



Hollywood need never worry about running out of raw talent, for the average child is born with a flare for the dramatic. Even my one year old experimented with the performing arts in order to a) demand my attention, b) get an oatmeal-raisin cookie, or c) land his older sister in trouble. But he cannot hold a candle to my older child. This is the child who practiced facial expressions in front of a mirror and can produce real tears at a moment's notice.

The obvious venue for these talents is nursery when you try to leave them with the teachers and escape for 2 ½ hours. The first time I left my daughter in the care of the nursery nurses, I walked her into her room, helped her hang her coat on its peg, gave her a hug and kiss, and turned to leave. Behind me I heard her inhale sharply and I swear it sounded like a stage curtain going up. And then it began: the wailing,

the screaming, the pathetic cries of “Mummy!”, the vice-like grip on my leg. The nursery teachers pried her off of me and said in calm, chipper voices, “Go, go! She’ll be fine!”.

I left the room gnawing on my bottom lip, got back to the car and burst into tears. So desperately had she clung to my leg, so piteous were her howls of anguish, you would have thought I was abandoning her forever deep in a forest to be raised by wolves.

It’s not fair, dammit. Why does everything have to be so hard? I paced the car park and told myself again why this was the right thing to do. She needed to socialise and be around people her own age. She needed the input and preparation for school that nursery can offer. And I needed some time – time to do anything: clean the house, write the book, talk to a friend, time to be something other than her mother – even if it was only for two mornings a week.

I took a few minutes to calm myself and went back into the building. I crept back to her door and peaked in the window. Did I see a child sitting in a corner, curled into a foetal position, sobbing at this terrible separation from her mother? No. I saw a child laughing and chatting to 4 or 5 friends as they played with the train set.

“She stopped crying the minute you left,” said the supervisor, who had appeared at my shoulder. “It was all for your benefit.”

Huh. I again found myself pacing the car park. It’s not fair dammit. I should be able to get a break without enduring emotional abuse from a toddler. And make no mistake about it: that is exactly what it felt like. And nice to see that she needs me so much. Bet I could drop dead and she wouldn’t notice as long as there was a Brio train set nearby.

But that is one of the great paradoxes of the parent/child relationship. You know, as a parent, that it is your job to raise your children to be independent – to be able to survive after you’ve gone. But a child becoming more independent and needing you less sets off the alarm bells in your head that say, “Too fast . . . too fast . . . Warning: grandchildren imminent.”

I have never been so acutely aware of the swift passage of time as I am now that I'm a parent. Watching my children grow up and trying to savour this time is like trying to hold water in my cupped hands and watching it trickle through my fingers. I already have visions of them graduating, getting married, having children. And it scares the hell out of me. It all goes so fast.

...I wrote that when my children were little. Now I have the advanced version of the same: both of my kids are in high school and both are now taller than me (as the shortest person in the house, they've started calling me the hobbit). I call my son to the dinner table and he answers me in a voice that has dropped -- something akin to a man's voice. That is too freaky for words. My daughter is now picking out her A-levels courses.

It all makes me feel old and rather helpless. The spectre of university is looming and the thought of taking her off to live among strangers, unloading all her gear into her dorm room and saying goodbye breaks my heart. But that is how it is supposed to be. The fact that they are growing up and becoming independent means that I've done my job, and I've done it well. But for all you young mothers out there, maybe this will help the next time your own little actor or actress delivers another aggravating performance: you know how frustrated

and angry you feel at that moment? By the time they're grown and gone, you won't remember that feeling. You'll pine for the days when little arms wrapped tight around your neck. So take a deep breath, give the drama all the indifference it deserves and cherish the days you have them at home.