

“When You’re Old, I’m Putting You in a Home”

by April Kutger

When Sienna was in the third grade, her long hair was usually brushed haphazardly into something resembling a puffball at the back of her head; wisps of fine, wiry strands jumped out around her hairline. The pain of brushing and braiding her hair was too much for her to endure every day, so I usually allowed it to be tangled but contained, however crudely.

Sienna wasn’t concerned with her appearance anyway. Her only efforts to look presentable were those I mandated. She wore Sunday-best clothes and clean white tights at my insistence. She played with her brothers more than anyone else and enjoyed rough games and the carefree life that comes with freedom from worrying about one’s looks. First impressions? What nine-year-old girl thinks of such things?

This was the year we were living with my parents in Illinois. Sienna's grandfather had to remind to wash her bare feet before coming in the house after playing in dirt, grass, or the street. I had to make sure she changed her underwear every day. Every evening, I had to tell her to clean her room of long-ended doll parties, tossed off clothing, puddled pajamas, and books strewn about. My mother demanded, “At least clear a path so you can get out, if there’s a fire!”

That late September in the outskirts of Joliet, Parent-Teacher Night was approaching. I wanted to make a good impression. My children were almost the only “children of color” in the school. When I had asked about diversity before I registered the kids, I had been assured by an administrator that “all the children are white except for two Native American children, but they're adopted.” Thank goodness those two adopted children lived right across the street from my parents – my children were not the only brown children at the school or in the neighborhood.

As the white mother of three mixed-race children, I believed the impressions we made were extremely important. In the mid-70’s, in the rural mid-west, many people imagined a single white woman with German/African-American/Native-American children to be someone you might see on “Cops” – a fat, slovenly, trailer-trash kind of woman with two-inch black roots and a dirty bra strap drooping on a pudgy arm that may have recently been injected with methamphetamine. Because I looked much younger than my 31 years and

had an All-American-Girl look, strangers often asked if I were babysitting the children. When I told them I was their mother, they would ask if they were adopted.

Having obedient, clean, well-dressed children with excellent manners is important to most good parents. It was even more important to me. First, my German-American parents and grandparents raised me that way; they believed cleanliness was next to godliness and proper English and good manners would open many doors. My grandmother had striven mightily to assimilate the family since World War I, when fear and hatred toward German-Americans had brought firebombs and surveillance, censored mail and job loss. Second, I was determined to have people think well of us, even those who set their minds against us on sight. I wanted to win them over. And sometimes I did. And then they were able to elevate their opinions of themselves, and everyone felt better. Third, I knew that poorly behaved children were impossible to manage and not very much fun. I wanted to enjoy my children, and I had to be able to manage them or our fragile family structure would break down very quickly.

After an early supper on Parent-Teacher Night, Sienna took a shower and sat on the floor by the side of my bed. I began brushing out all the tangles of her gauzy frizz. She wailed and cried, but there was nothing to do but endure it – her, the agony, I, the tears. She would wear a lovely, peach-colored knit outfit my mother had bought for her. The color was perfect for her light honey complexion.

When I had thoroughly brushed Sienna's hair, I parted it and rolled into a style reminiscent of Rosalind Russell in "His Girl Friday;" Sienna was very like the old-fashioned girls she loved to read about in *Little Women* and *Anne of Green Gables* or watch in old Andy Hardy movies and "The Sound of Music." When a few untamed wisps of hair would not obey, I decided to tame them with the curling iron. I stretched out the thin strands and, starting from the end, wound them around the iron's cylinder. When I got as close to the scalp as possible without touching her skin, I let go of the trigger to release the clamp. Although I was very careful as I worked, I had to speed up the process or we would be late. On the last tendril, the iron touched Sienna's ear and she yelped like a weaned puppy being nipped by its mother. I said I was sorry, but I couldn't play the comforting mother right then. It was such a little burn; I crossly told her, "Suck it up! We have to go."

Sienna and I arrived looking appropriately respectable for agrarian Illinois, and I got a good report from her teacher. She wasn't the smartest third-grader, but she was interesting and independent, character trait I valued more than straight A's. I appreciated nonconformance and self-reliance far more than simple brainpower. The night was an all-around success in my view. After scarfing as many brownies, peanut butter cookies and cups of punch as we could without appearing to be starving gypsies, we went home and to bed.

The next night I was brushing Sienna's hair before bed. I usually braided it in order to keep the nighttime knots at bay. Of nighttime knots, I had a great deal of experience; my mother had always kept my curly blond hair very short because of the matted frizz it so easily became. As I was brushing, I noticed a small brown patch on her ear. I realized it was a scab from the curling iron burn.

I said, "Oh, my goodness, this is where I burned your ear last night. Oh, sweetie, I'm so sorry."

Sienna's perfunctory and slightly haughty reply was, "Yes! You've ruined my beauty!"

I hoped she was being sarcastic – a rare commodity in the very young, because I laughed. When I finally stopped laughing – and by then Sienna was laughing with me, I was properly repentant and she forgave me. Whew! Another motherly mess gotten out of. Another potential, twenty-years-down-the-road, guilt trip avoided.

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Sienna's sarcasm showed up in many barbed retorts as she grew up. She never "talked back" but she sure could wield a sharp tongue. When she was about twelve, she was acting silly and childish about something, arguing a point she had no hope of winning, but refusing to give in or give up. After at least a half hour of her exasperating behavior, I said, "Stop acting so stupid, Sienna!"

She answered, "If you think I'm stupid, how do you think I got this way?"

I replied, "I guess now's the time to tell you that you were adopted!"

She groaned, "Oh, Mom!" The "Mom" was a drawn-out, two-syllable word.

Some years later, I attended a dinner-dance with my young friend, Mark. While we were dancing, a woman stepped on my sandaled foot with a stiletto pump. The steel heel drove into my flesh between the bones just below my big and second toes. Somewhat

anesthetized by champagne, I didn't even look down or at the dangerous dancer. I whispered to Mark, "Ooooooh! That hurt," but I kept on dancing.

A moment later, someone pointed out that I was bleeding all over the dance floor. I sat down, put my foot up, and was ministered to by numerous corporate officers afraid of being sued. Finally, I told Mark to take me to the emergency room where I got several stitches and learned that the blade of that high-heeled shoe had almost gone all the way through my foot.

I took sick leave for the next week so I could stay off my feet and keep the injured one elevated. The instructions from the emergency room doctor forbid getting it wet; taking a bath would be difficult. I put a plastic bag held with a rubber band over my foot. Using arm strength, I carefully lowered my rear into the deep, old, claw-footed tub; both of my legs stuck out over the edge. Resting my right foot on the spigot, I lifted my left leg and lowered it into the water. I washed all my parts and then relaxed in the hot water. After about twenty minutes, I called Sienna.

"See, I need you to wash my hair."

She looked at me with disdain and sneered, "Nooooooo. No way! I am not washing your hair!"

"Why not? You do it for little kids all the time, when you baby sit."

"Yeah, but that's the point; they're adorable little children!"

"Well, you better get used to it. You're going to have to do it when I'm old!"

"Oh, no I'm not! When you're old, I'm putting you in a home!"