

CHAPTER ONE

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TAKING OFF THE TRAINING WHEELS

*Growing up is a poorly choreographed dance:
When you hold her tight, she demands to be let go.
When you let her go, she cries to be held tight.*

This book is about your child's first steps.

It's about putting her on the school bus on her first day of kindergarten, and dropping her off at summer camp. It's about telling her "no," she can't drive to her friend's house, and it's about walking her down the aisle.

It's about which video games she can play and which movies she can watch and which friends she can hang out with. It's about urging her to try out for the play and the soccer team, moving her into her dorm room, and being there to comfort her when she's scared and sick and lonely.

It's about knowing when to hold her hand and when not to, when to stand by her side and when to watch from a distance, and when to not watch at all.

This book is *not* about everything human; it's about that single, powerful dynamic upon which everything human is built. It's about

the push-pull, back-and-forth ambivalence that characterizes every relationship and is most obvious as it occurs between parent and child. It's about holding tight and letting go.

Listen: It's a warm Saturday morning in late spring. There's a lawn mower buzzing away in the distance. Fluffy white clouds dot a perfect blue sky.

The training wheels have finally come off. Your little girl is wearing her pink princess helmet and a look that conveys both determination and terror. You jog alongside the bicycle, one hand clenched over the handlebars, the other holding the pink plastic seat, offering advice and encouragement. Smiling, even though we all know how this story goes.

"You can do it! Pedal harder!"

You've always been there to protect her, to bandage the boo-boos. You'd throw yourself in front on an oncoming car to save her. So why, now, are you launching her toward certain harm? She's going to fall. Probably skin a knee. Maybe bruise an elbow.

Every scratch and scrape she's ever had flashes through your mind. Twice you rushed her to the ER. You'll never forget her look of shock and betrayal when she broke her ankle. The screams and tears were bad enough, but that look said, "How could you let this happen to me? I thought you were here to keep me safe!" That was the hardest to swallow.

You're starting to breathe hard now. Is it the exertion or anxiety? Part of you wants to stop, to find the wrench and put the training wheels back on. She's safe that way. Well, *safer* at least. But another part of you understands how much she wants this new freedom. She wants to ride a big girl bike just like all the other kids in the neighborhood.

"I'm doing it, Mommy!" You recognize her squeaky, high tone. She's scared but she wants this so much.

"You're doing great, sweetie!"

Catastrophes run through your brain: Are the tires inflated? Are her brakes working? Does she remember how to use them? What if she hits her head? What if a car veers onto the sidewalk? What if she

steers into the street? I should have brought my cell phone to call 9-1-1. If she hurts her back, should I move her or keep her still? I wonder if these neighbors are home if I need a phone.

But you urge her on anyway: "That's it! Pedal harder!"

Somewhere deep inside, you know that this is about growing up. Today it's a two-wheeler. Tomorrow she'll get her license. Then she'll be off to college or a job. Maybe she'll get married. Will she have kids of her own? I hope she's better at teaching them to ride. More confident. Less panicky.

"Look, Mommy! I'm doing it!"

You must let go.

Your mom did. You remember her running alongside your bike. It was autumn. Crunchy leaves underfoot. You were scared and excited but she was right there, by your side, and then suddenly she wasn't and you were thrilled—flying like the wind for a moment that lasted forever until it stopped. Knee on pavement. Pedal against shin. Your favorite jeans torn. You knew that she would let go. You even told her to let go, but you were shocked when she did, that she let you fall. But then she was there once more. Holding you and comforting you and crying herself. And then you were back on the seat somehow and trying again.

"Let go, Mommy!"

No. Hold her tight. Keep her safe. She's going to fall.

Maybe I should have an ambulance standing by, just in case. Is her shoelace coming undone? It'll get caught in the pedals. She'll be thrown into traffic. And there's a bus coming toward us! It's so big and she's so small. We should stop. Tie her shoe. Check the brakes. Wait for the bus to pass. Wait for her to get bigger. We can try again tomorrow. Or next year.

"Let me go, Mommy! I'm doing it!"

Fear and excitement push-pull in your head. Hold her tight. Let her go.

And then she's off. Out of your hands. Screaming her excitement and terror and freedom and pride. She sticks her tongue out between pursed lips in concentration, just like her dad does. Her little fists are

white with pressure on the handlebars, wind whipping her hair out behind her. You can see through your own tears that she is doing it. She's on her own.

She glances back to make sure that you're looking and in that moment you remember doing the same thing a million years ago. Your mom was there, wiping her hands on her jeans, cheering and clapping for you, watching you go. Then it happens and you are powerless to do anything but watch. The handlebars turn. The front wheel shifts. She hits a divot in the pavement, and the bike collapses sideways on top of her, her body falling in a blur of pink and fear. Her screams blame you. How could you let her go? How could you betray her like this? Her cries are shrill, cutting to your core.

Oh my god—she's hurt!

There's blood on both knees and tears in her eyes, but she's conscious. Her arms and legs are still attached and bend where they're supposed to. And she's both smiling and crying. Her cheeks are bright red with embarrassment or accomplishment or windburn or all three. She clings to your neck like she did on the first day of preschool, like she did when you left her with her first babysitter. Her hair tickles your cheek and she's talking through her tears.

"Did you see? I did it, Mommy!"

Deep breath. She's okay.

Reassuring words. A kiss on the nose and you gently peel her off and settle her on the grass. Straighten her helmet. The knee is fine. Maybe that's paint from the craft closet, not blood. Her hand is scraped red but you kiss it better and remind her of the success. "You did it, kiddo! You were riding all by yourself!"

Then the hard part: "Ready to try again?"

She's ready. You're scared. But you smile and joke and put her back on the pink plastic seat. Straighten yourself up. Deep breath. Jog alongside again, holding tight until you have to let go.

Holding Tight, Letting Go is about taking off the training wheels. It's about the necessary and natural tension that defines growing up and growing apart. It's about the constantly shifting pressure between separation and reunion. Being together and being apart. "Me" versus

"us." It's about the back-and-forth two-step that describes every parent-child relationship everywhere through all of time. Whether it's the baby's first steps or the teenager's first date, or the simple, repetitive, and frustrating process of getting her off to school in the morning, the dance is the same.

You push her away but she clings and cries.

She pulls away but you demand that she stay.

Somehow, through all the fear and excitement, tears and yelling, terror and pride, the ambivalence resolves. The milestone is achieved. The training wheels come off. The sleepover is managed. The first day passes. The milestone is accomplished and then on to the next. Two steps forward, one step back in the best of times and gradually, back and forth, parent and child master another degree of freedom.

Along the way, roles change. Rules are modified. Relationships are redefined. This book is about that too. It's not only about how children grow up, but also about how families grow up. How identity shapes personality and both adapt in the context of relationships. It's not only about how parents shape who their children become, but how our children shape who we are as well.

This dance of ambivalence is the essential drama of humanity, replayed over and over again from that first cry of birth through our last breath. It's the tug-of-war that echoes through all of our lives and all of our relationships. It's how identity emerges, self-esteem is built, and confidence is fueled. It's how we, as parents, manage and communicate our anxiety to our kids in healthy ways so that they can do the same someday with theirs.

In the end, this book is not about learning to ride a bike as much as it is about how and when we let the bike-rider go, even though we know she's going to tumble and cry and look for reassurance. It's about finding a safe and healthy balance between holding tight and letting go, crossing your fingers and holding your breath and saying a prayer that she'll be okay. It's about trusting that all the lessons you've taught her will be enough because the world that she's inheriting is at least as full of beauty as it is of danger.

Real and Imagined Dangers

Two motives drive us to hold our children tight. The first is selfish and primitive and destructive.

No one likes to share their toys. We teach toddlers to take turns, to wait in line, and to share because that's how living together works. At age three, it's easy to mistake the blue shovel in the sandbox or the baby doll with the blond hair as "mineminemine," which, as any preschool teacher will testify, is certainly sufficient reason to kick all who dare come close.

By middle school, most of us are fairly well socialized. We learn that if we want to fit in, we need to let the other kids have a turn. We practice sharing and gift giving and begin to understand loss. A favorite gadget is misplaced. A treasured belonging is stolen. A pet dies. A best friend moves far away. Each of these moments is a tragedy marked by tears or rage or grief. A parent's job is sometimes to patch the wound, but more often simply to help the child manage the pain. To cope with letting go.

But then high school and hormones complicate the process. After ten or twelve or fourteen years of practice, most kids are pretty good at letting go. Sharing and taking turns. Until biology interrupts with its visible, audible, and even olfactory evidence of puberty. Breasts and zits and cracking voices and body odor reignite the primitive need for exclusive ownership, only now it's not about the blue shovel. It's about finding a partner.

Dating is about marking your territory, however briefly. It's about posting a "no trespassing" sign on another human being. Dating is about *not* sharing until one partner lets the other go.

Dating, like taking the training wheels off the bike, inevitably leads to getting hurt. Rejection, humiliation, and long, swooning days of poor-me spent in candlelit rooms listening to self-indulgent music can be so much more difficult than skinned knees and scraped palms.

Just like learning to ride a two-wheeler, dating is practice. Holding tight and letting go. Until you hold tight and swear to never let go.

Marriage is the real deal. It's a legally sanctioned, church-endorsed, publicly witnessed promise *not* to share. Long ago, marriage

was a form of ownership. The man owned the wife and the children just like cows and horses. Conscience and culture have since made matrimony into something a bit more equitable, but no less exclusive.

Enter Bouncing Baby Billy, stage left.

The hormones associated with pregnancy and childbirth (for men and women both) induce nesting. A biological drive to build the protective walls around family high and strong. To accumulate stuff the way a bear eats in advance of a long winter's hibernation. Once upon a time that may have meant curing meat and salting fish and stacking firewood in anticipation of months devoted to a helpless child. Today it means spending recklessly on tiny, frilly, hypoallergenic outfits and wireless HD cloud-based monitors and lots of brightly colored, expert-endorsed plastic manipulables. One way or another, the message is the same: mineminemine.

The new baby belongs to Mom and Dad (or Mom and Mom, or Dad and Dad, or either one alone without a partner) the same way the blue shovel belonged to the four-year-old. Both are precious. Neither is actually owned.

Except sometimes.

Sometimes, some parents can't let go. These parents mistake the child as a thing to be owned. Mom (or Dad) holds Bouncing Baby Billy and won't let go. The roles are reversed. She needs him for her sense of well-being. As Billy grows, Mom's clinginess becomes first over-protectiveness and then pathological. She doesn't send Billy to preschool. Okay. Plenty of children don't go to preschool. Then she won't let him go to kindergarten. Or on playdates. She insists on homeschooling not because she finds the local schools lacking, not due to a religious conviction, not because he has a terrible illness, but because she needs him close by for her sake. She can't let go.

Billy is taught that he is Mommy's helper—her friend or partner or nurse. That leaving her could mean losing her. If he were away, she might drink or drug or die. For this child, the training wheels never come off. At conception he was physically a part of his mother and by age five or, left unchecked, long into adulthood, he is still just as completely a part of her.

This is the first of two motives that drives some parents to hold their children tight. An adult's primitive and unhealthy need to feel needed thrust upon a child. A selfish drive that enlists a son or daughter to serve the parent's needs, where a healthy parent's job is to serve the child's needs.

The second motive that can inhibit letting go is likely more familiar and far more common. In fact, it may be a universal experience among parents throughout time.

Terror

For most of us, letting go is hard not because we need our children to make us feel whole, but because we can't stand the idea that they could get hurt.

We know that our children are weak and vulnerable and born into a very scary world. That was as true for the caveman who needed to protect his young from wolves and lions as it is for you I today. The predators of the past may no longer pose a real threat, but that doesn't mean the world is any safer. If anything, the dangers that our children face are more varied and far less obvious.

The caveman could hear the howl of a hungry wolf pack. He could see, hear, and smell a menacing predator. He could run and hide or fight these threats off, so it was easy to know when to let go. But lead poisoning happens without warning. Internet pornography appears without howled alarms. Radon and carbon monoxide kill silently.

The pedophile on the playground looks like any other well-intended grown-up until he doesn't. His approach is innocuous and benign, camouflaged among caregivers better than any wolf in the woods.

The ride to school on that big yellow bus is laughing and familiar and convenient until the crash and then you wonder why it had no seat belts. Why you didn't drive your son to school yourself? Why you didn't keep him home and safe in the first place?

Anxiety in the form of fear motivates us to hold our children tight. Terror motivates us to resist letting them go. You can leave the training wheels on forever and she'll be far less likely to fall and skin

her knee. You could forbid her from riding a bike at all or from leaving the house or even from leaving your side. You could lock her in a sterile bubble far from most dangers but, in so doing, you become a danger yourself.

Holding on too long can be as harmful as letting go too soon.

Is it cautious or crazy to use a video monitor in the baby's room? To track your grade schooler's cell phone by GPS? To review your teenager's URLs and tweets and texts? Is it protective or pathological to insist on meeting the parents before the sleepover? To demand that your son call you once a day from summer camp? That your daughter Skype with you twice a week from college? To move in to the house next door when she's married and living with her husband?

For both you and the caveman, and for every parent in between and yet to come, letting go is in part about evaluating the threat and in part about managing anxiety. It's a balancing act with no certain rights or wrongs within obvious extremes.

Practical Pointer:

BEING PREPARED BUT NOT ANXIOUS

There have always been and always will be threats in the world around us. Some threats are as unlikely as being struck by lightning; others are as common as car accidents. In order to let your children go even briefly, you'll need them to be well prepared but not nervous. You're much more likely to accomplish this goal if safety and preparedness are routine and matter-of-fact parts of your daily life.

Don't argue about bike helmets, seat belts and car seats, floatation devices and sunscreen. These and similar precautions must be as obvious and necessary as wearing pants. No helmet? No riding. Period. No seat belt? The car doesn't move. Period. There's no negotiating. There are no exceptions. There's no argument. As with any limit, your kids will test you on the need for these protections. If it's about safety, you must follow through every single time.

Holding Tight, Letting Go

Your emotions and behavior are key. Not only does this mean that you have to practice what you preach—yes, that means you do wear your seat belt 100 percent of the time—you have to do so without emotion. Your anxiety is contagious. If snapping on a seat belt or crossing the street or driving a car or being near water or in crowds makes you anxious, expect that your kids will become anxious doing these things as well.

Anxiety is to conflict like gasoline is to fire. If you're nervous, your kids will be nervous and there will be an argument.