

Straddling Time Zones

Mothering children

“My pum’kin!” Ava, the two-year-old Fairy Princess, hollers.

“No, Mom. Tell her it’s mine,” Lyda, the 13-year-old Vampire Witch, screams, her sinister ebony-and-purple dress flaring out around her legs.

I watch my children tussle over a plastic jack-o-lantern and marvel at the presence in my life of these two beautiful daughters born light years apart.

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Fate doesn’t always play the hand we desire. It wasn’t my plan to have a gap of more than a decade between children—ten years and nine months to be exact. Getting pregnant the second time around was far more complicated than the first; not the “oops, the diaphragm has a hole in it” type of getting pregnant.

Expecting at age 42 raised eyebrows instead of congratulatory hugs. Friends asked if I understood the consequences of having children so far apart, and having the second “so late in life.” Did I realize I would deal with teenage angst and the terrible twos at the same time? “Why start over? You’re more than halfway done,” another friend asked, referring to the amount of time remaining before Lyda turned 18 and left the nest forever.

Why start over? Because Lyda’s father died when she was a baby, and instead of enjoying her early childhood, I grieved for a lost husband. Because I wanted to envelop myself in the warm closeness of someone snuggling into my lap at a time when Lyda didn’t want anything to do with me. Because I enjoyed being known as someone’s mom instead of by my first name, and Lyda needed a sibling so she wouldn’t be alone in the world. Because I enjoy kid-oriented holidays. Especially the ones where we can pretend we’re something different.

My reasoning for having another child resonated as I transformed my daughters into a Fairy Princess and a

born a decade apart...

by Lisa Harris

Vampire Witch with the help of costumes, makeup, and hair combing, or, in the witch's case, tangling. Lyda fretted that I didn't know how to tease hair, paint her face, or apply gore.

"Really, Mom. You don't know how to do anything," she said in a tone perfected by teenage girls.

"How did I ever manage without you?" Dressed in a rented Dorothy in Oz costume, with my hair braided in pigtails and tied with a baby blue ribbon, I rolled my eyes as I applied fake blood to the corners of her mouth. How did I ever manage without you? Especially during all those years applying my own makeup and arranging my own hair, let alone earning a Ph.D. and mediating between warring factions in the emotionally charged world of environmental consulting.

Wanting a second baby meant playing lab rat to infertility treatments, because my second husband's vasectomy reversal hadn't worked in spite of the promise told by all those baby announcements tacked on the Houston clinic's waiting room wall. A second baby meant enduring hormone shots, blood tests, egg harvests, and sonograms—not to mention discussing sperm counts at the dinner table and struggling to pay the equivalent of a hefty down payment on a second home. I subjected myself to three intrauterine insemination attempts (a procedure often referred to as the turkey baster method), and when those failed, I underwent four heavy-duty treatments of intracytoplasmic (worth 77 points in Scrabble with the bonus) sperm injections (ICSI).

After the first ICSI treatment, blood tests revealed a positive outcome. I injected myself daily with hormone shots within a bull's eye the nurse drew in ink on my left flank. Towards the end of my first trimester, I visited the doctor's office for a sonogram. I had expected to see a bright flash of light, a heartbeat calling to me, as I had on two previous occasions. This time, the sonogram's screen pulsed with blackness, the lighthouse silenced. Devastated by the loss, I tucked a copy of an earlier sonogram's shooting star into my jewelry box, in memory of a child not born.

My mother suggested I leave well enough alone. One child was plenty, she said. Why tackle children in high school and preschool at the same time? It would be like operating in two separate time zones simultaneously.

Did I really want to cope with changing diapers, late-night feedings, and leaky breasts at the same time as the teenage emotional rollercoaster, where one moment they need you and the next they can't stand you?

I said nothing as I sat at the dining room table with a calendar and circled my most fertile days, beginning the process again.

A gazillion hormone injections later, after the fourth round of egg harvest, fertilization, and implantation, my blood tests returned positive again. I held my breath for 12 weeks, the period most prone to miscarriage. Each day, I plunged a needle into an ebony-and-purple bull's eye, the same color as Lyda's Halloween costume.

Now, watching my two feisty daughters, Lyda and baby Ava, play tug-of-war over the pumpkin, I am thankful for being true to myself and not listening to my mother's or friends' well-meaning advice. This moment is worth all those needle jabs, lab tests, and credit card bills.

With a yank, Lyda grabs the pumpkin from Ava's grasp, triumphantly shouting, "It's mine," as she steadies herself on black high heels. Princess Ava lies on the floor in a puddle of taffeta, sobbing.

Sometimes I wonder what it would have been like to have produced stairstep children who attend the same school at the same time, to shepherd my children through life's passages in one continuous phase. But that is not my life. My mothering journey will be shaped by leaps followed by seemingly never-ending plains, only to face a mountain range, again, as each daughter struggles through her path to independence.

With tears dried, we stand in front of the full-length mirror and admire our reflections. Ava swirls her dreamy skirt and says "I'm a princess" in a singsong voice; Lyda, fake blood oozing from the side of her mouth, bares her teeth and hisses at her little sister, who screams and hides between my legs. In the mirror, I expect to see a 17-year-old version of myself, like Judy Garland playing Dorothy, but find a 40-something woman dressed in a silly outfit, who really could stand to lose five (okay, ten) pounds, clutching a smiley-faced jack-o-lantern and preparing to soar over life's hurdle. *MW*