



These are the times that try moms' souls.

As I sit at my computer attempting to write this column, I'm distracted by a series of text messages from my daughter. Two hours ago, before the crack of dawn, I put Amelia on a "motor coach" (that's a fancy bus) with her fifth grade class, and they are currently trundling southward on an overnight trip to SeaWorld and the Kennedy Space Center.

She's been anticipating this adventure for months and talking of little else for weeks. It is her first such adventure without her mother... but only her mother seems fazed by this fact. I barely got a second glance as she cheerfully boarded the bus with her friends. Reassuring, I suppose, in that knife-to-the-heart kind of way. I drove home in the waning darkness, confident that all was well with her, if not exactly with me.

But now, two hours later, here we are engaged in a text exchange that began ominously:

"Mommy i'm car sick and i think i might throw up. What should i do?"

It's times like this when I wish we'd never allowed her to have that damn cell phone – something we caved on, incidentally, because of this trip. "Mom, I need to be able to call you

guys when I'm in Florida," she'd said... adding dramatically, "In case of an emergency." Crafty little cuss.

Okay, it was a decent argument, but now I find myself in this excruciating position. My baby is moving farther away from me, minute by minute, mile after mile, and she's suffering – and I *know* she's suffering – and there's nothing I can do about it. "Take deep breaths," I text back, feeling helpless.

My mother never received any real-time intel like this when I was a kid, and we both got along just fine. She never even knew the leg of my bell bottom jeans had caught fire at Girl Scout camp 'til the whole weekend was over. (A wonderful weekend, I might add, once my pants got "put out" by the counselor and I downed a couple of s'mores.)

But, back to my current dilemma. This whole scenario – me sitting feebly at my desk, getting short, disturbing snippets from my daughter as she hurdles away from me toward a faraway land of exotic beasts and roller coasters – seems like a perfect metaphor. (That's right, boys and girls. It's time for English 101, again!) You see, I've been feeling this way a lot lately. Amelia is starting middle school in the fall, and whether it's a new cell phone, or an overnight class trip, or any number of other "signs," everything points to the same undeniable reality: I'm losing my little girl. She's movin' up, and before you can say "Billy Joel" three times fast, she'll be movin' out.

I know, I know. This is a *good* thing. Children are *supposed* to grow up. I get it. Spare me the caring platitudes, please... all the uplifting talk about cocoons and butterflies and the spreading of wings. My mind knows all that, but my heart isn't there yet. My heart just wants to sulk a little. So bear with me.

I attended a meeting for the parents of rising sixth graders last week, with a team of "advanced studies" teachers who were impressive as could be. They talked about the difference between elementary school and middle school... and how much harder middle school would be. Gone are the days of memorization and regurgitation; those halcyon days of times tables and spelling words. It's time to start thinking conceptually. It's time to start honing those "21st century skills" – communication, collaboration, critical thinking and creativity – and mastering the latest technology. The homework will be harder and the hours longer and the A's won't come so easy anymore. Extra curriculars are important, too – colleges like them – and, by the way, it's time to

start taking our kids to college campuses... letting them see what that's all about.

It all sounds very exciting and challenging and... serious. So serious. Like everything's about to get real.

And I *know*. It's a *good* thing. Leave me alone and let me mourn my playground days.

Remember the first time you put your child on a merry-go-round? That feeling of panic that gripped your throat as she moved away from you... slowly at first, then faster... up and down, around and around...? What if she didn't like it? What if she got scared? What if she fell off, and you couldn't reach her?

Sending my child off to middle school feels like putting her on that first merry-go-round all over again. But this one's not a carnival ride, and it never stops.

The world has changed so much since I was young. And it seems to be moving faster and faster each day, like some crazy carousel spinning out of control. (With really loud music.) Sometimes, I wish it would slow down just a little. Maybe even let me off. Yet, this is the world my child must learn to navigate. She has to master those 21st century skills no matter how her mother feels about the 21st century. I must prepare her to "compete in the global economy," even though the very phrase makes me shudder. So we will do our virtual summer school and visit our college campuses and bone up on our critical thinking...

But, gosh, sometimes I wish I could just put her in a sunbonnet, don my prairie skirt, throw a pair of overalls on the hubby and steal away to some small farm in Iowa.

Totally unrealistic, I know. But a girl's gotta have a dream, right?

Next year, my daughter will be learning things that I've long forgotten... and things I never

knew in the first place. She'll acquire skills I never had; skills I may never have; skills that were just invented yesterday. It's highly likely that this will be the year the difficulty of her math homework officially exceeds my ability to help her with it. (Okay, so there are few a perks.) Perhaps most unsettling, she'll be encouraged to think for herself, and some of those thoughts will not be *my* thoughts. Soon enough, she'll discover the dreadful secret I've been hiding all these years – that I don't know everything and I'm not always right. From now on – for a while, anyway – much of her "critical thinking" will likely be directed at her dear old mom, who will grow to seem more old, and less dear, by the day.

I remember. I was in middle school once. Then high school. My mother survived it, and I suppose I will, too. Mom even turned miraculously wise and funny and charming again, right around the time I went off to college.

That's the thing about the merry-go-round. It takes us away, but it brings us back, too.

Epilogue: Despite the queasy journey, Amelia had a glorious time at SeaWorld. She texted me to say she'd ridden the roller coaster without getting sick... not even a little bit. Today, the kids are at the Kennedy Space Center. Mine just emailed me a funny photo of herself, dressed in a space suit, standing on Mars. She looks perfectly at home.

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