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The Graduates

For survivors of the turbulent teenage years, this rite of passage is anything but ordinary

I'M STARTING TO SUSPECT that I was covertly enrolled in some sort of secret government stress test to see what happens when you put a woman of a certain age and two teenage daughters in a small Brooklyn apartment with a disgruntled cat and no central air-conditioning.

It's the perfect hormonal storm: all the angst of middle school, a high-stakes dose of college-application hell, plus a trip through the Bermuda Triangle of women's health—what doctors so poetically call perimenopause, a condition they blame for everything from ankle acne to homicide—and the irrational urge to get yoga-teacher certification.

Let's just say there are moments when I think anyone who visits our house should be issued an estrogen dart gun. We run high on laughter but low on impulse control, mood regulation and common ground when it comes to room-temperature preferences and body piercings.

Nonetheless, we have not only survived the past four years, but both daughters will be getting diplomas this month. This was not a given. The usual maladies of puberty are magnified by our frantic digital ecosystem—even the toughest kids can be knocked off track.

Then there are the unexpected tragedies. For us, it was when the girls lost their beloved stepmother in a freak accident. At the time, my eldest had just finished a rocky entry into high school and her sister was in fifth grade navigating the maddening rules of tween cliques. The fragile bridge they were building to adulthood crumbled in a day. Grief seemed to reshape my girls at a molecular level. One held tight to the tangible evidence of loss, cycling through photos and calling her stepmom's cell phone just to hear her gentle voice until the account was shut down. The other turned inside herself, shutting out school, shielding herself from the outside pressures to counter-

act what was going on inside. It was a dark summer.

I wonder, are young hearts more resilient? Do they heal better than an adult's? Do they become stronger or just accumulate scar tissue? All we can do is wait and see, and that might be the hardest part of being a parent. But for now, for us, the world is back in focus, if in a new, more tenuous way. Every college acceptance letter or drama performance that seemed unlikely or impossible three years ago brings a sweet kind of gratitude.

This week we will get new dresses for graduation, in all new sizes (good news



for them, bad news for me). You'll see us on Facebook looking as if we floated into our good fortune effortlessly. But know this: if our clothes reflected the reality of our journey, we'd look like extras from a *Mad Max* movie, sweaty, proud and buttressed by homemade armor.

Come graduation day, I know I won't be the only parent with invisible armor who worried that a diploma might be knocked out of reach or rendered irrelevant by bigger issues. There is an epidemic of depression and anxiety in our schools—and I suspect we're only documenting a fraction of the problem. So while there will be tall young women, cool and confident in their caps and gowns, some will have spent eight weeks

at grueling wilderness camps foraging for food because they stopped eating at home. There will be brilliant boys who cut themselves, a tangible reflection of wounds they get in the social-media Thunderdome. There will be kids who don't have safe homes, or homes at all, and others who have everything but a purpose.

And the school auditorium will be filled with the parents who've soldiered on, mortgaged houses to pay for substance rehab, spent more time in emergency sessions with teachers than on vacation, who turned the city upside down to get their son a place at that last-chance school. They know about the impossible choices and disappointments that aren't in any parenting book. And they include some of the people you think have done everything right. Sometimes what looks like indulgent, competitive helicopter parenting is really a desperate fight to be ordinary. For all of them, this rite of passage is anything but ordinary, but you wouldn't know it.

Sometimes it feels like a secret society. Kid trouble is the last taboo, after all. We confess to infidelity or Botox or grownup mental-health battles, but we cover up or downplay our most visceral fears about our children even when we're talking to our oldest friends. It's the topic that makes us most vulnerable. And that's all the more reason to celebrate a diploma.

Plus, we're at the cusp of June, and everything is a few tender days away from full bloom. By August, my family will be back on the *Mad Max* highway. But until then, the three of us get to argue about tattoos over dinner. One of us will leave the room sobbing (probably me). We'll take turns turning the air conditioner on and off in our ongoing climate war. No one will clean the cat box unless I yell. And all of us will know this is the good part. ■