

Mothers, daughters, growing into friends
The girls turn 20, 21, and a lovely thing happens.

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Twenty-one years after becoming a mother , I found myself lugging a suitcase up a narrow street in Paris with an aching anticipation in my chest.

I'd come to meet my daughter, who was returning from a semester in Mali. I knew the experience would change her. I didn't realize how the reunion would change us.

"Mom!"

There she was. Leaning out of a balcony window.

She was tan. (Did she have enough sunscreen?) Her long, thick hair was gathered up in a careless knot. Her hazel eyes (a little more caramel than my green) were shining.

When she came down to let me in, I cried. We hugged and she said something comforting. She helped me carry my suitcase upstairs. These were my first clues.

During the following eight days, I cooked and did laundry and replaced some of her worn-out clothes. Meanwhile, she gave me novels she'd finished and thought I'd like. Insisted on sleeping on the couch while I got the bed. Helped restrain me from buying an overpriced skirt.

We walked marathon miles around the city with no agenda. Talked. Played Scrabble. Rode bikes. Talked. At night, exhausted, we'd watch bad American movies dubbed into French.

By the end of the week, it dawned on me. My daughter wasn't just becoming an adult. She was becoming a friend.

The truth is, our relationship had been evolving since she left for college. But children grow up so surreptitiously. Even though you're watching it happen, you're still blown away when they're suddenly looking at you at eye level. Fitting into your T-shirts. The emotional changes are even sneakier.

From the moment they're born, kids are (mostly) adorable little black holes of need. Sucked into that love void are your privacy, your sleep, your sex life, and every nanogram of your energy.

From time to time, children allow glimpses of their incipient humanity. Like the day you find yourself confessing that you feel lazy and, instead of asking if that means she's doomed to eating leftovers, your daughter says, "You work so hard, you're entitled to a day off. " Or it's your birthday and she buys you a Wonder Woman T-shirt, with the receipt so you can return it if it doesn't fit.

That's when you literally become Wonder Woman - wondering if you're dreaming.

Karen Fingerman, a professor of sociology at Purdue University who has studied the relationships between mothers and daughters, says there is a natural progression, and it's mostly positive.

"Adolescence is often a time of conflict and when that goes away, everyone takes a huge sigh of relief," Fingerman says. "It's a common shift that women get in their 20s, they start to do nice things for their mothers . It comes as a big surprise. "

Surprise? Try shock. Try looking at this composed young woman who taught HIV prevention to Muslim girls in a Catholic school run by French nuns, this voice of reason who worries about you hurting your back with that heavy bag of groceries - and thinking, "Who are you and what have you done with my daughter? "

Look, I read *The Red Tent*. (My son gave it to me after he was assigned to read it in 11th grade.) I'm sure that for eons there have been mothers and their grown daughters who have bonded and stayed up late eating figs and commiserated about how men snore. But like many women who grew up in the 1960s, there was too large a generational divide between my world and my mother 's for us to ever feel like friends.

She wore A-line skirts and perfectly ironed blouses with Peter Pan collars. She had given up her career to raise children, not because she wanted to but because that was what was expected. And she never had to decide whether to accept a joint being passed around at a party.

Until my own children were born, my mother and I shared few experiences. My daughters and I, however, have been criss-crossing paths for years. And that, apparently, is an emerging sociological phenomenon.

Melinda Blau, 61, author of *Secrets of the Baby Whisperer*, is working with her 36-year-old daughter, Jennifer Martin, on a book about the trend.

"The mothers and daughters of our generation experience what we call 'generation overlap,' " Blau says.

"We're the first generation . . . shaped by the same cultural forces. " As a result, baby-boomer mothers and their daughters are enjoying one another's company in ways previous generations could not.

"I can shop for my daughter and she shops for me," says Blau. "People go to yoga classes together, get their nails done. . . . "

Fingerman's studies found that daughters in their 20s often think of their mother as their best friend.

"In some ways," she says, "it's almost sappy. "

Once they reach their 30s and 40s, daughters have a more nuanced view. They see their mothers ' imperfections, she says. "It's not that the honeymoon is over. It's more like going from a pink wine to enjoying a complex chardonnay. "

I'll toast to that.

My daughter and I are not "best friends. " I will always be too protective of her to ever pour out the full contents of my heart, even if I thought she'd be sympathetic. I'm sure she won't let me know everything that's troubling her.

As for nuance coming with age? She's already got the \$50-bottle view. She totally gets my flaws.

And no matter how close we are, she says, I will always be her mother .

"My friends," she notes, "wouldn't tell me I have to eat green vegetables. "

But she does tell me that she finds she enjoys spending time with me. "It's nice when you realize you have the same values and interests," she says. "And now, I do things with you voluntarily, not because I have an obligation. It used to be that if I didn't have plans to be with friends over a weekend, I'd be upset. "

Despite all the dysfunctional families in this country, the kind of sweetness and light that my daughter and I shared in Paris turns out to be fairly common.

"What the research shows is that about 80 percent of women who participate in studies have genuinely good relationships," says Fingerman.

Lucky them.

Lucky us.

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