

## VOICES

# Going away to college

By **DIANE LUND**

*Special to the East Oregonian*

In my mind I knew it was inevitable. That didn't stop me from feeling panicky. My daughter was going to college.

"Mom, hurry up, what's taking you so long?" said Elissa, who stood by the front door, her suitcase in hand.

"You haven't had any breakfast," I replied. "Come get a bowl of cereal."

"Mom, I'm not hungry. Let's go," she said.

Tinker kept licking her face. As if he knew she was leaving. On her 10th birthday, Elissa had woken up to find this brown fluffy-haired dog lying on her bed. They became constant companions. Tinker would get so excited when she came home from school, he'd jump up and down begging for a treat. A neighbor promised to take care of Tinker until I came back.

Dousing my coffee in the sink, I reluctantly grabbed the car keys. Two heavy boxes, nearly everything Elissa owned, were in the backseat. I took the wheel. Neither of us spoke for the longest time. Finally, I broke the silence. "I'm going to miss you terribly," I said.

"Mom, you'll be fine," she replied. "You have so many friends. Maybe you'll meet someone special."

I shrugged. Those weren't the words I wanted to hear.

When we reached the Mount Shasta Viewpoint, Elissa climbed into the driver's seat. "Don't take those curves too fast," I warned her.

She sped off. Tightening my seat belt, I knew it was useless to say anything. Elissa had a mind of her own, an eloquent mind like her father.

Elissa had been the center of my life since the day she was born. I adored her. Every time she did something new, like learning to tie her tennis shoes, I'd buy something special, a book or a doll.

I was astounded to see her overalls covered with paint after I picked her from preschool at the Jewish Community Center. I asked her teacher what happened. Elissa had gotten so excited drawing me a picture, she hadn't noticed the smudges on her clothes.

"She's such a delightful child, so adventurous and imaginative," her teacher said.

Where had the time gone? Wasn't it just yesterday when I had gone to her swim meets, her piano recitals? Taken her to Israel to meet her father and shown her Jerusalem, the city of her birth.

Now our time together was drifting away like the sand on the beach. In a few short days, she'd be on her own. And unfortunately, so would I.

I had urged Elissa to choose a college outside of Oregon. Not wanting to inhibit her life the way my mother had. Always checking up on me. Wanting to know where I'd been, who my friends were. Never trusting me to make my own decisions. Questioning me all the time. Until I couldn't take it any longer and moved out.

Elissa deserved her freedom, unencumbered by me who wanted to control her life.

"You need to go away to college," I said. "Find your own identity. Figure out what you want to do in life. I don't want you feeling trapped like I did."

We had done the college circuit tour the year before. Visiting the campuses of Pomona, Scripps, Occidental and Santa Clara.

She chose Santa Clara. A Catholic school. In northern California. As I pulled into the parking lot, we looked at each other. She looked glorious. A cold sweat ran down my face. I helped her unload, carrying the boxes to her dorm room.

"Don't get too religious, I don't want you see you reciting a rosary," I told her.

"Mom, you know me better than that," she replied.

I drove home the next morning. Expecting to hear my daughter's voice on my answering machine. But there were no messages. My heart ached.

Fumbling through my purse, I found the crumpled piece of paper where she had scrawled her new phone number and picked up the receiver.

"No," I told myself slamming it down. "I need to let her be."

Walking into her bedroom, I opened the blinds. Everything was gone. Her clothes, all her makeup, her boom box.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw her teddy bear. Lying on her bed, its beady eyes smiling at me. I cuddled it in my arms, crying softly. The yellow and white fur around its nose had long ago worn away.

The teddy bear had been a gift from my mother along with a pink frilly dress, a polka-dot sleeper, and diapers.

When I'd lay Elissa in her crib, I'd wind the key so the bear could play a soothing lullaby. Soon it became her timeless possession.

Had she left the bear to comfort me?

The phone rang. "Mom, are you OK? I haven't heard from you and was worried something might have happened."

## ANYONE CAN WRITE

Nearly 40 years in the business have taught me that readers long for meaning and a connection at a deeper and more universal level.

And that's why the East Oregonian will be running, from time to time, stories from students who are in my writing class, which I've been teaching for the past 10 years in Portland.

I take great satisfaction in helping so-called nonwriters find and write stories from their lives and experiences. They walk into my room believing they don't have what it takes to be a writer. I remind them if they follow their hearts, they will discover they are storytellers.

As we all are at our core.

Some of these stories have nothing to do with Pendleton or Umatilla County. They do, however, have everything to do with life.

If you are interested in contacting me to tell me your story, I'd like to hear from you.

Tom Hallman Jr., [tbhbook@aol.com](mailto:tbhbook@aol.com)

*Tom Hallman Jr. is a Pulitzer Prize-winning feature writer for the Oregonian newspaper. He's also a writing coach and has an affinity for Umatilla County.*

"I thought you were too busy to call," I said.

"Mom, you'll always be in my life. I love you," she replied.

I took a deep breath. My daughter was hundreds of miles away. Yet we still had a special bond.

Called love.

When Elissa came home the following summer, I was thrilled. We spent several hours sorting through her old clothes and books in the garage. Tucked underneath her Sunset High School yearbook was the teddy bear.

"Remember this?" I said, dusting it off. "It's yours now. A token of my love."



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