



Independence Day

The first day of kindergarten portends a lifetime of saying goodbye

By Kelli Wheeler

I'm gonna cry. My biggest baby started kindergarten last month. I was so worried about him not being ready, and now it turns out I'm the one who's not ready. Wasn't it just yesterday that this little guy with chubby little cheekies and leggings used to look up at me with arms outstretched, asking, "Hold you?" when he wanted to be picked up? Now, all of sudden, he's picking out a Harley-Davidson backpack for the first day of school with his spiked hair and Converse high tops.

It was just last year when I drove him by his future school to get him used to the idea of the transition from preschool to kindergarten. His apprehension nearly broke my heart when he asked, "Mommy, does kindergarten have windows?"

Perplexed by his question, I replied, "Well, yes. Why?"

"So I'll be able to wave bye-bye to you when you leave me."

Hang on, I need another tissue.

So there we were at the first day of kindergarten. I had prepared myself to do the tough love of prying his little fingers from my leg and firmly encouraging him to interact with the other kids and not be shy with the teachers. You know, do what every other mother and father there knew their child was capable of: showing off advanced social skills and bedazzling the teacher with brilliance.

As soon as we walked through the classroom and onto the playground, he wrestled his hand from my grasp

and ran for the monkey bars without a glance back.

"Logan, I'm going to go now, OK?" I called after him, worried he'd panic when his excitement wore off. "Logan?" I had to call again.

He waved me off without turning around. I'm still not sure if the hot tears stinging my eyes were tears of pride or rejection.

Wasn't it just yesterday that I was the overwhelmed first-time mother in Target, racing to get my shopping done while the baby was still sleeping? When seasoned mothers would smile at me knowingly and say, "Treasure this time, they grow up before you know it," I wanted to flip them off and tell them I'd see them at the 1 a.m. and 3 a.m. treasured feeding with me. Now it seems like an evil prediction.

Nearly six years have gone by in my firstborn's life. It may not seem like a lot of time in the spectrum of a lifetime, but as a mother I see it as one third of the way to his leaving me for something or someone else when he turns 18.

I love that he needs me right now. I love how the last thing he wants to do before he goes to sleep at night is

give his Mommy a hug and a kissie. I love that when everything seems to be going wrong in his little world, he thinks I can fix it—and he wants me to. I love that he thinks nothing of telling me, "I love you so much, Mommy," and "I don't ever want to leave you, Mommy."

So I guess it's not the threshold of beginning kindergarten that I'm having a hard time stepping through. It's the transition into independence

I'm mourning. I know that as he starts school, he's going to learn so many wonderful things and skills and life lessons. He's going to grow in so many ways in his first formalized year of school—physically, mentally, socially and emotionally.

And I would be sad if he didn't. But it is so hard to know that as he grows into the amazing person I know he will be, he will be growing away from me. He's going to quickly realize that there is a world out there besides Mommy and desire to be a part of it. Yet my world will always be him, and I'll be fighting to keep him in it.

I can't even look at teenage boys right now because they represent the road my son is so quickly traveling. It makes my heart ache to think

this little guy with the squeaky, sweet voice, his favorite blankie still constantly by his side, and an unabashed love for kitties will, before I know it, cast all these things aside as he grows up and into himself. The voice of reason (that would be my husband) tells me I will enjoy every stage of my son's growth and there will always be something wonderful about him to cherish, but I know at age 13 he's not going to stop everything and run over to me when I ask, "Can Mommy have a kissie?"

I want them to stay my babies forever.

So just like when I got the letter for kindergarten saying my son was going to be in the P.M. class instead of the A.M. class, I'm pulling myself up by my bootstraps and trying to shake off the selfishness and self-pity.

I will not hold my children back because I want them to stay my babies forever. I will embrace that my value is not tied to whether or not my children need me. I will not burden my children with my difficulty in seeing them grow independent, but will only show them my joy of seeing them soar to their highest potential.

But I'm going to need to buy some stock in Kleenex.

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