

DRESSING MY DAUGHTER

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OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

"Unfortunately, there is no mistake," she said, closing the file. "We are worried about your daughter, Rebecca. She's very bright and works extremely hard but she doesn't join in any activities, seems to have no friends and never looks comfortable with herself!"

The headmistress passed the signed report card to me.

I frowned. Very bright? Rebecca's report cards were always full of disappointing rows of B+ grades. Not a single A, let alone A+, but at least all the hours she spent studying kept her out of my way. More importantly it kept her away from all the temptations of the modern age - fashion, make-up, pop music and that scourge of today's world - social media. Of course she didn't have any friends! All the girls round here wore tiny mini-skirts that showed off their fat legs. Most unsuitable companions for my Rebecca. Goodness knows how the parents let them get away with it. Probably gave the girls money and let them buy their own clothes.

When Rebecca needed new clothes, I took her to the market. For some reason, she always gave me that surly look of hers (she really was a difficult child) as we went round the stalls. I bought her lovely crimplene skirts and pastel coloured cardigans with flowers embroidered on the front. The local shoe shop had some nice flat lace-ups, which finished off the outfit perfectly. For school, I always dressed her in the long navy blue A-line skirt and white shirt of the traditional school uniform. She stood out beautifully from all the other girls in their short skirts and tight blouses.

"Mrs Jones!" I realised with a jolt that the headmistress was still talking. "I think you really need to help Rebecca find friends, perhaps join some social groups. Does she have any hobbies perhaps?"

“With her grades, do you think she can afford hobbies?” I stood up. “This is ridiculous!” I nodded to the headmistress and walked out of the room. Hobbies indeed, whatever next!

The remaining years of Rebecca's time at secondary school flew by. Which is just as well, there's nothing worse than having a teenager in the house, they're such a worry and so expensive to feed! Then she got a place at University. I was stunned her grades were good enough, but there you go. She chose to study French and Italian. Italian? A language she knew nothing about?

“I hope it won't be too difficult for you,” I said as I gave her the tweed skirt and beige cardigan I had bought her as a gift.

“I'm sure I'll manage, Mother,” she said with a grimace as she climbed onto the train.

She came home for the three weeks of her first Christmas break. She got off the train, dressed all in black and wearing high heeled shoes. Her eyelashes seemed unnaturally long and, most shocking of all, she was wearing lipstick!

“What on earth are you wearing?” I said.

“Lovely to see you too, Mother” she replied, “I'm wearing new clothes!”

She didn't speak on the drive home, but then, I've always told her to be quiet in the car so I can concentrate on driving.

When we got home, we had a cup of tea, then Rebecca went for a bath. I sneaked into her bedroom and went through her rucksack. It was full of clothes that looked like they had come from a fashion catalogue.

Rebecca talked non-stop at supper that night, which was very annoying, but gave me a chance to think about what to do with all those clothes. My attention was suddenly drawn to what she was saying, when she mentioned a party she'd gone to.

“Rebecca!” I said “You can't go to parties! You're at University to study, not to enjoy yourself!”

Rebecca gave me her surly look again (I was beginning to think she'd never grow out of it) and didn't speak for the rest of the meal.

Next morning, Rebecca was already in the kitchen when I got down for breakfast. She was wearing trousers that were far too tight and a shockingly low cut top.

“I'm going to the city library today to do some research,” she said. “I'll be back this afternoon!”

“Well I'll be out shopping, I need lots of extra food and toilet rolls now you're home again,” I said “but I'll be here to let you in when you get back.”

A plan was beginning to form in my mind.

When Rebecca left, I went into her bedroom. She had unpacked her toiletries and books but most of the clothes were still in the rucksack. I opened a drawer and found a couple of tiny pairs of panties (how did she expect such things to keep her warm?) which I stuffed back into the rucksack. Then I took it downstairs and sneaked it into the car. I drove to the next small town and handed the rucksack in at one of the second-hand shops. Then I went to the supermarket to buy all the extra supplies I'd need if I was to feed both of us for three weeks.

When Rebecca got home mid-afternoon, I was wringing my hands.

“Oh Rebecca!” I said, “something terrible happened while we were out! Someone broke in and stole your rucksack!”

Rebecca looked at me suspiciously. “There's no sign of a forced entry. Mother, did you forget to lock the door?”

“Yes I must have done!” I sobbed.

Rebecca sighed heavily. “Did they take anything else, Mother?”

“Only a bit of money, I think.” I continued sobbing, “I've not noticed anything..... stop!” I shouted as she walked towards the phone.

“I'm going to call the police, Mother!” she said “I need to report a crime! Unless that is, you know a reason why I shouldn't?”

“Oh Rebecca, I don't know,” I said, unsteadily “It's only clothes. I can buy you new ones!”

“I'm sure you can, Mother” she said with her surly face. But she put the phone down.

She barely spoke the rest of that Christmas. She didn't come home that Easter or that summer. In fact I've not heard from her since. But the other day I got an envelope with a Paris postmark. Inside there's a cutting from a French magazine with a photo of a model walking down the catwalk. Her surly face looks very like Rebecca's. It's amazing the girls they use as models these days.

Based in Edinburgh, Juliet is an adult education tutor, wildlife surveyor and conservation volunteer. Her poetry and short stories have been widely published, set to music and baked into cupcakes. She blogs at <http://craftygreenpoet.blogspot.com> and can be found on BlueSky and Twitter as @craftygreenpoet.