

MY BABY GIRL

Renesmee has existed for four-and-a-half years, which for her is the human equivalent of an eleven-year-old. Almost a teenager. We've had so little time to get used to having a child and she's almost not a child anymore.

I was thinking recently about her brief toddler-hood and her close attachment to me then. I'd read once that children who spend their earliest days in an incubator can have trouble bonding with others later in life. In former times, parents weren't allowed in the hospital intensive care units and those unfortunates who had a sickly or premature infant were forced to look at their babies through glass. They were allowed to meet and hold their infant only after it was well enough to be taken home. If the child expired in the hospital, the parents met it upon its demise. Of course, because newborns require physical contact when small, prohibiting that early closeness increased the probability that the baby would die. A vicious Catch-22.

With the latter part of the 20th century came a more humane approach to infant care. Not only are parents allowed, but are actively encouraged, to spend time with their incubator babies in order to promote healthy bonding from both sides.

I sometimes wonder whether Renesmee's first days had some influence on her relationship with her mother and me. Though Renesmee saw and touched her mother in her first three days of life, Bella was completely unresponsive as she suffered through her change. Renesmee was cared for by Rosalie and Jacob mostly, though everyone pitched in, unable to resist our baby's charms.

One of Renesmee's earliest memories is from the day of her birth when she reached out from Bella's womb and grabbed what she could reach, which happened to be my nose. When she was young, she liked to remind me frequently of that day. It seemed to be her way of reaffirming that I am her Daddy, her first caretaker on her first day. There must be something about that initial connection of trust that sticks with a child (or at least

with our child). Renesmee and I were extraordinarily close in her first couple of years.

Bella has told me that she and Renesmee were connected while Nessie was inside of her. Bella began speaking to her and comforting her from the first day she was aware that Renesmee was there. And she always felt that Nessie heard and understood her. She certainly recognized Bella's voice.

I remember with great joy the day that Nessie made herself known to me from inside Bella's body, when presumably her brain had developed enough for me to read her mind. She didn't yet have coherent thoughts, but she had perceivable expressions of emotion. The first thing I read was her sense of delight at the sound of Bella's voice. What a thrill that was! She responded similarly when I spoke. It was clear that she knew her parents before she was born.

Renesmee heard Bella speak briefly right after her birth, and then had to wait for three days to hear her again. Renesmee had an adjustment to make when she was re-introduced to her mother, because Bella's voice sounded so different. Nessie and I didn't have that difficulty. She recognized me and my voice from the instant she was born and that remained constant for her.

Bella confided in me that when she awoke from her change and saw Renesmee for the first time, she didn't immediately recognize the child who had been living in her womb. She had to reestablish the emotional bond that had developed between them during Nessie's gestation. No doubt that was partly because three days after her birth, our daughter already was well on her way to becoming a toddler.

I've wondered whether that brief estrangement from Bella in the beginning explains why, of her two parents, Renesmee relied more on me to take care of the day-to-day minutia of her early life. For example, if I was anywhere about, she would ask me to prepare her food and feed her. (That was best, because Bella was entirely unable to handle the donated human blood that Renesmee preferred.) She always came looking for me when it was time for her bath, too. She enjoyed having me drag out her

fleet of miniature plastic boats...two sailboats, a little cruising yacht, a canoe, and a fishing boat... and play "boat races" and other bathtub games with her.

Of course, others of the family did these things for her too...Bella or Rosalie, Jacob or Esme. Often, she had two or three of us at a time attending to her needs. She might be the only child in history who had nine adults always at her beck and call. But whenever Renesmee had an "Ow-ie," which wasn't often given that her skin is nearly as indestructible as her parents', she'd run to her Daddy for a "fix-it" kiss.

One thing we rarely noticed was the length or sharpness of her fingernails and toenails. They never scratched any of us except Jacob, and he healed immediately from such minor injuries. None of the rest of us ever had to trim our nails or cut our hair, so we had to make an effort to remember to do it for Renesmee. With nails as proportionately tough as her skin, sometimes she'd scratch herself in her sleep or when playing. One afternoon, she toddled up to me to show me a minor scratch across her cheek.

"What happened to you, little one?" I asked her, picking her up and holding her against my chest. She placed her palm on my cheek and showed me how while playing "paints" with Jacob, she swiped her ragged thumbnail across her cheek and dug a little gouge. She had allowed Jacob to clean the blue paint off her face, but when she saw the scratch she wanted me to "fix." I swiped a little venom across the mark when kissing it and it healed instantly. She didn't consider this magical, since she'd never known any different, but she liked it all the same.

(At the time, I wondered how difficult it was going to be to integrate our daughter into a human classroom when the time came. Not only did her world have an entirely different reality than that of her peers, but she grew so fast that we would have to move her from one school to another at least once a year, and probably every six months. We dodged the problem by remaining in Forks and enrolling Renesmee in the Quileute reservation school. Though she wasn't Native American, she was allowed into the school by special circumstance as the object of Jacob's imprinting. She is always welcome on the reservation and is understood and accepted there

for what she is. It was made easier for the wolves when Carlisle let it be known through Billy Black that Renesmee has the same genetics as the wolves themselves, one more set of chromosomes than humans have. We all anxiously await her puberty to see if she will exhibit the traits of a shapeshifter.)

After healing Renesmee's scratch, I said, "Let's get the clippers and take care of those nails." (For Nessie, "clippers" means a pair of small wire cutters for jewelry-making, and "nail file" means the matching miniature file for metal.)

I tossed my daughter onto my shoulders and hauled her lickety-split to the upstairs bathroom in "the big house," as she calls the Cullen residence, not to be confused with our private cottage in the woods. I addressed each of Renesmee's fingernails, first clipping and then filing them, to remove the sharp edges. When all ten were short and smooth, she raised one foot for my inspection from her perch on the bathroom counter. Yes, unattractively long toenails too. I took the clippers to her feet, and then gave each foot a little rubdown.

Alice had introduced Renesmee to the wonders of fingernail polish. With her hand to my neck, she asked me to paint her nails red and black, one hand and one foot of each color. She giggled like a maniac when I tickled the bottom of her feet and played "little piggy" with her toes. Even with my speed of movement, the nail-painting job took a long time, between her kicking her feet to mock-avoid my tickling and me trying to keep the nail polish on her nails.

It was one of those memorable moments that I spent with our baby who was not a baby for long. Sometimes Renesmee reminds me of that day, which was special to us both. Of course, once I'd done the job one time, I became the nail tender. Whenever her polish began to chip off, here she'd come, showing me her "boo-boos" and asking me to redo them. I didn't mind. It was just one of our "things," something that we did together during that preciously short period. By the time Renesmee was the human equivalent of nine years old, she had wisely turned to Auntie Alice for all advice and assistance of a beauty and fashion nature.

As a pre-teen, Renesmee has gone all private and secretive about her personal business. She knows I can read her mind, but it doesn't keep her from hiding things from me. We are working to redefine our relationship now that she is a young woman.

I often lament that Renesmee grows so much more quickly than a human child. I would love to have prolonged those months of babyhood when we were so close and Daddy was her hero. She's still wonderful, of course, in all new ways, and she still loves her Daddy, just differently. If it were possible, I would love to have another child or two with Bella. Being a father is one of the most delightful things I've ever done.

When Bella was human, she said she'd never had any particular interest in being a mother and wasn't worried about missing that experience when she became a vampire. There's something that changes inside you when you become a parent, though. The potential experience transforms into an actual one, complete with all the emotions that make parenthood a thrilling, engaging, and wonderful adventure. We are extremely blessed, given the improbability of Renesmee's existence. I'm much closer to understanding Rosalie's psyche than ever before.

Edward

Ω