

Globe and Mail, Facts and Arguments, Aug. 6, 1998

Chilling and Puking

Often it seemed I was living with a heedless stranger,
when it was really my beloved daughter.
Such is the tsunami called adolescence.

As the single mother of teenagers, I have come to understand that there are two reasons childbirth hurts so much. First, because a woman's body has to make way for a small person to squeeze through, and second, so that parents subliminally associate this person with pain. This prepares them for the teenage years.

It began slowly in this house, the agony of adolescence, but as it began to roll over me like a tsunami I recalled all the articles I had read about teenagers, the words like 'sullen', 'self-centered', 'over-emotional'. Since birth, my darling daughter had been cheerful, warmhearted and open, the kind of girl who would rather talk than eat or sleep; she managed to squeeze homework and family into her busy social life. But suddenly she was never off the phone, unable to stay in a room or a car without the radio blaring; she was sharp-tongued and yet closed-mouthed, uninterested in anything beside friends and music groups. It happened so fast it was bewildering.

One of the key words in her new vocabulary, one of the polite ones, was 'chill'. That's all they were doing when they got together, her friends, 'chilling' - except for another, newly favoured activity, puking. She came home from parties now with puking stories - which of her friends had puked where and for how long. And then came the day that she told her own puking story, because she had sampled every kind of alcohol available at this party, and there was a great deal. She told me calmly she'd chosen to try it all there, because the party was at a close friend's, an easy walk from home.

I looked at the neighborhood kids as they slouched outside the front door, waiting for my daughter to come out and chill. These were kids I'd known for many years, only now their faces were blank, as if we'd never met; both boys and girls with piercings or neon hair and tattoo's or pants so vast and shoes so wide or high that the clothes looked like circus costumes to me. I wondered if we looked simultaneously so absurd and so dangerously out of control to our parents, in our bell-bottoms and psychedelic prints. They all smoked, too, these kids, and I didn't know which was worse, the easily accessible cigarettes or the just as easily accessible illegal stuff.

After a death in the family, I had to fly off one weekend. My thirteen year old son went to a friend's, but my daughter wanted to stay at home. "It'll be fine, don't worry," she smiled. Her two best friends moved in to keep her company. So I went, calling to check at eleven on Saturday night, as prearranged. "Everything's fine," she trilled. As I walked up the front steps on my Sunday return, however, I could see that nothing was fine. The front yard was a mess of cigarette butts and empty bottles. And so were the

living-room and the dining-room and the kitchen. The chaos was indescribable. And this, apparently, was after the clean-up.

She had invited “a few close friends” over on Saturday night, and somehow the word got out; neighborhood kids had poured in, and she couldn’t stop them. In the end, just before my phone-call, she had telephoned the police. So, I later found out, did the neighbours.

“I love the police,” she told me with tears in her eyes. “I was like hysterical trying to get these guys to leave. I didn’t mean for this to happen, Mum.” The state of the house was one heartbreak, but then the next one dawned: things were missing. A lot of my jewelry; some of our sound equipment; every drop of alcohol in the house, including bottles of vintage wine. I wept, and she wept, and then we cleaned up.

A few months later, I had to go away again. She assured me fiercely that she had learned her lesson; nothing would happen. And when I returned, nothing had happened, according to her; a group of her closest friends had merely lived at the house for the weekend, sleeping in my bed, butting cigarettes everywhere, removing or breaking a few things. It was around this time I learned from her school that she had been skipping classes and was in danger of failing the term. Things looked pretty black, around then. She was harsh and rude, as if she was trying to blame the pain of growing up on me.

After a few months of banning her friends from the house, I relented one afternoon and let her invite in a few neighborhood kids. It felt safe because I was there, monitoring. While I monitored in one room, a boy in another slipped my laptop computer under his jacket, and vanished. Nobody, it turned out, knew his last name or where he lived.

So I made a lot of mistakes and learned a lot, too late, about parenting teenagers. I’m relieved to say that things are turning around, I think. My girl reluctantly agreed to see a counselor and kept going for awhile; sometimes we went together. She pulled herself together at school, sort of. The air has cleared between us and we laugh together again, sometimes. She had a part time job for a couple of months, where they said she was responsible, personable and efficient. She gets up in the morning, usually. I’m living with my beloved daughter again, instead of an angry, heedless stranger. Most of the time.

A few days ago, we discovered that something very precious to me had been broken, but she assured me neither she nor her friends had done it, and I believe her. My girl said, “Mum, even though I didn’t break it, I want to pay to have it repaired. You’ve had a hard time recently. I owe you.” I’m proud of her for being forthright, but I will still give her the repair bill, no matter how big it is. Because she’s right.

(I showed this to her, by the way. And what she said was, “Mum, you let me off easy.”)