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Bethany Sorensen

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Shoulders

Bethany Sorensen

“**W**e” are taking a nap, but she’s the only one sleeping. The canvas shade above our heads and the subtle breeze off the water make the 95-degree heat tolerable. The gentle rocking of the houseboat lulls us both into a trance.

Her back is to me. I hear the telltale sound of her subconscious thumb-sucking. It means she’s fallen from the waking world. She’s out for the count. I feel the relief every parent feels getting their exhausted child to step away from the fun and action long enough to rest and reset. Maybe I’ll sleep too. The full moon the night before kept me awake; I watched it until even the bats called it a night.

I am tired but can’t close my eyes against the scene beside me. My daughter is curled up, a towel covering her legs, wearing her favorite navy-and-white-striped swimsuit. It features a smiling pineapple wearing sunglasses on the front. One strap has slipped just outside her tan lines so I can see the contrast of sun-browned tones against her natural skin. Her tousled dark-blond hair curls and waves from a recent swim. I see the gentle rise and fall of her shoulders. My eyes rest on her small back. Even the majesty of the thousand-foot-tall redrock walls surrounding me cannot compare to the marvel of those tiny shoulder blades.

Like every mother before me, I wonder how many more times I will watch her sleep. It’s not an infinite number. I consider the last time I held my son, now ten, while he napped. My arms were asleep, and it was time to start dinner, but I couldn’t bring myself to move. I had the same feeling then as now—slow down and enjoy. I want to remember this.

In half an hour, my little girl will wake, stretch, and jump back into life, moving fast, her preferred speed. There's a good chance she'll strap on her life jacket and leap off this deck into the warm water below within two minutes of waking.

Realizing your child is growing up hits at odd moments, certainly not when you expect it. You would think realization shows up when birthday candles are blown out or on school picture day. Instead, it steals into everyday moments and catches you off guard, like when we're walking up the stairs to bed and she turns to ask for her favorite story—the one about unicorns believing little girls are real. Suddenly she looks older. I stare, trying to determine what subtle changes have taken place. I can't narrow it down. When did it happen? A small heartbeat of panic pulses—I need to pay closer attention. Tonight I will use all my best voices to read her bedtime story aloud because the countdown has begun. Which story will be the last?

I launch into another parental pastime—imagining her future. We won't always sit at gymnastics meets watching turnovers on a four-inch-wide platform while my husband mutters “I *hate* the balance beam” under his breath. She will outgrow the backpack that looks large enough to carry her. She will wear swimsuits unadorned with smiling fruit. Her shoulders will grow. What will those shoulders encounter? She will drive away. She will change her name. Someday she will watch her own baby sleep and wonder whether she's given enough to help that little person survive life's storms.

Her earliest days began with milk and mimicry. Words came with a side of pureed fruit and vegetables. I didn't need forensic science to determine by the spatter pattern that sweet potatoes were not her favorite. Sentences and solids were followed by chapters and a variety of cuisine. In a matter of long days and short years,¹ we progressed from naming apples, bananas, and oranges as we walked the grocery store aisles to please and thank you, wash your hands, be kind on the playground.

I nourish her a little at a time, offering love and language like individual stalks of wheat placed across her back, laid so lightly she barely feels them. Each lesson accumulates until, through the years, they become great sheaves of love, faith, and knowledge. She is hardly aware of the precious burden across her shoulders, nor of how much more there is

1. Gretchen Rubin, “The Years Are Short,” June 15, 2012, video, 1:57, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KktuoQwb3vQ>.

to glean. I am tempted to slow the pace or carry her load, wishing to grant her respite. Surely there is still time to prepare. Yet I know some of what may lie ahead. Her burden feeds her strength to accompany her years. Only then will she “not be beaten down by the storm . . . , neither . . . harrowed up by the whirlwinds” (Alma 26:6) so she can “come again with rejoicing, bringing [her] sheaves with [her]” (Ps. 126:6).

A slight breeze has picked up. The change in the air stirs her to wakefulness. She turns toward me, pleased at finding me there. She stretches, smiles, and reaches for her life jacket. I snap the buckles for her, each click nudging me free of my reverie. She asks to jump and I nod, slowly resurfacing into the present. I watch her step to the edge of the deck, square her shoulders, and leap.

This essay by Bethany Sorensen won honorable mention in the 2021 Richard H. Cracroft Personal Essay Contest, sponsored by BYU Studies.