

A Variety of Glimpsed Moments (2013)

I squeeze my husband's sweaty hand as the nurses urge me to give one more push. Just one more and this excruciating pain, as well as nine months toil, will all be over. With all the strength I can muster, I do as I'm told. A tiny, squealing infant is thrust into my arms and I am instantly spellbound. Everything about her is mesmerising, from her screaming, wet head to her perfect little bellybutton, marking the spot where our internal bond was severed. However, as one bond ends, another one is formed. I am startled by the worry and panic I feel rising in me as the midwife takes my baby to clean her, surprised by my instinct to protect her at all costs. This is not only the start of her life, but the beginning of a new life for me, this time playing the role of 'Mum'. This is a journey we embark on together.

I blink, and she is five years old, toddling up the hill towards her first day of school. Dressed in her ankle length skirt, with pink ribbons tied around her lopsided pigtails, she is blissfully ignorant to the enormity of the day. The excitement of filling her much too big school bag with colouring pencils and Twistables has gradually worn off and her expression changes as I see the clogs in her head begin to turn. She screws up her little face to let me know she is not impressed with this plan and her grubby hand clasps mine, attempting to pull me in the other direction. I assure her that she'll love school, that there will be lots of other girls for her to play with, but she doesn't look convinced. For fear of making eye contact with anyone who might try to convince her to stay, she buries her head in my jeans and lets herself believe she is now invisible. A young woman with a friendly face and a paint-splattered t-shirt attempts to prise the determined five year old off my leg, but to no avail. Not until the teacher mentions the word 'jellybeans' does she loosen her army-tight grip and bashfully follows the woman who is to become her second mother to a table in the centre of the classroom. Without so much as a backwards glance at me, she eagerly joins in the other children's games while munching on her jellybeans. She appears to have readily forgotten the warning I drilled into her about not taking sweets from strangers. I worry about her principles.

Fast forward to December of third class, I proudly watch on as she takes centre stage in her class production of 'The Nativity'. With a checkered tea towel secured by an elastic hairband on her head, and a cane borrowed from grandad in her left hand, there is no denying that she is the

perfect Joseph. Her upper lip is brushed with my murky brown eyeliner that is almost as old as she is. I worry it will bring her out in a rash. I beam with pride as she belts out her lines, captivating her audience of forty parents. The hours spent practising in the kitchen have clearly paid off as she requires no microphone to make herself hear. My trusty 'camcorder' gives a final clink before dying a sudden death. Its little lens clearly couldn't handle the intensity of my star's acting, but no matter. Even without the recording, I will never forget this moment. I hang on her every word, carefully reciting her lines in my head before she belts them out herself. She doesn't falter. The minor characters of Mary, with her pillow-stuffed tummy, and the angel, with her tinfoil tiara, go unnoticed until they take their place beside the star of the show at the end of the production. She takes her bow and I continue to clap and holler until my hands are red raw and my voice begins to go.

A rainy Saturday night during her fourth year of secondary school. Mascara runs down her cheeks and her bare legs and pricked with goose bumps from the biting January night as she clambers into the car. The make-up which she spent hours carefully applying is ruined and the humidity of the over-packed rugby club has made her perfectly straightened hair frizzy. Her too-short dress is stained with sweat from the gross workout that is an under sixteens disco. Amidst her sobs, I catch snippets of the night's antics. Something about a boy she liked going off with her supposed 'best friend' – the usual. All too aware that this exposure and openness she is offering me could end at any moment, I need to play my cards right. I do my best to assure her that there will be other boys, that I never liked the friend anyway, but my attempt to form a connection falls flat on its face. Sure enough, by the time we pull into our driveway the sullen, distant individual who has taken over my daughter has returned. Sometimes I worry that this teenager phase will never end.

A balmy Friday at the end of May sees the UCD carpark packed to capacity with overdressed parents, eager to watch their offspring graduate. As I sit with my husband in the elaborately decorated graduation hall, I can't help but be overcome with a wave of emotion at the significance of the event. Today marks the day she leaves the education system for good. After today, she enters the big, bad realm of the real world and the sheer thought of this fills my head with worries and doubts. What if she's not ready? What if she doesn't find a job? The list goes on. Sensing my anxiety, my husband gives my hand a tight squeeze and I do my best to give him a reassuring smile. Whoever said that parents never stop worrying about their children was entirely accurate. Practising the breathing techniques I learnt in yoga, I try to stay in the moment, to focus on the real reason I am here today – to celebrate my daughter's achievements. I spot her on the stage amidst the sea of young men and women, finely dressed in their caps and gowns, and my heart almost

stops. Sometimes it's hard to remember that the young woman on stage is no longer the ten-year-old with the checkered tea towel over her head, but a strong, educated woman who is just beginning the adventure that is her life. As the lecturer calls her name and hands her a scroll, the floodgates open and I don't even attempt to stop them. Some moments are meant to be seen through blurry vision.

The church bells ring for twelve o'clock mass as the old 'Merc' pulls up outside the steps. Although we are late, I am ashamed to admit to myself that this is the earliest I have been for mass in years. The bridesmaids fuss about her, smoothing her dress and straightening her veil, as she begins her ascent into the church. In the porch we meet her father, smartly kitted out in the first dress suit I've seen him in since our own wedding day. Although his kind eyes are wrinkled around the edges and his hair is thinning in places, as he squeezes my hand I am reminded of that day in the maternity ward almost thirty-two years ago. As the organ strikes up inside the church, she grasps her father's arm. Her crisp white dress shimmers in the rays of the midday sun that enter through the atrium. She permeates a certain radiance and her deep blue eyes, so like my own, are as alive as I have ever seen them. This is the look of a woman in love, a look I myself am only too familiar with. I had been right on that dismal January night so many years ago when I told her there would be other boys. As the church doors swing open, we are greeted by the traditional music and the familiar faces of her dearest friends and relatives, all turned to watch the bride begin her journey towards the rest of her life. As I watch on from behind, I feel completely at ease. For the first time since her birth I find I am no longer worried about her, what her future holds or the decisions she's making. We raised her well, giving her all out love and support, and she has blossomed into everything we could have hoped for her, and more. Our part in her story is over for now, this is our curtain call. It's our turn to take a bow.