



growing child

● the childhood years

Pulling Forward: The Transition to Kindergarten

By Jennifer Bostwick Owens

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I surrendered myself to fluffy-haired Adele, the baby of the family. When she was two-years-old, we set out for the bakery on weekday mornings to nibble on muffins and tell nursery rhymes. "Then up Jack got and off did trot, as fast as he could caper, to old Dame Dobb, who patched his knob, with vinegar and brown paper," we recited in unison.

The days passed slowly by. We were almost one person. *What will become of me when you start kindergarten, three-and-a-half years from now*, I wondered, stroking her soft golden hair, without this diet of muffins, rhymes, and the smell of you?

When she was one, we sat snuggling on the loveseat, light streaming in through the tall windows, Adele stroking the soft skin of her belly while I read aloud piles of stories. A character's voice or a word sounded funny, and she plucked her pacifier from her mouth to chuckle smartly.

I was smitten by her, my second daughter, her pale nutty skin, her gleaming black eyes, and soft light hair. She stood on the loveseat to play with my face, eyelids and lips, with delicate fingers.

For outings, I dressed her in her sky-blue fleece jacket with the fuzzy, pointed hood. On her feet, I buckled the rhinestone clasps of small red-velvet shoes. The driveway gravel crunched as she practiced walking. Her eyes sparkled like fine-cut gems, her finger pointed up to the daytime sky, to where the moon would later shine, calling, "Moana, moana." The two of us were completely entwined.

In the evening, she high-stepped like a wind-up toy around the comforter atop our queen-size bed, escaping a diaper change, giggling, squealing.

I trapped her, pulling her legs out from under her to tape a diaper around her. I pushed her fleshy arms into the sleeves of a tiny T-shirt, one that didn't snap underneath, leaving her tummy free to rub.

Just barely grasping that she was her own little person, she popped her head through the neck hole, chirping, "Addie!"

"Tomorrow is your first day of kindergarten," I whispered to Adele, who stretched out longer in her twin bed now. "I want you to know I've loved spending time with you before kindergarten—the mornings we walked to the bakery for muffins, the stacks of books we read together. I'm excited you're starting kindergarten—and I'm going to miss having so much time with you."

She grabbed my neck. "Oh Mama," she cried, "I'm going to miss you!"

"It's okay," I held her. "We're ready." I rubbed her slim back. "You've been getting bored." The six years, they'd dragged and flown. We were on the eve of a transition.

In the morning, she climbed the stairs to our bedroom with a small pile of clothes. I helped pull her red cotton dress over her head.

"Papa, did I tell you there's a real sink in my classroom?"

"What's it like?" Steve asked, eyes wide with interest.

"It's silver, with a little water fountain we can use." Adele's excitement was tentative and shy, without its characteristic fire.

I brushed her golden hair. "Why don't you go down and put on your new shoes, and you'll be ready."

Our older daughter Colette was up and dressed, filled with her own qualms about moving to the other side of the building, to middle school. She talked to her little sister about the pleasures of kindergarten.

Neither resisted school. They climbed into the car, and it felt right for them finally to be together, to serve as each other's quiet support, as they ventured into the world without me. In the parking lot, a staff member opened the car door.

"Have a great day," I said, remaining in the driver's seat as instructed. The girls faced in the direction they were going, without looking back. My job was to pull forward and exit. Bravely, we carried out our roles. That first day of kindergarten was a half day, and I picked up Adele at noon to bring her home for lunch. I put some music on the stereo: "There's a little white duck, sitting on the water..."

"Oh no!" she yelled. "Not this! Not Burl Ives!"

"Okay! Sorry. What do you want to hear?"

"Elvis."

With gusto, she spooned macaroni and cheese into her mouth while I looked for the CD. When the first track started, she scooted off her bench to come over. "I want my favorite song," she said, pressing the button with double arrows to skip ahead.

She returned to the table, drawing boldly with a hot-pink oil pastel between bites of lunch. Then she belted out with Elvis, "I'm just a hunka hunka burning love!"

Must have been a pretty good day.

*Jennifer Bostwick Owens is a writer living in Nashville, Tennessee, with her husband, their biracial daughters, and two dogs: a pointer mix and a puggle. She holds degrees in English literature from Mills College (honors) and Stanford University. Her literary memoir *The Loveseat: A Mother's Story* is represented by Katherine Boyle at Veritas Literary in San Francisco.*

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