

# Rite of Passage

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“Mom. Mo-om! Let me go on that one. Please?”

My son’s excited voice warns me. My eyes confirm the challenge is even worse. The massive roller coaster he’s pointing at is huge; the screams from its riders are sharp even in the surrounding racket.

“Are you sure you want to get on that thing?” I ask, my apprehension rising.

“Oh, yes. And look, Mom.” He scoots over to a notice posted at the entrance of the ride and practically merges into it. His hand draws an imaginary line from his head to the wide line painted at the top. It lands about two inches higher. “This year I’m tall enough. I can really go on this thing.” He rushes back, grabs my waist, and gives it a quick squeeze. “Oh, Mom, please, please, please, pretty please?”

I know I’m the intrepid kind, but I don’t like modern roller coasters—well, not all of them. The huge plunges and the resulting freefalls from these new, state-of-the-art thrill rides do not correlate with my definition of excitement. They remind me of another ride, more traumatic, more devastating. I stare at the coiling metal structure, appropriately baptized *Viper*. From my angle it looks bigger than Mount Everest and as nasty as the snake it’s named after.

I gulp and turn to my husband for help, but his expression signals he’s not going to be very cooperative. He thinks my phobia is exaggerated, female histrionics, controllable if I put my mind to it. Not like his—physical, debilitating, masculinity subtracted. Only, I know better. In emphasis, my husband shakes his head once more and mimics gagging expressions. My oldest son, who suffers from a middle ear malady, hangs on to his father’s side like a leech, his mutinous expression one of, “You’ll never get me riding on that thing.”

“Well, I guess you’re tall enough to ride—”

“He’s not going in any ride alone.” My husband’s tone is emphatic, his eyes disappointed at my easy capitulation, in me. “I can’t believe you’re even considering it, Maureen. Bryan’s too young to ride without adult supervision. You know that.”

“Jack, you promised he could ride the roller coasters. Alone. He’s tall enough now. These people are more safety conscious than I am.”

“I never said he could ride alone. He’s too young to be responsible.” His eyes lift, as if asking the sky for patience. “I can’t believe I’m having this discussion with you. You’re the adult here.”

I want to slap my husband. He’s always using his escape clauses, caging me into a corner, forcing me to decide, to capitulate to his logic. And the frustrating part in all this is that, if I agree or disagree, it end up always being my fault, or my lack of sense, or my smothering sensibility.

“Besides, nothing’s going to happen to Bryan if he doesn’t ride this thing. It won’t be the end of the world.” My husband’s eyes soften. I recognize paternal condescension in them. “Why don’t we go catch the animal show?”

I stare at my husband. “The park closes after the animal show.”

“So?”

I look at my youngest. His almond eyes are locked on my face. He looks like a puppy dog begging for a treat, suspecting he won't get one, and trying not to be too disappointed. It wouldn't be the first time.

“I'll ride with you,” I tell him, knowing I'm going to regret it. Yet, I can't trample my youngest son's yen for adventure. Not because of my fears, or my husband's cowardice.

“Let's go, Bryan.”

“All right!”

Taking no chances, my son grabs my hand and drags me through the entrance.

“You're going to regret this, Maureen,” my husband yells after us. We rush inside, the path leading to the ride winding and winding around the foot of the metallic monster. The pace my son sets leaves me with no breath. Finally, we catch up with the shortest line in roller coaster history. My hands begin to sweat and I know I'm hyperventilating. I silently scold myself. I've been on other roller coasters with my son. How bad can this one be? This isn't an elevator, falling and jerking to a stop every couple of inches. It isn't a metal cave trapping me for hours on end.

The roller coaster roars past our left at a dizzying speed. My mental reply is, “Oh, shit!” My son is awestruck, nervous, excited.

“Da bomb,” he says. “Way cool.”

My legs start faltering as we approach the point of no return. I lock my knees and manage a couple of steps. “Are you sure you want to get on?” I ask again. The first plunge looks gigantic. I try to forget the claustrophobia, the jolts, the elevator doors stuck open, a faded number “6” dancing in match light, framed by gaping steel jaws.

My son suddenly stops his excited bouncing and turns to face me. “Are you scared, Mom?”

My first instinct is to blurt out the truth: *Yes, son, I'm scared spitless.* My second thought is that I'd never impart my fear on my sons. It's my problem, not theirs, and I'm not about to break that habit by telling them about the New York blackout, about getting stuck on my apartment building's elevator, alone, a matchbook my only comfort. Four hours in a vertically sliding coffin. My husband dismisses my fear—it happened long ago. I should have gotten over it by now. I look at my son again. How can I spoil his first experience in a grown-up roller coaster ride? After all, this is his rite of passage.

“Nah,” I answer instead, and take another deep breath.

“Are you sure, Mom? If you really don't want to go, I understand.”

I pat his nose with my finger and smile. “I'm game if you are.”

He hugs me tightly. “Thanks, Mom.”

Pausing at the turnstile while my son rushes through, I glance at the rotating metal fingers and then up at what can be seen of the ride. I hesitate, my gut wrenching in a nervous spasm. I

can do this. I can. I slide reluctantly through, my stomach muscles clenched, fear riding my throat. Up ahead, my son heads for the waiting area marked “first car riders only.” I rush after him, grab him by the T-shirt, and pull him back.

“Oh, no. Not on the first seats.”

“Aw, Mom.”

“Don’t ‘Oh, Mom’ me.” I steer him to another waiting area. He looks disappointed but doesn’t complain. For now, it’s the best he’ll get.

Our turn arrives too quickly. A silent, apathetic teenager opens the gate and points to our seats. With a similar air of bored monotony, another teenager imprisons us under foam-padded steel hooks. My son strangles the padded metal handlebars in his euphoria and bounces like a springboard in his seat. I check the bars securing me in place for the tenth time and grab on for dear life.

The roller coaster jerks to a start. We roll up. I look around and then decide against it. My stomach lurches. The climb doesn’t seem to stop. As we clang higher, I wonder when the hell this is going to start. Another internal voice nastily reminds me that what we climb is what we plunge.

My saliva dries in my mouth.

By now, halfway up, the twilight breeze feels cool. I whisk off my baseball cap as well as my son’s, secure both under my butt, and try not to dwell on the drop ahead.

“Look, look, Mom,” he shouts, even though I can hear him perfectly. “We’re flying.” He stretches both arms out and flaps them like a bird. I grab on to both and slam them back on the rods.

“Stop that,” I order, trying to ignore the shrinking view below me. “Just hold on.” I turn to face the looming sky and follow my own advice. But my stomach is knotted like a brick and my entire body is rippling with tremors. I pluck at my temporary steel fork prison bars wanting to merge into them, to become as rigid as them. I want out and can’t.

Finally, the roller coaster reaches the summit. The sky welcomes us. We hover for a second, for an instant. I look down.

Oh. My. God!

Gravity shoves us. The roller coaster plunges. Freefall grabs hold of my body. My stomach compresses, heaves. We plunge faster, faster. The wind slaps my exposed skin. My facial muscles start to ripple like waves. My stomach feels glued to my mouth. I huddle to see if the nauseous effect gets better. No go.

We take a curve. My son’s legs slam into my body. I strangle the foam-padded rods. He’s laughing. I’m screaming. We turn the other way. I’m compressed against my prison bars. By now my skin is vibrating. My hair lashes my eyes, ears, and mouth like a thousand tiny whips. My mind screams frantically, “I want to get off! I want to get off!” My screams get louder.

We lurch. The roller coaster roars up another huge hill. It dives. The wheels underneath thunder, the wind above carries my screams. We whiz into a tighter curve. Faster. Faster. We

zoom upside down. My butt gets plastered against the seat. We twirl at impossible angles like training astronauts. My son leans forward into the G-force. I huddle even closer into my seat, my arms numb from grabbing on. We zip up another little mountain. We roar back down. We jerk. We finally slow down. The roller coaster glides into home.

The beast rests.

“Awesome,” my son whoops. He shoves the steel hooks from his body and jumps out onto the platform. I want to bend and kiss the ground.

“Mom, wasn’t that the most awesomest thing? Wasn’t it, huh?”

I drop the baseball cap onto his head and take a huge breath to steady my stomach. My hands are trembling and my body wants to go into convulsive tremors. “Yeah,” I croak.

“Can we do it again? Please, please?”

“Sweetie, I—”

“Mom, please. This is our last day here. It’s almost closing time. And Daddy won’t come with me. He never does. Says it’s stupid to do these things, but that’s because he pukes all the time. I think he’s afraid.”

I look at my son in wonder. Out of the mouths of babes...

“Please, Mom. You’re the only one that shares these things with me. Please, Mom, please?”

Near us, toward the exit, I see my husband waving impatiently at us. “Come on,” he yells. “I want to see the tech exhibit before the park closes.”

I look into my son’s pleading eyes and weigh two minutes of fear against his disillusionment. I mentally brace myself and say, “Okay.”

He hugs me tightly and gives me a whopping kiss. “You’re the bestest Mom that ever lived on the planet. I love you.”

I lift his cap, ruffle his hair, and drop a kiss on his forehead. “Yeah. I love you, too.”

Riding high on a wave of euphoria, he waves at his father and zips back through the entrance.

“Guys, get over here,” my husband yells. “Guys. What are you doing?”

I wave. “We’re going to ride this again.”

My husband’s jaw drops. I smile.

I follow my son at a slower pace, nursing my shaken courage, persuading myself the second time around won’t be so bad.

Yeah, right.

With eyes brimming with happiness and face flushed with excitement, my son rushes back to me. He hugs me fiercely once again and takes my hand. I squeeze his and follow him along the endless loops and through the turnstile. With a heartfelt sigh, I stand in line again.