

Missing your sweet little kids? Here's where they're hiding

When my youngest daughter was little, she used to tell me that I was her favorite grown-up. But that is so 10 years ago now. Since she has two older sisters, I wasn't surprised when I unceremoniously got pushed off my pedestal.

These days I am routinely treated to random surliness and harsh judgment. Anything I wear is subject to ridicule. They laugh condescendingly when I tell them a story I think is interesting. Even simple requests are met with eye-rolls. Any opinion I offer tends to be dismissed with great disdain. Clearly my sweet little girls, including the one who once thought I was all that, are currently MIA.

But recently I made an interesting discovery while I was replacing some tatty, overstuffed memory boxes—the ones where I'd stored all of those precious drawings and cards that you accumulate during the childhood years—with some new ones.

I had collected so much stuff that I needed to divide it all up in order to conquer it. And in the process, guess who turned up? There was my long-lost admirer, hiding up on my closet shelf, along with her sisters, tucked away in some boxes I hadn't opened in a long, long time.

As I made my way through crayon drawings and handmade Mother's Day and birthday cards, I caught vivid glimpses of the children who loved me. Back when they weren't as shy about expressing their feelings for me, I was known as “my gorgeous mom,” who was “as dazzling as a sparkling jewel” and “as sharp as a tack.” The 9-year-old's Mother's Day fill-in tribute poem said that if I were a car, I would be “a tow truck because my mom guides me on the right path.”

I also found evidence that the argumentative people I've been dealing with are actually more considerate and appreciative than they currently appear. I found a note from somebody who “pinkly-promised that I will not ever miss the bus again.” An anniversary card recognized that parents were people too: “We'll try really, really, really hard to be good! You deserve some rest.”

A letter from one daughter just after she had turned 12 noted that, “I know sometimes I may act like I don't appreciate you as much as I do. I don't want to be mushy, but you do give me a lot.” She thanked me for always answering her questions and encouraging her, and signed off with the wish that, “I hope I don't give you grey hairs.”

A Christmas gift tag reassured dear mommy that, “I would always come home for Christmas!” Another card for no particular occasion read, “I know that sometimes you don't feel appreciated, so I just wanted to say thank you!”

Suddenly the loving children I thought I had lost were magically visible again.

Other things I came across reminded me that these sometimes-infuriating people were actually likeable and funny. In fact, I had saved copies of one daughter's thank-you notes for her 8th birthday gifts because they were so entertaining. In one, she told her friend how much she really loved the sparkly Justice t-shirt and necklace, noting that, "It's the total package with the necklace." Another showed she had integrity (if a not-yet-fully-developed sense of tact): "Thank you for the mosaic-by-numbers craft. I had one like it. We gave it away."

Somebody's fifth grade assignment to write a personal letter had a special P.S. noting that the required complimentary close of "Your daughter," should be amended to read, "Your favorite daughter."

When she was 6 years old, one daughter had written to Santa asking very politely for: "an ironing board" (to play house with I guess), "a big red barn" (probably for the miniature town she and her sisters were creating), and "an Asian family" (a puzzling request until I realized that she was probably looking for a new cast of characters for her Fisher Price dollhouse).

Since these finds were just too good to keep to myself, I hauled my box downstairs and read the best ones out loud to my daughters, who as luck would have it, were all gathered around the kitchen table at the same time—an increasingly rare occurrence these days. And we all had a good laugh—the very thing I wish we'd do more often.

Best of all, I walked away from my closet-cleaning with a priceless discovery—the 9-year-old who said I was "the best mom I could wish for" isn't gone forever. And in the meantime, I have enough stored in my memory box silo to help get me through these lean years.



About Joanne McHugh

Joanne McHugh lives in suburban Philadelphia with her husband and three daughters. After climbing a few rungs on the corporate ladder, she rebalanced her life to spend more time with her children. Along the way, she discovered that her side hustle of writing and editing is what she'd rather do anyway.