

Unraveling

BY LISA K. HARRIS, AB'82, MBA'84

Rattling south on Chicago's "L" with my daughter and 200 pounds of her stuff wedged into six suitcases, I wish Lyda would turn and say she'll miss me. With her phone pressed to the window, she snaps pictures of big city possibilities instead and finger flicks them to friends. Wrigley Field's rooftop bleachers. Snap. Swish. A river that will run green for St. Paddy's Day. Snap. Swish. She's already left me, I realize; her body's just waiting to catch up after I drop her at college for the first time. I dread the reverse journey, me alone on the train racing to O'Hare to catch a Tucson-bound flight.

A year ago I sat in her high school bleachers with different expectations.

"Why do you want her to go away to school?" a mom friend asked as we watched our daughters stride across the football field during the marching band's halftime show, smoothly changing directions, their patent leather shoes in perfect step.

She should go to the best she gets into, I thought, my eyes wandering left to the University of Arizona's stadium. Regardless of where that might take her.

"I would think you'd want her to stay here, given how close you are. And, well ... what happened?"

What happened was years of single parenthood after Lyda's father died. Cancer swiped Peter with a magician's sleight of hand. His absence left

me staring across the kitchen table at toddler-aged Lyda, wondering how to put the tablecloth back under our lives.

After the funeral, after I returned the last casserole pan, after my mother left, I stood at the kitchen sink feeling adrift. Something tugged at my pant leg. I glanced down to see Lyda, her finger pointing to an O-shaped mouth, a hungry chick looking to her mother. It struck me then that I wasn't alone as long as I had her.

Widowhood was a free fall—a bag of potato chips was breakfast, morning started midafternoon, and friends didn't know what to do with me. Lyda pulled my parachute's rip cord. We floated on afternoon naps, Wednesday swim practice, Saturday birthday parties in the park. And later, Tuesday night marching band maneuvers.

Her "I've got a better way" attitude infused our lives with a feistiness that yanked me to the other side of grief:

"Don't paint the wall that yucky color."

Mid-roll, I pause. "It's what the decorator suggested."

"She doesn't know anything." Fanning through color swatches. "Here. It's even called Peace and Harmony. Isn't that what you're looking for?"

"Yes, but ..." Laying roller down.

"The other's totally boring."

The bond we constructed was as tight as skinny jeans fresh from the dryer. She spoon-fed me soup when I suffered from a wicked case of food poisoning and rendered honest answers to "does this make me look fat?" She rode sidecar as I maneuvered into and out of

a second marriage: sprinkling petals before my feet as I walked down the church aisle, swabbing my forehead as I birthed 11-pound Ava, and, after the marriage crashed, bolstering my negotiating skills the morning of the property settlement by reminding me of how we'd been done wrong.

I knew she'd leave, though that day felt far off, even when we searched for a perfect-fit college. Together, we clicked through admissions websites, walked ivy-clad campuses, listened to chatty guides rhapsodize about their schools. It was all so heady. Like a coach heading to the championship game, I read up on tactics, attended College Nights, paid for SAT prep classes, edited essays.

We were in it to win.

At Declaration Breakfast, seniors announced their choices; nearly three-quarters shouted "U of A." When Lyda yelled, "University of Chicago," teachers nodded approval but moms raised eyebrows.

"Chicago's so far away and different," my bleacher-sitting mom friend said. "She'll never be the same."

Going away wasn't that big of a deal. She'd still need my guidance and input. I'd still be a major part of her life. Right?

Lyda spent the summer sorting—choosing which yellow T-shirt to take, the one from Urban Outfitters or the one from Forever 21? These pink pants or this flowered sundress? Do they

I imagined life without her teenageness. I'd lose the languages of both texting and layering. Middle age would smack me upside the head faster than Lyda's fingers could spell o-l-d f-a-r-t.



The rest of the story: After graduating this June, Lyda Harris, AB'14, could safely venture onto the seal in the Reynolds Club.

wear flip-flops in Chicago? In January? When I offered advice, she tossed back her long auburn hair, dismissing my 30-years-too-late fashion ideas.

That's how we'd say good-bye, I feared. She'd turn away from me, flicking her mane in dismissal, and I'd sob uncontrollably, like I had every first day of school, every summer camp send-off.

I imagined life without her teenage-ness. I'd lose the languages of both texting and layering. Middle age would smack me upside the head faster than Lyda's fingers could spell o-l-d f-a-r-t. Emptiness bubbled up as well, dark loneliness I hadn't felt since Peter's death. What *had* I been thinking encouraging her to apply out of state?

Ava tried to make things better. "After Lyda's gone we can play the games *you* want on Game Night."

Monopoly wasn't much fun with two players, I thought. Too bad, as the game was perfect for teaching Ava about planning ahead.

"Can I have Lyda's room?" she asked, squeezing my hand, "My ponies

and teddy bears need room to roam."

On the night before our Chicago flight, I stood at the sink jamming a taco into my mouth. Lyda flopped onto the floor with last year's prom dress she was resizing for a friend. Obviously she wanted to talk. I had yet to pack, change the cat litter, write instructions for the house sitter. But I waited, knowing there were few of these impromptu moments left. She stitched while I ate.

"Mom, would you do me a favor?"

Did she want me to mail her a homemade birthday cake? Her favorite glazed in chocolate? Where was that recipe anyway?

"Would you wear something other than black or tan?" She pulled thread through taffeta. "And don't have stains on your clothes." She waved the needle at yalsa dribbling down my black shirt.

On campus, dressed in a new outfit Lyda chose for me—tawny slacks and a ruffled maroon shirt, one I refrained from eating in—we troop behind bagpipers to the University's main gate. At the wrought-iron curlicues, the

parents head right while our children proceed through—a symbolic tear-jerker if ever there was one.

The pipers blow their last, announcing the moment has arrived.

"Is this it?" Surprise in her voice, as if she just now understands that she'll be executing a solo turn. For what seems like months, she holds my gaze with eyes that say she'll miss me.

I realize that I had it all wrong. She isn't leaving me. It's me that must step aside—step into my life so that she can march into hers. I'll finish my novel, hike Yosemite, and help Ava move her toys onto Lyda's shelves. Pivoting, I head toward the O'Hare-bound train. On the way, I'll pick up Scrabble, a game that works well for two *or* three players. ♦

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