

Having no particular desire to play tennis at dawn, I hunker into domesticity on Saturday mornings. I read the paper without feeling compelled to clip significant articles for the office. I make big breakfasts. For her part, she eats the breakfasts, watches cartoons, and sometimes we bake cookies. We run errands and argue through the market and the mall and maybe have lunch at McDonalds.



Mom stuff. Simple activities accomplished in some sort of primal ritual — a ritual too often missed during the rest of the week in tired, overworked, overwhelmed, "dual-career" families such as ours (where, I should add in simple fairness, her father cooks dinner nearly every night.)

When her aunt and uncle, my brother and sister-in-law, first broached the subject in the spring, I immediately responded that it was too long, almost all summer, 500 miles from home, no, thanks all the same, but it

wouldn't work.

But when I asked my daughter, she jumped at the invitation to spend the better part of summer vacation — "free as a bird," as she put it — with four girl cousins, aged 1 through 9, at the beach!

"Not quite free as a bird," I tell her. "You'll be swimming on the swimming team with your cousins."

"Oh," she says, subdued. An excellent swimmer, she is not entirely enamored of team sports.

"But you have to do something," I tell her, finding myself arguing uncharacteristically in favor of organized sports. "You can't just hang out all summer."

"But Mama," she says with the irrefutable common sense of young children. "That's what summers are for!"

As every working mother knows, summers present the worst of school-age child care dilemmas. You can usually make it through two weeks at Christmas and a week at Easter with a variety of sometimes patchwork measures. But three months is a long time for patchwork. Which is probably why you see a lot of kids just "hanging out," because their parents didn't have the time, or the energy, or the money, to arrange a complicated schedule of swimming lessons, craft and computer classes, day camp, perhaps even the dreaded summer school.

I could feel the tension building as winter turned to spring, as my thoughts turned to the Question of Summer Vacation.

Our housekeeper, a cheerful and conscientious woman, divides her time be-

tween our house and another family's. The scheduling is complex, but she is able to earn a living wage and generally things work out.

Summer was a problem. To fill in the times when she would be working for her "other" family, I had hired a teenage sitter who lives next door to come over in the mornings.

That was fine, except the teenager would be visiting her grandparents in another state in June. So, I arranged a complicated schedule for my daughter of one week with my parents, one week of my vacation, a week at

Brownie day camp. And one week with my brother's family at the beach.

I know it's official, serious family business when my brother, who is a lawyer and thinks methodically, calls me at the office.

"I really think you should send her down here for the summer," he said, amiably. "I really think she'd have a lot more fun than being with a babysitter all day."

"She won't be with a baby sitter, all day," I respond, too archly, knowing that a lot of the time she will.

"She'll get to go to the beach every day, and swim on the swim team, and they have a roller-skating party and ice-skating and miniature golf, and if she joins the swim team she gets goggles and a snorkel," he said, arguing his case as lawyers do. "Think about it, just think about it, we'd love to have her, and she's no trouble. I'll send you the schedule."

Sure enough, two days later, a letter arrived with the schedule of the swim team in the beach community where he lives. He's right, it looks like a kid's dream, and, "Please, Mama, please, Mama, I wanna go!"

I know one of the major reasons I balked at sending my daughter to the beach for the better part of the summer is because I felt like my working-mother routine had failed. Despite all my efforts, all the scheduling complexities, all the money paid for sitters, the fact of the matter was that I would not be there to take her to swimming and tennis and miniature golf, that my sister-in-law would.

So I left her standing in her nightshirt with the drawing of a big rabbit and the inscription "Some Bunny Loves Me" on the front that I bought her for Easter, standing on the lawn of the big house by the beach 500 miles from home, and I drove off with tears blurring my vision, watching in the rearview mirror as my beautiful, brown-eyed, curly-haired pal waved and blew kisses and looked just a little sad.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" I had asked her, perhaps 40 times.

"Yes, Mama."

"Remember to comb your hair," I say, "and don't forget to wear your glasses and try to choose

some clothes that match and don't drop your dirty clothes on the floor. Change your underwear every day and take a sweat shirt to the pool for the meets. Oh, and don't forget to take your vitamins and use your eardrops if your ears start to hurt. And don't forget to brush your teeth . . ."

Here it comes. "Maamaa," with a withering look. "I'm not a baby anymore!"

Our phone bill will be ridiculous. When I

talked to her the other night I asked if she was homesick, and she said she was, "but not enough to come home, Mama."

And I'm thinking when I go to the market by myself this Saturday morning that maybe I'll buy some plastic fingernails with the little vial of glue and put them in the mail. □

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