

A Letter to My Daughter

You were sitting among a band of teenagers, in a light purple velvet dress, elegantly holding a silver flute. You glanced at the audience and gave me a confident smile. As the conductor raised the baton, soft nostalgic music echoed around the hall. The music was like a gentle breeze seeping into my heart and flipping open a book of memories.

It was memories about you, my dear daughter.

It started with a scene about 10 years ago. You were a fearless little girl, short black hair framing your round face perfectly. Your character and appearance won you the nickname “Little Dora.”

You were indeed an explorer. A glittering rock, an intermittent buzzing of crickets, or a fresh dewy flower could all capture your curiosity. When your tiny hands, you stroked the soft ears of the huge husky in our neighbor’s backyard, and my heart almost pounded out of my chest. When you knelt down, digging dirt and examining earthworms, I was counting how many more loads of laundry I had to do in a week.

Your little head was filled with questions. There were no questions that were too silly for you to ask, only questions too hard for me to answer. “Mom, why are cucumbers called 黄瓜 (yellow melon) in Chinese although they are not yellow?” “Why are pomegranates called 十六 (16: sound of “石榴”), not 十八 (18)?”

My favorite moment of a day was when I picked you up from your daycare, when I was greeted with your beaming smile and biggest hugs. You couldn’t wait to tell me about your new

friends, stories told by your teachers, and rewards you won from challenging games. On the way home we often sang out loud, followed by a long cheerful laughing.

As you entered school age, we slowly moved into a new chapter characterized with homework, group projects, extracurricular activities, and various contests. Your favorite clothing was no longer a princess dress, but graphic tees and jeans. Your hair grew longer, hanging down over your shoulders or tied back in a ponytail. My baby girl was blooming into a tall, slim adolescent girl, brimmed with life and hope.

Our life got busier. I drove you around the town after school and during weekends, rushing from music classes to swim practice, from the Chinese school to ballet school. Our together time in the car was featured with either basic questions and answers like “How’s your school?” “Good,” or pure quietness. Both of us seemed to be too tired to initiate any interesting conversations.

During family dinner time, our conversation was often centered on school work, swim meet schedules, and your test scores. After dinner, you would retreat to your bedroom, telling us you still had homework to work on.

I gazed at your back, wondering what was widening the distance between us. I fantasized that I could travel back in time to get your muddy high fives, to sing “She’ll be coming round the mountain” with you, and to be baffled by your funny “silly” questions. Those are sweet memories always cherished, but I have to face the fact that you are a teen now.

Growing up in China, I had no clue about a teen’s life in the United States. At your age, I strived for high scores in all subjects, taking pride in winning the first place in tests. But I wanted your teen years to be different from mine. You should take time to learn about different aspects

of life, to develop responsible values and independent thinking, and to explore your real passion and interests. I wondered how I could best play my role as a mom in this process.

There must be a door to enter your heart, and to get hold of the key needs a lot of love, understanding, and patience.

For me, the great moment came on a Friday evening. You were writing in your pink leather journal in your bedroom, door half-open and soothing music on. My strong curiosity prompted me to pace into the room.

“Allie, what are you writing about?” I asked, trying to sound casual.

“A story,” you said and looked up.

“Can I read it? I love reading stories,” I requested, not sure whether I could get a positive response.

You hesitated, but still handed the journal to me.

It was a story about a girl who lost her dog, her dearest friend. It was a beautiful piece of creative writing with rich emotion and vivid language, still missing an ending. As I leafed through your journal, stories recording meaningful moments in your daily life flied out of pages: your excitement in anticipating an overnight field trip, your amazement at seeing birds flocking to our garden, and your sadness when learning a friend was leaving for Japan. You poured out your strongest feelings and deepest thoughts on paper.

How come I had not noticed your passion in writing? How come I had never told you that writing is also my love?

“Allie,” I turned to you, draping my arms over your shoulders. “I liked your articles. I see your talent and passion in writing. There are a few sentences I would probably write differently.”

“How? I’d like to know,” you asked, eagerly, which reminded me of the days when I was pestered with all kinds of questions popped out of your little mouth.

I put forth my opinions on several wordings and sentences, while you listened attentively and jotted down notes on the margin of pages. Then you asked me to stay longer to help you frame the ending, which I accepted with a smile.

Writing became a bridge between us, ideas passing from your brain to mine, and vice versa. Sometimes, we snuggled beside each other and chatted until night wrapped the day in its dark blanket. We plotted out stories, gave names to our characters, and debated on the best verbs to describe actions. Some discussion led to a burst of laughter, leaving your dad, who was eavesdropping, totally puzzled.

As those scenes unfolded in front of me, tears moistened my eyes.

Suddenly, the beat of a lively music shook me out of my thoughts. It was the last song of today’s concert - an exciting song - rhythm filled with energy and vitality. My eyes were locked on you while you were pressing the flute to your lips and blowing into it. A rosy glow covered your youthful face.

I was living in and enjoying the present, basking in the brisk melodies. Life presents itself in ebbs and flows, and I will embrace whatever it brings us with you, just as we will write our own stories together.