

A MOTHER LOOKS AT THE SOMETIMES TUMULTUOUS RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WOMEN AND THEIR TEENAGE DAUGHTERS

BY CHARLOTTE WATSON SHERMAN

the **war** on girls
interiors

Daughters Beloved

am losing her. I see it in every rolled eye, each glance of adolescent disgust, the indifference of her shrugged shoulders.

The younger of my two daughters and I are grocery shopping at Safeway, neutral ground, you would think.

"Do you know where the salsa is?" I ask.

"The other way," 17-year-old Zahida says as she pushes our shopping cart half-full of food for what used to be a family.

"Here's some salsa," she says.

"That's not the kind I'm looking for," I say and turn just in time to see her eyes roll heavenward.

For a moment I am caught off guard. Is it a crime now to want a certain something? But it's not just my pickiness that seems to infuriate her; it is my *existence*—my adult-woman-in-a-body being that silently enrages her.

Only one year ago this same girl used to grab me and walk arm in arm no matter where we were. Instantaneous hugs were common. There was no ever-widening gulf of silence between us.

I don't know how to love this strange girl, I find myself thinking. And: How will I go through this a second time?

When my older daughter, Aisha, now 21, had entered puberty, we had circled each other in a primal feline dance, baring claws and fangs. Round and round we went with back talk and smart mouths, willfulness and

outright defiance, until the day, fed up and frustrated, I reached out and slapped her so hard her head snapped backward, and blood, dark as garnets, streamed from her nose.

"Don't you remember that time I had to slap you when

you were a teenager?" my mother asked after I told her what had happened. *Had to slap me?*

I recalled she had made some vague threat that "two women can't live in the same house." But I don't remember acting as if I knew more than the King James Bible. I don't recall blatant insolence. I couldn't have been anything like the terror Aisha had become.

I remember myself as a silent and obedient daughter, though once I entered puberty, I was overcome with emotions I clearly didn't understand. My adolescent hormones, gawkiness, acne, hair that refused to be tamed—all left me constantly on the verge of tears. I had taken to writing poems about gray skies and pouring rain to capture the downtrodden images of my interior landscape.

"What's wrong with you?" my mother had asked one day in a fit of agitation after she entered the kitchen and saw me sitting with my head resting on the table.

That day, as I silently wept, a scene from an old movie edged its way to the forefront of my mind. A distraught girl sobbing, sitting at a table in the golden light of her family's kitchen. The mother, kneeling beside her, wiped the daughter's tears with the edge of her apron, stroked her daughter's hair and murmured soothing words of love and consolation.

If only I could have lived in that make-believe world where a mother displayed her affection for her daughter without hesitation. My mother had never told me she loved me, certainly not with a brush of her fingertips over my troubled skin. She had never said I was pretty and perfect just the way I was. I would have traded the purple midi and black-leather coats, the green-suede wedgies—all the trendy clothes that were expressions of love she *bought*—for one perfect, excruciatingly wonderful, heart-filled embrace.

"I'm all messed up," I wailed. "Look at my hair," I said as I pulled my half-kinky, half-permed bangs into the air. "I'm ugly."

I waited for her to embrace me, but there were no hugs, no gentle strokes, no soothing words of love.

"Do you want me to take you to a psychiatrist?" she asked. She had clearly been shocked. Negro girls from Mississippi never talked like

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'Some of us don't know how to express deep feelings for our girls because we've never experienced life as a beloved daughter,' says the author (above).

this. Once, when I had asked her what she had talked about with her mother, she replied, "I didn't spend a lot of time with her. She was always working, washing and cleaning for White folks."

You can't give what you never had.

Hundreds of years ago, mothers in Africa were free to love and nurture. But in this land, our ancestor mothers were often physically and emotionally absent from their children, forced away from their children to labor for others.

Over the centuries, many of us never learned how to nurture our children properly—and now don't even know how to express deep feelings for our girls because we've never experienced life as a beloved daughter. That day at my mother's kitchen table, I dried my eyes. And I promised myself I would never be like her when I had children of my own.

Then I became a mother of two teenage daughters, perplexed by their behavior and poor attitudes, often confused, as well as angry. I questioned my ability to parent.

When my girls were young, I hugged and kissed them, told them they were beautiful and smart. I cooed, cuddled and rocked them. I didn't want them ever to question, not even once in their life, whether or not they had been loved.

As they grew, our love for one another was unquestioned—until they each hit puberty. Then it seemed as if whatever bond I had painstakingly tried to establish with each child snapped overnight and turned into constant bickering and surliness. I restrained myself as long as I could.

But the day came when, in blind fury, I slapped my child.

I had experienced Aisha's adolescent anger as a personal attack, a betrayal. And in doing so, I lost sight of the reality of the out-of-control hormones that ruled her body, her confused mind. After I slapped Aisha, I knew I had to release the child she was in my mind so that she could grow into the woman she envisioned herself becoming. No one was ever going to love her the way I loved her. And now I was going to have to give up control.

I faced my greatest fears and gathered information to give her about birth control, sexual assault, domestic violence, personal safety. Then I let go. And waited. We maintained a relatively peaceful coexistence until she reached 18, unharmed. Now we move tentatively toward each other as we attempt to establish a new adult relationship on neutral ground.

Today Zahida, determined to reject all attempts at maintaining a connection with me, calls on me to be wiser, more compassionate than I was with Aisha, than my mother was with me. I'll have to listen and negotiate more, have more patience.

"You'll see what it's like when you have children of your own," my mother often warned. My girls look at me now, a range of emotions crossing each daughter's face. *They don't know anything about me*, I marvel, *as I knew nothing about her*. And yet I love them unconditionally, as my mother loves me. □

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