

ABSTRACT

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PARENTING STORIES

Peter Henri Witte, Master of Fine Arts, 2017

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This collection of stories is about the experience of raising young children, the minds of children, and inheritance. These connected stories explore the wild and the mundane, the joyful and sad, the confusing and obvious, the bizarre and yet altogether familiar experiences that make up family life, both today and yesterday. Narrated by a father of two young children, most of the individual pieces are very short stories, but there are also stories packaged in a variety of other forms, including bedtime tales and numerous dialogue-only fragments.

PARENTING STORIES

by

Peter Witte

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Dedication

To Rachel

Acknowledgements

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Fiction

He died and instantly transformed before my eyes. I approached cautiously because, although dead, he smelled alive. He was on his belly, legs hanging over the sides of the hospital bed. The muscular hump was pointed to the ceiling, quaking, the last energy that would move through the brute. The paws, with their thick hook fingernails, though limp, suggested a great power paused in time, not forever at rest. Observing those paws I recalled a vacation to Michigan where I watched him reach in the reflecting water and, barehanded, grab hold of and pull out a thrashing fish. As I moved along the carcass, I ran my fingers through his fur, avoiding the areas caked with blood, mud, and greenish-yellow grass. I thought about the person I had become, and who I might still become. I made my way to the massive head and faced him. Faced his moist black nose. His beige muzzle with its mouth opened, ever so slightly ajar, as though he was gently breathing. I looked at his placid eyes. I drew closer, then closer, and even closer still. My eyes were inches from his top eye. I peered in and saw a murky image, an image of an adolescent, cowering. I kept looking and that image turned into a reflection. That reflection changed and suddenly I looked older. More wrinkled, grayer. I looked angrier, too. I saw a version of myself where the wild, the primal, were no longer hidden. I saw myself in my grizzly's eye, and I wondered: had this great beast that formed me also transformed me? I backed up, turned, and left that room. I left feeling uncertain, not knowing which way I'd go next. But I left.

Blemishes

I'm at the dermatologist's office to have something on my face removed. It's only cosmetic, but I've never liked the blemish. I sign in at the receptionist's desk, and turn around to find a seat in the waiting room where I can read the latest issue of *The Atlantic*, which I brought along with me.

So, what's your sport? says an Old Man who is staring at me from the middle chair out of the row of five in the room.

I look at him and pause, wondering if I heard him right.

You look like you're in shape, he says. I wonder what your sport is.

Oh, thanks. It's basketball, I say, as I sit down on a chair next to the wall, leaving some space between us.

Basketball, he says. Now that's a nice sport. Are you any good?

I can play a decent game, I say. I place my magazine on the empty chair, pull out my iPhone.

I never could play it very well myself, he says. Did you play in high school around here?

No, no. I'm from Illinois. I played there, I say, and I start to fidget with the iPhone.

Oh, I see, he says. I went to SLU-High here in town. Our high school team there wasn't very good, but I was friends with the star player. Went to Korea with him, as a matter of fact. But he never returned.

The Old Man looks away, shakes his head. I set down the iPhone, on top of my magazine.

That was a brutal experience, he says. Just a brutal war. Did you know there was hand-to-hand combat with the Chinese? A lot of people today don't know that.

Yeah, no I didn't know that, I say.

But what I don't say is that my father was in the navy during the Korean War, that he was always tight-lipped, and that he'd taken all his stories into the ground with him.

I was a reconnaissance scout, the Old Man says. Way up at the front line. I'd radio back the positions of the Chinese to the artillery units. You know, hit such and such coordinates. And the artillery would be launched up, over our heads, and come down and strike that location.

Did you ever get scared being at the front line, near where the artillery was headed? I say.

Oh no, he says. If I felt uncomfortable, I could always radio the coordinates and skedaddle. But, boy oh boy, it was brutal. At this place called Wonsan the field was just covered with dead Chinese. Or dying ones. Just feet away. As close as that wall, he says, pointing across the room.

I try to imagine what it'd be like to be that close to a bunch of mangled corpses, but the only dead body I'd ever seen was my father's, nicely arranged inside a coffin.

At the time, the Old Man says, I was fighting alongside two British soldiers. These Brits were great fighters, you know. Really well trained. And funny. Just really funny guys. During a lull in the fighting we were looking out at all the dead Chinamen out there. And there was this one whose face was distorted in a funny way.

His mouth was wide open like this. Died with this terrible look on his face. I'll never forget. Never forget that look. We're looking out there, talking about the face on that one. Next thing I know the Brit on my left, he gets up, walks over to the dead man, pulls out his pecker, and just pisses in this dead man's mouth. I mean, just the strangest thing.

I shake my head. I think about all the stories that my father never told me, about the unsaid things that will remain unsaid.

Then, the Old Man says, the Brit on my right, he gets up, walks over, and wouldn't you know he pulls out his pecker and does the same thing. And I just couldn't believe my eyes. It felt unreal. Incredibly unreal.

I nod. I recall the time when I was a boy and I spied on my father after I came across him in his backyard garden. He was kneeling, alone among the tomato plants, examining the vines for ripened fruit, and talking to himself. I watched as he plucked and placed good tomatoes in a basket and tossed bad ones away, toward the compost pit. I couldn't hear what he was saying, but he looked animated and intense. He looked angry, like he had something rotting inside that he couldn't so easily discard. And I had a hard time deciding if I wanted to hear what he was saying or if I wanted to maintain that distance between us.

Next thing I know, the Old Man says, I get up, walk over to this Chinaman's corpse, pull out my pecker and I go on and do the same thing. And while I'm pissing I'm looking up at the sky like this and saying to myself, Am I really doing this?

Unsure how to respond, I settle on saying, Wow.

It was just a terribly funny thing, the Old Man says. Just the way it was. I mean war is so strange, so unbelievable.

The Old Man turns away, looks at nothing in particular, closes his eyes.

I want to close my eyes, too. Rid my mind of the Old Man's story. Stamp it out. Take it and bury it.

After a moment, the Old Man's eyes open, he turns back to me, says, So, what line of work are you in?

Before I can answer, the door that leads to the exam rooms opens and a voice calls out for Mr. Whitey. I don't correct the mispronunciation. I stand up, turn to the Old Man, say, Well, nice chatting with you.

Likewise, he says.

I walk over to the nurse, through the door, and into the exam room, where I'm prepped for the elective procedure to my face.

First Date

“Okay. Here’s one for you,” he said. “If you were stranded on an island and had only one book with you, so that this book would be the one that you had to reread for the rest of your life, which book would it be?”

“I think,” she said, “well, it’d have to be a book that was inexhaustible. Something that you could keep finding new nuggets every time you returned to it. It’d have to be a book with many ideas. I don’t know, Homer’s *Illiad* or *Odyssey*. Or maybe Plato’s *Republic*. God, dare I say the *Bible*?”

“Those are good ideas. You’d not be bored, that’s for sure.”

“What about you?”

“I asked the question, but I don’t have a good answer. I like your list. But, I suppose, if I could add to it I might throw in Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* because I could reread passages from that continuously.”

“Oh no...you’re one of those guys.”

“What? What’s that supposed to mean? Come on.”

“It’s seems too cliché. A white dude who likes Wallace.”

“I suppose I’m just not into the canon. I like contemporary shit, is all.”

“But of all of the contemporary work out there, why Wallace? What makes his work so compelling?”

“I like how he explores the Midwest. Have you read *The Pale King*? It’s doing a lot of things, but one thing it seems to clearly do is heroize the boring, Midwestern life. I identify with it.”

“But he’s a misogynist.”

“Is he?”

“Really?”

“I mean, I’d never thought that.”

“Well, it’s in there.”

“To be honest, I just want to understand *Infinite Jest*. I’ve read it, but I don’t understand it. What better way to get to understand that book than to sit around on an island reading and rereading it?”

“Okay. That’s fine. It’s a strike against you, but so far it’s the only one.”

“Well, I’ll just have to be careful from here on out now won’t I?”

“I think so. I think so.”

“Okay. Your turn.”

“Hmm...Okay. Here, I have one: do you want children and, if so, how many?”

“Really? Is that your question?”

“What? What’s wrong with it?”

“It’s just...I feel like it’s a trick question.”

“Trick? There’s no trick. It’s just a straightforward question: do you want children or not? I feel like every guy has thought up an answer to that question before. And I think their answers are usually telling. So, do you want children?”

“I’m nervous after that Wallace debacle.”

“Don’t be. I was mostly poking at you.”

“Okay, fine. I’ll be honest. I am open-minded on the topic of children. You know, I can see it going either way.”

“You are so political.”

“One. I want one child. I don’t know if I could handle more than a single child.”

“But would you really want to have an only child? That would be so lonely for her. Or him.”

“Do you have siblings? Because I do. There are worse things than lonely.”

“Hmm.”

“No. I’m kidding. I love my siblings. But, really, I think one child would be a lot to manage.”

“Well, I want three children.”

Push Gift

A well-meaning friend told me that they are standard. “Everyone gets a little gift,” he said. “Something to mark the occasion. After all that they do to bring the baby into the world, as the fathers, it’s the least we can do.” He advised making the gift something that would last, something that could, perhaps even, become an heirloom. So that’s how I wound up at the jeweler, the same place where I had bought her engagement ring. Only, unlike back then, when she was there to help me decide on a style, color, cut, etc., this time I was trying to make it a surprise for her, so I had very little information to assist me.

The sales clerk who greeted me was a younger woman. She was thin and fit with bright eyes that as soon as I saw them I had to look away. She was smartly dressed in a navy blue dress with a green floral pattern, the kind of attire that, as a Washingtonian transplant, I’d become familiar with. And even though she paired the dress with a pearl necklace and matching earrings, the usual flourishes, there was something unique about her, something I couldn’t quite pin down.

I looked into the display cases at the jewelry, avoiding directly looking into her eyes, as I told her the reason for my visit, which, I admitted, “I don’t have an exact idea in mind of what I want to get her.” She suggested that I think about a ring, since necklaces are liable to be grabbed and broken by the baby, which I thought conveyed a nice sensibility, or was it experience as a sales clerk? I gave her the upper price limit that I had in mind and she told me she had some ideas and then brought me across the store to a display case in the corner of the shop, near the window.

“What about this green one?” I asked, pointing at a ring with a thick band that pinched an olive-green, princess-cut stone.

“Ah, yes,” she said. “This one is marvelous. The stone is peridot.”

“Peridot?”

“Yes. It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” She opened up the case, handed the ring to me.

I looked closely at it. The band might be a little too thick, I thought. “It’s not, by chance, the January birthstone is it?”

“No,” she said. “It’s August’s.” I looked at her. She smiled. I looked away. I didn’t want to get a stone that matched the month that my daughter was expected. That, I felt, would be cliché.

“It’s supposed to symbolize rebirth,” she added. “Quite the nice meaning for your wife, don’t you think?”

“Hmm,” I said, turning over the ring in my hand, examining it. I had no idea what to expect at the hospital. No real understanding yet of what a birth would be like. I imagined it was going to be challenging, emotional. But how challenging and emotional, I hadn’t a clue. I imagined my wife opening the box, our newborn baby on her chest. I imagined she’d like it, but more than the ring, she’d like the gesture. She’d put the ring on and we’d kiss.

“Here,” the sales clerk said, reaching for the ring. “I’ll put it on for you so you can get a sense of how it’d look on your wife.”

“No,” I said. I closed my fingers around the ring, pulled away. “Please. That isn’t necessary. Thank you.” I opened my hand, picked up the ring in my fingers, turned it over again. “I’ll take it. It’ll work fine.”

Earliest Memory

It was at the hospital where my mother was lying on a hospital bed in the post-operation recovery room following the caesarean section birth of my sister. I would have been three-years, six-months-old. I don't remember what I was doing before the visit, how I got to the hospital, or who I was with, but I'm told that a family friend who was watching me and my siblings, brought us there after the birth, and that we met my father in the waiting room before we were brought in to see my mother. All I have is a vague memory of walking in a dark corridor, holding somebody's hand, and feeling nervous. In my memory the corridor's walls, ceiling, and floor were painted black and there were flashing blue lights on the floor, but that can't be right. I also remember entering the room where my mother was recovering. In contrast to the corridor, my memory of this room is probably more accurate. Everything was white: the floors, the walls, the hospital bed, my mother's gown, the room's lighting. I remember seeing her and wanting to be on the bed with her, asking if I could, and being told by someone, I'm unsure who, that I could not.

***In the Labor and Delivery Unit, George Washington University
Hospital, Washington, D.C.***

“Here: would you like the honor of cutting the cord?”

“No. Thank you. But no.”

Fever

It is just before one o'clock in the morning and I am on duty. My wife has to leave first thing in the morning for an important work meeting and so, as of twenty minutes ago, following the midnight nursing session, she's now in bed. She probably had one of those experiences where her head hit the pillow and she crashed out, exhausted.

I am with our four-month-old daughter and she's feverish. She's been fussing and nursing, fussing and nursing, on and on all evening. But right now she is asleep. I am holding her, pacing in the living room of our home, trying not to wake my wife. My daughter's seems to be a precarious sleep. Every time I stop pacing, she starts to wake. I think I can go on with this pacing all night, if I must. There are at least two bottles of breast milk in the fridge that I can warm quickly if need be. That should be enough. I've alternated between softly singing and gently humming "Ten in the Bed" about twenty times now. But I am quiet now and my daughter's seems to be in a deep sleep.

If my memory holds, I recall that I don't have anything pressing on the work schedule tomorrow. It's looking a lot like I will be staying home.

I walk to the kitchen, open the cupboard, and gently take out a package of Nutter Butter cookies and, quietly as I can, I grab a handful. Then I get a glass, open the fridge, and pour myself a glass of milk. I do all of this with my right hand. My daughter is nestled in the crook of my left arm.

I bet, I think, that she'd stay asleep if I transferred her to the vibrating-bouncy chair. It'd be easier to eat these cookies and drink the milk. So I give it a try.

Slowly, I move her from the crook of my arm so that my left hand is now supporting her head. I slide my right arm out from under her back and hold her tailbone with my right hand. I bend at the knees and reach out, lowering her to the chair. She is still asleep, but she frowns and whimpers. I quickly move to give the chair a gentle bounce and this, along with the vibrations that the chair makes, calms her.

I sit down on the couch and arrange things so that my daughter in her chair is within range of my foot, so that I can gently bounce her as I eat my cookies and drink my milk.

I look out of the window and see the sky. It is surprisingly clear. There are thousands of distant stars, radiating little dots. I haven't seen the sky like this since, well, since I can't remember when.

I lie my head down, my foot is still bouncing my daughter, and I prepare to fall asleep, hoping that everyone else in the house stays asleep.

Stay-at-home Dad

I had arrived in the office with enough time to read and respond to email before the nine o'clock meeting with my boss to discuss the end-of-year report that I had written. After I'd read and responded to a handful of messages, a new one popped up from my wife with the subject line "maria," our nanny's name. The first line was also unusually sloppily written. Apparently she had had just enough time to dash it off before leaving for the office. That morning Maria had put a notice in with my wife that she would be returning to California to care for an elderly parent at the end of the year. We had, my wife wrote, a little over a month to find a replacement.

This news would never be welcome, not when you have a caretaker for your children that is working out nicely, but with the looming end-of-year project deadline, my wife's email had the effect where it immediately induced anxiety. I had to step away from my work. I pushed away from my desk into the hallway, past the office of my organization's president and CEO where I heard her speaking with the vice president of policy. The administrative assistant was in the elevator, probably headed off to get coffees for the two executives, and I wanted to avoid small talk. So instead I headed to the stairwell and jogged down three flights of stairs, walked through the building's main corridor, and headed out into K Street.

My son was six-months-old. It wasn't going to be easy to get him adjusted to another caregiver, but after my wife and I took turns with each of our six weeks of maternity and paternity leave, he seemed to adjust to the sole care of Maria just fine. But what about my daughter? What was she going to think about Maria's departure?

They seemed to get along so nicely. But, then again, she was only two-and-a-half. After months of a new caregiver, would she even remember Maria?

I walked to the alleyway between my office building and the one next to it. Small flocks of pigeons were perched on the window ledges of both buildings. Many of the birds were resting, but some were cooing with their little purple-green-gray chests puffing in and out. There were also a few down in the alley, pecking at pieces of bagel. Halfway down the alley an individual was sleeping inside a cardboard box, entirely covered by wool blankets. There was a steaming coffee and a fresh bag of Dunkin Donuts sitting nearby, a present from a caring passerby, a gesture clearly meant to recognize the sleeping person's humanity. I went to the alley looking for a moment to think, but instead I found an incongruent scene that, in my current mental state, made me start to cry. So I hurried back to my office, wiping my brow with a tissue along the way.

By the time I had returned to my desk, there was only enough time to sit down and collect and quickly scan my notes for the meeting. I was still scanning them when I walked into the hallway where I rubbed shoulders with the vice president, who said, "Morning," in way that was more cheerful than usual. I suspected sympathy.

"Is she ready?" I asked the administrative assistant.

She nodded and grinned innocently.

"Hi Nan," I said, walking into the president and CEO's office.

"Hi Galen," she said, turning to look at me on the other side of her desk. She motioned to the leather couch. "Please have a seat."

I sat in my usual spot next to “presidential photography row,” the bookshelf where Nan had placed the photos that had been taken of her standing next to every United States president beginning with George H.W. Bush and ending with her most recent acquisition, Barack Obama.

She had the report I had written on the desk in front of her. It wasn’t opened. She cleared her throat, then picked up the report and leafed through it.

Finally, she said, “There are a lot of problems with this.”

Things Handed Down

I was sitting on the edge of the bathtub waiting for my two-year-old daughter to finish pooping and thinking about the parenting advice I'd come across which advised that what I was doing for my child at this age was helping her to form behaviors that would last her for life. As I handed her squares of toilet paper that I folded, the thought occurred to me that I didn't have a plan for breaking this pattern where I sit with her as she uses the toilet. I should make a painful but necessary break from this bathroom ritual, I decided, sooner than later.

She started to crinkle together the toilet paper I had handed her into a ball.

"No," I said, sharply. "Don't ball it up. That's a waste."

"I forgot. I forgot," she said. Then she corrected herself by un-crinkling then re-folding the squares. Her eyes became teary and she said, "I just forgot, Dada."

I handed her more toilet paper and, as I did, childhood memories came rushing back. I remembered my father, in his Sunday clothes, walking into the bathroom where I was holding a wadded up ball of toilet paper. "Boy," he shouted, "You don't do it that way." Then he showed me how to fold the toilet paper squares like so.

"It's alright," I said to my daughter. "Just try to remember next time. Okay?"

"Okay, Dada," she said. "I'll remember."

"I know," I said, and I smiled.

***Breastfeeding My Brother: A Five-Year-Old's Memoir of Her Mother
as Told to Her Father***

I remember how Mom always needed privacy.

Dizzy

On our walk to preschool lately we've been passing the carcass of a headless bird, just lying there on the red-brick sidewalk, rotting.

The first time we passed by the dead bird, my preschooler called it a "dizzy bird." I thought she called it dizzy because its head was missing, but after further reflection I thought maybe it was because whenever we play Ring Around the Rosie she gets dizzy and falls to the ground, dead-like. Whatever the reason, I decided I didn't want her to have the wrong idea about that bird.

"It's not dizzy, darling: it's dead," I said. "It's a dead bird."

"Why is it dead?" she said.

"I don't know why. Maybe a predator killed it or old age or something else. Somehow, though, it died. So it's dead. Not dizzy. That bird is dead."

I pushed the double stroller that held her and her younger brother further along our route and watched the back of her head. I imagined that I could see inside her head, that I could see tiny people, homunculi-like, responding to my words, using some sort of elaborate computer system that cross references incoming information against a collection of memories, experiences, and known words and concepts, trying to piece together what "dead" meant, and coming up with nothing out of all that young knowledge. So I tried to help.

"It's not..." I said, and I paused, grasping, looking for a way to say something that would help make it make sense to her. "It's not living anymore. Sort of like the bird went away, but left its body behind. I guess the best way to explain it is that

living things eventually stop living, and when that happens we say that they are dead.”

Killed, died, dead...I wanted to take those words back out of fear that she'd ask me if one day I was going to die, or if one day she was going to die. I hadn't yet thought out how I'd answer those questions when they eventually—when they inevitably—did come. Fortunately, during the remainder of our brief walk that morning, she didn't follow-up.

~

It's been three weeks since we first saw the dead bird, but every day on our walk to preschool, without fail, the carcass is still there, broken and waiting for us. My one-year old son hasn't displayed any signs that he's even noticed the bird, but my preschooler, from the moment we leave the apartment, she starts talking excitedly about how we're going to see it.

Today as we approached it, she shouted, “There it is! There's the dead bird, Daddy.”

“Yes,” I said. “I see it.”

“Why is it still there?”

I pushed the stroller just past the dead bird so it was out of the children's line of vision and stopped to look closely at the battered carcass. A wing, with splayed black and bright yellow feathers, was nearly severed from the rest of the weathered and shrinking carcass. Little gray bird feet were curled in the way that dead feet curl in. It was a decaying mess. But odd as it may be, the thought that occurred to me right then and there was, *What beautiful feathers.*

“I don’t know,” I said, pushing forward. “I don’t know why no one has moved it yet. That’s a good question.”

~

After preschool my daughter’s teacher, Ms. Patricia, said, “Tara and I had a conversation today about a dead bird...”

“Oh yeah,” I said, “Well, for the past few weeks on our route to and from here there’s a dead bird that’s been lying on the sidewalk. She seems pretty interested in it.”

“Ah, I see,” Ms. Patricia said, nodding, as though I just helped her solve the puzzle of the day. “I couldn’t figure out exactly what she was talking about, but I sensed it was something like that.”

“Yeah, it’s been there awhile,” I said, looking at my daughter, who seemed to be paying attention to a game a couple of her classmates were playing. “Maybe I’ll bring a plastic bag tomorrow and, if the bird’s still there when we walk past, I’ll pick it up and throw it away.”

“Maybe that’s not such a bad idea,” Ms. Patricia said.

~

On our walk home, as we approached the dead bird, my daughter turned around in her stroller seat, looked at me.

“Daddy,” she said, “I don’t want you to throw the dead bird away.”

“Oh,” I said. “And why not?”

“Because,” she said, pausing, checking in with the tiny people at central command. “Because I don’t want you to throw it away.”

“Okay, darling,” I said, thinking that her request seemed fair enough. “I won’t throw it away.”

We moved closer to the dead bird.

“Daddy,” my daughter said, covering her feet with her backpack, “I don’t want the dead bird to get me.”

“The dead bird won’t get you, sweetheart,” I said. “Don’t worry. It definitely won’t get you.”

“And don’t throw him away. Okay?”

I didn’t understand why she didn’t want me to throw away the dead bird, or why she was afraid that the dead bird would get her. But, once again, I thought, fair enough. “Okay,” I said. “I won’t throw the bird away. I promise.”

“Burr!” shouted the one-year old, pointing up at the sky, where a blue jay was flying overhead, screeching.

“Yes, Jackson,” I said. “That’s right. There’s a bird.”

The blue jay soared higher and higher, up above and then past a group of oaks, out of view.

The three of us, with our varied misunderstandings, experiences, and perspectives, with our collective yet incomplete knowledge, we carried on. A moment later we quietly strolled past the dead bird, toward home.

The Forest for the Rooster God

My daughter woke up from her nap demanding I call her this silly name and now, going on two hours, I've been calling her Rooster God. All because of an absurd dream.

She's three-years old. We're not church types. She doesn't even know who or what the hell God is. Okay, she's three and a half, but still.

"I'm Rooster God, the champion of forests," Rooster God says.

I'm a stay-at-home dad. Her and her brother. He'll be two in a couple months. I've been doing this for three years, three months. Ever since my wife's first maternity leave ended. I just up and quit my job. Just like that. But it was an easy decision for me to make. My wife is a professional arguer. She's high powered. And she makes good cash. A D.C. prototype, really. It keeps me happy despite the games I'm forced to play.

"You mean champion of the farms," I say. "Roosters don't live in the forests, sweetheart. They live on farms."

"No. Rooster God lives in the forest," Rooster God says.

"You read this, Dada," the almost-two-year-old says. "You read *this*, Dada."

"Okay, I'll read it," I say, even though we've already read *Peek-A-Choo-Choo* five times today. "I'll read it in just a minute, Jake." I turn to Rooster God, say, "Look, you can pretend that Rooster God lives in the forest, but roosters don't live in the forest. They live on farms is all I'm saying."

"No. Rooster God lives in the forest," Rooster God says. "I choosed it. I choosed the forest."

“Read this, Dada,” the almost-two-year-old screams.

“Okay. Okay,” I say. *“Oh-kay.”* I pick up the almost-two-year-old. “Jake, you can’t just start screaming and demanding things. I’m in the middle of something else, buddy.”

He clobbers me in the nose with a closed fist.

“Ow,” I howl, holding my nose, really playing up the pain, not just because it hurt, but also because I saw a mother at the park do this when her child popped her on the nose as a way of trying to get the child to respond with empathy to her pain.

“Oh, ow,” I say again, still holding my nose, looking at him. He squints, his brow creases, his head turns slightly. I think it’s working.

But then he jabs me in the eye with his pointer finger.

“Oh, fuck,” I say, and I set him down, walk away. Out of frustration, pain. Out of self-defense.

The almost-two-year-old starts crying. “Hold you, Dada,” he says, reaching to me, trailing me. “Hold you. Hold you.”

“The Rooster God thinks Dad just used a bad word.”

“Please,” I say, holding my eye, pleading with Rooster God to show me mercy.

“Dada, hold you.”

“The Rooster God wants Dad to say sorry.”

“Hold you. Hold you,” the almost-two-year-old keeps saying, his cries increasing in loudness.

“Belle, I’m sorry,” I say, and, again, I pick up the almost-two-year-old.

“No,” Rooster God says. “I’m not Belle. I’m Rooster God.”

“Christ, Belle,” I say. “Just leave it.”

“Call me Rooster God. I choosed Rooster God.”

“Okay. Okay. *Oh-kay*.”

The almost-two-year-old seems to be settling down. He points to the fruit bowl on the counter, says, “Bana, Dada, bana.”

“You want a banana, Jake?” I say.

“Yah,” the almost-two-year-old confirms, and he smiles, as tears roll down his pink cheeks.

I set him down, grab a banana, peel and break it, hand over half. “No,” he says, and he starts jumping up and down, screaming, “Big one. Big one.”

“Okay. Okay. *Oh-kay*.” And I hand him the rest of the peeled fruit. I turn around and Rooster God is standing on top of the dining room table, feet spread apart, straddling the candelabra centerpiece that my wife’s mother gave us for our wedding present. Rooster God has both arms in the air, holding her brown teddy bear above her head. It looks as though a stuffed animal sacrifice is about to take place with the potential of collateral damage. And the thought occurs to me, *I wonder what my father—Mr. Machismo—would have done in this situation.*

Using a sharp tone, I say, “Get down. Now. You know better.”

“No,” Rooster God says, just as sharply. “I am the *champion* of the forest.”

“*God dammit*,” I yell. “Get off the table.”

Rooster God’s eyes get smaller. Her eyebrows wrinkle. Her nose lowers. And the brown bear comes down, slowly. Rooster God walks from the center of the table

to the edge, steps to a chair, then to the floor. She walks past the almost-two-year old, past me, toward her room, where she stops at the door, turns back, says, “You are a bad rooster. And I am not playing with you,” and she enters her bedroom, closes the door.

The almost-two-year-old has smashed banana in his hand. His other hand is smashing more banana against the wall, as he says, “Boom. Boom. Boom. Boom.”

All that booming, it rattles up a memory. Something from long ago. Something unpleasant, painful. A memory that now is more shadow than body. A shadow standing above me, yelling, and smacking me into line. And although I try to keep this memory buried, it is there, forming my parenting, as a sort of correction.

I walk over to Rooster God’s bedroom. Try the handle. Locked. I reach up, to the door’s crown molding, where I keep a paper clip to open the door whenever it’s locked. After I pop the lock and open the door, I see Rooster God lying on her bed, holding and looking at *Bumble-Ardy*, a Maurice Sendak book.

I walk to her bedside, kneel down, say, “Sweetheart, I didn’t mean to suggest that I didn’t want to play with you. I just felt frustrated that you stood on top of the table after we just talked about that yesterday.”

“I stood on the table because I am a woman,” Rooster God says. She grins, nods several times, as though checking whether I understand her logic, which of course I don’t.

“Okay,” I say. “But women don’t stand on tables. You don’t see Mom standing on tables. So let’s not do that anymore. I don’t want you to fall and hurt yourself.”

“Dada,” the almost-two-year-old says, from behind me.

I turn, say, “Yes, Jake.”

“Appo, Dada. Appo,” he says.

“Dad,” Rooster God says. “I won’t stand on the table again. I choosed to not stand on the table again. Okay, Dad? It was an accident.”

“Okay,” I say. “Thank you for being cooperative.”

Tonight my wife will be home late again. Soon enough I’ll give the kids dinner, put them in the bath, and then it will be books and bedtime. We won’t be saying any prayers, but I’ll tell them a story, say I love them, and kiss their foreheads. I’ll tell them I hope they have sweet dreams. And I’ll mean it.

But for now I take the almost-two-year-old’s banana-covered hands and walk him to the kitchen. We wash his hands. I slice a pink lady apple. By the time the apple’s sliced Rooster God has joined us in the kitchen. The almost-two-year-old reaches for a slice, says, “Thank you you’re welcome.”

“Yes, Jake,” I say. “You’re welcome.”

“Dad,” Rooster God says. “Did you know that roosters are bigger than bears?”

“No,” I say. “I didn’t know that, sweetheart.”

And it’s true. I didn’t.

Compulsions, Part I

Right after I served him the requested plate of eggs, toast, and raspberries and started to walk away to fix my lunch, my one-year-old son threw the plate to the floor.

“God damn it,” I said, losing my patience. “Why did you do that?”

He gave me a defiant smile and said, “I throwed the plate because I did.”

Compulsions, Part II

And then there went another plate of food, tossed on the floor.

I lost it. I scrambled around the table, pulled the one-year-old from his seat, brought him to the floor, turned his body horizontal, and smashed his face against the cheesy macaroni with broccoli, smashed his face into the rug, and screamed, “Do you like the mess now? Huh? How do you like the mess now? It’s not so funny now, is it?”

I let up and he looked at me. His reddened face had yellow smeared all over it and he was crying. “Dada,” he said, through tears, “Dada, stop.”

October 30

“Really?” my wife asked, irritated. “It’s all gone?”

“Well,” I said. “It was a rough day.”

“I mean...it was a huge bag. I just can’t believe that it’s all gone.”

“The Reese’s were my favorites until the Almond Joy’s became my favorite.”

“I’m shocked.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll get another bag for tomorrow night. It’ll be fine.”

She shook her head and walked away.

“I said it was a rough day...don’t you even want to hear why?”

Asshole

While cleaning up pieces of macaroni and cheese and broccoli out from under the table after dinner, I moved a chair that knocked my daughter, who was playing with stuffed animals nearby.

“Ow, Daddy,” she said. “That hurt my leg.” And she started to cry, though, as I was becoming rather adept at distinguishing between the two, this one was more of a fake cry than a show of true emotional reaction to pain.

“I’m sorry about that, sweetheart,” I said, trying to stay calm, a suggestion for how to react when a child became whiny or overly emotional that I had read the night before in one of the parenting manuals I had on my nightstand. I’m not usually into parenting books, but I had been so high strung lately, I had to do something. So I located a few with the help of a dear librarian, I read bits and pieces of one, and then, there I was. “I didn’t mean for that to happen. It was an accident.”

“But it hurt,” she screamed, “and it is hurting a bunch.”

“Okay, darling.” I gently touched her knee. “It was an accident. And I will be more careful next time.”

She calmed down then said, “An accident like yesterday when you hurt my hand when you squeezed it?”

“That wasn’t an accident, darling,” I said, trying to accept and admit my imperfection as a parent, which was also advised in the book I had read. “That was a mistake. Daddy was mad and he grabbed your hand so you’d stop dumping the water onto the floor. That was something I did that I shouldn’t have. A mistake.”

She looked away. Picked up her stuffed lion, petted him.

“You know,” I continued, “your dad isn’t perfect. He does things that he regrets doing. And I’m sorry I did that to your hand. I’m sorry. I will work on my patience, sweetheart. I will try to not make mistakes like I did yesterday. Okay?”

She looked back at me and said, “So yesterday you weren’t making an accident, you were being an asshole.”

“Darling,” I said, not paying much attention to the language she had just used, not giving attention to the behavior I do not want to see, which was another suggestion I’d read. “No. Yesterday I made a mistake. That’s all. I wasn’t being anything. It was a mistake is all.”

“Okay,” she said. “I forgive you.”

“Thanks,” I said, and I returned to picking up the rest of the food from the floor and then I finished with dinner clean up.

Expectations

My two-year-old son and I were on an afternoon stroll, taking an urban hike, contemplating the various spots in the shade because we had nowhere to be, nothing else to do. That morning I'd heard the weatherwoman threaten early afternoon thunderstorms, but the sky was as bright blue as my son's eyes.

We approached a stone wall where a group of men were sitting, smoking what looked like hand-rolled cigarettes. There was a scraggy, tanned white man with a ponytail and a couple of black men, one with thick eyeglasses and a ball cap, the other wearing sunglasses and watching smoke rings that he blew up in the air. They looked like the types my dad would call "goddamned bums."

My son and I ambled past them.

"Hey," the ponytailed man said. "Look at that boy. He's Batman."

They all laughed.

"A blond Batman. Holy smokes," he added.

We continued walking, but my son, curious, likely interested in their laughter, turned to look at the men.

I too looked at the men and smiled, nodded.

"He'll be pushing you around someday soon, mister," the ponytailed man said, and then he gave a smile that revealed browned teeth.

"I guess so," I said, as I continued smiling and kept walking.

Their laughter trailed us.

Once there was some distance between us and them, the ponytailed man said to the others, “That’s a good kid right there. Look at that strut. Got his chest out and all. Holy shit. He’s gonna be tough.”

As we continued on our way my son looked up at me, said, “What that boy say to you, Dada?”

“Oh,” I said, and paused, looked at my son, examined his deep-set eyes, his big mouth, broad face. He was a replica of his grandfather. Looked more like him than me. “Well,” I continued, “that man was just saying you’re a big kid is all.”

We walked on and approached a couple of older women, sitting on a bench, chatting away. One had a notably wrinkled face and wore a flower-print sundress. The other had dyed, bright-red hair and a navy blue corduroy dress. They looked to be lost in conversation, oblivious to the many stimuli surrounding them, but as we neared, the woman facing me, the one with the flower-print sundress, said, “Well now, isn’t he *all* boy.”

“Yeah,” I said, and I looked at the women, smiled. We stopped walking. I continued, “I suppose he is.”

The woman in the sundress raised her eyebrows and said, “Is Daddy babysitting today?”

“Yeah. I guess you could put it that way—though he is mine.”

They both looked at me with crinkled brows.

“It’s just, it’s not babysitting, really. It’s more like I’m taking care of my son today, just like I did yesterday and just like, God-willing, I’ll do tomorrow. Just another ordinary day, I’d say.”

“Sure, sure, I know,” the woman in the sundress said, as she nodded repeatedly and waved her hand, as though dismissing my comment. She then looked at my son and said, “Hi there, young man, what’s your name?”

My son hid behind my legs.

“Well,” I said, patting my son on the head. “Isn’t somebody a little shy?” I turned to the women, smiled, and said, “It’s Clyde. He’s two.”

“That’s a nice name,” the woman in corduroy said.

“Yes,” the woman in the sundress said. She turned to me. “A nice biblical name. I like it.” Then she turned to my son, “Well, Gabe, tell your mother she’s brave sending you out alone with your father.” She turned back to her friend, said, “When John was that age, Ernie would not have been trusted to run so much as an errand with the boy.”

They both laughed.

I forced out a laugh, and said, “I’ll be sure to report back to his mother.” We started walking again, and I said, “Enjoy the afternoon, ladies.”

“You, too,” they both said to our backs.

As we walked on, my son looked over his shoulder, staring at the women who seemed to seamlessly move right back into the conversation they were having before our encounter, “the constant chattering of women,” as my dad would say. Again my son looked up at me and said, “Do those grannies know Mama, Dada?”

I laughed. Then I said, “Not exactly. No. They’re just being friendly.”

He took that in and looked like he might absorb it slowly, but instead he quickly said, “I didn’t like the wrinkled one.”

“Oh,” I said, using all my might to keep from laughing or smiling, from encouraging that kind of name-calling. “Well, it’s not nice to say you don’t like someone.”

He looked ahead, then back at me.

“But,” I said, taking his hand in mine, “so long as they’re not around when you say it, and you’re just telling me, I suppose it’s okay.”

He smiled, said, “Okay, Dada.”

Up ahead there was something shining brightly on the sidewalk that drew my son’s attention. He pulled his hand away from me and let out a shriek as he ran toward it. He neared the shiny object and reached down, picked it up, examined it.

“What’s that?” I said, as I caught up to him.

“Monies!” he said, his little hand held out above his head, displaying a penny. I smiled and admired his enthusiasm over the simple find.

A middle-aged, pink-faced man in a suit was passing by from the other direction, observing my son. He stopped next to us, laughed heartily, and in a deep baritone voice, said, “Find a coin, eh. That’s a good boy. A sign of good fortune for the future.”

My son seemed to be entranced by the man’s voice.

“That’s right,” I said, and I smiled at the man. “A lucky day indeed.”

“I found monies,” my son said, holding the penny out for show.

The man laughed again, used his hand to brush back his white-hair, and kneeled down next to my son. “That’s right: money,” he said. “You’re a smart boy, aren’t you?” He looked at me, said, “A business mind here.”

I said, “Well—

“I tell you what,” the man said, looking back at my son, “Keep working hard, keep your eyes open like that, focused on money and other important things, and the world is your oyster, son.”

The man reached out his palm, said, “Give me five.”

My son slapped the man’s hand with his own, then the man laughed and rubbed my son’s head, said, “Good boy,” and stood back up.

“A fine boy you have,” he said to me, and patted my arm. “I’ve got two myself. They’re grown now. Probably older than you even.”

“That’s nice,” I said, and not knowing how else to respond, I added, “They must be nice men.”

“Enjoy him while he’s young,” he said, and he laughed again. “Good luck,” he added before he turned and continued down the sidewalk.

My son and I stood there watching the man. He seemed to have a little hop to his step, a joyous walk if there is such a thing. I watched him in the distance and realized it wasn’t just his ideas about money that annoyed me, but also the familiarity.

“What that boy say to me, Dada?” my son said.

“Oh,” I said, looking my son up and down, wondering what he might have absorbed of the man’s little pep talk about money. “He was just telling you how impressed he was that you found that penny is all.” I smiled, nodded.

A generous smile came over his face as he looked at the penny. Then he said, “It’s pretty, Dada. It’s pretty, right?”

“I agree,” I said. “It is a pretty thing to look at.”

We smiled at one another for a moment, then I said, “What do you say, shall we continue on? I think there must be a nice spot up ahead where we can have our snack.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I want a snack.”

A block later we found a bench in the shade, empty except for a couple of friendly squirrels I shooed away. We took a seat. In the oak above us a robin was chirping out a ditty. I opened a plastic container filled with fresh peaches I’d sliced that morning and we ate the fruit. Peach juice dripped from the side of my son’s mouth, down his chin. He looked at me, smiled his grandfather’s smile.

Time is a strange thing. Some days it moves by so slowly. Other days I can’t get enough of it. Then there are those moments where I can’t quite tell where I am within time.

We finished off the peaches and I used a baby wipe to clean my son’s face, his hands. I cleaned up myself, too, and organized our things, then looked at him. He was gazing off, perhaps watching those friendly squirrels scamper around, perhaps noting the motorcycle parked down the road, or maybe he was observing the young couple meandering down the sidewalk, arm in arm, approaching us very slowly.

“So,” I said, “What shall we do now?”

And I looked at my son and waited on his response, expecting nothing in particular.

Bedtime Stories, Part I

There once were three bears who were walking in a forest. They came upon a group of little girls. The little girls thought they were princesses. The bears asked the little girls if they could play with them, if they could be the little girls' princes. Two of the little girls ran away, screaming, "Help! Help! Bears are after us." The third little girl was brave though. She looked at the bears, stood tall in her princess outfit, and said, "No, you may not be my princes." She said, "I already have a prince," even though she didn't already have a prince. Then she said, "I don't need any new princes." The bears then fell to the ground and started to cry and rub their eyes as they shouted, "It's not fair. It's not fair. It's not fair. We want to be princes." The little girl said, "But you are bears and I am a girl. You can't be my princes." But the bears cried harder and harder, saying, "It's not fair. We want to be princes." The little girl said, "Please. Stop crying. Stop being babies." But the bears kept crying, kept saying, "It's not fair. We want to be princes." The little girl said, "Please. Why don't you stop crying and use words." She said, "Talk to me why don't you?" The bears eventually stopped whining and crying, even though for many moments they continued to sniffle and breath heavy breaths. Once they were calm though, they stood up and looked at the little girl. She looked at them, looked them up and down for a good moment or two, then she said, "You can be my princes I guess." And then they played as princess and princes for a long time, until the little girl's dad said it was time to go home.

Bedtime Stories, Part II

In a far away land there lived a little bunny rabbit. This little bunny didn't have any ears. In place of her ears, the little bunny had noses. So she had three noses. Well, as you might expect, everywhere the little bunny went she could smell her surroundings really well, but she could not hear well. In fact, she could not hear much of anything. Some bunnies said she had a listening problem. One day this three-nosed bunny was hopping along, just having a grand old time, when it came upon a delicious-looking field of cakes. Strawberry cakes. Chocolate cakes. Carrot cakes. Lemon cakes. Even green bean cakes, which though the bunny had never eaten such cakes, she had seen them before when her daddy had eaten them. Well, of course the bunny was excited to come across so many cakes. So she decided to eat the cakes. Of course, since she had three noses, she decided to eat the cakes that smelled the most delicious first, and then make her way to the other cakes. So, first she ate all of the strawberry cakes, which smelled so good. Then she ate all of the chocolate cakes, then the carrot cakes, and finally all of the lemon ones. But when she got to the green bean cakes, she stopped. She didn't think the green bean cakes smelled as good as the others. Plus she was feeling tired and full. So she took a nap. When she woke up she was hungry again. But all the cakes were gone, except the green bean cakes. And she still didn't want to eat the green bean cakes. But she thought about it and recalled how her dad seemed to like the green bean cakes that he ate. In fact, her dad seemed to always eat all the green bean cakes that he had. So the little bunny decided that she'd just try one of the green bean cakes, just to give them a try. Because she was hungry and they did smell okay. Not as delicious as the strawberry cakes, but still nice enough. So she ate

a green bean cake. And it was good. So she ate all the green bean cakes in the field.

And after that she always ate every green bean cake that she ever came across.

Restless

My three-year-old daughter kept coming downstairs because she couldn't sleep. I kept bringing her back up to her room because I was trying to keep the marital bed childfree.

My wife was asleep and, though it was long past my bedtime, I was awake, listening to the dog's noisy breathing. It had been twenty minutes since the last visit and I was getting drowsy. Then I heard it again, the pitter-pattering across the wood floor, and I lost my patience. I jumped out of bed and met her at the doorway. "That's enough," I said, sharply.

I took her by the hand, right back to her room, and put her back in bed. "No more," I said. "Do you understand? It's way past bedtime." Then with a gentler tone, I added, "Darling, I'm tired."

Once again, I kissed her forehead and left her room. As I closed the door, she said, "You're not my dad anymore."

On another night, perhaps, I would have replied, scolded, corrected her. Instead, I ignored the comment, walked back downstairs, and got into bed. Soon I was asleep.

The next morning I awoke to the dog whining at my feet and my wife fast asleep, cuddled with our daughter.

Drop off

As I was putting away her backpack and lunch at preschool today, my two-year-old daughter tugged on my arm and started crying, saying, “No. Don’t leave, Dada. No. Don’t leave.” Other parents were ushering their children into the classroom, putting away their things, kissing and hugging them, and exchanging goodbyes, see you soon, I love you. But my daughter, tears rolling down her face, holding onto my leg now, kept saying, “Don’t leave, Dada.” I told her I’d be back in a little while, I gave her a hug, a kiss, then I took a cue from the teacher, who had come over to rescue me, and I turned to leave. But my daughter grabbed my shirt and screamed for me to stay. The teacher intervened by picking her up, and carrying her away, turning to me and mouthing, “Leave. It’s fine.” And so, again, I turned to leave. Only this time my daughter screamed, “Dada, please. Please, Dada. I miss you.” I kept walking, not turning back again. From the hallway I heard my daughter make terrifying noises that sounded like what I imagine a pig being gutted would sound like. I walked down the hallway, past several other classrooms, through the entryway, to the parking lot. I got into my car and sat down, turned the key in the ignition, starting the engine. I wiped sweat from my brow. I grabbed the wheel and saw my arms were shaking. I was breathing rapidly. I looked in the rearview and saw other parents and children just arriving or departing. I tried to slow my breathing by focusing on the inhales, the exhales. I closed my eyes. Soon I stopped shaking. Soon my breathing slowed. I opened my eyes again. And I waited for a few more moments before, eventually, I put the car into reverse, and backed up, then drove away.

Music Together

My wife suggested that on Tuesdays, when our daughter was in preschool, perhaps a good way for my one-year-old son and I to spend time together was Music Together, an early-childhood program where parents (or other caretakers) introduce their children to a variety of music traditions and sounds during weekly group gatherings. The program was recommended to my wife by a friend whose child attended the weekly gatherings with her nanny.

So there I was, at ten o'clock in the morning, in the all-purpose room at the south county recreation center, sitting in a circle with eight women, each of us with a child in our laps or crawling nearby. All of the mothers were sitting criss-cross applesauce, even the overweight woman, but one of the nannies wasn't and neither was I. I've always had flexibility issues, so I was sitting spread eagle.

After the "Hello Everybody" song, little Marcel, who was sitting across the circle from us, had fussed one too many times, so his mother brought him to her full bosom, pulled open her blouse, and began to nurse him. I averted my eyes and ignored my son, who was pointing and saying repeatedly, "Meck, Meck," until Miss Patricia began the next song by tapping together two rhythm sticks, left over top of right, then right over top of left, back and forth, continuously. Several of the parents, including myself, joined her, tapping our sticks together, singing along, "Rye ran tin tinnah, ran tin tinnahhhh, rye ran tin tinnah tin tinnahhhh."

For the remainder of class, I kept thinking about how I was the only man in the room. At preschool drop-off there were both fathers and mothers. Many of the fathers were dropping off before heading to the office, but still, I noticed them and

they helped to make me feel like less of a sore thumb. This class was supposed to give my son and me an activity to do together in the community, a way that we might make a connection with other kids and parents. It wasn't intended to make me feel isolated, different, disconnected.

After the "Goodbye Everybody" song, I turned onto hands and knees and stood up. I grabbed hold of my son and we walked to the side of the room where my Dude bag and our sweaters, socks and shoes were stored.

Throughout the room I heard chatter and fussing, mothers repeatedly giving directives to toddlers. I sat on a chair to put on my son's socks and shoes and I caught the eyes of Natalie, a strawberry blonde cutie who was tottering over to us. She came all the way over, touched my knee, and said, "Dada."

I thought she was referring to me in general. "Here is a daddy" type of thing. But her mother came over and, as though embarrassed, said, "No, Natalie. That's not Daddy. He looks a little like Daddy, but Daddy's at work, sweetie." She smiled at me and rolled her eyes. Then added, "She's a bit of a daddy's girl."

I laughed and nodded. Then I finished with my son's shoes, stood up, and we walked from the room and out of the building. The trees lining the walkway to the trail that would take us home were orange, purple, red, and yellow. Fall had arrived.

Secrets, Part I.

When my wife and our three-year-old daughter returned home from a morning play date at a friends' home, she was exhausted. I had already put our son down for his nap and I told her that I'd manage lunch and nap time for our daughter, so she should feel free to lie down and relax. She thanked me, grabbed her novel, then went to lie down in the other room.

I sliced apples as my daughter ate a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and told me all about the fun she had at her friend's home. I wasn't saying much. I was just half-listening to the child as information poured out of her. She described the pretend games she played, the toys she saw, and the frustrations she and her friend experienced. Then, in more of a hushed voice, she said, "Do you know what else? I have a secret."

I perked up. "Oh yeah," I said. "What's that?"

"Well, you can't tell Mommy because it's about mommies."

"Oh," I said and I stopped slicing.

"You have to trust me." She looked to the door where my wife had gone to rest. "You have to trust me not to tell Mommy."

"Okay. I promise I won't tell your mother."

She smiled, nodded, looked nervous. Then she said, "Eva showed me that her mommy has a bloody diaper."

I laughed.

"It's not about jokes, Dad."

"I know, darling. It's just...what did—"

“Eva told me that the bloody diaper is about babies,” she said, and raised her brows, her eyes opened larger. “She told me that it has to do with babies and that’s why it’s bloody.”

“Is that right?”

“Yes. It is.”

I nodded.

“There’s another secret,” she said, looking concerned.

“Okay,” I said. “What is that?”

“Do you trust me? Trust me you won’t tell Mom?”

“Yes. I promise.”

“I once saw that Mommy has a bloody diaper just like Eva’s mommy.”

“Is that right?”

“Yes,” she said.

She looked down, took another bite of sandwich, then a drink of water. I started slicing the apple again. For a few moments we were quiet. I finished with the apple, threw away the scraps, then brought the slices to the table where my daughter was sitting and I sat across from her.

“What do you think?” she said, “Does Mommy’s bloody diaper have to do with babies, too?”

I looked at her, examined her closely, saw how much she looked like her mother. I smiled. “I think that it’s not about babies,” I said. “Not exactly anyway. But, you know, you could ask Mommy.”

“No!” she said. “You trusted me.”

“Okay, okay, okay,” I said. “I won’t tell her. But it’s not really about babies.”

I paused as I took a bite of apple and chewed. “It’s more like...um...it’s complicated.”

She looked confused.

“Here, it’s like this,” I said. “What you saw is a type of waste that was from the inside of Mommy that needed to come out. When it came out it looked like blood. That’s all. It’s not...it’s not about babies. Okay. It’s more like it’s a type of poop.”

Her eyes narrowed, her brow wrinkled, she looked down. After a few moments she looked back up and said, “You know, that’s gross. And I’m telling Mommy.”

Secrets, Part II.

I had put the children down for a nap and was ready for alone time. Or, at least, I was ready for several moments alone. So I went into my bedroom and closed the door. I was going to lie down and read in bed when I noticed one of my wife's bras. It is among my favorite of her undergarments. It's black with a pattern of tiny white flowers, and a white lace trim. Several other articles of her clothing were on the bed, items that must not have worked for the way she was feeling that morning. So they had been tossed aside, mostly thrown onto the bed, but some pieces had fallen off of the bed, landing on the rug. I picked up the bra, walked to the full-body mirror, and peered into it, at my overweight body. I took off my shirt and slipped my arms in the bra. There was no way I was going to be able to snap it on. I was too big. But I did manage to pull the straps over my shoulders, so that it sort of looked like it was on me. I observed myself in the mirror for a few moments. I had gained ten pounds over the course of the last year. Had I become hairier, too? I wondered. Well, I thought, I definitely am softer. My muscles are less defined. I stepped away from the mirror, took off the bra, and lied down on top of the comforter on the bed. Soon I had fallen asleep.

I slept until my daughter woke me up two hours later. "Daddy," she said. "I don't like you with your shirt off."

Fortunate

We were at the playground in the park with a pond that the locals refer to as Goose Lake because of the flock of Canadian Snow Geese that breed there. My kids and I were tossing rocks and watching them splash in the pond. We must have looked like we were having a grand time because after a short time, another child who we had seen on the playground, a boy of about five or six years old, came over to join us. He approached us tentatively, standing nearby, but not very close. But when I looked over to him and smiled, he asked, “Can I play with you?”

“Sure,” I said, and I looked over to the playground where the older woman, perhaps his grandmother or some other caretaker, who I had seen him with earlier, kept an observant eye on him. I waved to her and she nodded.

“What are you doing?” the boy asked.

“We’re throwing bombs,” my son answered.

“No,” my daughter said. “We’re throwing rocks, but calling them bombs.”

The boy laughed. He picked up a rock and tossed it into the pond. My children made explosion sound effects and cheered, then threw more rocks into the pond themselves.

“Careful,” I said. “Don’t throw too closely to the geese.”

“Okay, Dad,” my children said in unison. The boy looked at me and nodded.

The children kept throwing rocks, making bomb sound effects, until my son ran around the pond to examine a big tree limb that he noticed. My daughter followed behind, shouting to him to wait for her. The boy, though, stayed by my side, and asked me, “Do you know what I once saw here?”

“What’s that?” I said.

“I was here with my dad and I saw a dog chase a duck and the dog bit the duck and the duck passed away.”

“Oh,” I said, surprised at the way the boy told the story in a matter of fact way.

“My dad was upset at the man with the dog,” the boy added.

“I can imagine,” I said. “That was probably not nice to see.”

The boy shook his head no, frowned. I looked over to my children and saw my son had a large stick that he was wielding like it was a sword. My daughter was pretending to be frightened, screaming, running around in circles.

“My dad passed away too,” the boy said.

“Oh,” I said, turning to him. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“He was shot and then his car drove across the field and he ended up passing away.”

The boy’s honesty threw me off. I felt uncomfortable with how, unprompted, he shared this information with me. And I was confused by the details and the sequence of events in the boy’s story. Was he telling me his father was shot while driving? Or was he shot only to die later in a car accident?

But all I could manage in response was, “That’s terrible. I’m very sorry.”

My children, still across the way, now were throwing sticks into the pond.

The boy picked up another rock and tossed it into the pond, making another splash, only this time there weren’t any sound effects to go along with it.

I conjured up the courage and asked him, “Do you miss your dad?”

He looked at me and nodded. Then he said, “I wished he didn’t pass away, yes. Mostly, I wonder what he’s doing in heaven now.”

I nodded, subtly, blinked my eyes, turned from the boy. What can I possibly say to that? I thought. My daughter was now screaming about something that was not pretend and rushing around the pond, toward us, apparently angry with her brother. In the distance, I heard the woman who was taking care of the boy calling to him. The boy, turned and shouted, “Si, Abuela. Viniendo.” Then he said, “I’m going now. See you next time.”

“Okay,” I said. “Take care of yourself.”

“Bye,” he said, before running off.

In the meantime, my daughter and her brother had seemed to resolve whatever spat they were involved in and were now, once again, tossing rocks into the pond, making sound effects, laughing.

I looked over to the parking lot and watched the boy and his grandmother get into a car, and drive away. Then I gave my children the two-minute warning for departure from the park.

Once we were settled in the car, my daughter said, “Dad, I’m hungry. Can we go out to eat?”

“I want Potbelly’s,” my son added.

“Let me think about it,” I said, but really, as I put the car in drive and started driving from the parking lot, I was still thinking about the boy and his dad. Then my children began to whine, “I want to go out to eat. I want to go out to eat.” And I lost it. I slammed the brakes, turned around. “Be quiet,” I screamed. “Be quiet. This ‘I

want to go out to eat' garbage. This whining. Stop it." They looked at me, their faces quickly turned from whiny to shocked. "This whining has to stop. Do you even understand how fortunate you are? Some kids don't get to go out to eat. Ever. There are kids in this world who don't have the luxury." Then, I repeated myself, emphasizing every syllable while pointing at the ceiling: "They don't have the lux-ur-y."

I turned back around. There was silence for several moments. And I thought about the boy. Did I ask the right question? Should I even have asked one? Should I have responded to his comment about heaven, said something encouraging?

"Dad," my daughter said. "I'm sorry."

"Me too, Dad," my son said.

I looked at each of them, in turn, in the rearview mirror. They each smiled at me. I said, "Thanks. I'm sorry I was so mad just now."

Then, finally, I started to drive again.

"Dad," my daughter said. "Are you hungry?"

"Yeah," I said. "I think I could use a Potbelly sandwich. How about you?"

They both cheered, "Hooray!" And we made our way to the Potbelly's that is nearest our home.

Cuddle Time

As fortune would have it, right about the time my daughter became interested in her origins, she found a children's book with illustrations and descriptions of human growth from conception forward at one of those Little Free Library stands. *See How You Grow* is a book for parents who want to be able to provide their children with a clear, sensible answer to the certain inquiry, "Where do babies come from?" From a quick glance, it looked like the perfect book for parents who want to give their inquisitive children an answer with more substance than what is allowed by the standard a-stork-delivers-the-babies type of explanation. It's not that the stork tale is a bad story, per se, but it doesn't stop the questions from coming, which is what I'm after, as a parent. So, we brought my daughter's find home.

That night it was my wife's turn to read before bedtime. She read excerpts from the new book to the children and reported back to me that the text was detailed and that the children seemed to be rather engaged by it. "Nice find," she said.

"It wasn't me," I admitted. "She found it herself."

The next night it was my turn to read to the kids. We cuddled together on the couch with the book my son chose, *Where the Wild Things Are*, my choice *The Giving Tree*, and my daughter's choice, *See How You Grow*, which her brother roundly applauded, shouting, "Oh yeah!" In the very beginning of that book, under the section titled "How does a baby start?" there is a drawing of a couple lying in bed, under the covers, arms wrapped around each other. Though they are apparently naked, it is a book for children, so only their arms, shoulders, and faces are revealed. The bearded man is kissing the blond woman's forehead and she is smiling. It does

not look like a moment of sexual intimacy, but rather what my wife and I would look like if our children were watching us hug at the departures platform in the moments before a long trip where we were going to be separated for days. In other words, even though the couple is shirtless, the picture is not risqué. Alongside the picture, the book says that in order to make a baby, a man and woman who “love each other” must “have a very close and special cuddle in bed.” And after I read that, my son said, “Dad, I love that part.”

Dress Up

We were having drinks at a friend's house when my two-year-old entered the room, pantless, sans diaper. Whenever his older sister and her friends played dress up, he'd get silly and play dress down. But this time he was red-faced and crying. I excused myself, brought him to the other room.

"They said, 'Go away,'" he said, and he whimpered.

"Ahhh," I said, and patted his back. "I'm sorry. Tell you what, let's go upstairs, get dressed, and talk."

We found the diaper and pants on the stairs, then went to the guest bedroom to re-diaper, re-pants.

"Elsa said my penis is ugly," he said, referring to his sister's friend by her princess name.

I snapped, "Don't listen to her." I turned and searched the wall for something comforting to say. Over our silence, I heard princess voices in the next room.

My parental mouth has said many predictable things: truisms, clichés, things said to me decades ago. But occasionally, I surprise myself.

I looked at my son, said, "Your penis is beautiful. Okay?"

He smiled, nodded.

"Alright," I said, as I fastened the diaper, stood him up, pulled up his pants.

"And remember what I said before: you can be a prince with clothes on."

Again, he nodded.

"Hey look," I said. I grabbed a pillow, stripped off the pillowcase, tucked it in the back of his shirt. "A prince cape! Now you're ready!"

“Thanks, daddy,” he said, before hurrying off, bravely, back to the room where princesses ruled.

Potty Time

When our two-year-old son finally showed an interest in using the toilet, we jumped right on it, ready to say or do just about anything to encourage him and sustain his interest in “going potty like a big boy.” Unlike his older sister, he had always been private about his business. So, shortly after he started using the toilet, he made a rule that when he was going, we could not be in the room with him, but we had to stay nearby so he could call us in if he needed any help. Thankful that we could, in fact, raise a child with a modest impulse, we readily agreed to his idea and so placed a chair right outside of the bathroom where, each time he went to the potty, we would wait for him to finish. The chair routine became ritualized to the point that we simply left a chair outside of the children’s bathroom so it’d always be there.

This arrangement worked out nicely, at least insofar as it helped to get him potty trained, but it’s been over a year and he still demands that we wait in the “potty chair” until he finishes.

Last night, as I waited, I checked Facebook on my iPhone. I scrolled through the various pictures and stories on my timeline until I became irritated by the lives of other people, then I closed the app and put the phone away. Through the door I could hear my son singing.

He sang, “Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha...going pooh pooh...ha, ha, ha, ha, ha...going pooh pooh.”

I knocked on the door and asked, “Are you done in there?”

“I’m not done,” he said.

“Stop singing and finish already.”

A moment later, I heard him singing, “Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha...wiping my butt...ha, ha, ha, ha, ha...wiping my butt.”

That’s it, I thought. Why am I putting up with this? I decided that this would be the last time that I waited outside the restroom.

He continued, “Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha...my butt’s so dirty...ha, ha, ha, ha, ha...my butt’s so dirty.”

I knocked on the door again and, without waiting for him to respond, I opened it. He was sitting on the toilet, looking like he wasn’t in a hurry, that he was relaxing even. I was about to ask him what in the hell was taking so long, but before the words came to my mouth, he said, “Why aren’t you on the potty chair?”

“You are taking too long,” I said. “Could you hurry things along, please?” And I turned to leave when he called out. “Dad,” he said. I turned back around, nodded, expectantly. He continued, “Thanks for waiting on the potty chair like a good dad.”

“Sure,” I said. “No problem.” I smiled and then walked out, closing the door behind me. Then I sat back down on the potty chair until he finished.

Mortality

It was the morning when I was headed to visit my brothers for a weekend of camping in central Illinois. A short flight and a quick trip, it was no big deal. But I took a trip alone three years ago, a flight where the small plane that I was on had encountered terrifying turbulence—I am not exaggerating when I say terrifying either: when the drinks started flying through the air and the flight attendants were thrown around, I held hands with the woman in the seat next to me, a total stranger—and ever since then I’ve had some anxiety about traveling alone.

The anxiety was starting to build first thing in the morning. As I stepped from the shower and dried myself, I noticed that the way the sunshine came through the blinds felt different from most other mornings. Maybe it was the way the sun shined on my graying beard or maybe it was how it shined on the small patch below my eye, which the dermatologist called an aging spot, “nothing to worry about,” but when I looked closely at myself in the mirror, I was overcome by a sense of my own mortality. I brushed my teeth, trimmed my nose hair, cleaned up my neck with a razor, and splashed on a bit of Old Spice. Then I unwrapped the towel from around my waist and stepped out from the bathroom.

My wife was awake, lying in a way so that she was facing me. I could not tell how long she’d been awake, if it she had been lying there for several minutes or if my opening the bathroom door had caused her to wake. But she gave me a generous smile and said, “Have a nice time with your brothers this weekend.”

“Thanks,” I said.

I began to dress. I had my underwear and a fresh shirt on and had begun to pull on my pants when I stopped and said, "I want to make a request."

My wife smiled and said, "Okay."

"If I die on this trip, please don't throw away all of my papers and books and pictures. Okay?"

"You sound just like my mother."

"I'm serious," I said. "Please. Save it for the children. Or send it to my family."

"Okay," she said, and she laughed. "I can just imagine."

"My sister," I said. "She'll take it. She'd probably take everything."

"I can't believe my husband is afraid to fly alone," she said.

"One other thing," I said.

She nodded, said, "Yeah?"

"I've written notes, just in case I, you know, in case I die. One for you and each of the children."

"You're crazy," she said.

"There on my desk. Under the rock. Okay?"

"Okay. I will find them," she said. Then she stood from the bed, walked to the bathroom, and before shutting the door, she added, "Just make sure to have a good time."

I finished putting on my pants and then started packing a light bag.

In a Crowded Terminal, Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport

I was excited for a little away time, a chance to relax with my siblings and mother without any parental duties to manage simultaneously. But shortly after I arrived to the airport, I found out there were massive delays because all of the flights in and out of the region were grounded or redirected to land elsewhere until further notice due to a computer problem that had created communication issues between the tower and airplanes. There were not any seats at my gate or any of the other gates in the terminal, so I found myself in Terminal A wandering around in circles to pass the time. But as the problem became prolonged, I became anxious and agitated. As did other travelers, including a child probably the same age as my son, a young boy who I saw writhing on the floor, screaming something indecipherable. From what I gathered, by the way that his father was carrying on and pointing, the complaint had something to do with the piece of pizza that, I guessed, was recently turned upside down on the ground. Maybe the boy wanted different toppings. Maybe he dropped it. But, really, who could be sure?

As I watched the boy, watched his face turn pink then red, watched all manner of inconceivable facial contortions become real, my immediate thought was, “Kids can be such assholes.”

The child’s father tried to quiet and soothe him, but to little avail. The boy’s mother, giving a bottle to their other child, a baby, was simultaneously trying to soothe her eldest child, speaking gently to him. I stopped walking and found an area of wall to lean against where I could observe the scene. Watching the boy lose it and his parents try to make the situation better, I found my feelings of agitation start to go

away. Soon, the boy had recovered, and he was eating pizza again—his mother had given him her slice. I realized I was no longer agitated myself. Instead, I was feeling sad, emotional over the fact that I was about to travel away from my children for the weekend.

I left the wall and, again, circled the terminal until some twenty minutes later when the computer problem was resolved. Shortly, I was boarding the plane, sticking my backpack under the seat in front of me, settling into my seat. After I settled in, before I turned my phone to airplane mode, I decided to call my wife, hoping to I might get in one more goodbye to her and my children.

After Death

The apartment smelled of lemony chemicals and Imo's pizza. Corrugated boxes were dispersed around the place, some flattened not yet used, others half-filled, and some completely packed and taped shut, waiting to be carried to the U-Haul. I was packing and moving my life to its next station, leaving Saint Louis, bound for grad school on the east coast.

"You're throwing that away?" Alexandra said, pointing at the Goodwill pile.

"The sock monkey?" I said, sitting down with a fresh Schlafly pale ale in hand.

"Why wouldn't you bring that? Didn't Mom give that to you when you moved here?"

"I don't think so. Anyway, you're so sentimental. It's a cross-country move. Difficult decisions need to be made. Feel free to keep it yourself."

"Wait a minute..." Alexandra said, as she stood, walked to the pile, moved things around and pulled out the board game Yahtzee, held it up. "You are *absolutely not* throwing this away."

"I planned to."

"Dude, Yahtzee?" She examined the red and yellow box, her brow wrinkled. "No. You can't."

I took a swig, observed her. From the neck up, she looked like a young, female replica of our dad, plus a wig.

"You know," Alexandra said, as she sat back down, Yahtzee box in hand, "I think about Dad all the time."

I looked at her and gulped another swig. I wasn't really in the mood to talk about our dad. We hadn't talked about him in a long time, not since the weekend of his funeral two years ago. And now, the night before my move away from Saint Louis, here was my sister, bringing him up. I used my t-shirt to wipe sweat dripping down my forehead and said, "Yeah. I think about Dad a lot, too."

Feet away the door to the front porch was opened, but tonight, once again, the Saint Louis summer yielded no breeze.

"I just never imagined him dead," Alexandra said. "Even after the diagnosis. After the fall, the surgery. Or after they started hospice. It just doesn't feel...it's just not real. Life without him."

"It hasn't felt real for me either," I said.

I looked at the floor where there were dust bunnies, uncovered in the wake of recently moved furniture. Fluff, hair, and other particles that must have been accumulating and growing for longer than the grass on my dad's grave.

I took another swig then said, "Do you think Dad was happy?"

"Huh?" Alexandra said.

"Do you think he died a happy man, content with how life had gone?"

"Content with his life? Yeah, I'd say so."

"I'm not so sure," I said.

"Why would you say that?" Alexandra said. "Of course he was. He must have been."

"He was miserable. It had to have altered his views on life."

"Yeah, but—

“That last week, do you know how much morphine he was on? They don’t start morphine let alone put you to that level unless you’re miserable.”

“But that’s different. You’re asking—

“And he’d been miserable for a long time, Alex.”

“I get that, Mike.”

“You know not long before he died I was there to give Mom some relief. I think she was visiting you even.”

“Could be,” Alexandra said. “She came down in mid-March that year, right after John was born.”

“Yeah, sounds right,” I said. “Well, that weekend was unseasonably beautiful so I thought I’d get Dad some fresh air. So I get him dressed, jiggy him into the wheelchair, and we go out. We get a couple blocks from home and I’m thinking about how I’ll always have this moment. And just as I’m thinking this, Dad moans, like he did, you know. So I stop pushing, walk around to him, and eventually gather that it’s too cold, he wants to go back. So there I was thinking we’re having this moment and yet Dad’s miserable.”

“I know what you’re saying—

“So you agree?”

“Dude of course I agree that he was not well, but—

“You agree he was *miserable*?”

“Can I finish?”

I nodded, said, “Sorry,” took a swig.

“You’ve asked me something else,” Alexandra said. “You asked if I thought he was happy when he died. And I think so. I do. I think he was ready to go. Done suffering. Done being miserable.”

“Exactly,” I said.

“But I think he was *content*, Mike. And someone can’t get to that point without thinking long and hard about their life.”

“Agreed,” I said.

“I mean their *whole* life, Mike. And Dad lived a nice, full life.”

“I agree, but...I guess what I’m saying is that terminal illness is a bitter thing to swallow. It’s not like it’s less bitter for a seventy year old.”

Alexandra set down the Yahtzee box on the floor, leaned back, looked at the ceiling. She started messing with her hair. She removed the scrunchy, pulled her hair back, then put it into a new ponytail. She took a deep breath, breathed out. She had a look on her face I hadn’t seen in the past couple months. A look of frustration or annoyance. I feared she might again ask why I’ve decided to leave for grad school now, why I chose Georgetown when there were plenty of reputable universities around the Midwest. I still didn’t have an answer that would satisfy her.

But instead, Alexandra said, “I keep having this dream. Dad’s sitting in his office, turned from the desk, facing the wall. And I’m standing in the door, watching him. He’s holding a wooden cross, one I’d never seen before. And he’s stroking the crucified Jesus part, rubbing it like rabbit feet, and silently talking to himself. Lips moving, nothing coming out, like he’s praying. And remember that red quilt grandma made?”

“With all those different square patterns on the one side? Yeah,” I said.

Alexandra nodded, then continued, “Well, in this dream Dad’s legs are propped up and they’re covered by that quilt, but his feet are sticking out. And his toes are curling in, all rigid and pale and lifeless. Like he’s already dead.”

“Weird,” I said, shaking my head.

“Each time I have this dream, I’m trying to talk to him. I’m shouting, ‘Dad. Dad.’ And although he turns to me, he just stares, like he’s looking through me. And he continues stroking Jesus and talking to himself.”

“Weird, Alex. That’s a weird dream.”

“What do you think it means?” Alexandra said.

“It’s a dream. There isn’t a meaning.”

“What? Come on. Of course there is.”

“I don’t think so,” I said. “If there’s anything to make of it, it’s that you have a weird subconscious, or weird whatever it is that controls our dreams.”

“Well, I think there is a message in it.”

We continued sitting, neither of us talking for a few moments. I could hear crickets chirping outside and the faint sounds of cars driving along Kingshighway a couple blocks away. I finished off the bottle then looked over at the Imo’s pizza box that was on top of a stack of boxed books, and I stood and reached for a slice.

“You know,” I said, holding my hand up, the slice in the air, “I never thought I’d say this, but one thing I’ll miss about Saint Louis is the pizza. The Provel’s really grown on me.”

Alexandra smiled and said, “You’ll get better pizza on the east coast.”

“We’ll see,” I said, and I put the entire piece in my mouth, walked to the screen door, and looked outside. My apartment was on the building’s second floor, across the street from the Missouri Botanical Garden in the Tower Grove neighborhood. The grounds of the Garden were gorgeous, an oasis on the city’s south side. And the view from my apartment, which was mostly grassy hills and ordinary trees lining the Garden perimeter, even it looked majestic. But at night the Garden simply looked like most any other place filled with shadows.

I turned back to Alexandra. “Well,” I said, “I really owe you for coming over here to help with this move. Or, I should say I really owe Poppa Bear for taking care of your rascals by his lonesome tonight. Anyway, we’re almost done. I should go lock the truck and you should get home. I can finish moving things down in the morning.”

“Mike,” Alexandra said. “Do you think Dad’s in heaven?”

“Heaven? Well, I don’t really believe there is such a place.”

This couldn’t have been the first time I told her I didn’t believe in heaven, but the way Alexandra looked at me, it seemed what I said had somehow wounded her.

“But,” I said, and I paused as I contemplated an amendment, as I searched for something else to say. “But I like the idea of heaven.”

“If you don’t believe in heaven,” Alexandra said, “then what do you think happens to the soul after death?”

“I guess I like the idea that we all have a soul, but I don’t really believe that there’s such a thing as a soul either.”

Alexandra continued looking at me. Her face reddened.

“I don’t...look...it’s...” I said, the words fumbling out. I looked down, at my hands. And I thought about how one’s thoughts, one’s beliefs, once they are spoken, once they pierce the consciousness of another, they can’t really be amended. “Alex, I’m just telling you what I think.”

“I know. I know,” Alexandra said. “It’s just, if heaven doesn’t exist, if there aren’t souls, I wonder what you think happens after we die?”

The question was there, hanging in the air for what felt like a long time, but in response all I could do was look at my hands. Eventually, though, I did look up and I saw that Alexandra, too, was looking at her hands.

“I don’t know, Alex,” I finally said. “I don’t know what happens after we die.”

Alexandra gave me a slight smile, then looked away. She gazed over at the screen door. I too looked over at the screen door and for a long while the two of us sat together, not saying anything, quietly listening, as the sounds of the Saint Louis summer night came in through the screen door.

Grace

The night before we met Mark Grace, Dad had too many Michelobs and was more generous than usual with his baseball assessments.

“He isn’t great like Stan the Man Musial was, but, sure, Grace is a pretty decent left-handed hitter,” Dad said.

I was tired of comparisons from Dad’s childhood. Was done hearing about the World Series that Musial’s Cardinals had won. And I knew the point where these Cubs/Cards talks always led.

“But,” Dad said, “I’m afraid Grace’s talents will be wasted in Cubby blue.” He chuckled. “They haven’t won a Series since before I was born.”

I wanted to say that Mark Grace had just finished the 1989 season fourth in the league in batting with a .314 average. That the Cubs were reigning National League East champs. That the nineties were going to be the Cubs decade.

But Michelob flowing or no, Dad wasn’t the type you argued with. So I just asked if he’d ever seen Musial play in person, even though I had already heard dad tell the story more times than I could count.

Dad said if I went upstairs and grabbed him another Michelob he’d tell me all about May 1946 when Grandpa took him to Sportsman’s Park for Musial’s record-setting double header.

Moments later I returned to the basement with an opened Michelob, a couple swigs shy of twelve ounces. Dad was lights out. I slid the remote out from under his bearish arms, found a seat on the rug that was too close to the television, and sipped down the remaining beer.

~

“Some bitch, boy. It’s cold,” Dad said. “This damned heater.”

I sat in the passenger seat of Dad’s Red Boat—a rusty 1973 Chevy Impala without a working heater that he cursed to hell every time he started the engine. On this day, though, the cursing never let up as we sped through the snowy landscape. The median and sides of the road were piled high with snow. Dirty, gray snow. Weeks after snowfall. Our destination was a sports cards show at the Holiday Inn located twenty miles north of home in Chicago’s western suburbs. Mark Grace was the card show’s main attraction.

I sat holding and staring at a 1988 Mark Grace Donruss Rated Rookie card that Dad gave me for my tenth birthday. Grace’s image was mesmerizing. The confident blue-eyed stare. The gold chain. The way Grace calmly knelt on his right knee. Ever since I received that Donruss I’d been dreaming about getting my idol’s autograph on it.

~

Dad treated the Red Boat as if it were in better condition than it was: he always parked in the lot’s least crowded section. So we pulled in the Holiday Inn and drove around back.

“Holy cow, boy. That’s him. There he is,” Dad said, pressing the Red Boat’s brakes, causing the tires to let out a little scream. “There is Mark Grace.”

Mark Grace was standing at the hotel’s back door, lighting a cigarette. The screeching of tires must have alerted him to us because Grace looked in our direction, inhaled, and turned away.

“What are you waiting on?” Dad said. “Here. Take this pen. Let’s get that signature.”

I slowly stepped out of the Red Boat. Dad more or less jumped out. We walked to the Cubs cigarette-smoking, leather-coat wearing, left-handed first baseman. As we neared Grace, I removed the Donruss from the protective plastic, held it out to him.

“Sorry, kid,” Grace said, “you’re going to have to wait in line like everyone else.”

“Oh, come on Grace,” Dad said, “We’re here now. How about an autograph for the boy?”

“Mister,” Grace said. “Right now I’m having a cigarette. If your kid wants an autograph, he’s going to have to get in line with the others. And I’m only signing things that are cleared through the guys inside. It’s in the contract.”

“Bastards got you by the balls, eh?”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m just saying. Bastards bring you here and control which kids get your autograph? If you ask me, sounds like a pimp arrangement.”

Grace inhaled deeply. Smirked. Looked at Dad. Exhaled through his nostrils. “I think we’re done here, mister. And you better just send the kid through the line. I don’t want to see your face inside.”

“Listen. Here my boy asks for an autograph, that’ll take you just a second, and you get high and mighty.”

Grace was turning away. He said, “Mister, we’re through.”

“You’re gonna get high and mighty? Who you think you’re talking to?”

Mark Grace turned back. He looked at me, seemed to take in the look on my face like batting signs from the dugout. He looked at Dad and said, “I could care a-good-fuck-less who I’m talking to so long as I don’t see your face inside.”

“You jerk,” Dad said. “Ever heard of common decency and respect?”

Grace squashed his half-smoked cigarette in the ashtray at the hotel entrance, pulled open the door, mumbled something, and walked inside.

“Go fuck yourself Mark Grace!” Dad yelled at the thick glass door.

~

The drive south was quiet. As we approached home Dad reached over, grabbed my thigh, and said, “I could use some greasy grub. How about a Big Mac?”

The Red Boat pulled into the McDonald’s drive-thru. Ahead of us on a Ford F-150 was a black bumper sticker with white block lettering that read, “SHIT HAPPENS.” Dad looked at me and said, “You know boy, sometimes life doesn’t go your way, but don’t let today color your view on Mark Grace. He’s a good ballplayer, even if he is an asshole.”

Dad shifted the Red Boat to reverse, used the rear-view mirror as a guide, and backed into a spot. “We’ve got plenty of time before your mother expects us,” he said, “Let’s go eat inside. I’ll get you one of those apple pie things and tell you about the time I met Stan Musial. A true gentleman.”

The Chef at the Grill in His Backyard: Part I

August 17, 1982:

5:32 pm

“Close that door! What are you trying to do: air condition the outdoors!”

5:34 pm

“Boy, were you born in a barn? Close the door behind you!”

5:39 pm

“Close the door!”

5:40 pm

“The door! Close the door!”

5:43 pm

“Goddamn it! Close that door!”

The Chef at the Grill in His Backyard: Part II

August 4, 2014

5:17 pm

“Close that door! What are you trying to do: air condition the outdoors!”

5:19 pm

“Were you born in a barn? Close the door!”

5:23 pm

“Close the door behind you! Come on!”

5:24 pm

“The door!”

5:27 pm

“Close the door!”

A Three-Year-Old's Dream

I was with people in our living room. I don't remember who. And there was loud stomping. It was like boom boom boom. And it was upstairs. We went upstairs to see what the boom boom was and there was a giant with a red hat on and he was making the boom boom with his feet. He looked at me with his eyes. They were red. And he kept saying I will eat you I will eat you I will eat you. I screamed but all the other people were laughing. And I tried running away, back downstairs, but I fell into the blackness below. I fell for so long. And I screamed and screamed. Then I woke up. I'm not going to wish for it to come true.

Knowledge

On Human Origins

You take a half-person's body, then another half-person's body, and you connect them together and put them inside the mom's body. Then they grow and grow and grow. Then you go to the hospital...well...actually, you start at the hospital.

On Happiness

It's when you feel good because something that you liked happened. Like yesterday night I liked the ice cream. It was good. So I have happiness.

On Colors

What happened? Did you touch the red-hot iron right after I said not to?

It's gray, not red!

On Music

I cannot nap at school because the music. It's too beautiful. The music makes me sad. Sometimes I cry.

On Anatomy

Do you wanna know how your heart is different from your brain? Your heart is red and your brain is blue.

On Temperatures

Hey. Good morning. Want to help me make breakfast?

(Nods.)

...

Dad?

...

Can I touch your nipple?

What? No! What do you think this is?

I want to see if it's hot or cold.

No thanks. It's the same as my arm and you just touched that. Come on. Let's go make pancakes.

On Society

But why would someone be a beggar?

Well, not everyone has a place to live or things to eat. Sometimes these unfortunate people beg others for money to help them get things they need.

That beggar was spooky, Dad.

...

...

Yes. I know what you mean.

On Lentils and Rice

Who served this? Who served me this? How dare you Mom and Dad!

On Spaghetti with Meatballs

Dad, you are the love of my lifetime.

On Chocolate Chip Cookies

You know something: you are beautiful.

Thank you. Do you know what? You are beautiful too.

Thank you.

You know something else. I love you as much as I love these cookies.

Thank you. Do you know what else? I love these cookies as much as I love you.

On Abstract Art, an Artist's Perspective

The red is a giant. The yellow dots are bugs. The blue is a tree. The tree has no leaves. The tree is dead. I don't know what the lines are.

On Questions and Statements

I want to ask you a question.

Go ahead.

I don't like the birds on your coffee mug.

That's not a question. That was a statement. A question is what you ask when you want to gather information. A statement is what you say when you want to provide information.

I have no further questions.

On the Murder of the Ant

Because ants eat caterpillars and caterpillars turn into butterflies and butterflies are beautiful and they help flowers bloom and flowers are beautiful and flowers make me happy. That's why.

On Peter and the Wolf

Do wolves live in the meadow around here, Dad?

On Time

Did you know that the clock has hands? Some move fast, some move slow, and some move medium. And there are numbers that tell you whether it is ten or nine or two or thirty or forty. Sometimes one thousand. It's interesting, you know. Time is what you live by.

On Life's Purpose

I don't know. I forget.

Parent-Teacher Conference

One of the teachers had just finished telling us that our son seemed to be most engaged with the art learning center. “You know,” the second teacher interjected, “Lately, right before lunch, he has been saying to us, ‘I wonder what Daddy drew for me today.’ He seems to really enjoy the pictures that you draw for his lunch. It’s so cute to see his excitement over them.”

“That’s good,” I said. I smiled, looked at my wife. She smiled.

“I was thinking that it might be a good idea,” the teacher continued, “you know, since he’s behind with recognizing the letters in his name, that to help, it’d be great if you could also write his name on the picture that you draw. During lunch, we could point it out and go over the letters with him.”

I became teary eyed. My feelings came on suddenly. Was I emotional because of the earlier suggestion and then the reminder that my son was behind with his literacy, or was it because I was touched by the fact that he had been enjoying the pictures that I drew for him, even though he had not directly shown signs that he had been? Probably, I quickly decided, I was emotional over both.

“Would you do that?” the teacher asked. “Write down his name on the picture?”

My eyes were full now, but with my wife and the teachers looking at me expectantly, I didn’t want to wipe them, reveal my emotional state. I realized I had become overwhelmed, that in addition to the tears, I had also lost my voice. So, in response to the teacher, I smiled and gave a vigorous nod.

A moment later, my wife asked about the class's term project and the conversation moved on. With the others' eyes averted, I discretely reached in my pocket for a tissue, pretended to wipe my nose, then I blotted my eyes. The conversation became a blur. I was thinking about my son and the new information that I had been given about him. Basically, he was illiterate and happy. Although we were being told that it was concerning, I knew that the literacy would be corrected soon enough. But his happiness, would it remain? Like my son wondering what the day's picture was going to be, I wondered what the future held for his happiness.

Our time slot for the parent-teacher conference was soon over and we collected the teacher's report, thanked them for their time and help, and parted ways. When we entered the room where the teacher's aides were watching the children during conferences, before he noticed we had returned for pick up, I saw my son playing with a huge box of Lego's by himself. He was building an elaborate, colorful structure. He looked to be concentrating hard. And he looked happy. The teacher's aide called him and said, "Look who's here!"

And by the time he looked at us, I had decided that whatever the future held for his happiness, there was always right now. I should, at least, be thankful for the current moment.

Our son called out, "Mommy!" as he ran to us and, in turn, hugged each of us.

Wild Dogs

Yes, I asked for roast dog. And make sure to feed the dog some.

But how can I feed the dog roast dog if I am going to roast *him*?

I don't understand your problem: roast *him* then feed him to *him*.

So I'm going to kill the dog dead?

Yes. Good. Then you feed him to him.

But first I roast him?

Yes. After you kill him dead, roast him, then feed him to him.

Fine.

...

I'm going to shoot him to kill him dead. Okay?

And then you roast him.

Yes. I *know*.

...

And now where is the gun gone?

The gun is under there.

Under where?

Make sure you shoot him with it.

I said where is the gun?

I said the gun is under *there*.

Okay. I got it.

...

And where is the dog?

...

...

Watch out: he's getting away. Hurry: take this.

Boom boom boom boom boom. I shot him dead. Boom boom. He's killed dead asleep. Boom boom boom. Really killed dead asleep.

He's a dead dog.

Killed dead asleep.

Good.

Good.

Okay. And now we have to roast him. Where'd the plate go?

It's there on top of the blanket. Right next to the broccoli.

It's not a blanket. It's the oven.

I'm going to shoot you dead.

On the Pool Deck

Over the preceding week or so, each day the temperature had topped out in the upper 90's, but it was Saturday and all signs suggested that the heat front was dissipating, which was good news because the children's friend was having an early afternoon birthday party at the pool. After a light breakfast and relaxing morning at home where my wife and I were able to read the paper as the kids played contentedly in the living room, we decided to take advantage of the pool's early opening time. We figured we could get a little relaxation in before the rest of the families showed up. So we put on suits, packed the towels, sunscreen, and water bottles, then headed out the door.

Our pool is an oasis in the outskirts of the town. Though it's right off a major roadway, the property is neatly tucked inside a small, forested area. Once inside the gates and away from the parking lot, the only views outside of the pool grounds are trees and grassy knolls and, as the pool deck is far enough away from the nearby road, the only sounds are birds and the normal noises associated with a pool.

We were among the first people at the pool and only the second family inside the kiddie pool area, so we were able to settle into a nice, shaded spot under an umbrella. I put sunscreen on our daughter, my wife put it on our son, then they were off, splashing in the water as we settled into our beach chairs.

I watched the kids romp around for a moment, then I looked at the other family across the way. I smiled, waved to the couple. They returned the smile, a wave. Their shy kid was observing our children, but not approaching them. My wife pulled out a magazine and started flipping through the pages. I watched our son pick up a water sprayer and spray his sister. She laughed and stormed away, calling him to

chase after. Giggles, happy shrieking, and splashing filled the air. I looked to the sky and saw a bright orange bird flash across the sky, darting from one tree to another. Must be a Baltimore oriole, I thought. I watched until I could no longer see the bird. Then I looked outside of the kiddie pool area, over to the big pool. I spotted a lifeguard, who seemed to be off duty, doing something with the water, perhaps checking the chemical levels. He was a teenager, no older than sixteen or seventeen, I figured. It occurred to me that someday our children would be that age and diligently working in their own summer job. Or, at least, I thought, hopefully they'll reach that age.

"Babe," I said, grabbing my wife's leg, interrupting her magazine browsing.

"Hmm," she said.

"What would we do if the children died? What if both of them died? What in the hell would we do?"

She put down the magazine, looked around, then at me, and said, "It's too terrible to think about."

"I know. I'm sorry." I shook my head, then continued, "I just can't imagine. It'd be tough to go on, you know."

"I heard most marriages don't survive the death of a child, let alone the death of two children," she said. "I mean...I just can't..."

Another family arrived and they knew the first family. The little boys ran to one another. The parents shook hands, hugged, and settled into a group seating arrangement.

“I think,” my wife said, “I would just go help lepers in India. I would have to go and do something good in the world.”

“Why lepers? Do they even exist anymore?”

She looked at me, shook her head as if in disgust, and said, “The point is, I’d have to do something good. And it’d have to be *away*. I’d have to get away from here.”

I nodded. The thought occurred to me that I’d need to get away too, but I couldn’t think of a cause that sounded like it’d be meaningful, at least not in the presence of this imagined horror of an idea. “I think I’d have to travel. See the world. Probably I’d go to Africa. Take a safari.”

“What?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “As you said, I’d need to get away.”

We were silent for a few moments. Our children had now joined the group of boys from the other families and they all seemed to be forming some sort of water game. The parents were laughing. One of the men was opening up a cooler and pulling out cans of beer. I looked at my daughter, then my son. Then I turned to my wife.

“To be honest,” I said. “I’d not be able to go on. I’d just commit suicide, somehow. Probably I’d buy a gun. Do it that way. Quickly, you know.”

My wife looked at me, nodded. Then she opened up the magazine again and returned to flipping through it. I returned my eyes to the trees, hoping I’d see that Baltimore oriole again, but I never did.

Jazz on the Lawn

It was a beautiful summer night in July. There were probably two hours of sunlight left and the temperature was mild following a string of several upper ninety-degree days in row. We had accepted our friend's spontaneous, mid-week invitation to meet up for a night of jazz music at a local park where the children could romp around in the nearby fields, run wild on the playground. When we arrived there was a large crowd, but we managed to locate our friends. The couple who invited us were sitting on a blanket with a man who I vaguely recognized, though it took me a couple moments to place. Eventually I recalled that I knew him from the neighborhood and had last seen him at a neighborhood concert that he had attended with his wife, who was dying of cancer.

"Galen, Erin," our friend said, "Have you met Chris?"

"Yes," I said. "I believe it was in the fall, perhaps at the one of the Parish House events?"

"Yes," Chris said. "I believe that's right."

"Nice to see you," I said.

"Ah, yes," my wife added. "I remember. You are in the musicology program, right."

"Yes, that's right," Chris said. "It's Erin and Galen, yes. Sure. Sure. I remember."

"Nice to see you," my wife said.

"Yes. Nice to see you, too."

I spread out a blanket so my son and daughter could join the pack of children, a group that included Chris's adolescent daughter. She was deep in conversation with our friends' older daughter. My son asked if he could go join the pack of boys roaming around, plastic swords in hand, cutting through the air. And though I did not recognize any of the children and it looked precarious, bid him farewell with a "Be careful." My daughter took a seat next to the teenage girls.

I turned to set up our lawn chairs and found my wife chatting with Chris. I observed him, seeing if I could decipher whether he was newly a widower or if he was only alone for the night, out to enjoy some jazz with his daughter while his wife was off doing something else.

I don't know what clues I was looking for, but I noted that he seemed pleasant, in good spirits, not fragile. Then I noticed that he did not have on a wedding ring. But, I thought, he wouldn't have taken it off so soon after the death of his partner, would he? Perhaps he never wore one in the first place. Well, what would I do? I might—

"How're things?" my friend said, interrupting my inner analysis.

"Good," I said. "You?"

"Enjoying the relief from the heat."

Soon my wife and Chris joined in and the full group was having a pleasant and dynamic conversation, jumping around from topic to topic, pausing from time to time to take in the jazz music or to listen to the leader of the band describe the next piece. We discussed the upcoming presidential election, the mixed-use commercial development being built nearby, the local real estate market, and class offerings at the

local yoga studios. Throughout the evening I observed Chris for signs that might clue me in as to whether his wife was alive and still battling or if she had succumbed to the cancer. Eventually the jazz band stopped playing and we collected our children, the blanket, our chairs, and exchanged goodbyes. We returned to our car without my being able to tell.

Back at the car, my wife said that she had not remembered meeting Chris's wife. Perhaps, she thought, if his wife had had cancer, and she wasn't there on a regular summer night, then maybe she did pass away. I nodded in agreement.

During the ride home, the kids recalled the evening's events, but I was quiet and thinking about Chris. At the last traffic light before we reached home, I was staring at the light, zoned out, pretending to listen when Erin touched my arm to call my attention to the fact that the light changed from red to green. I smiled at her, then drove on.

~

That night, after I put the children to bed, I opened up my laptop and searched online for Chris's name to see if I could locate information about his wife. And I did. She had died only weeks earlier. I had found a webpage dedicated to her life where friends and family had posted messages and pictures and Chris had written a moving tribute. I also found a video of the memorial service to celebrate her life that was held at the local chapel. I played the video. In the first moments there were images, from a distance, of Chris and his daughter, sitting in the front pew. The camera was positioned off to the side, so it captured their profiles. Chris was dressed in a colorful shirt, looking around and behind them, taking in the crowd, all the people who were

there to celebrate his wife's life. His daughter, whose clothing, a dress, was also filled with color, had her eyes downcast. I wondered, in that moment of grief captured in that video, a moment where this young girl was sitting at the celebration of her mother's life, I wondered, what she was thinking?

The thought was too much for me to take at that hour, so I turned off the video and closed my laptop. I switched off the light in my office and headed to join my wife in bed. Before I made it to my room, I stopped at the hallway window and peered outside, at the sky. I decided to locate the moon. It took a while, but eventually I found it in the southern sky, between clouds. It was more than a crescent yet not half-full, an image not unlike what I had seen depicted in several of the books I had read earlier with the kids. I observed it for a few moments. A minute. Five minutes. It looked beautiful, even on a night like the one I'd just experienced. As I observed, I felt appreciative of the moon's beauty.

I must have shifted my weight, because the wooden floor below me made a creaking sound, a common old-house noise, which made me look away from the moon. And as I stepped away from the window I decided a snack before bed would be good.

In the kitchen, I was conscious of the fact that earlier, just that morning in fact, my wife had lodged a complaint about the racket I make when preparing late-night snacks. Though I wanted to open a bag of chips, I decided a banana and a Honeycrisp apple from the bowl on the countertop would suffice. I peeled and ate the banana in short time. I ate the apple more slowly. As I ate it, I started to zone out. I glanced around the kitchen, looking this way, then that way, not focusing my eyes on

anything in particular for more than a moment. I thought, there is the refrigerator door. There the cupboard. The stovetop, the tea kettle, the microwave. Then I saw a crumpled paper towel on the marble countertop above the dishwasher and my thoughts quickly centered around Erin. What would I do if she were diagnosed with cancer? I wondered, Would I be helpful? Helpful with the practical, such as the logistics of the doctor's appointments? Would I be a good listener? An insightful respondent when she asks why me? Would I be strong? And what in the hell does that even mean: be strong?

I wasn't tired, so I walked to the dining room and looked out the window and across the street, at my neighbor's property. During the daytime, usually, you can count on seeing in the yard a bunny or two, nibbling grass, head bobbing up and slowly turning, always aware. Although rare, it is also possible that while looking out the dining room window, toward the yard, that you might see the neighborhood fox roving, in search of a meal. I had seen him the other day. It was daytime and I was home alone. I cannot recall what I was doing, why I was looking out of the window, but I think I was checking to see about a noise I had heard. Anyway, as I looked out, I saw the fox and was drawn in. He had an awkward way about him. Something to do with the shape of his back. And I thought his paws looked noisy. As if he were stumbling around, rather than creeping. I watched him in what seemed to be a methodical checking of the lot. He looked in the property's crevices, near the garage wall, the bushes behind the garage, the nearby fence along the property line. And as I observed the fox, I was overcome with emotion. And I cried. I believed I became emotional because the fox looked vulnerable. Sure he looked beautiful. But I became

emotional in relation to his wildness, his vulnerability. As I looked out at the neighbor's garage on the night of the jazz on the lawn, it occurred to me that the other day I never gave much thought to the bunnies.

Before I went to bed, my thoughts again returned to thinking about how I would react if Erin were diagnosed with cancer. I decided that, yes, I think I would be strong. Supportive and strong for her and the kids. But, of course, I didn't really know.

Virginian Sky

If I'm being honest about it, my nerves were thinned by the drive through the rain, which required heightened attention and concentration, a focus I hadn't used behind the wheel since that night in 2004 when I was driving my Olds Cutlass on I-74 through a blizzard in central Illinois, traveling from Champaign to Bloomington with my basketball referee partners, determined to get home from the Friday night game we had just completed.

The bickering and correction had started as far back as before our first pit stop. The constant whining and fighting over this or that perceived slight, my wife telling her to stop touching him, him to share the toy with her, both of them to stop saying that. I don't know how many times she asked our daughter to stop kicking the back of her chair, but it was as we neared Richmond when I had asked our son for the fifth time to stop kicking my chair. Before we passed Richmond, nearly our halfway point to the shore, I wondered, "Will this be the last time that we take this long of a drive?"

Then there was a piercing scream from the five-year-old, followed by a piercing reply from her three-year-old brother, as though their fight involved showing who could scream loudest.

"Jesus Christ," I said, sharply, looking back and forth from the rearview mirror and the road, "How many times. We are all in this same tiny space. Keep the volume down. It is hurting my ears."

My wife touched my arm and said, “Guys, let’s keep it calm in here. Your father needs to focus on driving,” which I knew was both as a sign of support and a reminder for me to focus on the wheel.

“One more outburst of noise that is not fit for the inside of a car,” I said, “and there’s going to be a consequence.”

“Ploooooop,” my son said and both children laughed.

“Now stop that,” my wife said.

We drove no more than a mile farther before I was flinching at my son’s shout, “Mine!” and my daughter’s scream, “Clyde!”

I looked over my shoulder and saw they were tugging on a stuffed bear. “Goddamn it!” I said. My eyes still on the road, I swung my arm in the back seat, slapping my daughter’s leg, then reaching for and grabbing the bear. I tore it away from them. And by the time I was handing it to my wife both children were crying.

“How many times do you have to be asked,” I yelled. “Jesus Christ. You have been yelling in this car for over an hour.”

“I want Fuzzy,” my son cried.

“I swear to God if you don’t stop Clyde,” I yelled.

“Okay,” my wife said, calmly. “Let’s all calm down.”

My daughter, indignant, cried, “My leg hurts.”

“How many times do you have to be told to stop it,” I yelled. “I’m sorry I smacked your leg, but for God’s sake, you deserved it.”

“My leg hurts,” she said again.

Then I pulled out my father's old line, "If you want, I'll give you something to cry about."

"Okay," my wife yelled. "That's enough. Stop it everybody." She turned to the children. "We are not far from our next stop. Let's all calm down. Okay?"

"Okay," the children said in between muffled cries.

I drove on, rattled by the whole experience. I knew, immediately, that I handled the situation poorly. And on top of that, I thought, Did I really just use my father's old line?

Down the highway, on all sides before us the sun fall was mixing with the clouds to produce a majestic sky of blue, orange, purple, yellow, and red. It was beautiful.

Yes, I decided, I did just use my father's line, and it was used in the proper situation, a similar context. And I'm sure that it was going to be as ineffective in my hands as it was in his.

Do we all turn into our parents? I can't believe it.

We drove in silence for the next several minutes. Finally, my son asked, "Mom, can I have Fuzzy please?"

"Not right now," my wife said.

"That was the consequence," I added. "No Fuzzy."

I looked in the rearview and saw my daughter smiling at her brother, antagonizing him.

Occasionally clouds and rain obscure the sun. Sometimes its light appears differently for one reason or another. And each night it goes away. But it is always

there. Unseen in the moment, you know that it will soon again be there in the sky,
brilliant and energizing.

Big Belly

A friend who has a son older than mine told me his son stopped giving him hugs right around the time he reached the age of seven. My friend didn't have a compelling explanation—"the boy's just being a boy"—but he did have a piece of advice: "Get those hugs with your son in now, before he doesn't want them."

For weeks after that conversation, I would ask my son for a hug "just because" at every opportunity. The other night, for example, as we were preparing to head out the door for an evening walk, I asked for one. And after he gave it to me, he said, "Ouch, Dad. You're belly hurt me."

"What?" I asked, amused by the way he put it. "What do you mean my belly hurt you?"

"I mean it hurt me because it's a big belly."

Surprised, I asked, "You mean big, as in, like a big adult belly? Is that what you mean? I have an adult belly?"

"No," he said. "Your belly hurt me because it is big."

"I know you're saying my belly hurt you because it's big," I said. "But I wonder what you mean when you say it's big? You're talking about how it's big because it's an adult belly, right? Big compared to your kid belly?"

His older sister, who the entire time had been standing by the door, waiting for me to finish lacing my shoes, said, "Dad! He means you have a big belly even for a belly on a dad."

I looked at my son. He nodded, then said, "Yeah. That's what I mean."

"Okay," I said, and I considered that as I finished getting my shoes tied.

My wife joined us by the door. “Ready?” she said.

Shortly, we were headed outside, walking along the trail, the kids running ahead of us.

The sun was going down and there was a nip in the air. Fall, it seemed, was quickly turning into winter.

Equality

We were on our way to a neighborhood holiday party, the type of gathering where keeping control of the children's sugar intake would be a near-impossible enterprise. So my wife was laying down the ground rules now, hoping the children might have more will power than either she or I do. She told the three-year-old the number of treats he could enjoy from the dessert table, but that candy canes, if there were any, were off limits, because the dentist had said so.

"No!" he yelled in response. "Equality!"

"No," she replied. "No candy canes. You heard the dentist."

"No! Mom!"

"Wait," I interjected. "Did you just say 'equality?'"

"Yes, Dad," he said.

"Wait. Where did you hear that?"

"I just know it, Dad."

"You know it? And what does it mean, do you think?"

He looked at me. "Equality," he said, "is when you get what you want and you don't get upset," then he looked at his mother and said, "I'm gonna get my candy cane, Mom."

Winter Morning Chant

Half awake, I had started the pot of coffee and was about to prepare breakfast when I heard the kids making music in the living room. I quietly tiptoed to the dining room, then peeked into the living room and spied on them.

The five-year-old had on her polka dot bathing suit and her hair was flopping down wildly around the ponytail that sat atop her head. She played a small drum, tapping it in a steady rhythm, “Dum. Dum. Dum,” as she walked in circles around her three-year-old brother, who was sitting Indian style on the rug, shirtless and pantless, in matching Superman underwear and socks. He had on his Darth Vader mask. As his sister marched and drummed, he waved his arms like a conductor. And together they chanted, “You’re dying. We’re dying. You’re dying. We’re dying. You’re dying. We’re dying.”

I watched for a moment, then returned to the kitchen and started making breakfast. You need to eat to live.

Vegetarian

My wife made a dinner of chicken curry with basmati rice and a radish, onion, cilantro, and tomato salad. Our son isn't too keen on curry though, so to please his three-year-old demands, I prepared other items to go along with it, including a favorite vegetable—zucchini, lightly salted and sautéed in lemon juice and olive oil—and the New York strip steak leftover from my wife and my Valentine's date night the evening before. There were several ounces of steak that I sliced, sprinkled with salt and pepper, and reheated in a pan on the stovetop, effectively changing it from medium rare to medium well, which was better for his tastes anyway.

We sat down and my wife served the curry to everyone but our son, who I served zucchini and several slices of steak. Before I finished off the remaining steak, I offered some to my wife and five-year-old daughter.

“Is it living?” my daughter asked.

“Well, in fact, steak is meat from a cow,” I explained, “so it comes from an animal that used to be alive, if that's what you mean.”

She puckered her face and said, “Ew,” then stabbed at her plate with a fork, picking up a piece of thigh meat. “I'm a vegetarian,” she said. Then she opened her mouth and took the bite of chicken. Her mother and I looked at one another, smiled, then laughed.

The Memory of an Elephant

My mother had just arrived at my brother's home where my family was staying for the holiday weekend. I heard her enter when I was checking in on my brother's and my children, who were playing together in an upstairs room, a bunch of preschool aged kids tearing apart the area of my brother's home that he and his wife had designated as the playroom. I came downstairs and entered the kitchen where my wife, several of my brothers and their wives, my sister, and my mother were discussing our brother and his wife, the couple who wasn't present.

"There's my baby," my mother said, turning to me. "Come here."

"Hi, Mom," I said, and I walked to her, gave her hug.

"How are my grandchildren?" she said. "Where are they?"

"They're upstairs with their cousins," I said, and we split off into our own conversation and the others in the room carried on discussing the absent family members without us. "They're both doing well. Celeste is getting ready for kindergarten. She's really into drawing right now. Ask to see her drawings. She has her drawing pad with her. She loves showing her pictures."

"Okay," she said. "I will. I'd love to see them. And how about Clyde? How's he?"

"He's well. He's so tall. He looks older than he is. You'll see. And he's a very content, happy boy."

"He's always been happy. It was noticeable from the beginning."

“Yeah. I suppose. I guess a new thing is that he’s really into Star Wars. We watched the original three. Now he’s obsessed. So, don’t be surprised if he pretends to threaten you with a light saber or something like that.”

“You know,” she said. “Do you remember when he told me he didn’t like me? He just looked at me and said, very directly, ‘I don’t like you Grandma.’”

“He was *two*, Mom,” I said, with evident irritation. “It wasn’t like he was saying something with a deep meaning to it.”

“Well maybe,” she said. Her brows wrinkled. “But he clearly meant it. He was letting me know he didn’t like me.”

“Mom: *he was two*. He didn’t mean that he didn’t like you. He was trying to express a feeling, is all. He probably didn’t like what you were doing or wanted some space. He’s said that to other people. He’s probably told me that he didn’t like me a dozen times or more. I know he’s said it to Erin’s father. It doesn’t mean he doesn’t like you.”

She nodded.

“Believe me,” I said.

“Well, I remember,” she said. “I remember once when you were a child, probably no older than two yourself, we were visiting my sister in the city, and you told her boyfriend at the time that you didn’t like him. And I remember this man, he was no good, and when you told him that, I remember seeing my sister’s face and seeing how she was affected by hearing you tell her boyfriend how you didn’t like him. And you know what happened after that?” She paused. “She broke things off with him. Sure, she knew he was no good. It’s not like things were going well

between them. But the day when you told him that, I'll always remember it. Seeing truth being spoken by a two year old, like that, it was the final straw. Just the most honest thing. And it was coming from a two year old."

"Sure, Mom," I said. "But that doesn't mean Clyde—"

"I'm just telling you," she interrupted, "children are honest. Don't assume they aren't being honest."

Frustrated, unable to see how the story about my aunt's boyfriend was analogous to the one about my son, and wanting to join the rest of the family conversation, I said, "Okay, Mom. Okay."

"Anyway," she said. "I look forward to seeing the children, whenever they come down."

"Soon. I'm sure," I said, and I looked at the table before her. "Can I get you a drink?"

"That'd be great," she said. "I'll have a water with plenty of ice."

When I returned with the drink, she was addressing the whole group, "You guys remember how they met don't you? It was your father, bless his heart. He introduced them."

I placed the water on the table, then found a seat, and joined the group conversation.

A Song Sparrow in Whole Foods, Bethesda, Maryland

I was smelling apples, trying to figure out which to buy. First, I heard chirping, then I spotted him. He was overhead, on the steel beams, above the area with the self-serve bins of dried beans, grains, the pastas, fifteen feet away.

“Do you see the sparrow?” I asked my daughter, pointing up.

She was looking around for a cheese sampler, I could tell.

“See who?” she said.

“The sparrow,” I said. “There.”

She looked up and located him.

“Yes!” She said.

“Wow! Just listen,” I said. “Nice, isn’t it?”

We stood there, looking up. A moment passed and the sparrow paused his song, did a little movement, and poop came raining down. It landed, but from where we stood it wasn’t possible to see where.

My daughter started laughing. She turned to me and said, “He pooped!” And she laughed again.

I started laughing, too. Then she laughed even harder, which made me laugh harder, which caused her to laugh even more, and so on, until we were laughing so much, it was as though we were two five-year-olds.

And because I was looking at my daughter as I laughed, when I eventually looked back up the sparrow had gone, flown away. I check around, but I didn’t see him. He probably flew further that way, I thought, toward the meat section, which is where we were headed next anyway, after I decided on the apples.

Quiet

This morning I was reading the daily newspaper when my daughter entered the dining room, interrupting my skimming the article about last night's Republican debate.

"Dad," she said.

"What?" I said, not looking up from the paper.

"Did you know I can have a talk in my head?"

"Oh," I said, still looking down.

"But it's not like speaking out loud like I'm doing right now. It's inside my head."

I closed the front-page section, looked at her, and nodded. I said, "That's good." Then I picked up the Arts & Style section and, to signal I was going back to my reading, I pointed at it and said, "Okay. I'm reading right now, sweetie."

I looked back down.

A moment later, she left the room.

The Mind of a Child

I entered the bedroom. My five-year-old daughter was naked and looking in the mirror. She looked at me, then back in the mirror, and said, “I don’t know who I am. I don’t know what I am looking at. I’m going to die.”

“Please get your pajamas on, darling,” I said. “And did you brush your teeth?”

Johnny and June

My five-year-old daughter and I were snuggled on the couch watching a YouTube video of Johnny Cash and June Carter Cash singing “Jackson.” It was a live performance on the Johnny Cash Show, so it was from around 1970. Back then, Johnny was not yet the Man in Black, but still, he was one cool cat. He wore a black coat, a ruffled white shirt with a microphone pinned on, and charcoal gray pants. His hair was smoothed back and the guitar he played hung around his shoulder. He was facing June. She had on a bright red dress with a crinkled skirt, a bow on the chest, and see-through long sleeves. She looked elegant and sexy.

The stage was dark but for a constellation of about seven colored lights, a mix of red, blue, yellow, and green circles that seemed to be floating in the background, not too loud or distracting. Not that anything *could* distract from center stage. If not for the drums just outside of the shadows, it would have been easy to forget that there was a band behind them. Hell, if the camera didn’t show the crowd from time to time, it would have been easy to forget that this was a performance for a group of people other than my daughter and me. And, in fact, it was at one of those points when the camera was scanning the crowd, right around the moment when June said something about how she’d be dancing on a pony keg, when my daughter said, “Would you like it if they were your parents?”

“Perhaps,” I said. “Perhaps I would.”

And even though I already knew the answer, I asked anyway, “Why? Would you?”

Eyes Wide Open

A week ago, the last of my father's siblings, my dear Uncle Harry, died. You're not supposed to have favorites among relatives, or at least you're not supposed to acknowledge them for others' ears, but now that all nine of my father's brothers and sisters are dead, I feel comfortable admitting Uncle Harry was my favorite. He was in his eighties, from the Silent Generation. He ran a small painting business for more than forty years and lived in a modest home in a quiet suburb of Saint Louis with his wife of fifty years. Down the road from his home was a Catholic Church where he was a parishioner and gardener, a volunteer position he loved. He was calm, easy to smile, soft-spoken, the type of guy you might refer to as a gentleman. He lived a simple, humble life. I only saw him a couple handfuls of times throughout my life because he and my father lived far away from each other and neither of them had much time off from their jobs. But fortunately, I was able to see Uncle Harry about a year ago. He was traveling through the region to go to a relative's funeral and needed a place to stay. I was excited for his visit for myself, but also for my children because they had never before met my father or any of his siblings. Uncle Harry's visit provided them with a chance to have a connection with an earlier generation, which I thought was valuable.

After Uncle Harry died, I decided to fly to Saint Louis to celebrate his life with his immediate family, friends, and community. The night before I was to fly away first thing in the morning, I had turned out my son's bedroom light, gave him a sip of water that I had retrieved from the nearby bathroom, gave him a goodnight kiss, and prepared to close the door, standing halfway in the hallway. As usual, the

last thing I did was tell him about the next day's schedule of events, which he liked to hear me tell every night before I closed the door. I explained that tomorrow was the day that I'd be headed on an airplane for Uncle Harry's funeral, which I had told him and his sister about during that evening's dinner.

"Will you see Uncle Harry, Dad?" he asked.

"No, I won't see him" I said, my eyes adjusting to the darkness of the room, where I could see my son's eyes wide open, holding and stroking his stuffed monkey above the blanket. "I won't see him. He's dead remember? But I will probably see his body, if that's what you mean."

"Will his eyes be opened?" he asked.

We had talked about death before, as that question came up some time back with regard to my father. But Uncle Harry was the first person my son had ever known who had died, so I knew, sooner or later, he was going to have questions. They weren't a total surprise.

"No," I said. "His eyes will be closed."

There was a moment of quiet. But I could tell, by the way he was looking up at the shadow on his ceiling, that he had more questions.

"Will his eyes always be closed?" he asked.

"Yes. Now they will always be closed. Now that he's dead."

"But why?"

As I thought up an answer, I became intrigued by the way my son was connecting life and death with eyes being opened. Did this connection have something to do with how we open our eyes when we're awake and close them to

sleep? Did I once tell him that death was a kind of forever sleep? I couldn't remember anymore.

“Well,” I finally said. “That’s what it means to be dead. When you’re dead, your eyes are closed forever. It’s just—

“But, Dad,” he interrupted, sounding frustrated, “what about the fish at Whole Foods?”

“Oh,” I said, and though I laughed when I retold the story to my wife later that night, in the moment I remained collected when I told my emotional son that I was referring to human death. “Alive or dead,” I said, “fish always have their eyes wide open.”

Before I left the doorway, my son asked one more question, a request that I felt obligated to fulfill: “Can you not close the door all the way tonight? I want to see the hallway light.”

Stories Told

The trees along the trail were in various stages of blossom and there was a flock of grackles and another of robins nearby and making music. My daughter and I were enjoying a little one-on-one time, walking, holding hands, enjoying a late spring morning. It was Easter Sunday. At this time twenty years ago I would have been in a pew, dressed up, trying to stay alert while listening to Father Ron. But I left the church long ago and though my daughter was baptized, neither she nor I have been to a Mass service since.

Instead of taking my family to Mass, we were celebrating Easter by dyeing eggs and eating chocolate bars. I was also going to prepare a meal, a celebratory one that featured roast leg of lamb. It's not like lamb was part of my family tradition—ham was—but I like lamb, plus the Whole Foods down the road was selling some that was marked with a four on their Animal Welfare Rating scale.

“I liked hiding the eggs and then finding them,” my daughter said.

“That's nice,” I said. “You were really doing a nice job locating them, weren't you?”

She smiled and agreed, “I was.”

Her smile reminded me of my mother.

“Maybe later we can call Grandma,” I said. “She'd like to wish us a happy Easter, I'm sure.”

“Okay,” she said.

My mother was at Mass, no doubt. She was probably celebrating the holiday with one or several of my siblings' families in the Chicago area. For a decade or more

when I was growing up, on Easter she used to wear this one particular dress that was bright purple with yellow and green flowers on it. But after she lost a lot of weight, it stopped fitting her. As I thought of her now, I could not help but remember her in that dress.

“Dad,” my daughter said. “What is Easter? What’s the meaning?”

“Well,” I said, “remember I told you about how Christmas is a birthday celebration for the man referred to as Jesus?”

She nodded.

“Easter is a celebration related to Jesus, too.”

“Is it also his birthday?”

“No,” I said, and I paused, trying to think of how I might explain it. How was it explained to me? I could not even recall. I guess from an early age someone must have told the bible story to me. “Remember,” I continued, “how I said that some people believe Jesus was the son of God? Well, these same people believe that after he died, a couple days later, he came back to life.”

I looked at my daughter. She squinted, looked skeptical.

“Some people believe that even though he died, he was able to come back to life, and this has a lot of meaning for these people. So, every year, Easter is like the birthday of Jesus’s coming back to life from the dead.”

“But that can’t happen, right, Dad? You can’t die and still live?”

“Well, no. That’s true. You can’t.”

“Then why would people believe that story? If it’s pretend?”

“Well,” I said, “there are people who wrote this story down in what’s called a bible. And there were also people who went around telling other people this story and saying it was true. These stories were passed down for many years and even today, some people who hear the story believe it. They say that they have something that is called faith in the story. They believe it is true even though they don’t have proof.”

My daughter continued to look skeptical and she said, “That’s silly. How people believe somebody could die and still live.”

I shrugged, nodded in agreement. We continued walking in silence for a few moments. I thought about the stories that we are told. What makes us accept one unbelievable story over the next? Why, for example, does my daughter believe in Santa Claus, but think that it’s silly to think that a man could have returned to life from the dead? The same could have been said for myself. I can’t remember ever believing the story of Jesus, but I distinctly recall standing in my driveway with my older brothers as they disabused me of my belief in Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and the Tooth Fairy, which was saddest to learn for me at that time because I had just placed a tooth under my pillow. Being raised in a religious family, I had heard the story of Jesus at a younger age than my daughter, and surely I had heard it described as true, not just as some story, but I wonder, did I have the same doubt about the story when I was her age? Was doubt always there and I was just not able to express it? Did I ever believe the story that Jesus rose from the dead? I couldn’t remember.

We approached a maple tree that was filled with clusters of seed pods, commonly referred to as helicopters, and we stopped to examine them. They were

small, budding only recently, and I knew that they would not helicopter down with much spin, but I tore off a few and tried anyway.

“Get me some,” my daughter asked, referring to the pods. I picked a handful, gave it to her. She tossed the pods in the air and watched them crash without the grace of mature helicopters. She laughed and asked for another handful so she could try it again. The same thing happened with the second handful. And she laughed again.

We started walking again. “You know,” I said, reaching out, taking her hand in mine. “There are a lot of people we know who believe the story about Jesus, even as silly as it sounds. Like Grandma.”

“But you don’t, right?” she asked. “You don’t believe somebody could die and still live.”

I shook my head and said, “No.”

“Maybe we should tell Grandma that you can’t die and still live,” she said.

I laughed. I could not imagine what my mother would think if she heard her granddaughter telling her that her faith in Jesus was silly, his return from the dead impossible.

“No, darling,” I said. “I don’t think we have to tell her that.”

“But why not? We could just tell her that somebody can’t die and then still live.”

“Sometimes it’s not about whether a story is believable. It’s the message of the story that people care about.”

She nodded and looked to turn that idea over in her mind, but I was pretty sure I didn’t convince her that there was a message about Jesus’s life worth caring about.

Certainly I wasn't explaining it well. I didn't know how to anyway. And was it even going to be possible for me? My mother had faith in the unbelievable and my daughter believed it was silly to have faith in the unbelievable while still accepting some unbelievable stories as given to her. And me? I was the connection between these two generations, peddling some stories, unwilling to peddle others. Parenting, I thought, is filled contradiction, with making choices that don't really have a right or wrong answer. I decided to see if I could connect my daughter with my mother using a different means.

"Hey," I said, as we approached a cherry laurel where earlier that week I had located a robin nest. "Do you want to see the nest I told you about?"

"Yes," she said. "I want to see those bird babies."

We stopped and peeked in on the nestlings. They looked as though they would be fledgling soon. We watched their big eyes peeping out from behind the leaves and listened to the cheeping sounds coming from their tiny bodies. Then we turned around and headed back home.

"Dad, could you tell me again," my daughter said, "tell me that story that Grandma told you when you were a boy and found the blue robin egg by your front porch."

"Okay," I said, and I told her a story that my mother told me when I was my daughter's age, a story that conveyed the importance of loving, respecting, and appreciating things in nature. It's a story I like to tell and one I still believe.

Mother Nature

“Once upon a time there was a mother robin. She laid five, beautiful, blue eggs in a nest of sticks that she and father robin had built. Mother robin sat on top of these eggs keeping them warm so that the tiny bird babies on the inside might grow large enough to break out of the egg shell. Father robin watched over the nest, bringing food to mother robin, and mother robin kept the nest warm. Mother robin and father robin worked together like this for a long time, longer than it takes for the sun to go to bed and wake up again. In fact, it was such a long time that the sun went to bed and woke up again more times than you could count on all of your fingers before the first of the tiny naked birds broke through an eggshell. And when this happened, mother and father robin were so excited that they kissed their new baby, gave their baby a big hug, and then went off to get food for the baby. And by the time they returned with a nice meal for their first bird baby, another bird baby had broken through the shell. Well, mother and father robin were so thrilled again. They gave food to their first baby bird and then welcomed their newest baby with kisses and hugs before again heading off together to get their second baby bird some food. When they returned with food for their second baby bird, the same thing happened. There was another bird that broke through the shell. And so, again, they delivered food to their second baby bird before they welcomed their newest baby bird with kisses and hugs and then went out to locate food for their third baby bird. They returned, gave food to the third baby bird, and found that the fourth baby bird had broken through the shell. And so, more kisses, hugs, and another trip out for food for mother robin and father robin.

Only this time, while mother robin and father robin were gone collecting a meal for

their fourth baby bird, a little hand reached into the nest of sticks. And this hand took that fifth blue egg out of the nest and took it away. When mother and father robin returned, they fed their fourth baby bird a meal and looked for the fifth egg. They could not see it. They looked to see if the fifth egg had opened up. If there was a fifth baby bird that they could kiss and hug and give food. But they didn't see a fifth baby bird. Not anywhere. It was gone. And so, mother and father robin were heart broken. And they cried and cried. And all four of their babies cried and cried too, because they missed their little bird brother so much. Mother bird started to cry a song of terrible sadness. It was the terriblest sound that you could imagine. And she sang this song for so long and father robin joined her and so did her four little baby robins. The terrible, sad song was so sad that Mother Nature appeared as a little green fairy and asked why there was so much sadness. Mother robin explained to the fairy what happened and the fairy felt so badly for the robin family, that she offered to make her a deal. She would magically make the fifth blue egg reappear, so long as mother robin stopped singing the terribly sad song and instead sang a song of joy. Mother robin, of course, agreed to the fairy's conditions and so the fairy used magic and the fifth egg reappeared. Mother robin was so thankful that she kissed the fairy and broke into a song of joy, which greatly pleased the fairy. So the fairy left. Soon the fifth egg was cracked open and the fifth baby bird appeared. Mother robin and father robin kissed and hugged the fifth baby bird like they had done to all of their other babies. And mother robin was so happy that she decided that she would sing a song of joy for the rest of her life. And father robin said he would join her and sing that song of joy too. And they taught that song to their little baby birds. And those baby birds learned the

song of joy and learned to sing it as well as mother and father robin. They also taught it to their friends and, later, to their own children. Soon all robins were singing that song of joy. Generation after generation, mother robins and father robins taught that same song of joy to their little baby birds. Today, robins continue to sing that song of joy and continue to teach it to their little baby birds as a way of revealing their joy and happiness.”

Bamboo Swaying

I looked through the opened venetian blinds and glass where, twenty feet from the house, bamboo shoots were gently swaying in the breeze. My wife was working and our children were at preschool. I was alone, lying on the queen-sized bed, on top of the covers, nearly naked, but for my black ankle socks and whitey-tighties. I had a number of practical items to accomplish, but instead I was watching the bamboo.

As I watched, a memory came to me. My son's infancy included a prolonged period of mild colic, when the only way he could be soothed was when he was held. I would hold him and pace the room, shushing, patting. I would sing to him, too. Usually, I was a broken record, singing one or the other of the few songs I knew. Most often I would sing "Edelweiss," a song I knew from *Sound of Music*. A corny song, if ever there was one, to sing to your baby. But I knew it and he liked it.

They say that you shouldn't plant bamboo because it is among the fastest growing plants and requires a lot of maintenance, plus it is challenging to get rid of if you ever want to. But have you ever watched bamboo swaying in the breeze?