

# Smitten at Mid-Life

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Parenting can be a joy, a challenge, an extension into the past and future, life altering, and a proof to oneself of worth, stamina, and capability. When undertaken with trepidation at mid-life and I mean my mid-life of fifty, it was all these and more. But now “youthifying” at 62 and the increasingly smitten single mom of a 12 and ½ year old, the trepidation is gone. What has replaced that earlier caution and, yes, fear of being subsumed in the role of mom, is a deep and powerful connection with my daughter; a greatly enhanced sense of pride and confidence in my own capacity, and a lightness of spirit that continues to surprise and delight me. While I am somewhat embarrassed to say that I was not instantly blinded with overwhelming love at first sight, as many parents say they are, I have grown and continue to grow into my heart—my beautiful and bright daughter. I love her so. But 12 years ago...oh my...

Picture this. I am on the brink of the second half of my life on January 1, 1995 celebrating it in company with 50 curious Beijingers in our little apartment at the You Yi Bingguan. My daughter-to-be is not yet born--she will enter life in the Year of the Boar Jan. 20th and become our child on June 15, 1995. The heat waves of menopause are sweeping over me. I am several months into doctoral research in Beijing studying the social changes flowing from and fostering the new market economy and affecting highly educated women and men who are members, volunteers, and staff of China's first NGO's--a social club for single people, a nationwide women's hotline and a women's research institute.

The strain of working in a language (Mandarin) I speak imperfectly and can barely read and write is constant. The worry that I won't get enough information for my doctorate ratchets up the sweat

quotient. In the months after Mei Ming, switching daily from Chinese to English in language and culture, from researcher to wife and mother, from self-reliant independent to brain busting list-maker--enough baby socks, enough liners for the baby bottles, enough noodles for baby supper— at the same time asking questions about single women's sex and work lives and adjustment to the new market era tests my mettle and health.

I hadn't been at all sure about undertaking this responsibility. My ex-husband had been the forward engine. I doubted my capability to give enough to a child. Rather I felt that I didn't have enough for myself. How could I possibly love a child as any child deserved to be loved? Further I worried about managing the rigors of academic research along with all the added opportunities, responsibilities, and pressures of caring for an infant, despite my ex's involvement, and the fact that in Beijing we had a nearly fulltime baby sitter.

In the years before grad school, I had served as director of NOW NYC during the 1970s ERA campaign and Roe v. Wade. I had lobbied to pass more beneficial and egalitarian marriage and divorce laws in New York state. Personally I followed the pattern of my mother and grand mother both of whom had been marriage resisters: the former delaying until nearly 30 to finally marry in 1934 and the latter refusing my grandfather for 12 years until she finally agreed and they were wed in 1895. I also refused to accept the boundaries of the social categories of wife delaying my own marriage three years and retaining my own name, bank account, work, while insisting on sharing the domestic duties—still all barrier busting actions in 1977.

Being the child of a family in which three generations spanned two centuries and paralleled the several waves of women's movement activities gave me a rare and cautious perspective about marriage, divorce and children. And I had watched in my own childhood the difficulties of an older single mom raising two kids.



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But neither the cautions born of the very real discriminations against women as wives and mothers—not to speak as workers--from law and custom, and the exigencies of my childhood fully explained even to me why I was so so very certain that I would be a terrible and lacking parent. This was a job and a role for others—not for me.

Nonetheless, I loved my husband and I wanted him to be happy and always a bit of a reckless fool, I agreed and plunged ahead. And whatever the troubles and sorrows that ended my marriage, I will always be grateful to my ex for going forward over my doubts and worries.

When I say I am smitten, I do not mean that love smote me between the eyes and I saw the mommy light! No, it has been the accretion of small acts of love for my daughter and small acts by her over that past twelve years that has me smitten and has enlarged my heart. My love has not been the stuff of mommy romance as one friend had predicted rhapsodizing over the memory of the scent of her baby's damp hair. It is the dailyness of love—the dinners cooked and socks washed, the sentences interrupted in mid-word to go get her from school, the baths run and the flash of her dark eyes, her forceful character that I admire so and bark my shins against. It is been the ordinariness of our life together with Mr. Lucy, our tuxedo cat, and Mystery, the Goldfish and snow shoveling together with her little red scoop and homework from which my love has been born. It has grown from getting to know who my daughter is and how we are alike and how different we are—respecting and appreciating that and sometimes wishing SHE WOULD JUST DO WHAT I TELL HER TO DO AND MAKE MY LIFE EASIER!!!

It has been in the reminders to myself that enough really is good enough and that perfectionist

as I am—done is better than nothing and so if I am not the perfect parent and sometimes my daughter has to suffer the slings and arrows of another comment about is that your grandmother and I am broader in the beam than I wish because I can't always manage everything and can't or don't fit in the exercise, and there are huge dust bunnies under the bed, what really matters is doing my best by my girl. I am increasingly smitten when I see her with her friends, The Tingas, they call themselves, and hear her tell about wanting to be pediatric dentist--Dr. Judy is her shero. Who knows, it's a long way to dental school from here. My admiration for her grows when she comes home dirty from climbing trees and primps for that special one she has her eye on, and whines about correcting her spelling. I am beginning to like it when she makes my life hard and argues. Is is not exactly pleasant, but such moments define her and define me as well.

I am clearly growing up along side my daughter and youthifying at the same time. As she moves deeper into middle school and gets "cooler," I get sillier. As she hangs out—no play dates, MOM! I hang back watching her enlarge her sphere and test her footing. The ever-increasing love I feel for her gives me confidence in her and in myself. Being smitten with love for my child at mid-life is clearly the best thing that ever happened to me. I am corny and trite that way. And I know now that my fears flowed from the romantic self-sacrificing ideals about Motherhood that are so socially powerful and increasingly in these conservative times—at least from my perspective--restrictive. But, I don't worry anymore. Even when I give in and let her win, I am my kind of mom and do the best I can. Sometimes that's pretty good and sometimes it's awfully thin. What is the growing constant is my love. And that makes me happy.