# **My daughter asked me to stop writing about motherhood. Here’s why I can’t do that.**

By **Christie Tate**

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“This is the most epic Christmas ever,” my fourth-grade daughter proclaimed from behind the new laptop we gifted her. After three years of her begging for a phone, tablet or computer, we capitulated with a basic laptop, complete with parental controls.

We envisioned it primarily as a tool for schoolwork and learning how to use a keyboard. Based on her enthusiasm level, she envisioned it as a tool for binge-watching her favorite shows and keeping up with Zac Efron’s love life. After enduring years of laments about how she was “the only kid” without her own device, it felt novel to soak in her gratitude and unalloyed joy.

That lasted almost 14 hours.

The day after Christmas, she hunkered down to explore her laptop. First stop: an Internet-wide search on my name. Second stop: a furious march to my room, where she thrust the shiny new device in my face.

“What’s all this?” she said. The screen was covered with thumbnail sketches of her as a baby, a toddler and preschooler — each paired with an essay or blog post I’d written on the subject of parenting. “Why are all of these pictures of me on the Internet?” She wanted to know, and she had a right to know.

Years ago, when I began publishing essays and submitting family pictures to editors, I considered the day my children would confront me about what I’d written. At the time, I’d read articles by parents of older children who were weighing the ethics of using their children’s stories or pictures for essay material, but my kids were too young to care what I shared about how they ate, how little they slept or how their taste in clothes was terrible. I remember thinking that one day I would have to answer for my work. Yet when the day finally arrived, I had no response prepared.

In the moment, I stammered, trying to buy time so I could go back and read what those sage parents had advised. When that failed, I told her the truth: that I write about our family in essays and that sometimes I include a picture. She was not comforted. “I wouldn’t do that now without your permission,” I promised.

Could I take the essays and pictures off the Internet, she wanted to know. I told her that was not possible. There was heavy sighing and a slammed door. When I had pictured our first serious conversation about how the Internet is forever, I always thought we’d be talking about content posted by her, not me.

I read through some of my old pieces, and none of them seemed embarrassing to me, though she might not agree. A few years ago, I wrote about a [disappointment in her social life](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/parenting/wp/2016/11/18/dont-perpetuate-the-mean-girl-myth-on-behalf-of-my-daughter/?utm_term=.aa49269fc63a" \t "_blank) — a girl she counted as her best friend abruptly stopped talking to her. While I wrote about the experience from the perspective of a mother trying to help her daughter through a rough patch without succumbing to anti-girl stereotypes about so-called mean girls, she might not appreciate seeing a painful episode from her past splashed across the Internet.

My impulse is to promise her that I’ll never write about her again. In most of the articles I found on this subject, the writers eventually gave up writing about their children when they reached a certain age. They stopped to protect their children’s privacy, or as Darlena Cunha explained, “to salvage their desire for such privacy so that as they become adults there is something there to preserve at all.”

I respect that approach and understand why it works for many writers, but it’s not a promise I can make. Certainly, my daughter is old enough now that I owe her a head’s up and a veto right on the pictures or on portions of the content, but I’m not done exploring my motherhood in my writing. And sometimes my stories will be inextricably linked to her experiences.

Promising not to write about her anymore would mean shutting down a vital part of myself, which isn’t necessarily good for me or her. So my plan is to chart a middle course, where together we negotiate the boundaries of the stories I write and the images I include. This will entail hard conversations and compromises. But I prefer the hard work of charting the middle course to giving up altogether — an impulse that comes, in part, from the cultural pressure for mothers to be endlessly self-sacrificing on behalf of their children. As a mother, I’m not supposed to do anything that upsets my children or that makes them uncomfortable, certainly not for something as culturally devalued as my own creative labor.

Writer [Christine Organ has described how](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/parenting/wp/2014/12/04/mommy-the-martyr-how-the-overglorification-of-motherhood-hurts-us-all/?utm_term=.c92ca21e920e" \t "_blank) “we seem to be creating this unrealistic image of the mother as all-giving, all-knowing, selfless, superhuman who will gladly give up the last piece of apple pie to please her lip-smacking, big-eyed child.” Surely, there’s a way to cut the pie so that I can write about motherhood in a way that takes into account my daughter’s feelings and respects her boundaries. But if I simply cordoned off motherhood as a forbidden subject for my writing, we would never know.

My daughter didn’t ask to have a writer for a mother, but that’s who I am. Amputating parts of my experience feels as abusive to our relationship as writing about her without any consideration for her feelings and privacy.

For now, we have agreed that I will not submit a picture for a publication without her permission and that she has absolute veto rights on any image of herself. As for content, I have agreed to describe to her what I’m writing about, in advance of publication, and to keep the facts that involve her to a minimum. I have not yet promised that she can edit my work, but we acknowledged that is a future possibility. She also requested that instead of using her name, I call her by her self-selected pseudonym, Roshelle, and I’m taking that under advisement.

One thing I did unequivocally say, however, was that I won’t write anything mean about Zac Efron. That’s a promise I intend to keep.

*Christie Tate is a lawyer and writer who lives in Chicago with her husband and two children. She’s on Twitter [@ChristieOTate](https://twitter.com/christieotate).*