

What Happened to My Little Girl?

By Dina Santorelli

It was only last May when my then seven-year-old daughter Helena and I were chasing princesses in Disney World, dripping with sweat during a heat wave while waiting on 45-minute lines for barely legible signatures in an overpriced autograph book. Life at that time was filled with rainbows and castles and princes on white horses and happily ever afters, and had I known that it was all on the verge of changing forever, I'd have taken far more vacation photos.

Fast-forward 10 or so months, and Helena's once-cherished pink princess lunchbox is now history, having been replaced by a disposable and less cumbersome paper bag. Most of her princess dolls have either been given to charity or languish pitifully in horribly contorted positions on the first floor of an abandoned Barbie Dream House, and the Disney Princess game, once a regular pastime of our little family, gathers dust atop a closet.

Last Christmas, after receiving a Cabbage Patch doll as a gift from a well-meaning relative, Helena's eyes welled up as she placed it next to me. "Don't they know that I'm big now?" she asked.

How could they, I felt like saying. I'm just barely getting used to the idea myself.

What happened? Wasn't I just chopping her hot dogs into bite-sized pieces? Wasn't she just sleeping with her Piglet and Flounder stuffed animals? Conversations that once revolved around Zoopals paper plates have turned into discussions of the dating dilemmas of Zoey Brooks of *Zoey 101* — you know, that show whose main characters attend some sort of sleepaway middle school?

After solemnly reporting that she no longer likes *SpongeBob Squarepants* ("That's when I was a kid . . . I'm almost a teenager now," she proclaimed), my daughter has graduated to *Ned's Declassified School Survival Guide* and *Drake and Josh*, running through the plot lines like a seasoned adolescent—and she's only in second grade.

I try to keep up, like in October when I proudly handed Helena a pair of black leggings with candy corns that I'd picked up at Target. But she took one look at them and (gasp!) rolled her eyes. "Mom, black's not my thing, it's yours," she said. I didn't even know she had a thing.

It's all going so fast that sometimes I just hold onto her real tight and tell her that I want to keep the world from spinning, to keep time from dragging us forward. But the truth is that while all this has taken me quite by surprise, I feel like I'm privy to something remarkable taking place, as



if a caterpillar is turning into a butterfly right before my very eyes. And when they're ready, they're ready — there's nothing we can do but sit and marvel at the wonder of it all.

Still, despite the furtive glances into the mirror and the never-ending search for "popular clothes," Helena still thinks that burping is one of the most hysterical things ever, and I catch her eyeing the TV while her brothers watch *SpongeBob* or *Pokemon*.

And just the other day, Helena waltzed into the living room holding her blue Disney autograph book. "Look what I found," she said, showing me the book as if she had uncovered a buried treasure. As she flipped through the pages, I smiled as I thought I caught a glimmer in her eye. Looks like this grown-up stuff is going to take some adjusting for both of us. ☺

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