***Fledging***

By Pam Boe

I exited the car dressed in a scrambled-egg-covered sweat suit, beat-up and mismatched crocs, my husband’s coat, and bed head. My eleven-year-old Varmint got out from the seat behind me, grabbed her 400-pound backpack, her lunchbox and bag of valentines, and shut the door.

We stood there, gazing at one another in the soft early morning light of the middle school parking lot, wishing we didn’t have to part.

Okay, that last part was pure fiction. I didn’t want us to part. I knew she was most likely wondering how she could get out of embracing me in front of God and everyone. She was also probably wondering if a one-armed hug would be able to, one, suffice Mama’s embracing requirements, and, two, avoid getting scrambled egg on her excruciatingly-carefully-picked out ensemble.

The unhappy truth is that Varmint is beginning to fledge, and I am the reluctant mama—and by reluctant, I mean that I’m the one who is on her knees tearfully weeping—Begging—her not to grow up and leave us. Unfortunately, that tack doesn’t really work so well, and it’s embarrassing because, with the current state of my old knees, I need no small amount of help to get up off the floor—but it’s time.

My husband encourages me to relax and allow her to bloom. He reminds me that this is what we have been working towards. This is exactly what she is supposed to be doing: testing the water with her own bare little toes. He doesn’t really encourage me with those specificwords, but when he says in exasperation, “Will you Back Off?” I know that that is exactly what he means.

So she stood facing me in the parking lot, and I saw my two-year-old little Varmint, binky in mouth, raising her hands and whining for “Uppies, Mommy!” I saw the three-year-old Varmint begging me to go with her. I saw the six-year-old crying that she doesn’t want to get on the bus—but the eleven-year-old with eyes already focused on the school behind me confidently said, “Well, I’ve got to go, Mom.”

I resigned myself that the kindest, most selfless thing for me to do was to allow her her freedom, and not force an embarrassing Mommy hug on her in front of her peers. “Have a great day, Love!” I blurted, as cheerfully as I could muster, and turned to get back in the car. My heart was breaking—ridiculous, I know—but it was breaking a small little break, one of a thousand that are coming in the next few puberty-drenched years of Varmint and my relationship.

Then the unthinkable happened. She grabbed my elbow and yanked me around before I could sit. “Mom,” she laughed at me, “aren’t you going to kiss me goodbye?” Then she enfolded me in her strong arms.

“Honey, I’m dirty with breakfast all over me!” I argued into her neck, trying to hide my extreme pleasure.

“Aw, it’ll wash,” she chuckled as she kissed my cheek and turned to stride confidently towards her day.

Me? I stood there blinking back tears—not of sorrow, of pride.