

She's Leaving Home (bye bye...)

Written by By Margaret Evans, Editor

Tuesday, 20 August 2019 07:54 - Last Updated Wednesday, 21 August 2019 04:46



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I was driving down Ribaut Road the other day and almost had to pull over when a sudden flashflood of tears nearly blinded me.

The source? Stevie Nicks on the radio, singing lyrics I've heard a thousand times.

"Well, I've been afraid of changin' 'cause I built my life around you . . . But time makes you bolder, children get older, and I'm getting older too..."

Landslide. A perfect word to describe the onslaught of emotion that keeps ambushing me when I least expect it these days.

I see pictures on Facebook of smiling children going back to school. Landslide.

My newsfeed serves up a "memory," a photo of my daughter on the first day of 5th grade. Little pleated skirt, sparkly turquoise lunchbox with hot-pink "A," feather woven into her side ponytail (they were all the rage with the 'tweens that summer, feathers and side ponytails), funny chipmunk cheeks. Landslide.

I hear her come in late, just past curfew, quietly washing her face and brushing her teeth across the hall. She's safe and sound and a familiar feeling of wellbeing washes over me.

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Then... landslide.

And with each landslide, tears. Who knew I could manufacture so many, so often? They say the average adult body is made of 60% water. I don't mean to brag, but I think I'm above average.

Her friends have been leaving for college for the past week, one by one, day by day. Most are headed not too far away – they're off to Clemson and Carolina, Furman and Wofford.

Amelia's doing something a little different.

Next week, my husband and I are putting our only child on a plane to an exotic locale halfway around the world, a mysterious land that was barely on her radar 'til pretty recently. She'll be there for almost a year.

Rewind: Last summer, our daughter began the application process for the Rotary Youth Exchange. For as long as I can remember, she's dreamed of spending a year abroad after graduation, and we'd heard great things about this program. She wanted to experience a new culture, and learn a new language, and she hoped her three years of high school Latin would be a good springboard toward fluency in one of the Romance languages. Italy was her coveted destination – we spent two weeks there a couple of years ago and she fell in love – but she'd have happily settled for France or Spain.

Rotary had a different idea. *"How 'bout the Czech Republic?!"* In Central Europe. You know, that little country bordered by Germany, Austria, Slovakia and Poland? Where they speak a difficult, strange-sounding *Slavic* language called Czech? And it snows a lot?

After an initial shock, followed by some serious Googling, we had all adjusted our attitudes and expectations. Amelia was intrigued, then excited, then fully on board with the idea of Czechia – that's what they call it now, informally – with visions of Prague Castle dancing in her head. Her dad and I were proud of the way she rose to the occasion.

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That was six months ago, and at the time, it seemed an eternity stretched before us. But then suddenly it was Easter, then senior prom, then her last dance recital, then – gulp – graduation, followed by a wisp of a summer. And now, here we are.

She has a brand new suitcase, a long-term residency visa, and a navy blazer sporting an already-impressive collection of international pins. (It's a Rotary Youth Exchange tradition. Look for these blazers on teenagers in an airport near you, and be nice to them. They're doing something scary!)

For months, she's been in a group-text with 70 other kids from around the world, all headed to Rotary District 2240 – which includes Czechia and Slovakia – and another group-text with the 11 “outbounds” from our home district 7770, with whom she's grown close over the past year. Her outbound friends have been departing on their respective adventures over the past couple of weeks – heading to places like Denmark and Sweden, Brazil and Peru, Switzerland and Belgium and, yes, Italy, France and Spain – even as her high school pals have been leaving for college.

So much leaving. Emotions are running high at our house. As the mom, I'm trying to stay focused on our checklist. Just checking off boxes – there are lots of boxes – and keeping a breezy smile on my face. Outside, I'm all no-nonsense, true-gritty, gittin' 'er done. But inside, it's landslide city.

As I write, I hear Amelia in the living room watching *Mamma Mia* for the umpteenth time. Along with the Harry Potter oeuvre, it's her film equivalent of comfort food. It's also “our” movie – the one we like watching together when we seek coziness. I hear the three dads singing the wistful “Our Last Summer.” (Stop!) Any minute now, Donna will break into “Slipping through my Fingers,” while dressing Sophie for her wedding . . .

ABBA, Fleetwood Mac, the Beatles... They're all trying to kill me.

Amelia received a Facebook message from her host dad, Michal, yesterday. It was written in Czech – which truly is a bear of a language. (Thank you, Google Translate.) There was a photo

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attached – Michal with his wife Kamila and their son Dany at the airport in Prague. Dany is wearing a Rotary blazer, about to board a plane for Denver, CO, where he'll spend this school year. He is Michal and Kamila's only child, and *our* only child will presumably be sleeping in his room a week from now in a city called Ostrava, near the Polish border. There, she'll attend high school and do her best to live like a Czech teenager, whatever that means. Kamila, a kindergarten teacher, has been messaging with Amelia – and occasionally me – for a couple of months now. Her English isn't great, but her kindness shines through and I love her already.

According to the Rotary International website, "Rotary Youth Exchange builds peace, one young person at a time. Students learn a new language, discover another culture, and truly become global citizens." My heart swells when I read these words. My anxiety melts away. Almost.

I am not a natural-born traveler. You might even call me a homebody. I was in my 30s before I made it to the West Coast, and my 40s before I made it to Europe, and I really didn't sweat it much. The problem is that I'm easily overwhelmed. It's the *idea* of travel that does me in – all the preparation and complication. Once I'm there, I'm okay. Happy, even. But the *idea*

of it? Oy

.

Fortunately, I married a man who loves nothing more than the next big adventure, and he's been forcing me out of my comfort zone for 20 years now. Our daughter inherited that wanderlusty gene, along with his dark hair and olive skin, and for that I'm grateful. If she were more like me, she'd probably be decorating her dorm room right now, and it wouldn't be more than a few hours from home. How much easier that would be. For me, anyway.

But this is Amelia's dream, not mine. She imagined it, she worked for it, and she is ready for it. If she can be brave enough to do this, I can be brave enough to let her.

I think. Ask me again in a few days, after a few more landslides.