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Eye To Eye

Marcia Morphy
St. John Fisher College

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"When my daughter turned twelve, we stood toe-to-toe, and she looked me directly in the eye. Clearly, she did not like what she saw. Overnight it seemed, I had grown small and she, tall; as my stature diminished, hers increased. She did everything right; I did everything wrong."

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"Mom, what shoes are you wearing? Those heels look terrible with jeans. And your hair..."

Once loved unquestionably, I was now judged unmercifully. But I understood the reason. My daughter was pre-adolescent — that in-between stage where her own shoes didn't seem to fit, and she couldn't wear mine.

However, one day my daughter decided that I could accompany her to a toy store, to buy a birthday gift for her friend. This time, she forgot to be embarrassed about my appearance, because her younger brother looked worse than I did. If my faults were in technicolor, his were in flashing neon. She told him so as we entered the store, and that's when I decided to browse alone. This puberty business was wearing me down.

Right then, I saw something in the display window that caught my eye—a three story Victorian home, complete with furniture, wall hangings, rugs and lights. The house was filled with people. There was a baby sleeping in the nursery... two children watched T.V. in the den. Dad was working in the garage and Mom was taking a turkey out of the oven. "Yes," I thought. It was the perfect dollhouse.

I felt someone standing next to me, and as I turned, I saw my daughter— her eyes wide and fixed on the display. Her lower face broke into a smile.

"Mom, can we get it? Look at the fireplace and fish tank. Don't they look real? And that dog and cat in the front hall; they look so guilty. I bet they knocked over the table."

"Yes, I bet they did," I answered. "That cat looks like Percey, don't you think?"

"Mom, you're not listening to me."

For some reason, my daughter always concludes that I cannot comprehend her point of view. Ever. She insists that I have my opinion, and she has hers. Period. Her eyes do waver for an instant, her lips do quiver for a second, but then she always manages to get out the fatal last words: "I knew you wouldn't understand."

But this time, she didn't stop there. "Please, mom, please. I'll give you all the money I've saved. I've never had a dollhouse, any kind of dollhouse before." She went on for the punchline — saying the words all parents hate to hear. "All my friends have one."

I never cared what other people owned — except when I was my daughter's age. A girl in my neighborhood, named Gail, had six Barbie dolls, the Barbie townhouse, and the Barbie Corvette. Not to mention the three suitcases of clothes. I never forgot how I felt back then, especially when my parents said "Absolutely no Barbie doll for you." Perhaps they did have a good reason...Barbie's body was too well-developed for its own good.

But that was past. I was determined my daughter would not suffer from the same fate I did. As I continued looking at the dollhouse, my mind and heart raced with childlike desire. But excitement soon turned to reality as I said "Honey, we can't afford to buy this dollhouse. It would cost at least $300 and Dad would be so upset. We came to the store to buy a birthday present for your friend. Let's get on with it and leave."

I ached inside as I looked at her face. My son, who was standing nearby, overheard our conversation. For a minute, he seemed lost in thought, like he was considering which new Nintendo game he would beg for. Instead, I heard him say, "Mom, get it for her. She never asks for anything..."
special. We'll hide it from Dad and he'll never know the difference. You know he doesn't notice anything but golf clubs."

I laughed aloud at the image -- my husband not noticing a five-foot-wide, lighted dollhouse. I wished things could be so simple. I looked at my watch, noticing it was almost five-o-clock. We hurriedly picked out the birthday gift, and moved towards the checkout counter.

For some reason, I felt horrible, cheated somehow. My daughter would soon be beyond such innocence, and there would be no time left for us to share a piece of childhood together. I made a quick decision. Grabbing my daughter's hands I shouted, "Didn't we forget something?"

We raced home with the trunk filled and drove up the driveway. My heart missed a beat as I noticed my husband had come home early from work that day. I opened the car door and quickly told him about our "new home".

I looked at my husband, expecting the worst, and was surprised by the understanding in his eyes. He helped us carry everything inside, and the night was filled with laughter and squabbling, as my daughter and I arranged the furniture and lights.

A few months later, my daughter had some friends over after school. I was given some "much needed" advice before their arrival. "Mom, please don't say anything about the dollhouse, like when I got it -- or just anything about it." I suddenly got the picture.

The girls sat in the living room with their Cokes and snacks. They talked about getting tickets to a rap concert, whispering about back stage passes and what they were going to wear. One of the girls looked inside the dollhouse. My daughter quickly said it wasn't hers; it was her mother's, and wasn't that weird. They all laughed.

After her friends left, the house seemed quiet. I sat down with a book; my daughter watched TV.

A little while later, I noticed her re-arranging some of the rooms in the dollhouse. Our eyes met, and she smiled. "Mom, you know it looks better this way, with the lamp and master bedroom on the first floor."

I got up and stood next to my daughter, still noticing that we were both the same height. I took one look at the furniture she had moved. "Yes," I said. "That looks much better than before." I gave her a hug in celebration. At last, we were seeing eye-to-eye. 