

## Risa: Older Teens



One of the hardest parts of being a parent is letting your children grow up.

From the time they take their first steps, they seem to want to run away, empowered by their sudden mobility, and laughing at you while you pursue them across the room. Believe it or not, as they get older, it gets harder to know when you need to hold them back and when you need to let them run.

Alec was almost old enough for High School when he asked me if he could meet his father at Penn Station in NY for a hockey game. His Dad could not leave work in Manhattan to come out to Long Island to fetch him and I was unable to chaperone Alec to the City. Alec had ridden on the Long Island Railroad a dozen times to Penn with his father, and

generally can be very sensible and alert. Still, I was unhappy with my agreement to deposit him on the train in Manhasset to be met by his father in NY.

I grew up in Queens and started riding the subway alone at thirteen. But, Alec was not a "City kid." I was trained, from a young age to clutch my pocketbook tightly and eyeball every suspect within fifteen feet of me. Less concerned about his wallet being lifted, than his person being misplaced, I gave Alec his last minute emergency plan information, as he boarded the train. Then I proceeded to grab a conductor by the arm and plead with him to keep an eye on my "young son", telling him that he had never ridden the train alone. Alec was mortified that I called in the cavalry, knowing full well he could handle himself. In the end, he arrived safely in New York and met his father without incident.

Alec was sixteen when he was leaving for a month for a college program in Dublin, Ireland. The program was well supervised, and the students were to be met by faculty members at the airport in Ireland. Post 9/11 security was tight at Kennedy Airport, although I phoned the airline to find out if I could accompany my minor child to the gate. I was told that I could not, but I could have an official chaperone appointed to accompany him on his trip. I knew that would not go over well, considering my minor was six feet tall and not interested in traveling with a babysitter. So, we said our good-byes at the security gate and I yelled after him "Son, get on the airplane with the big shamrock!", thinking "how hard could it be to miss that?". I would have remained in the security area for two more hours, until the plane took off, but my husband ushered me out the door, reminding me that we had dinner reservations in the City. Not surprisingly, Alec got to Ireland and managed perfectly well on his own.

Melissa was fifteen when I drove her to LaGuardia Airport for a trip to Santa Barbara, California. She needed to change planes in Denver. She had never flown without me and was traveling alone, save for another fifteen year-old novice traveler from New Jersey, whom she had never met. When we arrived at the airport, I dropped off Melissa and her now experienced older brother to check in, while I parked the car. When I entered the terminal, I expected her to be fully checked in. Instead, my teens were evaluating the latest DVDs at the Borders store. I brought Melissa to the security area, beyond which only ticketed passengers were permitted, so she could proceed to the gate, only to learn that she had not obtained a boarding pass. Unjustifiably hysterical, I corralled an airline employee for assistance, even though the kiosk dispensing the boarding passes was so straightforward it could've been operated by a five year-old. The kindly employee took one look at me, quickly assessed the situation, produced the evasive boarding pass instantly, and asked me if Alec and I wanted to accompany Melissa to the gate. I was so grateful, I almost kissed her.

A few days before Melissa's departure, her grandfather had cautioned her, telling her not to get lost shopping at the airport in Denver, but proceed directly to the gate and wait for her connection to Santa Barbara. I did have a mental image in my head of the two girls chatting away happily over their Starbucks™ Double Chocolate Chip Frappuccinos, while the airplane to Santa Barbara would taxi by undetected in the window behind them. Despite the multiplicity of potential complications, including my fear that the staff from the summer program would fail to meet her at the airport, Melissa and her companion arrived safe and sound at her intended destination.

Cars are actually the most feared form of transport known to the parents of teens. After months of driving with each teen behind the wheel, and after "having assumed the position" (right hand gripping the door handle, left palm pressed flat against the roof of the car to brace for possible impact), and wearing out the imaginary brake on the passenger side, both my children have grown into capable drivers.

New York State recently increased the requirement for young drivers from twenty hours of supervised driving to fifty, before the teen is allowed to take a driving test. Imagine, fifty hours in pre-crash position! Realistically, parents who drive enough with their children know when the teen has mastered this skill. I think it is sometime after the parent is no longer yelling "Stop. Stop. Stopppp!" at the top of her lungs, as the car approached each intersection. It varies from teen to teen.

When my kids were younger, I could not envision the day when either one of them would get into the driver's seat and drive away. Affording them real freedom, means handing them the keys to the car with no adult in tow. What is strange, is that now that that day has arrived, and I see how capable and responsible they have become, I am not filled with fear, but with pride, as they have taken just one more step towards adulthood. I guess I am growing up a little too.