Adventures in Urban Parenting

By Jessica Stockton Clancy

"Who took our television?" I asked my father. We had just come home to Manhattan after a two-week vacation at Grandma's house in Ohio. My days there were spent playing Frisbee with my siblings until sundown and floating for hours on inflatable rafts at a nearby lake. Occasionally, we had returned from family trips to find someone had "visited" us while we were away. "Sometimes there are unfriendly people who don't have things they need," my father explained, "so they take things that belong to others." That's logical, I thought. I was probably 8 at the time.

Back then my city upbringing never struck me as unusual. But as a parent raising a 3-year-old in Washington, D.C., I am faced with the challenge of making the unusual experiences that come with city living seem completely ordinary. As a child I didn't understand that my parents were filtering their reactions, downplaying the everyday drama of city life and successfully molding my perceptions like play dough.

When I arrived at college in Michigan, I began to realize that not everyone grew up like I did. I got raised eyebrows in response to the most basic accounts. "You took a subway to school?" Yes. What's so strange about that? "You didn't have a backyard?" No, I went to parks. Because the city was all I knew, growing up there was my blueprint for normalcy. I wanted to say, "You never saw A Chorus Line? Now that is weird!" But instead, I just shared my reality; Central Park was my backyard, my school-bound R train was the family station wagon, and iconic skyscrapers were my local landscape.

"Mama, why do you set the alarm?" my daughter asks one evening as I program our alarm panel. Because bad people can break into our house. No, that won't work. "So we know if someone comes in the door," I say calmly. "Like Papa?" she probes. "Yes, like Papa … or anyone else." She seems satisfied and drops it. I feel as if I have come up with the right answer on a game show as that tick-tock music plays in the background. I know that I am only safe with this generic response for a matter of years, or maybe

only months. She is getting wise. And she asks a lot of questions.

I know this won't be the last inquiry with an urban theme. My parents had their hands full with three kids wanting answers. I was 9 when I asked innocently, "Who is the Son of Sam?" I was also naturally curious about vigilantes, junkies, gangs and graffiti. And there was Captain Clean, a homeless man who sported a scuffed captain's hat and picked up garbage on the streets near our apartment. He sometimes napped in the doorway to our building. "We need to get by Sir," my father would say politely. "Can I please ask you to move?" The Captain grumbled a bit but always cooperated. He was just a part of the neighborhood, and my parents reacted casually to his presence. What could have been scary or weird just wasn't.

The same was true for countless other experiences. Though we lived in a nice brownstone apartment for much of my youth, it was New York, and there were occasional animal sightings. The night a rat decided to cozy up with me, in my sleep, resulted in a field trip to the emergency room. It was an innocent mistake; the rat thought my lip was a snack. The doctor told us New York City rats didn't carry rabies, so in the end it was an educational experience. When we got home, my father casually spread tin foil around the bedroom floor, explaining it was a "rat alarm," and we went back to sleep. It was a school night—what else would we do?

As a parent, I am working on my laid-back attitude. But when it comes to your own children, I'm sure no one is completely immune to a pounding heart; my parents had to be faking it at least some of the time. Their ability to be cool when things got "interesting" is a great parenting lesson for me, but I haven't quite perfected it yet.

As I returned from a walk with my daughter recently, I spotted a man on our street with his pants around his ankles, hiding nothing and stumbling towards us. Without hesitating, I collapsed my umbrella stroller, scooped her onto my hip and crossed the street. Staring straight ahead, I walked briskly, until I could no longer see our streaking friend in my peripheral vision. "What are you doing Mama?" she asked as I dialed 911. "There is a man who needs help," I said, forcing a fake smile. "So I am calling the police to tell them." She is completely unfazed. Note to self: I said it was okay, so therefore it is.

My parents' stoicism seemed to be on autopilot. And it wasn't just the gritty incidents they handled well; they managed to bring everything towards the middle. The good, the bad and the "only in the city" moments—it was all just everyday stuff. I never thought much about the fact that my neighborhood dance school held our annual recitals at Carnegie Hall. It was just a big auditorium where I danced 12 times. Other than my little sister, I don't know anyone else who has performed at Carnegie Hall, with or without a pink poodle costume. But it was never a big deal. My father and brother took turns with the Super 8 movie camera, and after the show I got a bouquet of congratulatory carnations. Then, we headed to McDonald's for dinner, and that was the end of it.

Just as I have, I know eventually my daughter will look back on her urban experiences and realize her childhood would have been very different growing up elsewhere. In January she witnessed President Obama's inauguration, bundled in so many layers of fleece and down she could hardly move. Riding on my husband's back in a carrier, she passed out as we swam through the mobs of people on the street outside the Metro. She woke up just as we positioned ourselves with the masses in front of a JumboTron, not far from the World War II Memorial. "I thought we were going to be on the steps of the Capitol," she said rubbing her eyes. We couldn't help but smile. Just another day in the District.

Some people say, "I can't imagine raising kids in the city," as if it were an odd or even irresponsible choice. But normal is just a word, and it's meaning is what you make it. Of course, everyone has different visions of what they want for their children; I like that my daughter can sleep through the sound of sirens and wake up in the morning to the gibbons calling her from the zoo. To her, home means playing in Rock Creek Park instead of a backyard and being able to see the Washington Monument from our bathroom. I have no doubt her childhood will be as normal as mine was.

Jessica Stockton Clancy is a freelance writer and full-time mother. No stranger to city life, she grew up in New York, lived in Detroit and Los Angeles while working in the film industry, and now calls Washington home. Jessica is currently launching the D.C. branch of The Momoir Project (www.themomoirproject.com), a series of classes to inspire mothers to write their own first-person stories.