



The Bittersweet Goodbye

A parent wrestles with the start of the school year

By Cynthia J. Drake ✪ Illustration by Andy Ward

It was the night before my son August's first day of kindergarten, and I was standing in the condiment aisle of H-E-B, sobbing. Somehow while contemplating nut-free sandwich spreads for his brown-bag lunch, my mind wandered to images of my newborn baby, freshly swaddled in a Michigan hospital nearly six years earlier. I told my husband, Wesley, that I wasn't ready to take our son home, wasn't prepared to take on the responsibility of raising this magical being on our own. Instinctively, I must have known that leaving the hospital that day would put us on a fast track to

this one—this moment in a suburban Texas grocery store preparing for kindergarten. It seemed to happen in the blink of an eye.

Parents across Texas are now sending their kids off to school in an annual ritual that has always been hard—particularly for first-timers—but feels a little more challenging these days. School shootings, cyber bullying, and other dangers our kids might face make school seem like a different environment than it was when I was a kid.

That first day, we walked August into his elementary school in

Pflugerville. A sign overhead said in cheery letters, "Help your child grow, send them on their way, kiss and hug them here, help them start their day!" The parents around me were trying, imparting urgent last-minute advice in a variety of languages to little ones with backpacks sagging around slender shoulders. "I love you, Little Bird," I said, subtly wiping the tears threatening to spill from my eyes.

Yet even as I fought back tears, I was thankful for other things. Unlike the homogenous, rural Midwestern schools where Wesley and I grew up, Texas schools offer our kids enriching cultural experiences. In just a few months' time, August would begin reading and writing in Spanish and English in his public school's language immersion program. I would beam as I saw his hand-scrawled pictures of dinosaurs, their body parts labeled in Spanish. August would make friends with kids from different backgrounds, asking the simple question, "Will you be my friend?" This was the life Wesley and I chose for our kids, and it was already filled with opportunities we didn't have.

After the first day of kindergarten, I watched the long parade of parents embracing their kids and saw exhausted teachers happily relieved of their energetic charges. As August and I walked hand in hand, he stopped, bent down, and plucked a small white daisy from the grass. He examined its delicate petals before handing it to me. "For you, Mommy."

As much as the world occasionally feels scary or sad, the innocence and wonder of kindergartners haven't changed. As that first day of school ended, I could already imagine August growing up in another blink of the eye. But I was there in that moment for the magic.

Frequent *Texas Journey* contributor **Cynthia J. Drake** loves experiencing life in Texas through the eyes of her two sons.