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chapter one

NOTHING CAN TEAR US APART

And so it has come down to this: You're going. Really going.

Oh, you'll be back. It isn't as if I will never see you again. But when you return, it won't be for long. For all practical purposes, you are gone for good.

Though you'll always remain in my heart and be a member of our family, nothing will be the same. While I may finance your lifestyle temporarily, you are now your own person, making your own decisions.

It's stunning to realize that the clichés are true.

All those platitudes I heard last week, when you were born, are now indisputable. "Hang on to every moment, every day," I was told when I showed you off as our new arrival. "Before you know it, they'll be gone."

I nodded and smiled and pretended to agree, to understand something beyond my wisdom. But what did I know? I was barely more than a child myself.

Before you know it

Now I tell new parents the same. I plead with them to heed, and they nod and smile and pretend to agree. Perhaps to them last night's diaper change made the wee hours (pun intended) seem eternal. How I long to be awakened and needed in such an innocent way now! New parents wonder if those tedious times ever end, and tomorrow they'll wonder where they went.

You're at an age when you don't want to be told what you do and don't understand. So forgive the lump in my throat, the catch in my voice, and the glaze in my eye. *They were right! They were right!* is all I can think. You were here such a short time, and if I had my way, I would hold you desperately and keep you here.

How surprising that must sound. I remember when getting out on my own was a consuming passion—and it seemed the feeling was mutual. Why, then, my loved ones' emotion at my leaving?

Much as you don't want to hear it and perhaps don't even want to think about it, the fact is you can't understand me just now. You will. Your own child will educate you beyond any classroom or degree. You'll cradle that baby in your arms, and anything else you ever cared about will pale to worthlessness. Your life, your being, will focus on that child. Though you'll know and be reminded by experts that it's not healthy to center your existence on your child, you will do it anyway, helplessly. You'll be awash in a kind of love not often expressed articulately because there are so few words for it.

Then, too, there are so many distractions to the communication of that love. As you think back to your years at home, you may think of difficult times, of frustration, of quarreling, misunderstanding, lack of connecting. My years—here I go again—allow me to see those as only part of the whole, bits of a beautiful mosaic, the underside of an embroidered fabric.

I love you with all that is within me, with a love

beyond words. It may take weeks, even months, to adjust to your absence. But even when I have overcome that and adapted to a freedom that long sounded attractive, some things will never change. You need to know that.

As you grew, you heard me say silly things like, "Where was I when you were getting so tall?" "Since when did you become so good-looking?" "How could you be a teenager already? Weren't you just in first grade?"

You shook your head and wondered how adults could be so nerdy. I once felt the same. Yet now, in earnest passion, I try to convince you that life is, indeed, short. It *is* a vapor that appears for an instant and then vanishes.¹

Watching you as a freshman, I wondered what your mature body would be like when you were a senior. Suddenly the sophomore and junior years blipped past my radar screen, and I didn't have to wonder. There you were, mature and defined, on the move. I tried to let go as I longed to hang on, so forgive me if the parting has come too quickly.

The songwriter tried to tell us in her beautiful lyric that the moment we try to hold in our hands slips through our fingers like sand. "Yesterday's gone, and tomorrow may never come, but

we have this moment today. . . . Hold them near while they're here and don't wait for tomorrow to look back and wish for today."²

Much as I knew that preparing you for this day was a priority, I spent less time preparing myself. But I don't want you focused—especially now—on my melancholy, because I am proud. I am hopeful. I am praying. I want only the best for you; that's what love is.

Only my selfishness would tell me I'd rather have you stay than go. That's the same selfishness that is jealous of heaven when a beloved saint is taken. That covetousness would cup a butterfly in our palms and withhold it from its purpose—its freedom.

A dad's unconditional love

So as you think about me with whatever emotion is appropriate, feel free to not focus on my pain, my longing—yes, my grief. It's a hurdle. It's my burden, not yours. I inform you of it for a higher purpose: to let you know the depth of my love for you.

I know you'll make me proud, because you already have. At this transition, you need to know only one truth. It was best expressed by the same lyricist as above when she wrote:

We'd like to collect you and shield and
protect you
And save you from hurts if we could;
But we must let you grow tall, to learn
and to know all
That God has in mind for your good.
We never could own you, for God only
loaned you
To widen our world and our hearts.
So, we wish you His freedom, knowing
where He is leading,
There is nothing can tear us apart.³

Though there are many things you could do out there on your own to disappoint me, hurt me, or even repulse me, nothing can tear us apart. You might even take actions or choose a lifestyle so nauseating to me that you would be unwelcome in my home as long as you persisted.

Yet like the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son, I will stand scanning the horizon for your return. Nothing you can ever do will make you other than my child. I will love you, cherish you, pray for you, and stand ready to forgive you. Anything else would mock the unconditional love God has bestowed on us by calling us His chil-

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dren, which He did even while we were dead in our sins: "But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)."⁴

Today is a day when I wish I could approximate the unconditional love of God. Where I have failed to communicate that to you, I can only apologize and ask your forgiveness. For those times when you have felt that my pleasure in you, my love for you, my acceptance of you has been based on performance, I must take responsibility. I'm sorry.

And while I'm a finite, imperfect, sinful person myself, my goals are lofty. I want you to know and believe that your parents love you more than anything on earth. No matter what you do or don't do, say or don't say, start or don't start, finish or don't finish, accomplish or don't accomplish, you will still be my child. I will still love you.

You may be gone from our home, but you will never be gone from my heart. You may choose to leave so that you can cleave to someone else.

But nothing can tear us apart.