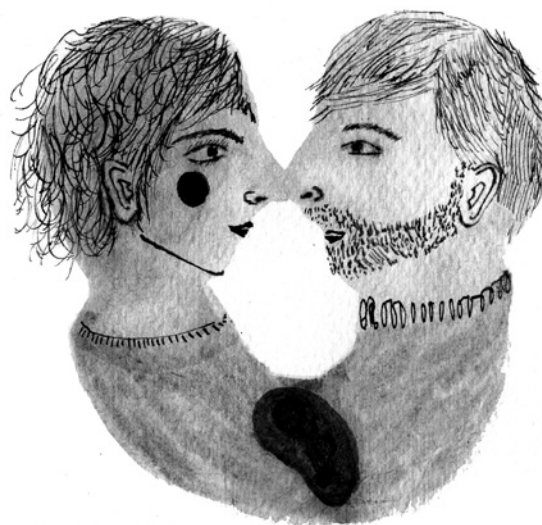


Five Dials



NUMBER 19

The Parenting Issue

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... plus Arthur Bradford, Kevin Baker, and the wisdom of a group of randomly selected nine-year-olds.



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Designed by Dean Allen

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On Foreign Bureaus and Parenting Issues

The *Five Dials* parenting issue couldn't come at a better time as one of the staff of the magazine is getting ready to welcome a child into the world at this very moment and the rest of us are hoping he might take a chance and name the child Fivedials or at least Dialsy, though the suggestions so far have been met by a resounding silence, which perhaps says more about the immaturity of the staff than anything else, and by 'staff' I mostly mean 'me.'

I don't have any children, and at each stage of assembling this issue I have been skeptical of what can be said about parenting, and what people will want to read about parenting. But again and again I have been won over – hugely won over – because of the talent of the writers involved. As a non-parent I was reminded that writing about parenting means writing about life, death, betrayal, trust, love, revelation, pain, compromise, mess, epiphany, and that's a decent enough index for any issue of a literary magazine.

If you're getting the sense I was a passive force in this process, I mostly was. The guest editor of this issue is a longtime friend, writer, editor and New Yorker named Deirdre Dolan. She's also a mother to two young daughters. I remember the first time I saw just how good a mother she'd become, and how strange it was to witness this sort of transformation in a friend. Where did these skills emerge from – the calmness, the patience, and the controlled intensity of that 'I'm-not-messing-around-young-lady' look she occasionally employed? Had they been lurking for years? Were they learned on the fly? I won't say too much – there is much discussion of parenting to follow – but it has been impressive to watch someone else put together this issue, especially while balancing a child on her lap.

As ever, *Five Dials* is determined to reverse the current trend and open up bureaus in all corners of the world. We now have foreign desks in Jaipur (a folding table near a tent) and the west coast of Canada (a folding chair on a wooden

deck.) As regular readers know, the magazine is often edited in the quiet solemnity of the Penguin offices at 80 Strand in London, where our operation is surrounded by some of the great London literary editors of the day, who pore over manuscripts and pencil in editorial suggestions. This issue has been edited in a slightly different environment, Deirdre's apartment, which I guess you could call our New York office. Like many other offices it is open plan, and if you don't look too closely (or listen to the sound of Harriet, the dog, snoring on the sofa) you'll see it resembles the workspaces of 'real' magazines. For instance, we too have a young woman working at the front desk, though that front desk is very small and she refuses to answer our phones because she's busy using a purple crayon to draw a big heart with glitter inside. Like the *New York Times*, there is a muted television on in the corner so we can constantly monitor world events, though the only news we're monitoring at the moment is whether or not Princess Jasmine will escape from a large hourglass and help Aladdin defeat the evil Jafar, who has turned himself into an enormous

cobra. Also, as is traditional at most newsweeklies, someone just put a plastic tiara on my head and then ran away laughing at me. —CRAIG TAYLOR

PARENTING is an intensely personal experience and hard to write about directly without inviting a well-meaning reader to sleep. I approached some writers for this issue who said yes, but then disappeared because they couldn't square the creepiness of unpacking their kids' lives in print. I understand why, and am therefore thrilled that so many other great writers agreed to give it a shot.

I enjoy talking to people about being parented and how they parent, and get that most people's stories come down to one of two things – "they did their best," or "we did our best." In our age of competitive parenting and aggressive self-understanding it's a slightly bitter pill to swallow – so boring and true. It's also not something you hear people say too often.

In all of the essays and fiction that follow, writers acknowledge in variously funny, sad, and truthful ways the humbling compromise that is parenting. In Alain de Botton's brazen but comforting tweets about human nature; in Sarah Miller's frustration with breeder pride; and in Katha Pollitt's gorgeous chronicle of the ease with which newborns can make away with our identities, however temporarily.



There was a commercial lately that I'd sit through all 27 seconds of, despite my hair trigger DVR finger, that opened with a woman making an extremely average effort to brush her teeth. It cuts to some other half-assed teeth brushers and the voice-over says something like, 'That's good enough for me.' I loved this ad because it reminded me of real life, my life, how often I don't get the whole job done. Although I'm supposed to think she's a loser, I found something encouraging about her giddy lack of guilt – I probably think 'that's good enough' to myself at least five times day. It reminded me of Jim Windolf's excellent story about a dad giving his son the worst sex talk of all time, and John Kenney's humour piece on the same theme.

Nobody knows what works. Most people just make some choices and defend

them for the next 18 to 50 years – claiming nurture (good manners) or nature (crippling shyness) when it suits them best.

The main reason I like to hear friends talk about how they were raised is to understand who they are (we're not such reliable narrators). Back in high school I imagined a very specific image of my future family life – me walking home from the subway in winter and looking up into the second floor windows of a Brooklyn brownstone where two small children were coming out of the bath, wrapped in terrycloth robes. There was warm glow from a fireplace, and of course a warm, loving man getting them ready for bed. My life's pretty close to that, and when I imagine what I'll be thinking about thirty years from now I'm reminded of this quote from *The Corrections*, two big Jonathan Franzen books ago:

'He was remembering the nights he'd sat upstairs with one or both of his boys or with his girl in the crook of his arm, their damp bath-smelling heads hard against his ribs as he read aloud to them from *Black Beauty* or *The Chronicles of Narnia*. How his voice alone, its palpable resonance, had made them drowsy. These were evenings, and there were hundreds of them, maybe thousands, when nothing traumatic enough to leave a scar had befallen the nuclear unit. Evenings of plain vanilla closeness in his black leather chair; sweet evenings of doubt between the nights of bleak certainty. They came to him now, these forgotten counterexamples, because in the end, when you were falling into water, there was no solid thing to reach for but your children.'

—DEIRDRE DOLAN

ON DAUGHTERS

Beautiful Screamer

By Katha Pollitt

I was ecstatic when my daughter was born. Beside myself. I didn't care I'd had a Caesarean, although I would have liked more Demerol afterwards. I didn't even care that the operation was unnecessary, the result, as Lissa, my obstetrician, acknowledged, of a lab mistake. 'You're strong enough to handle this,' she told me when she dropped by my hospital room a few days later with the news. 'You can take it.' Lissa and her partner, Jane, were beautiful, slender, delicate dark-eyed women – they looked like they had been antelopes in a previous life. They wore high heels and little black dresses under their white coats and stocked their waiting room with *Town and Country*; you felt they should be drinking Martinis at the Beekman instead of sticking their hands up your vagina. My main goal at every prenatal visit was to get Lissa to promise not to give me an episiotomy; to me this represented all the horror and humiliation of childbirth, being slit open like an animal, a butterflied chicken on a grill. She would politely accept the articles I had cut out for her from *Science News* and

International Family Planning Perspectives and promise that she would never perform one unnecessarily. As it turned out, she kept her word. I had the unnecessary C-section instead.

But so what? Mistakes happen. I had Sophie, that was the important thing. When the nurse put her in my arms, I looked into her eyes and it was like looking into a pair of morning glories. They were that blue, that clear, that open. I felt we understood each other completely, as if Plato was right and we arrived on earth full of knowledge and that this was the very moment, right here in the operating room, before she began to forget. It was as if my mother and grandmothers sent her to me from that other world. What difference did it make how she'd got here? It baffled me how women could go into childbirth perfectionism, blaming themselves if they couldn't give birth vaginally or if, in the end, despite the childbirth preparation classes, despite meditations and mantras and visualization and breathing and exercise and monitoring of diet and always remembering to avoid words

like 'pain' and 'unbearable' in favour of words like 'discomfort' and 'tired', they went for the painkillers. 'I had an epidural,' one new mother confided in me as we shuffled along the hospital corridor in our bathrobes. She laughed nervously. 'I hope my baby will be all right.' Having a baby was machismo for women: it was like becoming a Marine. You couldn't be a sissy, a wimp, a girl. Because it wasn't about you: it was about doing what was best for your child. Anything that went wrong in that department was your fault. In this respect pregnancy and childbirth were psychological boot camp for motherhood: anything that went wrong there was going to be your fault too.

I had resisted the competitive-sport aspects of labour and delivery – you are the athlete, your husband is the coach – but I was as susceptible to guilt as any other educated middle-class woman. Never mind that I had researched and written articles debunking the insistence on total abstinence from alcohol during pregnancy, as if one drink at mealtime would turn your child into cabbage. Look

at the wine-loving Italians, the Spanish, the French! Years later, when my funny, clever, talkative daughter scored only average on the IQ tests she had to take for kindergarten, my first thought was, 'It must have been that New Year's Eve champagne before I knew I was pregnant – rather a lot of champagne, if truth be told – that Chianti with pizza at the Marionetta, that beer with the Chinese takeout.' Never mind that I had also researched and written articles about the fallacy of IQ. When the psychologist who had done the tests called weeks later to say that he'd made a computational error and Sophie's actual score was 'in the gifted range', I felt the way you'd feel if your jury came back with a verdict of not guilty, after a trial in which the prosecutor was so brilliant you'd started to believe him yourself. Maybe you shot your husband and just forgot. Maybe you embezzled that money in your sleep. 'Hey,' the psychologist said when I reminded him of the many hundreds of dollars we'd paid for his services, 'I didn't have to call you. I'm being nice to you.' It was as if he knew I had been willing to kill off my daughter's brain cells. I wasn't innocent. I was just lucky.

MY FRIENDS who were mothers had seemed mildly alarmed when I told them I was pregnant. Perhaps they wondered how I would manage, given that I had never taken care of anything larger than a cat – well, two cats, actually, which isn't as easy as it sounds. It just didn't seem to me that raising a baby was so complicated. People had been doing it for years! True, according to the childcare experts whose books began to pile up by the bed, parents hadn't always been doing a very good job: there were definite right and wrong ways to feed an infant, play with it, socialize it, keep it warm and clean and happy and curious. But what did the experts know? Didn't the whole field revise itself totally every decade or so? Feed on a schedule – no, feed on demand! The experts were mostly men, anyway, whose wives did the daily work of raising the kids. On the other hand, at least the men took the trouble to be twinkly and avuncular. Penelope Leach, the only famous woman expert, was a dragon – the infant-care equivalent of Margaret Thatcher, or

Barbara Woodhouse, who had that dog-training show on television ('No bad dogs – only inexperienced owners!') – and you couldn't dismiss her as just another man laying down the law. She was a mother herself; a better mother than you, because she never seemed to have a minute in which raising children was not the foremost thing on her mind. She wrote that you had to talk to your baby when you were pushing the stroller and that not to do so was rude because if the baby was a grown-up you would make conversation. She wrote that if you had a job and the baby was happy you had still done the wrong thing, you had just got away with it. Penelope Leach had quite a bit of useful information, which she delivered in a brisk, friendly way, but that was just to cosy you along. Like the men, she obviously thought that if you ignored her advice you'd produce an addict or a killer or a C student – but if that was true the human race would never have survived all those millennia living in mud huts on a diet of lentils and goat milk. Although come to think of it, perhaps inadequate child-rearing practices explains the plethora of addicts and murderers and C students throughout world history. Maybe Hitler's parents had failed to supply him with a black-and-white mobile for his crib. It's not as if human beings are so great.

When Sophie went for her six-month check-up, our paediatrician urged me to get a copy of Dr Richard Ferber's *Solve Your Child's Sleep Problems*. But she doesn't have any sleep problems, I protested. 'Well, she will,' the doctor said wearily. 'Just you wait.' Dr Ferber proposed training your baby to sleep through the night alone by letting her cry without comforting her for longer and longer periods. This was 'Ferberizing', which sounded like some new way of waxing your car. I was quite sure parents would never have Ferberized their babies back in the mud huts. The whole family would have all slept together in a warm smelly heap. I wasn't up to the rigours of Ferberization. It seemed so cold and mean. Sophie could learn to cry herself to sleep when she grew up, like everybody else.

When Sophie woke up and fussed I scooped her up and walked her around the apartment. 'Beautiful screamer, wake

unto me,' I would sing. 'Starlight and moonbeams are waiting for thee.' Sometimes I would take her into the bed I shared with my husband and we would fall asleep together. According to the experts, this would produce a relaxed and confident baby who trusted her parents to respond to distress – or a needy, manipulative user who would expect her parents to be at her beck and call for life. What was amazing, too, was that these know-it-alls were not in the least disturbed by their disagreements, even when their opposing advice was placed side by side in magazine features with titles like 'We Asked the Experts' and 'You Wanted to Know.' They just sailed on, blithely asserting their wisdom like political pundits. The important thing, after all, wasn't to give the right answer. It was to train parents to see child-raising as a set of technical problems they couldn't solve on their own, and never to have the thought that perhaps the reason for the conflicting answers was that the questions weren't all that important; whatever you decided probably wasn't all right. The whole childcare-advice industry was about the production and soothing of anxiety, like those women's magazines where the five-day all-tomato weight-loss diet sits right next to the recipe for double-chocolate Oreo pie, and the article listing ten steps to a new you is followed by the one about accepting yourself as you really are.

LOOKING BACK, I can see that I became depressed. It wasn't baby blues, or, as we now medicalize it, postpartum depression. It was loneliness. In the way that we prepare for ourselves the bed we most don't want to lie in, I had put myself in exactly the position I had spent my life avoiding: I went from being a writer who worked at home to being a stay-at-home wife. My husband was a conscientious father, but he worked long hours and wrote a book on the weekends. My friends, who had had their babies earlier, were back at work. Instead of spending time with people I knew and liked, I had play-dates with neighbours. I had always felt guilty about not writing enough; now I felt guilty about hiring a sitter so that I could sit at my desk not writing at all. It didn't really matter, though, that I wasn't getting anything accomplished,

because I had nothing to say. Interestingly, no one asked me any more what I was working on. Once a woman gives birth it's considered impolite, as if you're implying that having a baby isn't enough.

Had anyone enquired that first year, I had my answer ready: *I read the New York Times every day. If I die tomorrow, you can put that on my tombstone.* As soon as Cendra took Sophie for a walk, instead of dashing into my study and getting to work, like the stalwart mother-writers I admired, Margaret Drabble and Harriet Beecher Stowe and Sylvia Plath – well, OK, bad example – I sank into that thick grey soup of processed verbiage like an exhausted insomniac drifting, finally, into drugged slumber. I read the unsigned editorials about sewage treatment and the Japanese trade deficit, the obituaries of aged grandparents named Ida and Sidney (mourned by daughters Linda and Barbara and grandchildren Arielle, Jeremy and Zack), the 'Metropolitan Diary', with its familiar returning characters: the wisecracking taxi driver, the gallant doorman, the cheerful homeless guy. I read the real-estate section to measure my own decline in value. I read the fashion pages to reassure myself that, even if I could lose my pregnancy weight, there were no clothes in existence that I could remotely imagine myself wearing except the clothes I already had. I read everything but the travel section. Because what would have been the point of reading that?

It's not entirely true that I wrote nothing at all. I wrote dozens, possibly even hundreds, of drafts of one poem. It was called 'White Curtains', and I was never able to make it come right. It started well enough: 'White Curtains wafting and stirring at my bedroom window / in the clear sunlight at the beginning of spring.' Well, maybe take out 'wafting'; words like 'wafting' were definitely part of the problem. But the poem's real difficulty, of which 'wafting' was only a symptom, was the ungraspable nature of its subject. Something about the way life produces moments of beauty that seem to be about to reveal a mystery, but never do? 'How much we want such things to mean more than themselves' – but they don't mean more? Which is related to the way the death of a loved person has no effect on the ongoing-

ness of the world? 'Here is the unmade bed, the half-drunk glass / the book left carelessly open.' Rereading that poem in its many typed drafts, which look so old-fashioned now, like letters from the Second World War, with those thick black serifs and clouded O's and the paper gently puffed around each letter, I am struck by how effortful it seems, how laboured and heavy and dead. It's as if every line is the beginning of a thought I could neither complete nor connect to another thought, as if it had been dragged up with difficulty from some murky but insufficiently deep part of my imagination. Although it was miles away from what really preoccupied to me – the baby, my deteriorating marriage, the day-to-day routine in which I felt so swamped – I see now that the poem expressed exactly my state of mind, in its leadenness, its fragmented attention, its sadness that seems to come from outside the careful, elevated language of the poem, like darkness seeping in through the window behind the lamp and the bowl of flowers.

This was my dilemma, as I saw it: motherhood was such an intense experience, it was so important, so necessary, it placed you at the hot centre of life, like a coal in fire. At the same time, it marginalized you totally. You became invisible, a function, a means. When I was childless, it was obvious to me that mothers got the shaft. From the kitchen window of our little Greenwich Village apartment I would watch the mothers pushing the toddlers in their strollers to the preschool down the block. The kids were scrubbed and rosy, dressed in adorable outfits – heathery purple and buttery yellow, bubblegum pink and Granny Smith apple green; in the cold weather they wore thick jackets in bright primary colours and clever knitted hats that made them look like baby Vikings, or jesters, or lion cubs. The mothers trudged behind them in dull baggy sweats, like the Econowives in *The Handmaid's Tale*: Mr they could be their children's servants, or the black-clad stagehands you're not supposed to notice handling those elaborate Indonesian paper puppets.

Once I had a baby of my own, I found out more about why those women looked so grim. It is really hard to go

through your regular day with a stroller and baby in tow: shopping in crowded supermarket aisles or tiny cramped Korean greengroceries where everyone looks embarrassed for you if the baby fusses, and hanging the groceries off the back of the stroller, which sometimes tips over, sending the baby backwards looking *very* surprised; muscling up and down the subway stair and through the turnstiles, which are too narrow, so you either have to lift the stroller over or have to wait for the token booth clerk to buzz you through the door and whoops, there goes your train. Sometimes people helped me, mostly older Hispanic men or fellow mothers, but mostly not, and according to an op-ed in *The New York Times* by one of the new anti-feminist women writers who were then coming into vogue, this inconsiderateness was due to legal abortion. Apparently people wanted to help mothers only if they thought the mothers had not chosen their condition. If you had volunteered, you were on your own. This philosophy was in evidence even at the post office, which I noticed for the first time had a sign banning strollers and carriages from the premises. The government, it would seem, did not believe that mothers were entitled to buy stamps or send a package. How I fumed about that! Didn't the stroller ban violate my constitutional right to equal access to governmental services? Did they think I had no business to transact, or expect my husband to transact it for me? This was Manhattan, not Riyadh. I was like someone suddenly confined to a wheelchair who notices for the first time all the potholes and high kerbs.

It wasn't the physical hurdles that bothered me, though – as soon as I escaped the fug and mess of the apartment, I felt full of energy and zest. It took so much preparation to leave the house, I had to put together so many supplies and remember so many things and go back so many times for some forgotten item – diapers! Goldfish crackers! Milosh the filthy beloved boy-baby doll! – that by the time I was actually out on the sidewalk I felt as excited and stalwart and determined as a polar explorer. What got to me was the sense of exclusion, that there were no concessions or accommodation or even acknowledge-

ment. It was as if raising a child was just an odd personal hobby, like unicycling. At the same time, it made you fair game for public comment, even before birth. ‘It’s a boy!’ a homeless man assured me on the street. ‘That’s great,’ another man said, pumping a fist in approval. ‘You’re doing just what you should be doing.’ Who asked him? ‘Her feet are cold,’ a grandmotherly woman remarked as she passed by on the street, the first time we took Sophie out in her stroller. ‘Where are her shoes?’ Other passers-by weighed in too: ‘She needs a hat.’ ‘She looks tired.’ ‘Poor little girl.’ And then – this is the awful part – you notice you are doing the same thing with other people’s babies. Once I managed to work myself up into a major worry-fit because I saw a baby left in a carriage on the street in front of a brownstone. Obviously, the mother had just dashed inside for a moment, but I stayed and waited till she came back out. I made sure she saw me, too.

I KEPT THINKING there must be some way to turn it around and reserve the valences. Instead of making you less powerful, less central, motherhood should make you more so – more connected to others, more part of the swim and swirl. Surely there were societies in which that was true. Hadn’t there been some Indian tribe where the mothers made the big decisions? You should radiate heat and power like the sun. You had done, were doing, this great thing! You had profound revelations all the time, like when you realized that if you could sacrifice your life to save your child you would not only do it without hesitation, you would be grateful for the opportunity. Grateful! Imagine feeling that for another person. I could look at Sophie’s face for hours; it barely seemed possible that someone so beautiful could exist. Sometimes I felt guilty about the sheer delight I took in her: if I had had one those big-headed lumpy babes that look like Winston Churchill, would I love my child as much? I was so afraid she had died of crib death during the night that I used to make my husband go into her room before the morning. This is the secret emotional life of mothers, and fathers too. ‘I would drink her pee,’ my friend Nick said of his baby girl.

Shouldn’t these deep currents of feeling connect us to each other, adults to children, parent to parent?

True, in small ways they do. Suddenly you have something to talk to strangers about, the way men bond over sports – the gloomy guy in the basement at the Strand who prices the used books, Mr Kim the dry cleaner, the super’s bad-tempered wife. The Strand guy’s wife is pregnant! Mr Kim writes poetry! In the elevator, the super’s wife lets a smile flicker across her stern Albanian face. People are nicer to you if you are with a baby. Women on the street always smile at each other’s children, and sometimes at each other, too. But it is a rueful, brave-soldier kind of smile, as if to say, ‘Well, we’ve managed so far.’

FORTUNATELY, I loved breastfeeding. Sure, for the first month it felt like being bitten by foxes, but after that it was more just a fizzy feeling, like having breasts full of champagne. It wasn’t a sexual feeling exactly, but it was definitely sensual, and the closeness and warmth of the baby was sensual too – her soft skin, her heavy head, her hot milky breath, the way she lay back, sated. That breastfeeding is exciting is something you’re not supposed to talk about – in fact, a few years after Sophie weaned herself, a woman upstate lost custody of her child for a year when she told a breastfeeding hotline that she sometimes felt aroused while nursing – because God forbid a mother should get a little pleasure for herself along the way. By then, doctors had even stopped advising women to drink Guinness to help bring down the milk, a delightful home remedy that let you feel like Molly Bloom. Breastfeeding was another thing that had been turned from a source of power and pleasure into an occasion for guilt and self-doubt. ‘I’ll never be as close to my child again,’ intoned the soft, mournful Kotex-ad-style voiceover in the La Leche League video we watched in Lamaze class; never mind that the child in question looked ready to pick up a backpack and trot off to middle school. Why couldn’t they just say, ‘Some women really enjoy this, why not give it a try? See if it works for you.’ Why did breastfeeding have to be shrouded in warnings about health dangers from bottle-feeding

that have nothing to do with life in places with clean drinking water and public sanitation and healthcare – as if most of today’s breastfeeding mothers were not themselves formula-fed? If it’s so natural, how come there is a job called ‘lactation consultant’ that requires 2,500 hours of formal training? ‘I lay on that heating pad for nine months with mastitis behind every blocked milk duct,’ my friend Pat said when I told her I was writing about new motherhood. ‘It was excruciating, and I felt like a complete failure. Then I found out my mother had gone through exactly the same thing with three out of the four of us!’ Pat’s son had colic for nine months. She would sit at dinner with him screaming in the Snuggli on her chest as she quietly wept and tried not to throw against the wall the spaghetti carbonara her cheerful, attentive husband had whipped up after another big day in the office.

Two discourses competed for the terrain of child-raising: ‘parenting’ and ‘mothering’. The discourse of parenting was upbeat and funny and liberal and contemporary. It featured men, lots of men, writing in the aren’t-I-adorable mode favoured by male freelance writers when they venture into the personal, churning out clever 750-word pieces about coaching their daughter’s soccer team, helping with homework, explaining why the dog died. Dads made light of their shortcomings and screw-ups – ‘OK, OK, so I dropped the baby on her head, but now she speaks Chinese!’ It was as if they were already trying to impress the marital counsellor: ‘I do too cook! I make pancakes! Fantastic pancakes with blueberry smiley faces!’ Parenting, as the term implies, expresses the view that mothers and fathers are equally involved in taking care of children.

The discourse of parenting was mostly baloney. Anyone with eyes in her head could see that mothers were still doing most of the work. For example, as the ads for breast pumps and nursing bras and diet pills made clear, they were the ones who read childcare magazines. Parenting made life more complicated, too, because every decision had to be a joint one even though it was mostly you, the mother, who would be carrying it out. ‘If she naps now will she stay up

too late? How many eggs a week is too many? Jacket or no sweater? We agreed you'd try to feed her earlier, remember? We talked about that!' Still, the parenting mode served one very important purpose: it protected you, a little bit, from the discourse of mothering, which was the ancient and ferocious and scornful voice in your head. 'Right now,' that voice said, 'you are probably doing something selfish and heedless and lazy that is placing your child at *risk*, like hiring the sitter without checking her out with the FBI. Did you even look at the sell-by date on that salt-laden purée of chemicals you're spooning into that poor innocent?' In the world of mothering, children were always being injured in freak accidents or getting kidnapped because you zoned out in the park – just for a moment, but that was all it took. It was the mothering voice telling women their sons would take drugs and their daughters would hate them that made women so insecure, so worried, so hard on themselves. Was it the fault of Freud, who made infancy so crucial and blamed mothers for invariably screwing it up, as if the least little mistake could warp a child for life? Was it the lack of simple social rules, lines of authority, knowable futures? It wasn't as if we were raising our children to work beside us on the farm any more. You could be ruining your child now for a way of life that doesn't even exist yet. There was only one good thing about the mothering voice: it acknowledged that it was you, the mother, who was doing the heavy lifting. 'Pancakes with blueberry smiley faces, ha!' the voice cackled. 'Isn't that special.' In theory the voice might someday tell you that you had done a good job after all – when your son got out of rehab and your daughter had her own kids and started hearing the voice herself.

Meanwhile I held Sophie in my arms and danced around the living room to Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys. The winter sun poured in through the white curtains onto my grandmother's faded carpet, and I would think, 'I am having the most intense experience of my life, and I am having it alone.' When Sophie was older and could talk, she would always stop me from singing her to sleep with one Bob Wills song I knew by heart, my favourite, 'There's No Dis-

appointment in Heaven'. 'No, no,' she'd pipe up dreamily, 'not that one,' and I don't blame her. The words say there's no disappointment in heaven; it is the sweet, weary, defeated music of sad old wrinkled country people who've worked hard all their lives and are shuffling around a church-basement dance floor, waiting to die. 'Sounds of the midnight melt in my ear,' I would sing instead. 'I know that my beautiful screamer is here.'

WHEN SOPHIE started walking, I discovered the playground at West 91st Street, down in Riverside Park. At first I thought it was heaven, with its green painted benches set among big old sycamores and the simple, basic equipment out of my own childhood – seesaws, swings, slides, jungle gym, sandbox. I loved its shadiness, its sense of safety, its nothing-special similarity to other playgrounds. I even loved how run-down it was – the scraggly, nondescript bushes in the corners, the uneven hexagonal cement pavers, the plain pipe sprinkler that sent the children mad with joy in the heat. The playground belonged to the old Spaldeen-and-egg-cream New York I'd grown up in, in which kids roamed the neighbourhood by themselves and read comics in the candy store and getting into Bronx Science made you a genius for sure. It had probably looked much the same in 1950, or 1920.

After I had been there for a while, the playground seemed less like a delightful municipal bower and more like mommy purdah. How far away the wide, green promenade looked, just beyond the iron fence, where the kidnapers and molesters sauntered by the simmering Hudson. The playground was the flip side of the post office, the prettier face of exclusion. The only time you saw men there was on weekends, when businessmen and lawyers and journalists bustled about energetically. The tip-off came when they were leaving and had to collect the toys. 'Is this your pail? Come on, Justin, which shovel is yours, this yellow one?' Fakers! It was like Woody Allen wanting custody and not even knowing the names of his son's teachers. The women in the playground watched every move and exchanged knowing half-smiles. All week long, when the playground was

theirs again, they traded war stories about manly ineptitude and obliviousness. 'Dave went out for Pampers and we didn't see him for weeks! Rick dressed Jenny in the dachshund's coat!' Then they would give a little laugh and roll their eyes because what could they do? They were stuck in it now.

I knew people without children who talked about having a baby to keep their marriage together. Were they insane? You might as well set your house on fire because you were tired of your furniture. Now you *really* had problems. Baby care soaked up all the fun time – was it possible that my husband had ever made me laugh so hard I gasped for breath? That we had made dinner together side by side in our tiny kitchen that now seemed too cramped and narrow for even just me? It obliterated the in-between time too – the moments you spent wondering what Rock Cornish game hens actually were and whether socialism just expected too much of human beings – and at the same time introduced new arenas of competition: for attention, for sleep, for worktime, for who would get to go to the store for milk or cat food, a prize job because you got to take a walk and be alone for a good half-hour. And for a lot of couples, ones who had thought they were modern and egalitarian because they had jobs, low standards of cleanliness and enough money to eat out or order in whenever they wanted, having a baby meant becoming gender Republicans. The old assumptions about men and women, which had been lulled by money and leisure and youthful bohemianism and feminism, woke up. Suddenly it mattered that his job was the one with health insurance, that he made a lot more money, that when you came right down to it he simply was not going to modify whatever his purpose in life had been until now. Just as it mattered that you were the arty freelance one, the bored and restless one, the one who had wanted a baby more. Differences that seemed like accidents, that could easily have gone the other way, now looked as if they had always been part of the plan. Women spent a lot of time persuading themselves that becoming a gender Republican was natural, but what they meant was that it was inevitable, it was overdetermined, like the First World

War. You might as well acquire the frame of mind that justified the reality you had to live with. The alternative was to watch your life recede like a train, winking its red and blue lights. ‘How old are you?’ my friend Dan asked when I raved on enviously about another writer as we watched our daughters totter about the sandbox. ‘Thirty-seven, thirty-eight? After you turn forty, you won’t care.’

AS I WATCHED myself turn into a competent, blank person with a mind furnished by Pottery Barn, the neighbourhood was changing in exactly the same way. When we moved to the Upper West Side it was still possible to believe it was not just a haven for wealthy professionals drawn by the big, solid, thick-walled apartments so prized by musicians and, even more, their neighbours. Our building had character – and characters, too, people who’d lived there for ever: an old Finnish sailor who exercised in the winter months by walking up and down the stairwell, an ancient woman and her almost equally ancient son who collected trash and stored it in their apartment, the widow of Johnny Pineapple the Hawaiian singer, a pair of left-wing lawyers, a cartoonist. But these people were on the way out; when they died or moved away, the Wall Streeters and corporate lawyers and glossy media types moved in. The mothers in the playground were mostly the new people, clean-living and aggressively pleasant, hardly New Yorkers at all, really. They applied to motherhood the organizational skills that had served them so well in their jobs at Goldman Sachs and Merrill Lynch – jobs they would never admit they missed, yet had provided scope for energies that now boiled over within them. They were always arranging holiday parades and mini-camps and finger-painting sessions, and shooing out of the playground the teenagers who liked to fool around on the swings after school, or perhaps instead of school.

To these women, it was clear that the playground would not do. Within months of my arrival there, they had formed a committee to redesign it. The leggy old sycamores would be replaced by tidy islands of greenery; instead of the battered iron equipment – dangerous! uncreative! – there would be

elaborate wooden bridge-and-fort combinations, cushioned rubber mats. The ugly pipe sprinkler would go, too; water would play from fanciful hippopotamus statues. The renovation would be funded by the parks department, with plentiful donations from the corporations for which the mothers had worked, and it would look like a playground in Paris or an old-fashioned children’s book. Everything about the proposal irritated me: the fussy design – where was the open space for the kids to run and shriek and play wild games? – the corporate money, those cutesy hippos. The whole thing seemed like a grown-ups’ idea of childhood: saccharine, conventional and channelled. While the mothers bustled about with their blueprints and consultants, I sat with my playground friend Karen, a former social worker whose current stated goal in life was to raise her son to be as little like his ambitious workaholic real-estate-developer father as possible. We joked about asking the committee to instal a bar; we even daydreamed about trying to stop the whole project. It just didn’t feel democratic, these rich newcomers seizing control of public land and public money to make a fancy little corner for their own fancy children.

Karen and I went to one meeting of the mother’s group, where our concerns about democracy were received with polite bewilderment; everyone else was thrilled that somebody was taking the dirty old playground in hand. In a masterstroke of political manoeuvring, the mothers invited us to serve on the committee, an offer that, like the useless malcontents and complainers we were, we evaded. In the end they wrote up a public declaration and got enough signatures to make it look as if they had a lot of community support. Maybe they did. Karen and I sat on our bench by the slide and grumbled, because what, after all, could we do? How can you say to a community board, ‘I love the old sprinkler because it reminds me of myself’?

The mothers’ committee got their playground, and I had to admit it was darling. In the end, you couldn’t even say the project was selfish or elitist, because the city fixed up the 97th Street playground too, with colourful dinosaur statues for the black and Hispanic kids in that neighbourhood to climb on; they

even made another animal playground further north, with dolphins. It’s hard for me to understand, today, what bothered me so much. Maybe I just liked the fact the old neighbourhood wasn’t always making such a production out of everything. Or maybe I liked the old playground because its grey, run-down plainness mirrored my own state of mind. It was a place where you could think your own thoughts, without being jollied along by whimsical sculptures. But by the time they had cut down the sycamores and torn up the old paving stones, I was out of the playground and out of my marriage too.

SOPHIE WENT to a parent co-op preschool left over from the neighbourhood’s radical days. The children celebrated Kwanzaa and Tet; then played Hot Potato and dress-up and learned about Martin Luther King and recycling. I took a part-time editing job. Who knew there could be such exhilaration in catching the subway downtown, buying coffee from a street cart, saying hi to the receptionist? My husband and I shared custody, and never consulted the thick separation agreement our lawyers spent thousands of dollars squabbling over. On the days Sophie was with me, I did everything exactly the way I wanted. This turned out to be pretty much the way I had been doing things all along, but it felt completely different now that no one was watching me do it. I would read her *Scuffy the Tugboat* and sing ‘Kevin Barry’ as my father had sung it to me, and when she had fallen asleep I would go into my room and lie down on the bed I had shared with my husband, a good man who had done me no wrong. I would smoke a lot of cigarettes and read late into the night like a teenager. When my eyes began to close I would turn on the television and watch Korean costume dramas on a channel somewhere on the edge of cable. Trapped in the little box, women in stiff, elaborate red-and-gold gowns stalked back and forth before thrones and altars and occasionally even whole armies, declaiming, exhorting, berating, bewailing in voices as high and harsh as those of cats in heat.

Despite the lack of subtitles, I understood every word. ◊

Parental Advisory

Alain de Botton's 140-character advice

Family life tends to be marked by two factors: it's full of joys and sorrows – and it gives you very little spare time. For a writer, the solution may be aphorisms and, in the age of Twitter, therefore tweets. In my eyes, a good aphorism should be both intensely personal and entirely devoid of autobiography. The aesthetic goal of the aphorism is to obscure the personal circumstances that gave rise to it. Most of these tweets were written late at night or very early in the morning. Often, readers would contact me and say, 'Are you OK?' To which my response tends to be, 'Of course, but only because I can write this sort of stuff out.'

How tough you are on the cravings of kids reflects what the world has done to your own hopes.

—March 18, 2011 2:29 AM via web

At every new stage of parenting, the worries of the previous stage appear madly exaggerated.

—March 8, 2011 3:49 AM EST via web

Marriages begin with sense: 'we'll be less insane than our parents'. 30 years later, would settle for 'just differently insane'.

—5:25 AM Mar 7th via web

Adult love shouldn't be about remembering what it was like to be loved as a child, but imagining what it took for a parent to love us.

—12:02 PM Feb 25th via web

Laziness in relationships endemic because our earliest experience of love was with people who disguised the work that went into it.

—11:43 AM Feb 25th via web

An unfortunate marriage: still the most effective self-induced way to come face to face with tragedy.

—2:00 PM Feb 19th via web

Perhaps the most unambiguous victory of feminism has been to ensure that fathers properly nurture their children.

—1:29 PM Feb 14th via web

The world's airport departure lounges filled with people overwhelmed by love for their families: the world's kitchens a little less so.

—5:49 PM Feb 13th via web

Most marital strife could (implausibly) be solved by an extra 2 hrs of sleep, 3 evenings apart and an apartment of one's own.

—4:49 PM Feb 13th via web

Some bits of books take an age to compose, others trip out, readers are never any the wiser. Babies are born between paragraphs.

—6:01 PM Feb 9th via web

The child smothers the passion from which it emerged; that made its existence possible.

—8:00 AM Jan 13th via web

Much to the surprise of most adults, children generally can't wait to stop being children.

—8:05 AM Dec 21st, 2010 via Mobile Web

We (40+) were perhaps the last generation to fear our fathers.

—7:51 AM Dec 18th, 2010 via Mobile

In a moment of despair with his father, Samuel (6) puts an advert in the front window: "I need a new dada, pleeze". No takers yet.

—2:29 PM Dec 15th, 2010 via web

Beware of overly well-behaved children: the time to be truly crazy and unreasonable is when you are four. So that at 40 . . .

—2:27 PM Dec 15th, 2010 via web

To be as tough as the world to give kids the strength to deal with it eventually, or to be far less tough - for the very same reason.

—5:15 AM Nov 29th, 2010 via web

Haunted by Saul Bellow's remark: 'it is a wise man who is able to outgrow the attitudes to women of his father.'

—2:28 AM Nov 22nd, 2010 via web

To say of parenting, 'one can anyway never get it right' is to sidestep that one can still do the impossible better or worse.

—4:57 PM Nov 19th, 2010 via web

We don't need a god to weigh our souls at the end of our lives and judge us harshly for our shortcomings - only children.

—4:48 PM Aug 29th, 2010 via web

The only childhood truly deserving of the title 'privileged' is one which imbues someone with a capacity to be a friend to themselves.

—3:36 PM Aug 21st, 2010 via web

A goal of parenting: that your children make at least one less big mistake than you did.

—5:57 AM Aug 12th, 2010 via web

Accusing a younger generation of being more selfish than the last is to forget the problem is youth not generation, a problem cured by time.

—4:21 PM Jul 29th, 2010 via web

Exaggeration of nature: to ensure we make, at most, 4 children we must obsess about sex hourly from 12 to 80.

—1:44 AM Apr 9th, 2010 via mobile web

The Pain Machine

By Heidi Julavits

The other day my six-year-old daughter and I were listing our favourite words. I claimed *breakfast*, *kerfuffle*. She claimed *since*. Then she asked me to choose my favourite letter so that she could guess what it was. I chose *I*. After a few wrong stabs (*H*, *A*, *X*), she requested a hint.

'It is what I call myself when I don't call myself by my name,' I said.

She scrutinized me.

'Stupid?' She said. 'Idiot? Moron? *Fucking* moron?'

We both laughed. She is perceptive, my daughter, uncannily so, possibly even extra-sensorily so. This is the girl who leaves me notes on my pillow every third night; for example, after I accompanied her to a dentist appointment that involved needles and blood, she left me a note with a tracing of her palm and the caption, 'I got too hand it too ya, you where brave waching me at the dentist.'

She knows how hard it is for me to be around her when she's in pain, but not exactly because I cannot bear to see her in pain. She and I both know: it is a little more complicated than that.

FROM THE moment my daughter was born she could not be without me. Not for literally years. Nor could she be with anyone else. (When she could talk she asked my husband, her father, 'Remember when I didn't love you?') I was touched at first. Then embarrassed. Her neediness damned me. I swore to parents and grandparents who cast a gimlet eye upon our emotional squalor that I'd done nothing to encourage it – on the contrary, I assured them. Once our bond became unseemly, untenable – she was three or so – I'd gone out of my way to be unworthy. I'd become short-tempered and impatient. Also I ignored her pain. This was not difficult to do; her pain was rarely justified. To wear special seamless socks was to stick her feet in an iron smelter. To wear a soft acrylic scarf was to be garroted by a scroll of razor wire.

Over time, her catastrophic responses

to the mundane, they dulled me. The more heightened her reactions, the more anaesthetized mine. When I would hear, from the southernmost tip of the apartment, a caterwauling of such flamboyancy it might suggest, to the untrammelled ear, that an amputation was underway, I would roll my eyes. I would shuffle glacially towards the scene of the trauma – involving the rounded cardboard 'corner' of a book and a mutely scraped forearm – I would examine the unmarked skin, I would visibly fail to care.

Soon an unhealthy attachment came to replace our unhealthy attachment. We co-authored a hermetic *kerfuffle* in which we each emerged self-affirmed in our condemnations of the other, bonded by our mutual disdain. Her injury, my sluggish sympathy, her objective outrage at my cold category error.

'What kind of mother,' she would scold, 'doesn't care when her child is hurt?'

'This kind of mother,' I would say.

WHEN I WAS my daughter's age I felt her intensity of pain. But not her variety. I was not partial to my own pain; I was not partial to the pain of people. Instead I experienced the emotional distress of broken lamps doomed for the dump, or of a sweater knitted by my grandmother that I knew I would never wear. I once cried over the fate of a strand of my own hair that blew away in a windstorm. I was the tech-poor equivalent of Roald Dahl's Klausner, the amateur scientist in his short story 'The Sound Machine'. Klausner invents a device that allows him to hear the screams of roses and grass being cut, of trees being axed. 'As he listened, he became conscious of a curious sensation . . . that his ears were going up and up towards a secret and forbidden territory, a dangerous ultrasonic region where his ears had never been before and had no right to be.' Klausner subsequently runs around his neighbourhood trying to stop his neighbours from harming plants, and is deemed insane.

Perhaps because of these tendencies of mine, I did not like to be away from home. Not even, literally, for the length of a movie. I could not be sent to day camp. School I managed by writing on my desktop with my finger every word the teacher said. I adopted superstitions; if I was able to peel the foil top off my yogurt at breakfast without it tearing, I'd have a trauma-free day. If I wore the same sweater in my annual school photo, I'd have a trauma-free year. (This sweater was a green Fair Isle sweater, the kind with the yoke; my parents still have my school photos from grades one through six, me in this sweater that was not, technically, the same sweater – I grew.)

The less crazy among us realize at a point that it is untenable to be certain people.

Especially if, in addition to your heart's propensity to voyage into dangerous ultra-anthropomorphizing regions where it does not belong, you are hypersensitive to social shame.

By the time I was in middle school, I'd become sick of my own suffering. It humiliated me, it exhausted me. When I say *I hated myself* I mean I really, really did, with a homicidal intensity. So the weepy, unfit, full-of-shame girl I was, I got rid of her. I issued a hit, I put her six feet under. By high school she was gone.

And then, in the form of my daughter, she rose from the dead – or rather some zombie version of her did (or maybe a *less* zombie version). A girl who didn't ventriloquize emotional hardship on to lamps and strands of hair but *experienced actual physical pain*. The opposite of a zombie, in fact. A girl who felt pain even when there should have been no pain to feel.

IN RETROSPECT I think this is likely why, when she was not even five, I told her about Anne Frank, I told her about Hitler. This is likely why I've told her about the Twin Towers, and how the people jumped out the windows to avoid being burned. This is likely why, just the other night – while I was speaking on the phone to a friend whose mother had just died and my daughter was ceaselessly keening because she could not figure out something on the computer – I marched my daughter to her room and said, 'You do not have a reason to be crying. THIS

WOMAN has a reason to be crying. Her mother is DEAD.'

When a child lacks emotional proportion, tell her about the Holocaust. Tell her about terrorism. Why be crying, tell her, when nobody's even died.

Ironically, however, when she's actually injured, that's when she barely cries at all. And that's when I say, 'I know, I KNOW THAT HURTS.'

In other words (in others' words): I understand your pain.

In my words: I respect your refusal, for my sake, to behave as though you feel it.

But the problem is not that I fail in the majority of circumstances to understand her pain. The problem is that I fail to recognize it, by which I mean I refuse to validate it. But by which I also mean that her pain is foreign to me. She feels pain where I feel none.

WHICH SOUNDS histrionic, even impossible. *What kind of mother?* But while much of what I've written is true, it isn't entirely accurate. My daughter is not the off-putting headcase I've perhaps made her out to be; she is abundantly loving and lovable, generous and empathic and magnetic. She has always been astonishingly unmaterialistic. She gives her clothes and toys away, not because she's desperate to be admired, but because she, unlike me, has no emotional connection to objects. When I visit her friends' bedrooms I find her clothing, her headbands, her dolls. For Christmas she wraps up her belongings and gives them to family members. Some of these items are so archivally valuable to me that I steal them back when the cousin on whom she bestowed it isn't looking.

When my daughter was two we played a game called 'My Mouse', involving a plush mouse that we would alternately grab from one another and announce, 'My mouse.' I thought, like most of her peers, that she should learn to unhealthily care for a stuffed and easily lost stuffed animal. She did not care. (I did care; I had a soft spot for this mouse.) She faked her rage when I took the mouse from her. Soon she grew bored. When her daycare suggested we ease the apoplectia of her separation from me by allowing her to bring an attachment object, we were at a loss. She was attached to no object; in fact she might be said to have an object aversion. She, from the start, was fit only to love people.

I'VE FAILED to portray how tolerant and patient I've been with her, most notably during the tough early years, years that were so intense we waited nearly five of them to have a second kid; how I was the only person not literally nauseated by her scream that became legend among friends, one of whom, when driving behind our car, reported my daughter's screaming could be heard inside of *her* car, even with both our vehicles travelling at 50mph, the windows rolled up, the stereos and ACs on. My daughter, despite her decibel force field, has land-grabbed more of my heart than I thought available. Than I thought any longer *existed*. With her there was no Plan B, no escape hatch, no point in withholding. There was only the decision to love her and to accept the possibility of total emotional annihilation if she died. So I suppose it's important, here, to acknowledge that this is not an accurate portrayal, really, but a disclosure of my worst fears about my shortcomings as a parent and, more generally, as a human, and how these shortcomings might have long-term effects on people who aren't me.

I HAVE already fantasized about what my daughter will say in our future therapy sessions. In truth, however, I already know. I've witnessed her building the sturdy foundation of her future self-presentation. I've witnessed how I'm a crucial part of the plot machinery no matter what. As my Alzheimered grandfather used to say after we'd finished telling him a story about his own life, *Glad I wasn't there*.

I wasn't there. Yet I am always there.

For example. Since my daughter is constitutionally allergic to most clothing, I have adjusted my expectations of what constitutes 'clad' accordingly. She's allowed to wear the same outfit for weeks on end, and usually does. I demand only that she *wear some clothes*, but even this seemingly very minimal desire can, at times, seem grandiosely Fitzcarraldian, a bug-eyed delusion on a par with pushing ships over mountains.

One day – it was January, 18 degrees – she rode to school in her stroller wearing nothing but her underwear.

But some mornings she will decide she wants to try on the long-sleeved dress with the ruffled collar that a well-meaning friend or relative gave her as a

gift, and which I have hidden in a closet, because I know this dress will send her into a flail of exorcistic proportions. I beg her not to try the dress on; literally, I beg. *Please don't put on this dress*. (Here the fairytale parallels cannot be ignored; Snow White tying the toxic ribbon in her hair while the knowing yet ineffective reader screams, 'Nooooooooooooo.')

Despite my protests, my daughter will put on the ruffle-collared dress, very optimistically she'll do this, as if she really believes in her ability to wear a long-sleeved dress with a ruffled collar, despite years of behavioural evidence to the contrary. She'll insist that I button it, which I wincingly do. Nearly instantaneously she'll drop to the ground, victim of a seizure that falls somewhere between the voluntary and involuntary zones. When I say she occasionally foams at the mouth, I mean that she does exactly that. And when she finally claws her way back from this afflicted Helen Keller-before-the-waterpump-epiphany world, she'll stare at me and say, 'This is your fault. You forced me to wear this.'

And often then I cannot help myself; often, I laugh.

Which I know is exactly what I'm not supposed to do. But I view these fights less as attention-getting manoeuvres, more as creative acts. She is honing her narrative craft, her sense of structure and character believability. She is practising for that time when her deployment of causality is more refined and less easily dismissed as ridiculous, my blame more perfectly plausible, her identity the inextricable fault of me.

Also I find this relieving, a guarantee of our future snarled intimacy. No matter how I try, she will never be rid of me. I am always there.

NOT THAT she's really needed to hone her craft. She's gifted, a natural. The one therapist we took our daughter to – to teach us, essentially, how to put clothes on our own kid – was in our daughter's thrall in seconds.

We'd gone to this woman as a last resort; winter had rolled around again, it was the first really cold day, my husband and I, after an hour of trying to force (yes, force) our daughter to wear something in addition to a tutu (like, I don't know, a coat, or a hat, or maybe one sock), had

realized, as we sat, defeated, on that war-zone threshold to the outside world, that if this continued, we would get divorced. Or we would have to move to the tropics. Or we would have to consult a professional.

We consulted a professional, an occupational therapist, who quickly concluded that we were the fucked-up ones, not our daughter. But we'd been told by people that she probably suffered, not just from plain suffering, but from an actual condition called sensory integration disorder.

A sensory disorder made sense to us. When she was an infant, we'd called her the mood ring – was it only a coincidence that she screamed when we were with people who stressed us out (i.e. family members), but when we were relaxing with friends she would sleep peacefully on a patch of cold grass? Once she could talk, her dis-integrated sensory self could cull lost frequencies from the air. Once day, en route to a nearby cathedral to check out some peacocks, she said, 'I like this walk, this walk is so ...'

'Beautiful?' I said.

'I was going to say "beautiful",' she said, 'but then I thought, what if we see a car accident?'

Three blocks later, we saw a car accident.

I found this less creepy than reassuring; no wonder this girl couldn't wear socks.

BUT TO RETURN to my fantasy. As I've said, I don't imagine what she'll be telling this therapist; I fantasize about what I'll say in my defence. (This *is* a fantasy; meaning, there's got to be something in it for me. So of course I will be in the room with her and this hypothetical future therapist, and my side of the story will be solicited.) I honestly do fantasize about this, especially after we've had one of our more brutal confrontations, one that exposes me, even to myself, as scandalously hard-hearted.

Because I am a byproduct of *her*. This will be my opening gambit to the therapist, likely a woman prone to funk in the earring department but nowhere else, whom I will feel quite confident I can charm to my side even though past experience would not support this confidence of mine. This is not who I am, I would tell the hypothetical female therapist; or, OK, this is sort of who I am. My husband here (I would tell her) would probably appreciate it if I revealed what a bitch I

was when he dislocated his shoulder. Not directly after he dislocated it; my heart is good in true emergencies. But I am not so gifted a caretaker once the adrenalin subsides. A week later, when he griped about having to wear his sling in Paris, or three months later, when he was still too unstable to climb a mountain because of his shoulder injury, I was unsympathetic, even derisive.

It had got so bad, this behaviour of mine, that whenever he was sick he tried not to tell me; when he couldn't hide a bad cough, a thrown-out back, he asked me if I was mad at him.

So you see – well. You see. It is indefensible. I do not want people to feel pain. If they do, it makes me angry.

Quite evidently (I'd tell the therapist) I was the sort of person who'd been raised by parents who were emotionally and physically stoical. Here my father would be cited as the pre-eminent family stoic, the man who once said to me, when I was in the midst of some elementary-school-era sensory implosion, 'We're not going to have to send you to a therapist, are we?' The man whose child-rearing breakthrough occurred when I was an infant, and I was crying, and he said to my moth-

COSBY family



(GOOD PARENTING)

er, 'Is she hungry? has she been changed?', and when no suitable reason could be produced for my inconsolability, my father instructed that he and she ignore me, the upshot of which, he often boasted to me once I was a parent, was, inconceivably, this: 'And you never cried again.'

I would cop to these contexts and shortcomings as a means of coming clean, yes, but also as a way of establishing a trustworthy, self-critical base from which an argument can more believably be mounted. I, too, have been honing my craft.

Then I would tell the therapist that living with my daughter – and here I would seem to be joking, but it would be abundantly clear that I was not at all joking – was analogous to living with an abusive alcoholic. That I spent my life looking into the near future, attempting to spot the binge-and-violence triggers – a flocked and itchy nightgown, a pizza with a fleck of basil on it – and deftly sidestep them, so as to protect both of us from her sensory implosions. And so our lives in the present were fraught, stressful; I was absent, I was busy. I occupied a slightly different zone on our mutual timeline; I was the advance team, checking for bombs in the form of her. Though I'd killed off that unsuitably sensitive and fearful girl I once was, I had, for the first three years of my daughter's life, been my old self. I'd temporarily brought back my dead for her. She'd become my broken lamp, my lost strand of hair. I had been so scared of her feeling pain that I'd fled to the future to prevent it.

Or something like that.

IT'S A TRUISM that no crime goes unpunished, so I am willing to entertain the idea that I am being punished for that murder I committed so many years ago. I'm a novelist; a few years back, a critic pointed out, more or less, that my third novel was populated by sardonic, unsympathetic characters (I'm paraphrasing here, or maybe I'm attributing to this critic what I fear myself to be true); however, she believed, this critic, that I had it in me to write a book that was more emotionally direct.

This challenge is one that I've been trying to rise to ever since. But here is the conundrum: can you choose not to feel pain, yet still be able to evoke it (and not by throwing a brick in someone's face)?

Can you create an alternative human, an alternative you, who feels things that you do not?

I had a therapist once who wanted me to talk about the novel I was writing at the time, my first. I did not want to talk about this novel with her or with anyone; I've never really liked talking about what I'm writing, or might someday write, or have once written. But finally I relented, more for her than for me. I described my main character, her situation, etc. (It was an infanticide novel. The main character, a mother, kills her son because he is sick.) Afterwards the therapist looked at me and said, 'You have so little sympathy for her. You're so disdainful of her.' I was meant to see a fitting parallel in this – in fact, the therapist spelled it out for me. *You speak about her as pitilessly as you speak about yourself.*

But that relationship between me and me is an oft-acknowledged one, i.e. no big news. What mortified me was this: while trying to keep very far away from the autobiographical first novel trap, I'd done something arguably more artistically clueless; I'd written about myself without realizing I'd written about myself. I'd written a *roman-à-clef-à-clef*. I could not write an emotionally direct novel, but this I *could* do – I could put a character through hell, then show my readers why they shouldn't care at all about her.

BUT IF I WAS so unsympathetic towards this 'character' I dreamed up, how might this tendency of mine manifest once I was the creator of actual humans? How might a *real* innocent become the receptacle of my abundant disdain?

I have discounted this easy equivalency; I am bothered by this easy equivalency.

When I encourage my daughter to not feel the incredible pain she feels, I do it because I do not want her to lead a heart-breaking life. Aside from the unavoidable gutting tragedy, these kinds of lives are an option. You can choose not to have one. I chose not to.

In terms of my daughter, however, I have begun to rethink how I talk to her about her hyperactive sensory self. When we're at that threshold to the outside, and she can't put on her boots, I do not say, 'You are six years old. You should be able to deal with this.' Because I know to 'deal

with this' will require for her a massive system override; it will be the beginning of the creation of a person who might be capable, a few years from now, of performing a murder on herself. The other day, after one of her clothing tantrums, she shut herself in her room and yelling self-flagellated: 'Everybody hates me. My friends, my mother, my father, my brother. Even I hate me!'

In these future therapy sessions I cannot wait to be falsely blamed for everything that she is, and with which I had nothing to do. But this other legacy of mine, this ability to perform a variety of suicide that permits a person to keep living – I cannot bear to be accurately blamed for teaching her how to do that.

FOR CHRISTMAS this year we received the usual presents from my daughter. One cousin received a tulle skirt I remembered buying her last winter when we subways downtown to kill a snow day. Another cousin received a mother-of-pearl heart locket given to her by a racist Christian great-aunt who travels the world in a boat filled with old people and, despite her bigotry, really does mean well. (I remember the provenance of every object she owns, which is why I find it so impossible to give anything away.) Her brother received a stuffed rabbit that was once, for about a year, actually loved by her. And I received the mouse with which we'd played 'My Mouse'. When I opened it, my first impulse was to hold it high in the air and announce, mock-triumphantly, 'My Mouse!' But I didn't, because I didn't feel particularly triumphant. It was impossible not to read into this mouse (it has a name; it is Nussbaum) more than the simple fact that she was giving me what I cherished more than she ever did or could. Nussbaum seemed more unsettlingly symbolic, the first warning flare she would soon no longer need me in that way that had once, shamefully, shamed me. She could dispense with these objects over which we falsely fought, and I knew it was just a matter of time before the dramas we'd concocted to feel close to one another would fail to matter to her. I was the one who, by winning, had lost. Fucking moron, indeed. In these future therapy sessions, when we look back, I am not always there. ◊

Finally Getting Around to Having That Talk About Sex with My Dad

By John Kenney

As I sit in the ICU, watching my frail father, a kind of baby now, except not at all cute like a baby, I can't help but think of other times, better times, with him – throwing a ball (which we never did), throwing large fruit (once), throwing up – but also about better times without him – on vacation, getting upgraded to business class, sneezing. Would he die before regaining consciousness? Would I ever have the chance to say the things I'd always wanted to say, was afraid to say, none of which I could think of now?

Beeeeeeep! Flat line. Oh Jesus, no. He's dead.

I'm kidding.

He wasn't dead. He wasn't even in the hospital. I was just daydreaming, as you do about the death of a loved one. Or even a family member.

This was last Saturday and I was walking from the living room to the kitchen and my wife and the twins were out for the day and I remember that I was going to pour myself a glass of milk and eat a cookie. Which is when I thought, mid-pour, 'I never got around to having that talk about sex with my dad.'

I stopped right there, in the middle of the kitchen, bent my head to the right, looked up at a point on the ceiling, placed my left hand on my naked hip (I wasn't wearing pants), and thought back to a day, long ago, when my dad and I were driving back from the garbage dump.

It was also a Saturday and I was twelve years old and we were in my dad's Ford Falcon wagon and he was smoking and wearing a hat and I was smoking and wearing a hat and he was sipping from a can of Schlitz – a thing he did on Saturdays on our way back from the dump and also most mornings – and he asked me if I wanted one and I said sure and so we were smoking and drinking and wearing hats, as fathers and sons did back then, and he was staring at the road, elbow out the window, listening to the ball-game on the radio, humming a random tune to

himself.

Then he said, 'Thinking about sexual intercourse right now?'

I remember blushing, in large part because I was thinking about sexual intercourse right then; how it worked, who did what, if it was OK to do with a neighbour or a fish or a lawn tractor. I had so many questions.

'Gee, Dad,' I said, staring out the window, wondering whether everyone had a penis.

He threw his head back and chuckled.

'That's what I thought,' he said, tossing his can out of the window. 'You've got a look about you lately that just says *erection*. You've been seeing a lot of that O'Malley girl.'

'That O'Malley girl' was Tracy O'Malley, and it's fair to say I had a pretty big crush on her. She was also sitting in the back seat, as was my mother, my grandmother (who had passed away six months earlier) and our neighbour Phil, who would go on to become Pope John Paul II.

'Geez, Dad,' I said, this time adding a 'z'. Everyone laughed, even Tracy.

'Erection,' Tracy said, laughing. 'That's a funny word.'

My father said, 'I bet you fall in bed too easily with the beautiful girls who are shyly brave and you sell yourself as a man to save but all the money in the world is not enough.' I was confused but he laughed and so did the future Pope. I should probably mention that my father had an uncanny knack for speaking, verbatim, what would eventually become lyrics to every song on Liz Phair's *Exile in Guyville*.

Except then, instead of explaining sex to me, my father, Tracy and my dead grandmother got into a funny conversation about how Aerosmith was a bullshit band and also whether Zionism is essentially racism. Then we drove over the rotary and killed a dog.

Standing there in the kitchen, think-

ing back on that bygone time, I felt two things very powerfully. One was a pang for time lost. Where does it go? How can I be in that car, in that moment, and then standing here at this kitchen sink, absent-mindedly wrapping yards of Saran Wrap around my waist? The other thing I felt was that I was enjoying the pose I was holding. I will be honest with you and tell you that I felt pretty for the first time in many years. Then I saw my neighbour, Carl Raditz, staring at me from his yard, holding a rake, with a puzzled look on his face. I waved and he turned quickly and ran away. Being there, almost naked, waving to Carl Raditz and watching him run across the lawn and then fall down and me shouting out the window, laughing, 'You dumb prick!', made me think of my father again.

I called him and he answered midway through the first ring, as he always did because he lived alone three doors down the street from me and most of his friends were dead and me and my brother and sister, though we loved our father very much, also hated him and wished we'd had a different father and also wished we never had to deal with him in person or on the phone again. But we also knew he was our dad and that meant something to us too. Though not much. And also we wished, as I said, that we'd had almost anyone else for a father.

I whispered, in a scary voice, 'I'm calling from inside the house.'

'Who is this?' he said. He sounded nervous.

'Hey, Dad,' I said in my regular voice, which is unnaturally high, even for a man with non-functioning testicles. 'It's Gar. Gary. Your son. Your son Gary. It's me.'

'You're my least favourite child.'

I said, 'Yeah, right.'

And he said, 'No, I'm serious.'

This was a thing we did, me with the scary voice and him with the 'least favourite child' thing. We didn't do it often. In fact, this was the first time we'd ever done it. But I know we did it in good fun.

My father said, 'If I were a black man I would want my name to be Leroy.'

'What?'

'Nothing.'

I said, 'I was wondering if you had a few minutes to talk about intercourse. It's something we never got around to doing

and I feel we should.'

'You're a fifty-year-old man, for Christ's sake. You have four children. You're a banker in Stuttgart. Your code name is piglet.'

'I'm forty-two. I have twins. And I'm a paintball salesman in Morristown.'

'Who is this?'

'Gary.'

'Oh.'

He paused for what seemed like a long time.

'Dad?' I said quietly, pretending I was a character in a movie and this was a tender scene.

'I was just thinking that I shower less as I get older,' he said. And that the smell of cat urine is vaguely pleasurable to me.'

Less than a month earlier my brother and sister and I had got together at my father's house to decide whether to pull the plug on my dad. The problem was that he was perfectly healthy and it would have required putting the plug in first and none of us knew where the plug went, though we tried a few spots, but he wouldn't stop struggling so we talked, as a family, and decided against and it wasn't an easy decision emotionally, I will tell you that. He'd taken a fall earlier in the week, in large part because my brother had pushed him (as a joke) but no one

except me and my younger sister found it very funny. But it was funny.

I could hear him flick the top of his Zippo lighter, the one I had given him for his birthday when I was ten, the one that had the inscription on the side that said, 'To Doug. A wonderful lover. Raphael.' I bought it used.

'Sex,' he said, exhaling. 'I once had sex with half a dozen men in a Horn & Hardart toilet.'

'Excuse me?'

'I said I loved your mother very deeply. The passion never waned.'

'Do you have advice for me?'

'Wooing.'

I said, 'What?'

'Wooing. Crucial. When wooing, never use the word "penis" or "vagina". In fact, never use those words ever. No one wins. Never watch yourself having sex by way of a mirror. You'll either never stop laughing or be so disgusted you'll want to stop for ever. Never feel good about it. If you feel good about it that's just wrong.'

I said, 'Is it normal to cry before, during and after?'

My father paused and said, 'Do you want to know what I've learned, the thing I wish I'd known long ago, the wish I wish I'd done?'

'Tell me, Dad.'

My father said, 'If I could do it over I would pitch a pilot to the networks about Jesus. Modern day. He comes back as a mysterious Canadian who moves to Rochester and gets a job at a plant manager at Eastman Kodak. His name is David Toilet, only it's pronounced Twa-lay. I'd call it Dave Toilet.'

'That's funny.'

He said, 'It is funny, right?'

I said, 'Hey, Dad, do you believe in God?'

"God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him." Nietzsche. *The Gay Science*.'

Then we both start laughing because he'd said the word 'gay'.

'Do you know what amazes me about the world today? About all the change I've seen over the past eighty-five years?'

'What?'

My father says, 'They haven't changed the way you put on a pillowcase. Not one iota. Have they?'

'No, they haven't.'

He said, 'Has this been helpful?'

'Very.'

'OK then.'

I said, 'Hey, Dad?'

'Yes?'

'I'm glad you're not dead.'

'Who is this?'

◇

ON NOT PARENTING

At Least We Don't Brag

By Sarah Miller

When we were young my brother made home life a volcanic misery with his insistence on breaking what I thought were perfectly reasonable rules. This drama continued for years. Then my brother had kids and my parents suddenly became saints to him. He can't have a glass in his hand without raising a toast to their selflessness, their fairness, their wisdom. I don't think I was ever particularly vocal about their shortcomings, but one does wish, on occasion, to complain to a sibling about one's parents. This is an avenue now closed to me. If I so much as mention in sour tones my mother's tendency to over-pack, I am put to shame with his almost

awestruck reverence: 'Hey. Do you realize how amazing Mom is?'

OK, I didn't say Mom wasn't 'amazing'. I was just saying I thought maybe one day she would figure out how to get two days' worth of clothes into a carry-on. And I thought maybe my brother could respond, 'God, I know,' or just laugh, but no. Instead, it's, 'You don't understand because you don't have kids,' or, 'You'll understand when you have kids,' or, my least favourite, 'Imagine if you had kids.'

My brother (who, aside from being a parent and totally annoying, is a wonderful person) even said this to me on September 11. I was in Brooklyn, he was well

west of the Mississippi, and yet, what I was offered as comfort for my considerably fucked-up state of mind were these five words: *Imagine if you had kids*.

There is no other statement that is so freely uttered that so freely suggests to the person to whom it is so freely uttered that he or she is not really living, not really human, merely passing through this life half blind and half conscious. You can't tell a parent you went out to get paper clips without them telling you how much more intense, hectic, rewarding and mystifying this would have been if you only had kids. Because not only are you childless, you are not entirely human.

You will never really see, you will never really feel, you will never really *be*.

This idea is very anxiety producing, and it is for this reason that I actually always thought I would have kids. I thought it would make me a better or more interesting or deeper person. But I must say, other than the people I know who had kids and then stopped driving drunk or visiting meth motels, I haven't seen the experience improve anyone's life. I definitely haven't seen it improve their personality. Parents admit this. 'Oh, we're so boring now that we have kids,' they tell you. 'Oh, I am so in love with my daughter that's all I think about.' There's this sort of perverse pride in having funnelled one's entire capacity for happiness, pain, fear and disappointment into someone who is not you, and I think that's probably interesting, in a way. It's also interesting to have stuck with myself as the focus of my life. Interesting to me, that is. It occurred to me lately that we who haven't had kids at this age are every bit as annoying to the people who have as they are to us. We must seem so stuck, so self-absorbed, so disturbingly free to waste time. But at least we don't brag, because what would we say? *Imagine if you knew what was happening on Boardwalk Empire?*

There's the idea that the bad parts of having kids are made up for by the good parts, an idea that has recently been called into question by articles bearing the sorts of extreme titles people come up with when they hope whatever they're saying is so outlandish it couldn't possibly be true. One of the notable contributions to this genre was Jennifer Senior's 'Why Parents Hate Parenting' (*New York Magazine*, July 2010), and I personally enjoyed it for the accompanying shots of photographer Jessica Harper and her husband as they care for their infant twin boys. Jessica and Christopher are young, good-looking, urban and blessed with offspring. They are also miserable and shattered. They are the dream; they are the nightmare. Whatever. Who knows what their life is actually like, and truthfully, no matter how lost and betrayed the spread suggests they are, Jessica still looks enviably good in her nightgown. It *still* looks romantic. (It's kind of like saying you wouldn't want to be Butch Cassidy or the Sundance Kid, because they die.) And then the article, like most of them, winds down into this

philosophical rumination on what is happiness anyway, and then tells us about a study that concluded that maybe married women with kids are less stressed than married women without kids, but married women without kids feel more despair.

Which is probably true, because after all, we (I'm not actually married, but close enough I guess) have the time and the silence to feel the regret, shame, self-hatred and maybe just boredom that for mothers is lost in a whirlwind of laundry and loud noises – first crying, then hideous toys, then hideous cartoons sounds, then hideous live action television sounds, which I believe (though I will never know for sure!) reaches an apex with sunny Disney sarcasm. And then they throw their books around because they hate algebra, and then they hate you, and then they move out. If you're lucky.

I've always dreamed of saying to parents who ask me to imagine if I had kids, *Imagine if you could write*. Imagine if all your thoughts and ideas had a tendency to coalesce into good English prose, imagine how much richer your life would be. But of course you can't say that. Not only is it rude, it's undemocratic. Because not everyone can write, but everyone can, presumably (and let's not get into what a massive presumption this is) have children. Except that I really can't because noise isn't just annoying to me, it literally makes me crazy. I can imagine myself getting violent over uncontrollable noise, and you're not really supposed to tell kids to be quiet any more. It seems like you're not even supposed to complain about them, unless it's cute complaining. What you're supposed to do with kids these days is essentially let them do whatever they want. And there's no way I could deal with that. I don't want to spend my life wishing something that I created would just be quiet. Despair is definitely part of my life, I won't deny

it, but it beats noise hands down, any day of the week.

A baby. Yes, of course, who wouldn't want a baby? Who wouldn't want to feel useful in the way being a parent makes you feel useful? It's a lot to give up. There were so many times I thought about how wonderful it would be to hold up this thing, this accomplishment. But I'm so glad I was able to resist. I'm so glad I don't have to use the term *f-bombs*, and that I've seen *Team Umizoomi* only once. I'm glad it takes me five minutes to leave the house. And it's not just the not-having-a-baby thing I'm glad I avoided. It's not having a kid at all. Because as far as I can tell,

Americans judge a child to be well raised if he essentially disappears at eighteen, and that's pretty much it. You can count – it might be as high as 100, but you can count to 100 pretty fast – the number of times you'll ever see him again.

A few years ago, I was hugging my beloved (now dead) cat Orangey, and I said, 'Oh, Orangey, I just

love you so much.' My friend was over, and she had just had a baby. But I wasn't thinking about that. I was simply giving a stupefyingly beautiful pet well-deserved praise. I didn't expect a response. But my friend looked at me, obviously really wanting not only to speak, but to *communicate*. 'Imagine if you had a baby,' she said. 'Imagine loving someone a million times as much as you love Orangey.'

My first thought was, That poor someone. My next thought was, My poor parents. *Everyone's* poor parents. Because kids just leave now. My mother lives in Massachusetts, and my brother and his family and I all live in California. She has my father, and they are happy, but she misses her kids and her grandkids, and they are a part of her life only in snippets. The visits are finite, something that can be counted. I don't want to live with that kind of longing when I am old. ◊



A BEGINNING.
BUT ALSO AN END.

On Groceries

by *Christoph Niemann*

lightbulbs
toothpaste
Smart Money magazine

Drano®
pipe cleaner
2 lbs. cherry butter
flour
intl. phone card

16 regular soap bars
16 aloe avocado soap bars



After spending 8 consecutive evenings without a bedside light, Kathy finally remembers to pick up replacement bulbs. The big downside of reading in bed however is that it will attract mosquitoes, hence the toothpaste, which is a surprisingly effective remedy for insect bites. Unlike the novel Kathy is so much looking forward to read, a rolled up magazine is a very potent bat, just in case the mosquitoes overdo it.

Harvey has a crush on his neighbour. Recently, he overheard her complaining to the super about continuous problems with the pipes. He secretly hopes that those problems persist and he can spontaneously drop by and volunteer to help. After fixing the drain, he dreams of asking her over to his place for cherry pie. First he has to call his aunt Maude though, who moved back overseas after her husband died, and ask her for the exact recipe.

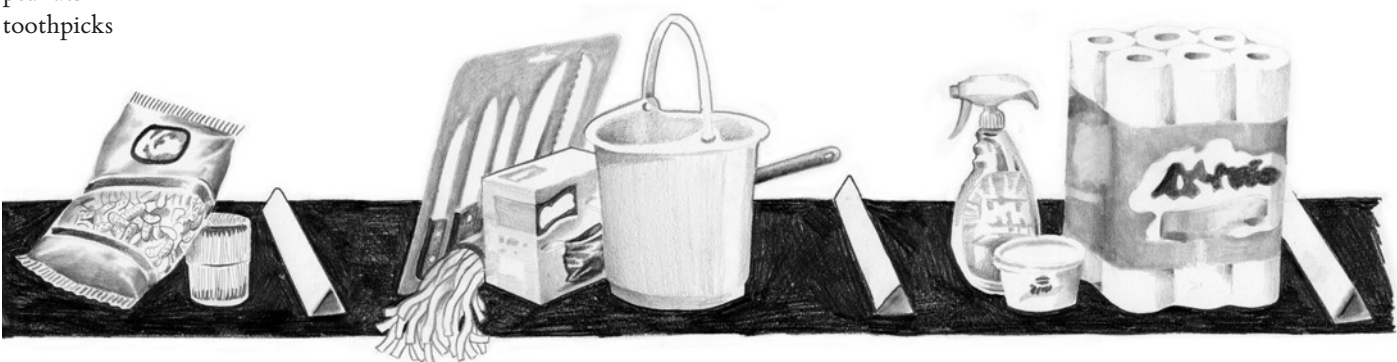
Sid's brother Art is in jail (he robbed a pharmacy, which he kind of knew was a bad idea, what with the pharmacist being rumored to be some sort of former martial arts wiz; at least Art's injuries resulted in the judge going easy on him).

Anyhow, Art loves to play chess, and since apparently they don't have a set in the jail's library or wherever they would have a chess set in jail, Sid wants to smuggle in the soap so Art can carve a set of pieces.

peanuts
toothpicks

set of kitchen knives
large bucket
cleaning mop
large garbage bags (extra strength)

window cleaner (500 g)
2% yogurt, toilet paper



Susanne's husband Geoff has been cheating on her. She has decided to kill him. She will mix some peanuts into his dinner. Geoff, being severely allergic, will be immobilized but fully conscious, while suffering a slow and painful death by a hundred stabs.

Tony's boy is in 2nd grade and was given the assignment to build a scarecrow. Tony's wife told him to get buy scissors, a hat, a broom and a large piece of cloth. Since he couldn't find any of those items, they will have to improvise.

Troy's cleaning lady told him they need window cleaner. Troy really loves yogurt. Also, if he remembers correctly, he's almost out of toilet paper.

‘I Wouldn’t Yell. My Dad Yells.’

A Conversation with Children on the Subject of Parenting

This roundtable discussion was conducted over pizza and Pepperidge Farm cookies in February 2011 on the 100th day of fourth grade for five public school girls in Brooklyn, New York. The aim of the conversation was to hear their views on parenting and life. Each child has been given a pseudonym.

FIVE DIALS: You five have been friends since first grade. Who’s the youngest?

Marin: I am and it’s so frustrating being youngest. Because it’s like you’re always shortest . . .

Rose: No you’re not, I’m the shortest when we line up for ballroom dancing.

Marin: But still, you’re always so small and it’s really weird to be last.

Julia: Do we have to do height? I have a twin.

Rose: He’s really annoying, no offence to you.

Hale: Show her the scratch.

Julia: He did this to me yesterday.

5D: At what age do you start liking boys rather than hating them?

Hale: Never.

Rose: Except this guy Bruce, who’s really nice. He’s really good to do ballroom dancing with.

[*The five girls jump up, partner off, and start frantically ballroom dancing.*]

Marin: My favourite thing is swing.

Sophie: There’s this annoying kid in my class, Jeremy, who has this really big crush on me and I don’t like him at all, but I can’t get away from him because he sits next to me in science and he gives me all these compliments.

5D: Like what?

Sophie: Like (*sing-song*) ‘Sophie, I love your new jacket. Oh Sophie, I love your hat.’ And today when we were lining up it was so embarrassing because he asked me if I wanted to listen to the song ‘Billionaire.’

5D: Why was that embarrassing?

Sophie: It was embarrassing because he can be nice and so I’m nice to him, but I really didn’t want to listen to the song. I felt bad saying no. He was like, ‘Are you sure?’ And I was like, ‘Yeah, I’m sure.’

5D: Can you imagine what it would be like to have kids?

Julia: I don’t want kids.

Rose: I want to adopt a kid. I don’t want to go into labour. It’s like a really hard poop.

5D: How do you know that?

Rose: I watch *Glee*.

Julia: *Glee* is inappropriate.

Sophie: I can imagine what it’d be like to be married.

Marin: I hate when my parents go out on a trip for, like, over a week because it gets me really, really weird.

Rose: I wouldn’t be divorced. Divorce is a big hassle, but it’s nice having two houses.

5D: How would you parent if you had kids?

Sophie: I wouldn’t get as mad as easily. Oooh, and I wouldn’t assume I was better than the kid at everything.

Hale: I wouldn’t ignore my kid whenever they say that I’m wrong and they’re right.

Rose: I wouldn’t yell. My dad yells.

Marin: So whenever I do my homework my parents always check it afterwards. If I make the slightest little mistake in the whole problem, they yell at me, ‘Marin! You’re not going to get this done! You have to get this done! Marin, if you want to go to bed not past midnight you have to get this done!’ And I’m like, ‘Okay, but just tell me what I did wrong and I’ll fix it.’

[*Huge laughter.*]

5D: If there was a magazine for nine-year-olds what would you want to read about in it?

Julia: Horses.

Marin: Secretariat.

Hale: How awesome Taylor Swift is.

5D: What’s a big deal at school?

Marin: I think love. Because kids in fourth grade take it a little too seriously. They’ve just learned words like date and kissing and they want to use them even though they don’t know the actual meaning of the words. It’s like, I want to date a radio. Like do you even know what that is?

Sophie: They take it too seriously. I mean a boy and girl can’t have a conversation without everyone being like, ‘Ooohh, oh my god.’

Hale: I know about love. I have a boyfriend and I kissed him.

Julia: I think love’s a big deal because it’s kind of a problem if you get older and you don’t know what love is. Hale and I and Rose care about it.

Sophie: It’s what you like, not who you are.

Hale: I don’t believe in online dating. It’s just so stupid. It’s like, ‘Oh, oh, I like fish. I do too. Let’s date.’ It’s so dumb.

Rose: If you like each other and you have everything in common then maybe you should have a lot of conversations online and become friends. But you have to have

to be able to have that spark. You have to see them. Maybe he's a Minotaur and has one eye then you're like . . . maybe not.

JD: What do you do at recess?

Marin: We basically wander around and make up games and chase the boys. It's actually very fun sometimes.

Rose: We actually stole a ball from them.

JD: Is bullying a real thing?

Rose: No.

Marin: Well today actually – Julia remembers this. There's these really weird toys that boys are obsessed with. They're little metal tops called Bey Blades. And this boy, Daniel I think, dropped his and we found the bottom part that spins and we took it.

Marin: Daniel would pick on us.

Rose: Daniel is the most annoying person.

Julia: He's never seen snow.

JD: Do you like being in fourth grade?

Julia: I totally love it except there's one problem in my life, Stephen. Let me demonstrate.

[*Everyone starts ballroom dancing again.*]

Julia: So we're in escort position and Stephen's like this, he's like obsessed with ballroom dancing and my teacher had to send him out of the room.

Marin: I like it except for tests, homework and maths. I hate maths more than anything in the whole world.

Sophie: I like being in fourth grade but I feel like they give so much homework on the days that you're busy but not on the

days that you don't have anything to do after school.

JD: Does being nine feel different?

Hale: More responsibility.

Sophie: Sometimes I wish I wasn't growing up. I could take a bath instead of a shower. Sometimes it's nice though.

JD: So growing up is mostly good?

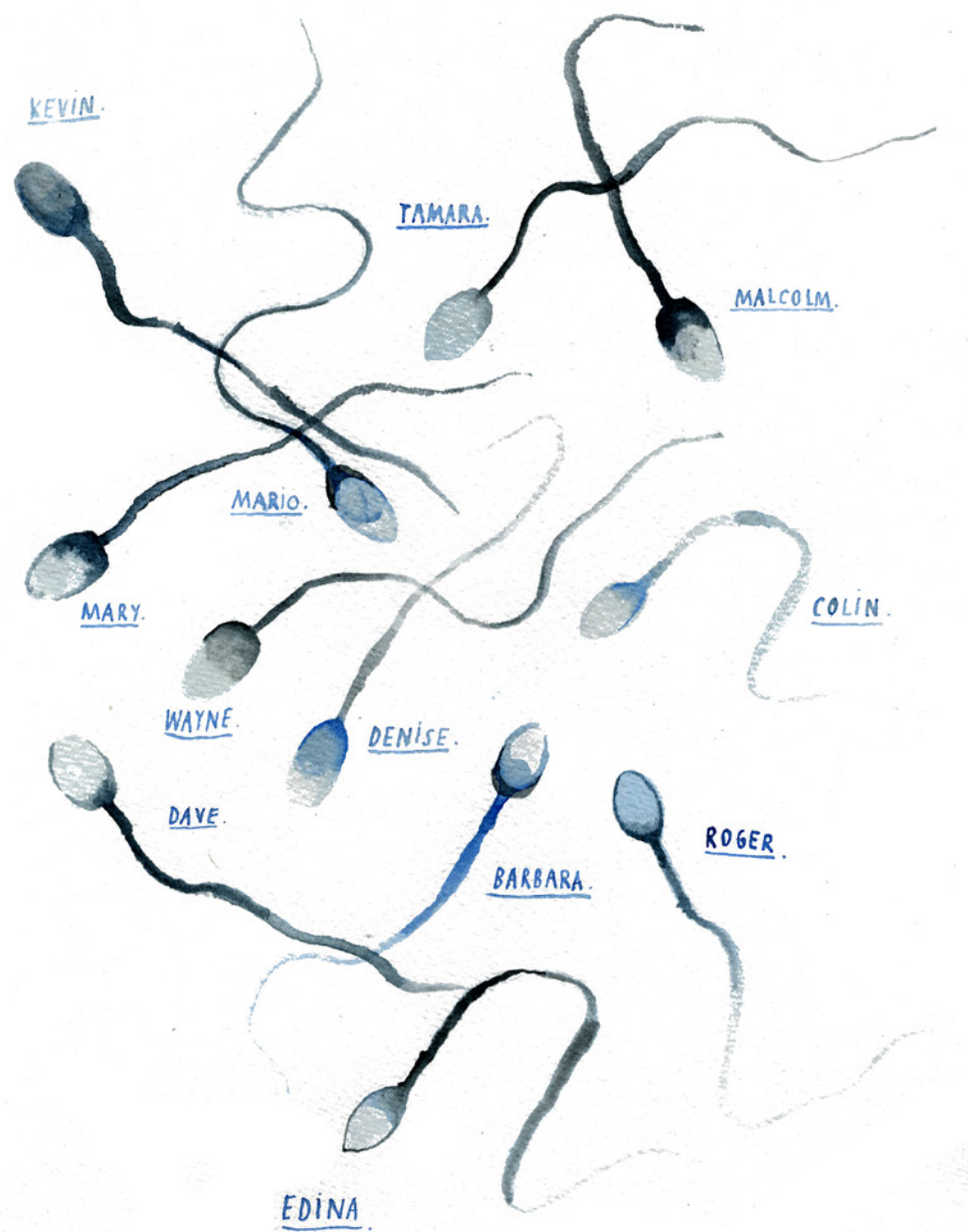
Rose: Yes, thank god.

Julia: No. Because I feel like you're losing your playtime. When you're a kid you get tons of playtime but when you get to, let's say, college your mind is on boys and work and jobs and business.

JD: What's the best part of everyone's day?

Julia: Ballroom dancing.

Rose: Not with the boys, but ballroom dancing. ◊



Life Requires Courage

Excerpts from *Reading My Father* by Alexandra Styron

I
When I got older, Daddy's stories became my own. I took the Man and the Farmer's Son and Ella Grasso's injunction against horses and made them into little set pieces. And I dined out on them frequently. In dorm rooms, at dinner parties, on dates, this ghoulish scenario seemed to satisfy the question *So what was it like having William Styron as a father?*, which often hovered when I got to know new people. The Great Man at home, then, was eccentric, dark, and cruelly funny. His transgressive behaviour and his wicked imagination shocked people. But they also stoked a romantic idea about the private lives of famous writers in general, and Bill Styron in particular.

The last time I told my father's ghost stories was at his memorial service, 2 February 2007. His death, when it happened, had been a long time coming; I'm not ashamed to say that when he breathed his last, it was a relief. Still, I was surprised by how shaken I was, at the graveyard, watching my brother lower the box of ashes into its small, deep hole. And I sobbed while that soldier played taps. But, within days, our family had begun to plan a celebration of Daddy's life, a party to which my mother could at last invite *everyone*. I knew without a doubt that I wanted to write something. It seemed natural, since writing is what I do. It would be an opportunity for closure, as they say in griefspeak. And then I would be really, seriously free from this whole freaking deal.

On a messy, sleet-drenched day, more than eight hundred people filed into St Bartholomew's Church in Manhattan. President Clinton, Senator Kennedy, Mike Nichols, Carlos Fuentes, and Bob Loomis would be offering remembrances. Daddy's best friend, Peter Matthiessen, was delivering the eulogy. Meryl Street and Mia Farrow were among the readers of Daddy's work, and my siblings had chosen works by Rumi, Faulkner, and Mary Oliver. I'd spent a week or so fussing over my words, but through all the revisions my first line remained the same.

'My father used to scare the crap out of me,' I declared. The lurid stories I chose that day were selective (omitting a couple that my husband, Ed, thought were actually too awful to get a laugh). And after I told them, I wondered aloud *why* he had done it. Why would a grown man scare his children so completely? (He had told similar tales to each of my siblings, and every one of them had a different twist.) Was it catharsis? Was he blowing off steam after a day grappling with all those barbarous slavers and Nazis who inhabited his books – real-life maniacs on the loose inside his head? Or was it a ham-fisted attempt at fatherhood? Was he just a dad with a faulty radar trying to make a connection? The answer that I settled on reflected what I believed was a deeper truth. Whether he meant to or not, Daddy taught us the lesson – a lesson which tested him hard at the end of his days – that life requires courage, and a sense of humour.

Now that he was gone, I had to wonder not why my father told those stories but why *I* told them. Why was this narrative – as hokey as a fifties TV show – the one that I was stuck on? There was something disingenuous about it. These hoaxes, and the way I described them, implied that a certain lightheartedness ruled the day in our house. That it was a Roald Dahl sort of place, and that Daddy, curmudgeonly and outrageous, was still at the core a comic figure. Which really couldn't have been further from the truth.

Even before *Darkness Visible* opened a window into my father's personal history, I encountered people who appeared to know more. Strangers often seemed hip to some broad and unsavoury secret, though they never said it outright. *It must have been hard*, they would say vaguely, putting a physical ellipsis to the conversation by rhythmically, knowingly, nodding their heads. *It must have been hard dot dot dot*. Or they would laugh a little too loudly and maybe touch my shoulder, smile, and shake their heads. Sympathetic gestures all, but they often hit quite wide

of the mark. Retelling Daddy's stories was, I guess, my way of managing that false intimacy by providing satisfying tidbits. They kept me from heading into territory I didn't want to explore. And they preserved a myth I was obviously as invested in as anyone.

II
 LIKE MY FATHER, I became, long ago, an itinerant island writer. For several years in my late twenties, I spent part of each winter in my parents' house working on my first novel. The book, about a troubled young woman who goes to an island in the Caribbean to attend the funeral of her childhood nanny, was, narratively speaking, pure fiction. But many of the details – warring parents, a child's secret, the hard choices of motherhood – as well as the bigger themes of forgiveness and maturity's apprehension of difficult truths were taken from experience. This was a very lonely and confusing time in my life, and the book reflected how fragmented I felt. Shuffling around the draughty rooms in search of pockets of heat, I would write most of the day and stay up reading late into the night, absent all other life-forms save for the indispensable companionship of my sweet Labrador Wally. I was, frankly, amazed by my own discipline. After years of mindless busyness that passes as a life for most actors, I had no idea I could be so singular in my focus, or feel so alive when I felt so alone. Not that I was particularly happy. Uncertain of where this new creative venue would take me, I only knew I was taking a terrific risk in my commitment to it. Nine years after finishing college, I was back in graduate school, looking to reinvent myself. The shadow in which I was suddenly standing did not escape my notice.

I wrote my first stories in near secrecy while I was still in Los Angeles, in 1994 and '95. They were shapeless little things. Spare and awkward as newborn colts, they overreached and under-reached, wobbled and froze, showed a flash of grace and then went splat in a tangle of poetic intentions. I didn't know how to write, but I definitely knew what good writing was, and my stories were not good. But after more than a year under the tutelage of an incisive teacher named Judith Taylor, who urged me to 'go home and go back to school', I began to allow

myself hope. Finally, I wrote a story I thought was pretty all right, and I sent it to my father. I took his long reply by fax, which began, 'Dear Al, you really are a very good writer,' and concluded, 'More! More! Love, Daddy,' as both a permission slip and a benediction. He was equally thoughtful, and gave me some excellent notes, on a second story I offered him. But the enthusiasm he showed so freely for these early efforts cooled when I announced my plans to enrol in a creative writing programme.

What had looked like encouragement curled up rather suddenly into something more familiar — indifference. His incurious, tight-lipped stance wounded me, even as I also sensed from him a notch of anxiety that I was pretty sure he couldn't help. I wondered if he thought I was naïve, that I'd not fully apprehended what a tough slog writing could be (I had). Or maybe he thought I expected the road to literary success to be a smooth coast through open doors and into the arms of an admiring public (I did not). Or was he just afraid of how he'd feel, or even how it would reflect on him, if I were to publish a bunch of lousy tripe (a legitimate possibility)? I had no intention of measuring myself against him. And I certainly didn't expect our relationship to flower, after so many fallow years, into some sort

of marvellous apprenticeship. I had my teachers, my fellow students, and writer friends with whom to commune. And I had my instincts, which, the longer I sat quietly with them, the more I trusted. André Gide wrote that 'whoever starts out toward the unknown must consent to venture alone'. Cosseted in the low light of those Vineyard winters, I crossed over

from fear of solitude, to a kind of bleak-embracing pleasure. The words and the pages, like yeast, began to rise. And so too did my attachment to the island.

In the spring of 1998, I finished my course work at Columbia University's School of the Arts. For most of my two years in the MFA programme, I'd workshopped sections of the novel. During the summer break, I left for the Vineyard, where I'd found a cheap little rental house in Chilmark that suited my new solitary

finished graduate school, I had roughly half the manuscript written, but I was determined to finish the thing completely before submitting it as my final thesis. I'd come to rely on my teachers at Columbia. Unlike the tomfoolery of my previous school years, my approach to graduate school was purposeful and all-embracing. Rather than being the youngest person in the room, at Columbia I was frequently the eldest. I grew confident in my knowledge and self-assured with my work. And

I took quite seriously the wisdom of my best teachers as well as their considerable editorial skills. So I saw no reason to graduate until they had seen me through the entirety of my journey. Besides, I didn't have any other consistent readers, no true mentors, no like-minded boyfriend to buck me up or egg me on. Other than Wally, and a small apartment I'd owned for several years, I was tediously, gloomily unattached.

In June, I went up to the Vineyard again. Buoyed by the fresh beauty of the season, I decided to look at real estate. (My New York apartment, bought in the bottom of the eighties market with a little money from my mother's

family, had appreciated considerably. I could, I was told, sell it for something else and still have a bit of money left to tide me over.) The first house I saw on the Vineyard was a dumpy seventies cape with two tiny bedrooms, a mildewed bathroom, and a giant and unsightly brick fireplace that rose like an interior building all its own, right up the middle of



Fig. 41. - Pods and Peas.
— FROM A STUDY OF THE DOMESTICATION OF PLANTS + ANIMALS.

persona. There I wrote every day, tried to teach myself the guitar, and made a nice group of new friends who lived on the Vineyard year-round. Sometimes in the afternoon I'd drive down to Vineyard Haven, but after an hour or so I'd flee, patting myself on the back for having had the good sense to extricate myself from the chaos and family mishegas. When I

the central living space. But through the leaking casement windows in the living room, I could see the place was indeed something special. An ancient stone wall rolled out in the lichen-covered ribbon own the property's western flank. Across the lawn, a great gush of blueberry bushes promised, come August, a bountiful harvest. And then I opened the door and took in a lungful of the perfume being diffused by the lilac trees, which, in full bloom, were splashing violet all over the irregular acre. By the end of summer, I'd bought the house and sold my apartment

in Manhattan. If I was going to be alone, I wanted to be able to see the stars and hear the ocean.

Just as I hoped it would, the Vineyard sustained me through my strange but necessary *hejira*. I was letting go of old things, building anew, and the island held me tight while I worked. A year and a half later, just before Christmas 2000, I completed the novel (marked in my journal by a sketch of a bottle of champagne and one celebratory glass) and found an enthusiastic publisher. The news, which I delivered in a delirious round of phone

calls, was greeted with unfettered joy by everyone in my family – except my father. He hadn't read the manuscript in progress. As far as I was aware, he didn't even know what it was about. But no matter, he was distinctly underwhelmed. As my parents alternated on two extensions in Roxbury, I noted Daddy's response ("That's wonderful, Albert," he declared anaemically and soon hung up without saying goodbye). But I brushed it off, just as I'd conditioned myself to do so many times before. I was too old to let him steal my happiness. ◇

PERSONALS

Undecided

My Online Dating Profile By Hugh Gallagher

I am socially awkward and don't try new things. I prefer quiet nights at home, but am currently homeless. I am drawn to women who express love by keying my car. Respect is overrated. I have never travelled and believe that books are filled with lies. I play video games, and expect you to watch, then applaud when I clear various levels. You should know the proper names of all enemies in *Halo*. (Please don't go calling them 'Orks'.) Most women bore me, but I find them to be a pleasant diversion from the tragedy of human existence. I have no plans for my future and don't shower. I have few friends, and they are kept at a distance, because they are only trying to get the plans for my flying machine. This machine is my life. You will financially support and champion my bitter fight against gravity. I will leave you when I am famous. I hate music, flowers, the beach, wine, honesty, candlelight, conversation, fairs, balloons, dreams, pastel hues, pandas, laughter, spontaneous jaunts to the country, gentle rain showers and all forms of physical fitness. All I talk about is myself. When I talk about myself in public – which is all the time – I do it loudly, with a fake British accent. I treat waiters, waitresses and shoe shine

'people' with blunt disdain. I don't want to meet your mother. I expect quiet. You must cook. I will advise you on wardrobe and public conduct, on the rare occasions when we leave home. And, just a reminder, it will be your home, as I am living in a box. I believe in nothing. We are existential prisoners, marking time on the people farm until we pointlessly die, at which point we enter an eternal void of all meaning. You should feel likewise. If not, I shall impress this point upon you, daily. There are people within my immediate social circle whom I believe are humanoid robots. I have written letters to the president about this. I don't watch football, because I know – know – when the players huddle, they are talking about me. I'm horribly selfish in bed. I have no interests except for my flying machine experiments and alerting the president to the humanoid robots who are masquerading as people. I love TV. Eye contact drains psychic energy, so I wear mirrored sunglasses at all times. I have one Yoko Ono CD. It's the one where she just screams. I listen to it at precisely 12.18 p.m., and 3.46 a.m. every day. Upon our first 'date' I'll expect a chart of your biorhythms. If you dip when I rise, we have no future. Don't fall in love with me. I'll

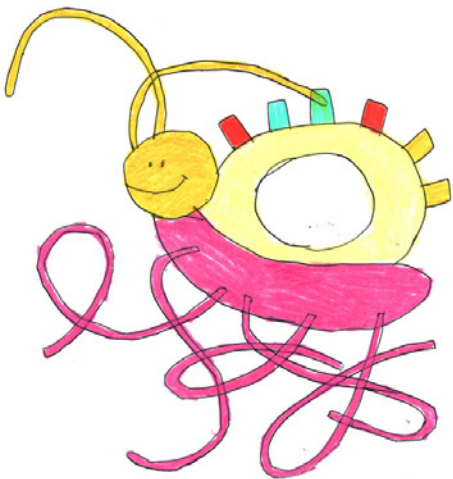
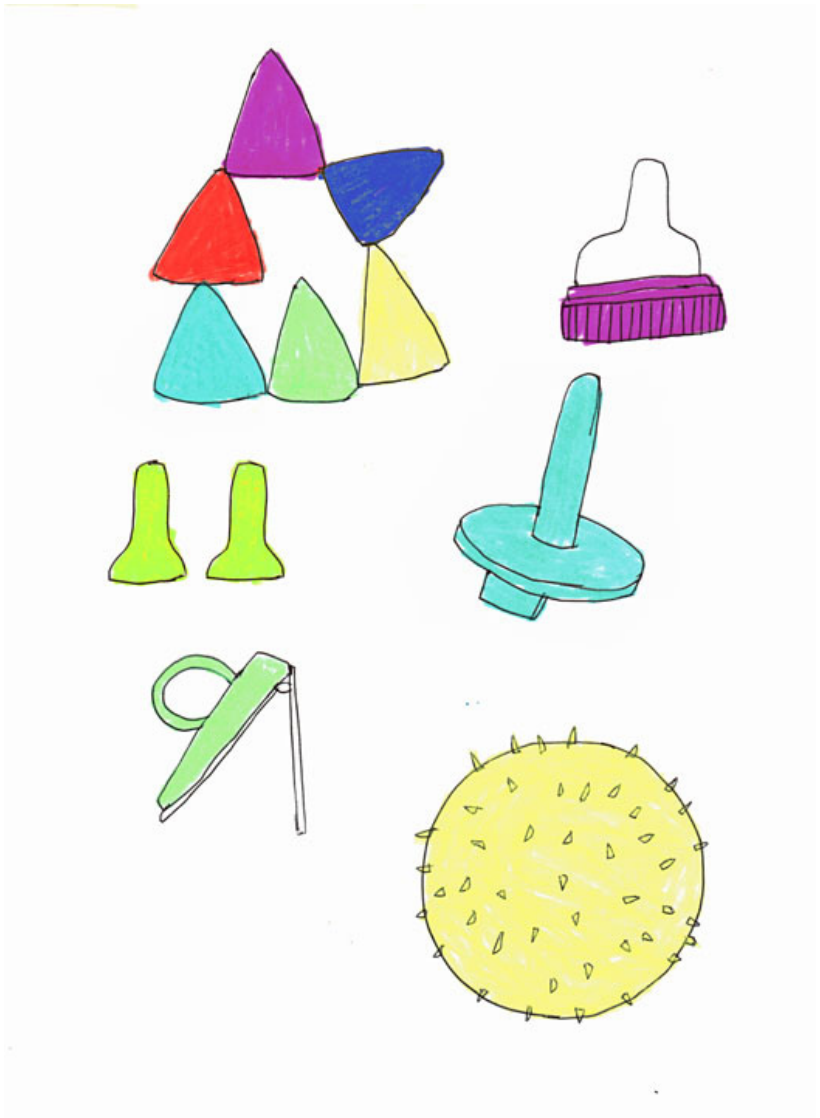
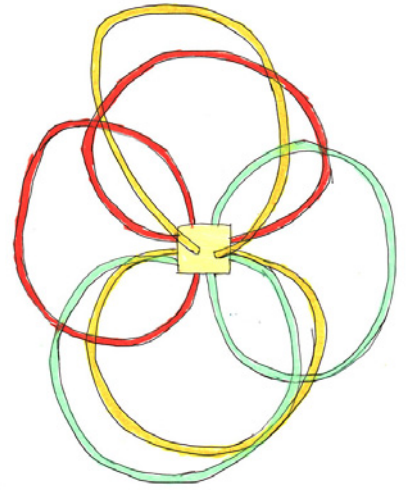
only hurt you. Despite this clear warning, you will surrender yourself to me. This is because I possess the Magnetic Pull of Greatness. James Brown was framed. Los Angeles is a refuge for our evil, inter-dimensional overlords. Tom Hanks might be one of Them. There are telltale clues in most of his films. I shall show them to you. Every night. You will take notes on this study, and also transcribe my poetry. I not only write but speak in iambic pentameter. My themes are the futility of love and the fact that everyone is against me. On Friday nights, we shall translate Season 1 of *The Love Boat* into German together. Knowledge of 1970s German slang a plus. Should be comfortable walking several paces behind me in public. To have no ambition but to serve my passions is mandatory. Should not wear slacks; I detest women in pants. When I tire of your charms, I shall cast you aside roughly, in a public place, while speaking in my fake British accent. Please be prepared. Your belief in love and humanity itself will be shattered. After dark, lonely, painful years of extensive, expensive therapy, you will finally forget me. At that precise moment, I will magically appear just to say hello.

Undecided about children. ◇

Still Life

by Tucker Nichols

OBJECTS I WAS UNFAMILIAR WITH



In the Witch City

By Kevin Baker

A few summers ago I found myself spending a lot of time up in Salem, Massachusetts. Having grown up in that part of the world, I knew Salem; I'd gone to its fabulously tacky Witch Museum as a school kid, with its musty old tableaux of mannequins in pilgrim clothes and with glowing red eyes.

Salem calls itself 'the Witch City', and on any given summer night you can see guides with lanterns, dressed up to look like old crones, leading tours of its ghostly sites and pulling along a train of smirking, sheepish-looking tourists in their T-shirts and shorts. The high-school sports teams are called the Witches, and there's a silhouette of a witch on a broomstick on the masthead of the local paper, and also on the shoulder patches of the town police and the firefighters. There's even a statue downtown of the late Elizabeth Montgomery, star of the 1960s television show *Bewitched*.

There's a downtown mall lined with shops where you can take care of all your goth and New Age needs, and stores selling witch lighters and witch keychains and witch pendants, witch pens and pencils and witch erasers, witch T-shirts and witch hats and witch hoodies, and everything else you could possibly imagine, *all witch, all the time*, right down to the most unimaginably witless and meaningless tchotchke of all, which is a bumper sticker that reads, *LIFE'S A WITCH AND THEN YOU FLY*.

Four hundred years of history, in one of the founding places of American culture and industry. Four hundred years of Salem; of Nathaniel Hawthorne, and the China clippers, and the textile mills, and transcendentalism, and the Puritans, and the Revolution – all boiled down to this: *LIFE'S A WITCH AND THEN YOU FLY*.

And all of it leaving aside the one small, gnawing fact of history, which is that . . . *they weren't witches*. They weren't witches at all, just twenty ageing women and men who were hanged and pressed to death under rocks – at least another five dying in jail – mostly because their neighbours

didn't much like them and wanted their property.

They didn't have magical powers. They didn't fly around on broomsticks. They couldn't wiggle their noses and make Larry Tate change his mind. They weren't witches, just innocent women and men killed in horrible ways during an awful bit of frontier hysteria.

It's like having a town in the Mississippi Delta devoted to merchandising its history of lynchings.

Except. Except for one out-of-the-way memorial to the dead. A very moving little monument that most of the tourists don't even recognize. Called 'The Stones', it is a square enclosed by a low New England stone wall. Inside are just a few birch trees and more stones on which are inscribed the names and dates of the executed 'witches' and, here and there, some of the things they managed to say in their defence, helpless against the indifference of their neighbours.

'I am no witch. I am innocent. I know nothing of it.'

'If it was the last moment I was to live, God knows I am innocent . . .'

'Oh, Lord, help me! It is false. I am clear. For my life now lies in your hands . . .'

'I am wronged. It is a shameful thing that you should mind these folks that are out of their wits.'

'Because I am falsely accused. I never did it.'

'Ye are all against me.'

'If it be possible no more innocent blood be shed . . . I am clear of this sin.'

Just these small, helpless voices preserved over all the years, still proclaiming their innocence to the uncaring hordes of tourists.

I WAS THERE in Salem because I was looking after my mother, who was suffering from Huntington's disease, taking her into her programme at the clinic in Charlestown. Huntington's, for those of you who may not be familiar with it, is a rare disease that literally shrinks the brain.

It acts like Alzheimer's, although it also afflicts most of its victims with spasmodic, uncontrollable movements, or curls their limbs up into claws. One by one your muscles shut down, and sufferers often die from choking when their throat muscles atrophy.

Worst of all, it strips away your personality layer by layer, changing you into someone unrecognizable. It wrecked my mother's life, ending her marriage of twenty-three years, turning her out of her home and leaving her unable to take care of herself.

A very gentle person, she was suddenly filled with rage that would bubble up at unexpected times, over completely unpredictable things. She threatened to burn down the house she shared with my stepfather, hit him in the face with a wine bottle, cursed at him, destroyed a painting he had made. A near teetotaler all her life, she developed a sudden and overwhelming desire to drink, maybe to deal with all the organic changes going on within her head. Always a dignified, self-conscious person, she now remarked loudly on things and people she saw and, most embarrassing of all, all but threw herself at men.

After her divorce, she had had to move into an assisted living facility near Salem, and this meant accepting certain strictures on her life, and leaving our old hometown, Rockport, which she deeply loved. Our civic fathers hadn't been prescient enough to have hanged any old women or pressed any old men to death under rocks, so we had to rely on the usual New England standbys of selling fudge, and bad paintings, and statues of sea captains sculpted from lobster shells to the tourists. But it is still a very beautiful place, and before my sister and I prevailed upon her to give up her car because she was a danger on the road, she used to drive back to the docks there and look out over the harbour, and the seagulls hovering above the lobster boats, and the deep blue ocean.

That's what always got me. The sense of her out there, alone, sitting in her car by the dock, not understanding why she had been banished. My mother had lived her whole life with other people, with her family, in one form or another. And now she was sick, so she had to go live alone.

The trouble was, she was always in denial about it. She always insisted that she didn't really have Huntington's, that the genetic test she had taken had given her a 'false positive'. She used to tell me that she was the-the-the-the . . .

'The "control", Mom?' I would say.

'Yes! The control!'

And I would tell her, 'Mom, you can't be the control if you can't think of the word "control".'

And we would laugh about it, because as much as she changed, as much as she forgot, she was always delighted to see me. And I was always glad to see her, on our trips into the clinic, although they made me more than a little nervous.

You never knew what she might do, or what might happen to her. She had a very nominal idea of what stoplights meant any more, and on one occasion she decided to strike up a conversation with a drug dealer in Boston Common. Before I could pull her away, she was doing a little dance in front of him.

We would go to the clinic, where she would be examined, and maybe given an MRI – they were simply studying her, more than anything, there was no cure, there is no cure for Huntington's – and then I would take her out to lunch some-

place, where she would always try to order a drink, and where I would sit terrified that she was going to start choking to death on her food, which she had come close to doing on more than one occasion.

You had to watch her very closely.

Walking out on the street in Charlestown after one appointment, I looked away for just a moment and she took a step and fell down in the street as if she'd been shot, even though she was still holding my arm, bruising her arm and her leg, and cutting her forehead. Her legs had been getting more and more unsteady; the assisted living facility had tried giving her a walker, but she had gone out one day and lost it. They eventually found it in the liquor store, even though she swore to us that she was *definitely not drinking any more* –

'Now, Mom, don't you lie to us. Tell us the truth now. Have you been to the liquor store? They found your walker there.'

So down she goes now, and I'm absolutely horrified, I'm the worst son in the world. She looks stunned, I'm thinking she's broken her arm, she's broken her leg, she must have a concussion.

But then she smiles at me, and she insists that she's fine. And when I was finally convinced that nothing was broken and she didn't have a cerebral haemor-

rhage, we went to a seafood restaurant where I wouldn't let her order a drink, and she nibbled happily at her lobster roll, and held a napkin full of ice on the cut over her eyes, and I sat watching her afraid she was going to choke to death in front of me.

And afterwards, I took her back to her assisted living facility, and went and walked around the pedestrian mall in Salem, with its statue of Elizabeth Montgomery and its answers to all your goth needs, and then I went back to the Hawthorne Inn where I was staying to pound a few drinks at the hotel bar because, hey, LIFE'S A WITCH AND THEN YOU FLY.

And then, that night, well past midnight, well past the curfew at her assisted living facility, and the time when anything else would be open, I get a call from my mother, asking me if I am coming to take her to dinner:

'Dearest' – which is what she always called me – 'dearest, are you coming to get me?'

There it is, coming over the telephone line, just this small, innocent voice calling out against her helplessness and the indifference of the world.

And then I have to tell her that I'm not coming. ◇

ON TWINS

Life Imitating Art

Eleven Thoughts on Raising Twin Boys By Darin Strauss

1
Everyone with a TV or some movies under his belt knows about the start of fatherhood – knows the stations of that particular cross: blue hospital scrubs; handshakes/tears; y'all be careful on your way home now, okay?

Thing is, if you've never actually lived that initial parenting moment, and then do – if you experience that atmosphere of shrieks and moans, that nausea-enforcing blood and that 500-words-a-minute doctor language – there's a good chance you'll miss how it's all really profound and sacred, and beautiful. I did.

I don't like to think I'm unprecedented in this. I see our central nervous system

as a kind of vintage switchboard, all thick foam wires and old-fashioned plugs. The circuitry isn't properly equipped; after a surplus of emotional information, the system overloads, the circuit breaks, the board runs dark.

That's my one parenthood regret, so far.

2
In 2000, I wrote a novel called *Chang and Eng* about famous identical twins; in 2007, my wife gave birth to identical twins. And, at the very time that I was spending my children's first days in a post-natal intensive care unit (the boys were born three and a half weeks prematurely), I had to scan the proofs of my then-forthcom-

ing book *More Than It Hurts You*, which is in some part devoted to children's hospitals; to that frightening world of oscilloscope blips and ventilator beeps; to the cosmic creepiness of a baby ICU. The novel follows an eight-month-old baby; my own babies turned eight months old the week the book finally came out. You get the idea.

Reading my own attempts to describe what happens in such a complex nerve centre right when it was *actually happening* to my young family made for a weird vibe, something about portents getting charged into reality. It sounds hokey. (But so much about parenthood sounds hokey. This is why everybody

hates stories about others' kids.) Anyway, all this stuff added to the vertigo there in the ICU, to that hard-to-describe *thing* all glazed new fathers have, the sense of a deep incongruity to it all. My babies seemed not to be real – yet alone my – children. (That everybody hates stories about others' kids probably explains my own fear about, and the obvious hard time I'm having so far with, this essay.) What my babies seemed to be, rather, were tiny special effects that some audience at home – watching the sitcom of my life – would get a kick out of. 'This space-case is getting kids?' they would say. 'Him?'

3
These sort of humdinger events – births, weddings, even deaths, I imagine – are so familiar to us they seem banal, which makes for a whopper of a contradiction. The banality comes in part from our having caught these scenes on TV many times (read above); but there's a reason we've seen them so often: they're in fact the opposite of banal. They're in fact so inherently un-banal that they're probably the dramatic motor in one of every ten narratives we come across. I doubt people in pre-TV generations felt this banal/humdinger paradox. I bet they, on a gut level, felt the bigness of all their big events.

Anyway.

This paradox stuff and the quirky similarities between my sons (Beau and Shepherd) and what I'd been writing about dulled, for me, the reality of their existence.

4
The first day we got them out of the hospital, all was chaos. One baby would cry while the other tried to sleep; then they'd switch roles. It was a twenty-four-hour wail-fest. My wife and I took them to their first paediatrician's appointment, and the entire way there laughed the laugh of the terrified. This wasn't parenting; it was Keystone Kops stuff, Farrelly-brothers mayhem; it was, surely, not doable for much longer. And we were only at the first day.

In the doctor's office, Beau had dirtied his diaper. (Oh, one other thing: don't you hate the gag-making nicety of our child-raising phrases? Why do we have to talk like babies when we talk about babies? Why do I blanch from writing, 'He crapped

himself'? *Why?*) So, I took my son into the men's room, feeling ready to change my first diaper. I did it, to my surprise, fairly successfully. I simply laid my son on the changing table and scrubbed his butt clean. Problem solved. Next, I bent to throw away the browned Huggies® Baby Wipe; when I stood, Beau had crapped himself again. Everywhere. On to the heretofore clean diaper; on to the changing table itself. On to, at least a little bit, the floor. I panicked. Before had been minor league stuff, not Keystone Kops at all. While this was, literally, a comedy shitstorm.

Laying one hand on Beau to keep him from slipping, I contorted myself so my fingertips might reach the door. Now in a sort of gymnast's candlestick position (hand A opening door; hand B on baby's tiny chest), I yelled to my wife, with even less sangfroid than it reads on the page, 'Honey, Jesus, come quick! There's an emergency with the baby!'

'What?'

She ran over in what seemed two floorless strides, her face gone the way of any new mother's at hearing the words 'emergency' and 'baby' in the same sentence. 'What's wrong?'

I explained in an agitated voice that Beau had gone number two, and there were no more diapers or wipes.

Next came one of those moments when you notice someone you love sizing you up, as if for the first time. The eyes narrow a bit, there's a pull on the brow and the person looking at you points out, without a word, how far your shares have dropped in their index of cool people. 'Where,' my wife said evenly, 'are you?'

Now, this surprised me. We were standing two feet apart at the moment in question. 'The *men's* room,' I said. (Duh.)

'And what is a men's room designed for?' she said, with the deliberateness of someone explaining to a Zemblan tourist that he's on the uptown A train when, in fact, he wanted the downtown F.

I waited. I waited for the electric bolt of comprehension. It never came.

'Bathrooms,' she was saying, 'are the one place in the whole building designed for just this kind of emergency.' And she walked away, holding our other crying son.

Right, I thought. I'm in a *bathroom*.

I used toilet paper and water and I got the mess out of the way. First real step towards fatherhood.

5
What makes writing about babies difficult is that everything about them is known and clichéd and sentimental, and yet true. At first, you see your children through a pall of helplessness. They cry, and they eat, and they shit, and you bust your hump trying not to hinder them in that. And they give you nothing in return. *And* they look like Winston Churchill on the nod. My initial thoughts were similar to what my friend Melissa Guion says she felt on her first night home with her mewling, hungry, clinging baby: 'Fuck *this* noise.' But then, once you're at your most sleep-needy, once you think you can't clean another shit-flecked buttock, or make it through another 3 a.m. feeding, the child looks at you for the first time; I mean, looks at you in a way that registers a kind of recognition. The gaze sharpens, the mouth bends smileward. And then you're done for.

For me, getting my boys to laugh became an addiction. What were they laughing at? At three months, they didn't speak, they couldn't crawl, they barely seemed to acknowledge each other's existence—but something you would do (blow out your cheeks to play mouth-trumpet, or hum into their bellies) would make them crack up. This is a selfish and embarrassing and transparent admission, but here goes: making my children laugh at my 'jokes' was the way I first began to love them.

It's different for women, I think. When the boys were a minute old, my wife held up Shepherd and asked, 'Don't you love him so much?' I didn't really understand how she could ask such a thing. *That* purple squirming howler? 'He seems nice,' I said.

Men, I think, need to be won over. For me, it was Shepherd's laugh – a raucous, yelpy, non-human gurgle that can run for minutes. And with Beau, it was his outlandishly soulful smile; I know it's hard to believe, but there's a decency and a poignant sweetness apparent in his face. You can just tell he's already a kind and slightly vulnerable person. These boys still haven't said a word to me, but I believe that they (along with my wife) are my best friends in the world. I know. It makes no sense.

6

As you read in thought #2, the babies were eight months old when my third book came out. I had to leave them to go on a twenty-two-city book tour. This was nice (the publisher was willing to send me all over) and terrible (I'd be leaving the kids for the first time). After three weeks on the road, I got to see them for a few days before I had to head off again. My wife and sons had been staying with my parents-in-law, and when I walked into the twins' bedroom, they showed me an expression, a blank glint of *I don't know who you are*. This was a heart-hurting moment. I kept waving and smiling, trying all the old prods. Nothing worked. Then Shepherd looked sideways at me for a second, and fired a quick toot from his mouth. That laugh was as if he'd said, *Oh, yeah* – this *clown*. It was better than nothing – a lot better, actually.

7

As a very young kid I was thin as soup-kitchen consommé, unathletic, given to homesickness. In the fifth grade a little girl called two of my friends and me 'the Shrimp, the Blimp, and the Wimp' – the phrase stuck. (I had one short friend and one heavy friend, so you can guess which name they hung around my neck.) My skinniness kept me in an internal slough of unease.

My own father, on the other hand, was a killer high-school and college athlete (1962 Mason-Dixon Hurdles Champion; basketball prodigy at American University). Dawn Steel, the first woman to run a movie studio, knew my father back then and wrote about him in her memoir *They Can Kill You But They Can't Eat You*. She called him, if I remember correctly, a 'paragon of elegance and style'. Even as a senior at Great Neck North, he had a Nike swoosh of grey hair just above his brow. A born ladykiller. But he's also kind of a fault. He didn't want to be one of those fathers who push their children too hard. As a result, he didn't teach me how to play basketball. Or, rather, when he saw I wasn't good at it, he stopped teaching me. I suppose I hold a slight grudge about this. (To be fair, he *was* my Little League coach; I spent a lot of time in the outfield, spinning around, looking at the cool effect that my spinning had on my view of the grass and three-leafed

clovers, etc.) I do remember the one and only time my dad taught me how to play ball. With a grunt, nine-year-old me heaved shots underhand. At this blacktopped outdoor court, the orange-painted hoops had chain nets that jangled if your shot went through, like house keys: an addictive sound. Once, to my surprise, my dad blocked my shot. And when he swatted away my desperate hurl, the outdoor ball made a cartoon, Road-Runnerish *ping!*

It's unfair, but this is the memory I keep coming back to. Me throwing the ball, my father slapping it away. It's unfair; my father is kind, and we're still close, and he did a good job raising me, and he made a tough call – the call not to pressure me to be an athlete. But I wish he'd taught me how to play basketball for real – more than that one time – and I wish that my memory of the one time wasn't that. Now that I'm a parent I want to call him and apologize for what's on my mind. It's unfair.

They fuck you up, your mum and dad. They may not mean to, but they do.

8

To get specific about what's downright cheesy in fatherhood – or about writing on fatherhood – it's that becoming a dad shows you that love is the fundament of all existence. You feel like some Republican candidate at the GOP convention just for saying this stuff.

All the same: I love my wife; I have, though not with the same seriousness or for as long, loved other women before her; and I love (some of) my other relatives, too. But being a parent is like taking an SAT on love: a more concentrated, stressful, more important test.

My wife and I and both our kids were sick last week – the normal, fluish, change-of-season bummer. And, bad as I felt, I caught myself saying, 'I hope the kids get better soon.' Now, again, I love my wife. (Do I sound like Bob Dole yet?) But if it had been only the two of us who'd had chapped nasal philtra and thermometers wedged in our mouths, I don't think I'd wish that she would be the first one to shake off our flu. Not to get all preachy about it, but that's parenthood, I think: wanting your kids to feel relief more than you want yourself to.

9

The reason I thought the audience at home – watching the sitcom of my life – would think, *Why is this clown getting kids?* is because I'm a chronic fuck-up. I have trouble paying bills on time, I often go out of doors with dumbly mismatched socks, etc. My wife, for good reason, hates it. This July, I killed four hours looking for my car in the LaGuardia parking lot.

Maybe it's an occupational hazard. The novelist Italo Svevo is said to have come back alone from a trip to an amusement park to which he'd taken his son. 'Where's the boy?' his wife asked (in Italian, of course). 'Oh, no!' – Svevo grabbing his coat and hat. 'I'll be right back.'

But 2008-vintage men don't get to be Italo Svevo. I care for the boys alone from 6.50 a.m. to 8.30 a.m., when I leave to go to my office to write, and I come home early, every day, to look after them from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m. I usually wheel them in our double-wide Urban Buggy® to the swings in Brooklyn's Prospect Park. The day before yesterday, however, it rained; our stroller seats had become tiny twin-reservoirs. I decided to try getting the boys to the park anyway. I somehow managed to carry them both – my grip on Beau's pants loosening as he bit into the dorsal-venous network of my left hand; Shepherd holding my shoulder and throwing his head back like a dance partner impatient for the dip – to my upstairs neighbour's apartment. 'Can I borrow your stroller?' I asked the neighbour, who has an infant of his own. He let me take *two* strollers.

Great! I thought. *I'll just push them side by side.* This was a mistake.

The wheels of the two vehicles kept crossing; Beau was too small for his stroller and just missed doing a face plant on to the sidewalk. Kerbs were a challenge (which one to lift first?), the passing of every car a kind of Sophie's Choice.

There's supposed to be a coherent end to this point, to good old Number Nine here; something in the spirit of *but I'm getting better every day and with extra diligence, blah blah blah*. The truth is, it's hard to stop being a fuckwit when you've always kind of been one. But you love your children and you do the best you can and hope nothing goes wrong.

If you're going to have more than one kid, I highly recommend going the twins route.

When I heard we were having identical boys, I panicked. Too much work! But it's sneakily great. You get all the hard (sleepless, messy) stuff out of the way in one stroke. Which is like paying for a house upfront. And your kids are always on the same developmental clock; you won't be breastfeeding one and potty-training the other. Also, and this is a big plus, they have a built-in friend. Even in the pre-verbal (present) era, my sons hugged and cracked each other up when we tried to put them to bed. It was heart-warming. And I know you cringed when you read that - the brightest-neon cliché there is - but it fits, because when I see

Beau make Shepherd laugh, and then the two of them start to snuggle, my heart is a spurting hot-water bottle everywhere in my chest.

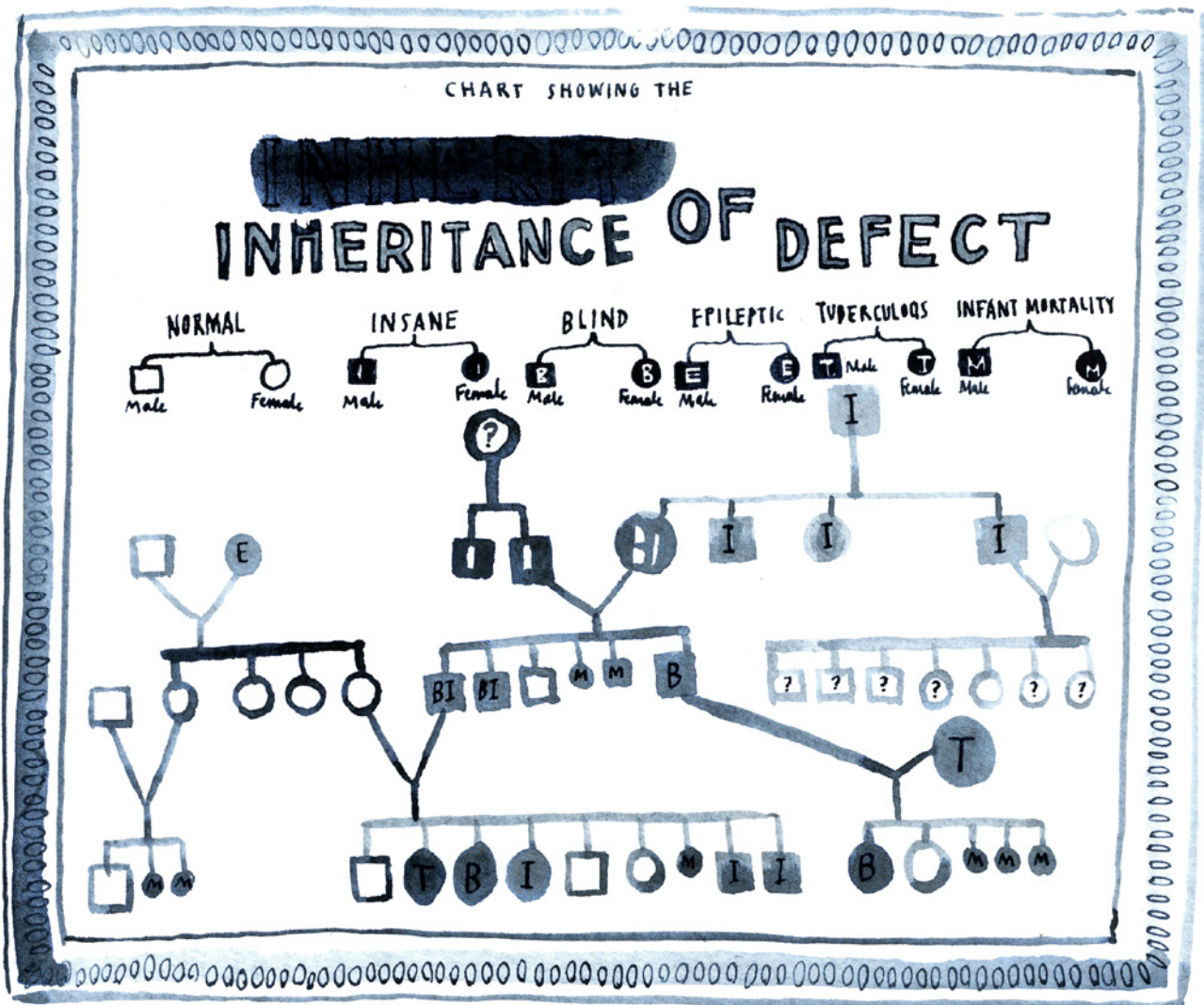
11

At first they looked like no one, puffball things, the only human detail being their eyes, and even those - just blue marbles set in dough - lacked the quickness of thought. But watching them become people is like looking at a fossil record: picking out what of our faces has endured in theirs. My wife's high regal forehead is there, and the shape of my mouth is. It's a reminder: we're all pretty much Mr Potato Heads, having been thrown together out of a narrow kitty of nostrils and ears and temperaments

in some embryological playroom.

And they already have distinct personalities, which is, I suppose, a testament to the mystery and magic of Self.

When I catch one of the boys focusing the cloud of his nascent personality (Shepherd bashfully looking at his brother for approval; Beau trying to make someone laugh by pulling a funny face), I feel the need to rush out and embrace them, as if to scoop the boys away from oncoming traffic. I don't know why it's so urgent. But most of the time I sit without moving, hoping they won't even notice I'm in the room. It's silly, and hard to put words to, but it's almost as if I've convinced myself that, if I can be quiet and still to the point of seeming not there, they'll stay this age for ever, and so will I. ◇



A Liberation in Slavery

A Q&A with Louis Theroux

The following conversation took place on the phone between Louis Theroux, who was in Miami shooting a documentary in a local jail, and Five Dials in New York.

5D: So you kind of went from zero to insta-family. How'd that happen?

LT: Well I broke up with a long-term girlfriend in 2001, then was carefree for a couple of years, and then met Nancy in 2003 and basically the family appeared in 2006. I was with Nancy for three years and then we started having kids.

5D: How many did you have?

LT: Two boys, three and five years. One of the weird things is I don't see that much of myself in either one – maybe more in the younger one. I had chubby cheeks too, and he's got a slight thing for throwing tantrums without malice. You'll say, 'Don't do that and get down from the table,' and he doesn't say anything. He'll wait a minute and you'll think everything's fine but then he'll just scream and go, 'Aaaahh!' Or he'll throw something across the room. And I sort of see myself in a certain thin-skinnedness – a sensitivity to some situations. He hates being criticized and maybe I can relate to that. Also he's the younger one, so maybe I can relate to that because my brother's two years older than me.

5D: Is having kids fun?

LT: I really feel like I could have had kids earlier because of all that spare time that I was never a hundred percent sure I was filling in the right way. All that going out and stuff. I wasn't totally in my element when I was making the scene. You'd think there were 101 things you'd be happy doing, but there's a liberation in slavery. It's taken out of your hands and that in its own way is fulfilling, I often find. Bearing in mind that I've not made some concessions, because I still travel for work and my partner has to pick up the slack, my

feeling is that when I'm around I feel like I have to do more to compensate for not being around.

5D: What are your best and worst parenting moments?

LT: The worst feeling in the whole world is doing childcare when you're ill. Under-slept is bad. You're irritable and you've got no patience and they're asking for this floppy toy, not that floppy toy, and you think really they're the same. At the risk of sounding macabre, I used to be baffled by child abuse, but you can sort of see how a less stable, volatile person struggling with drugs might choose to torture their kids. If you're doing it alone, and you're on the edge, I'm not that baffled by it anymore.

5D: Doing it alone would require more sleep deprivation.

LT: The middle-of-the-night waking up, those are the really bad times. The happy times are I suppose when you feel like you're a good parent. It sounds a bit lame, but I like doing things like collages, we call it glueing, where we cut up snippets of magazines and make collages. I like it when you can do something that doesn't cost something. Doing violence to *Vanity Fair* and the Sunday supplements is satisfying in its own right and produces unintentionally satirical pictures, which is fulfilling.

5D: Any other parenting pitfalls?

LT: The other one that's bad is when you feel, very occasionally, like they're being gauche or letting you down in public. You start to get that feeling and you're thinking, please be polite. It's embarrassing, and I know it's trite and it's about your narcissism. One funny one is please and thank you. And what do you do if they really don't want to say goodbye to granny? You can't force a kid to kiss his granny. I remember when my oldest was

a baby, about two, and Nancy's mom was still alive and in her mid-90's. Albert went over and gave her a goodbye kiss without much encouragement, and you could see how much it moved her. She'd had so little skin-on-skin physical contact, and especially with a baby, that it produced a profound effect in her, and it was all the more moving for being unbidden or at least uncoerced.

5D: How important are manners and discipline?

LT: I don't know. Something I struggle with is I guess whether to be over-strict or under-strict. Part of me wants to be Rousseau-iste about the whole thing. If they want to get down from the table halfway through the meal, part of me wants to chill out and relax and not be uptight, but another part is thinking I should be more Prussian military about it, so I agonize about that and I feel like I don't know. It's hard to get the balance right and when you see qualities in your kids that you don't like it's the ultimate narcissistic slap in the face. You feel like you've instilled it in them and have no one to blame. You have to be accepting, of yourself and of them. I think maybe sometimes you have to learn more patience and tolerance. I think I am pretty patient, but it's a daily struggle.

I did a story last year about America's medicated kids for the BBC and I was introduced to a book called *1-2-3 Magic*. The idea is that if a kid's doing something wrong you give them two chances and then the third time you give them a time out. It's draconian on the one hand and on the other hand it seems eminently reasonable. I get a little bit embarrassed doing it. The book encourages you to trust yourself as a parent – if you think the kid is acting up then he's acting up. But then I get into a mode where I worry I'm doing it more to make myself feel better – that it's a kind of low-key parental tantrum on my part. That's why it's good to have a partner, to kind of keep tabs on each other.

5D: Who's more strict?

LT: I feel like I'm more consistently sort of strict, whereas she's sort of a little bit more emotional.

5D: What was it like being around your American cousins when you were kids – did they seem more relaxed and/or savage?

LT: We only went over in the summers and we felt like a pair of little freaks. I think we felt like we were being exhibited. We were these two little English twit kids at family reunions of suburban middle class Bostonians.

5D: But isn't your dad the American parent?

LT: There was an Anglophile side to him that in some ways he sort of expressed through us. I felt like there was a role that we had within the family to be the perfectly behaved semi-aristocratic British cousins. So the Americans would be fighting over the free toy that came in the Cap'n Crunch, but we didn't do that, much as we wanted to. Or we would take pride in the fact that we weren't allowed to watch TV. There was a certain archetype that on some level we must have realized I guess our dad expected us to be.

5D: Were you conscious of it?

LT: When we got a little bit older we felt more self-conscious and we had a thing about seeming too British. We wanted to knock off our corners a bit, but we went a little too far. Instead of saying he'd like a tuna-fish sandwich my brother would say, 'I wanna toona melt,' and he'd end up sounding like Harvey Keitel.

5D: How do you like being the boss?

LT: As the younger brother that's not a role you're used to. As a parent you're the one who is doing the disciplining and the punishing. Suddenly you're the guy issuing the diktats. I feel in some ways it's part of getting older. Half the time I feel I'm faking it.

5D: Seems like faking it is half the job.

LT: Maybe, but you don't want to be an ironic authority figure, that would be perverse. When I left school before university I tried to teach in Africa for a year and I couldn't do it. I couldn't exert authority and I did a disservice to the students. I wasn't comfortable disciplining them. I had to quit after the first term. I couldn't handle it. I've had to grow all these new muscles. There's a part of me that, if I thought I could skate through it without being the one dispensing discipline, I probably would. The other night I swear I was up maybe four or five times with one of them – he was too hot, too cold, I've lost one of my dummies – and basically at ten to six he said 'We're awake' and I said 'Get back in bed, you've got school today'. Technically they're not supposed to get out of bed till seven but I knew I had a taxi coming at six and I'd just sort of lost the will. I could see this would be a battle and that I'd only get twenty minutes out of by keeping him in bed. So I'm thinking what am I going to say to Nancy, I've gone off script. So I said just lie there, just stay in bed, but I had no real reason. So they sat in bed and read some books, then my taxi arrived and I had to go.

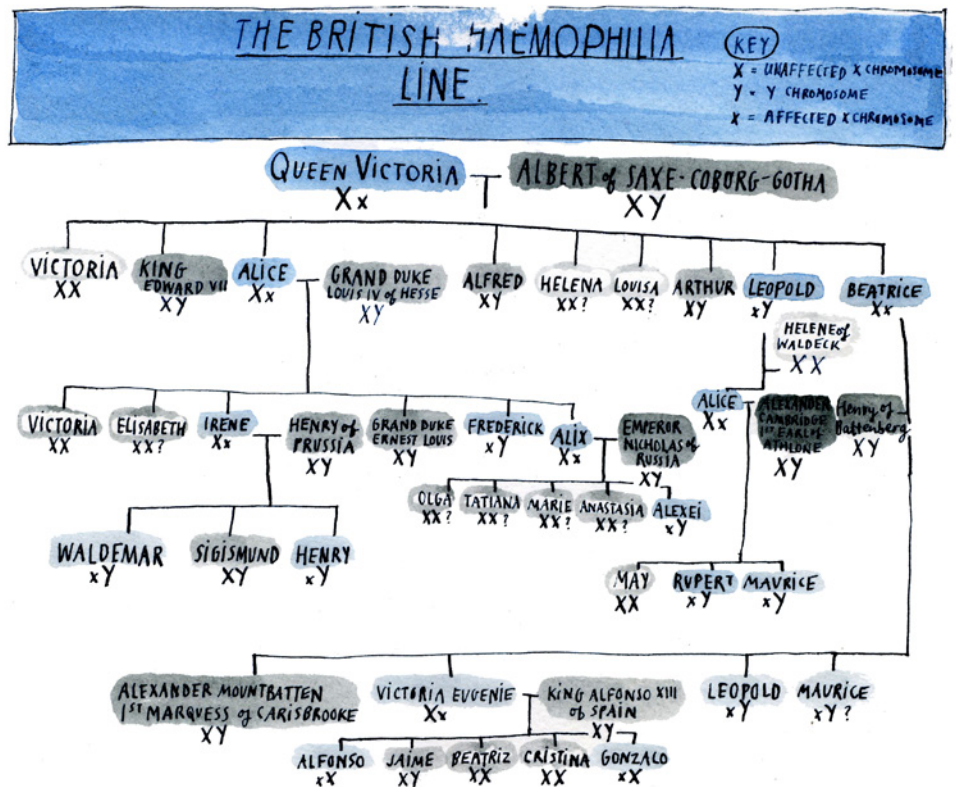
5D: I think everyone does what they can and then worries about not doing more,

which is why mom blogs are so popular – as much for advice as companionship in failure.

LT: I've not been as immersed in that milieu. Our kids are our proxy. We invest them with our own *amour propre* – if another kid pinches your kid it feels worse than if the parent pinched you, it's a very intense kind of emotion. It would be nice to believe that if you don't agonize over every decision and if you don't keep up with all the latest fads to do with parenting and put your kid down for the school that's been deemed the best then it doesn't matter.

5D: What did you think of Amy Chua's book?

LT: I was quite disturbed by the tiger mother thing [*Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*]. It works if you're trying to create classical musical virtuosos or if you want to become a concert violinist, but not to be a novelist or a standup comedian. Those rules and that kind of parenting produce a certain kind of excellence in a certain circumscribed sphere. I think there's a health that comes from a sense of benign neglect. I think my parents were quite neglectful in certain ways and it was quite a good thing. ◇



'75

By *Jim Windolf*

Every weekday morning, in the classic style, my father drove his pale yellow Toronado out of the suburbs and into the Lincoln Tunnel. He worked at a large insurance company on Sixth Avenue. He made it home, most nights, at seven o'clock. At some point along the way he grew a moustache – only to shave it off suddenly. And, that's right, one day – must have been in the spring of '75 – one day he swapped the Toronado for a lime green TR7.

I loved the TR7, or at least the idea of it. Its ad-campaign slogan, 'The shape of things to come', was irresistible to a ten-year-old boy. So my dad was something of a hero to me when he pulled into the garage behind the wheel of that small triangular British vehicle. My mother was not so thrilled.

I'm not sure how Mom occupied herself in those days, aside from running our small household (it was just the three of us). By the early 1980s she had a job as a restaurant hostess, which led to a career. But not then. I could feel the blankness, the deadness, in the house when I got home from school at 3.45 in the afternoon. I could hear it in the refrigerator's occasional sighs. Suddenly – for no reason – there were potted plants all over the house. A few of them were hanging from braided ropes connected to the ceiling. At the same time a canary appeared in the corner of the kitchen where the sunlight was strong. My mother named him Ringo. He lived in a white cage that my father refused to clean.

Things might have become violent. I can't be sure. I slept over at friends' houses whenever I got the chance, so I probably missed out on some of the action. The starting point was the smoke. The smell of it woke me late one night. I knew it was cigarette smoke – but that made no sense. My parents had quit smoking years earlier, when I was five. So I told myself the house was on fire. I imagined I had a shot at being a genuine hero as I sped down the carpeted stairs.

In the kitchen, there he was, my father,

seated in the darkness behind threads of smoke. He had huge shoulders, but in that moment he looked hunched and little. He wasn't wearing a shirt, just boxers. The birdcage, covered in a towel, was hanging above his head.

'What are you doing up?'

'I smelled the smoke.'

'I didn't know they had you on patrol.'

He took a drag. The tip brightened.

There was no sense in his hiding it.

'You hungry?'

'No.'

'Then get back to bed. We've got a big day tomorrow.'

Back upstairs, I stopped at my parents' bedroom door. I wanted to check on my mother, but I couldn't get my hand to the doorknob. I went back to my room, back to bed. Soon Mom was waking me up by taking hold of my feet.

I GUESS MY parents didn't speak during the long car ride to the Weehawken dock, where the Reynolds family kept a yacht, but I wasn't paying that much attention. I had problems of my own. Mainly, John Reynolds. He was an enemy of mine and he was going to be on that boat. Once he had spat on me from a school bus window. It had landed near my upper lip and it had a smell.

John Reynolds was twelve years old – two years older than me – and he was a liar. When the mouth of the Hudson River was behind us, he told me he had kicked a field goal in the Houston Astrodome during the Olympics. I left the dark cabin, climbed the ladder-like stairs – into the wind and the light – and headed to the back of the yacht, where my parents and his parents were drinking and talking.

I took a seat on my father's lap.

'Come on, Jimmy,' my dad said.

'You're too big for this.'

He gave me a push. I squatted down beside him.

Mom was the one who could read me.

She said, 'What's the matter, baby?'

'John said he was in the Olympics.'

'Well, maybe he was in the Olympics.'

I want you two to play nice. You'll be going to that camp soon and it would be nice if you two were friends.'

'He keeps lying about everything.'

Football isn't even an Olympic sport.'

'John?' Mr Reynolds said. 'We need to see you up here. Right now.'

'It's nothing, Harry,' my father said. 'It's kids. Go back down there and work it out, Jimmy. You don't need to get everybody involved.'

Mrs Reynolds glanced in my father's direction. 'We've had this trouble before,' she said. 'This lying.'

'John?' said Mr Reynolds. 'On deck, sailor, and I mean now! I'll give you three.'

I studied Mrs Reynolds while Mr Reynolds counted out three. You could see almost everything of her breasts in the bikini she was wearing. I looked over at my mother and noticed it was almost the same with her. There was another troubling thing: Mom was wearing cut-off blue-jean shorts over her bikini bottom, and she had left the shorts unbuttoned and unzipped, so that the idea of underwear inevitably came to your mind.

John Reynolds stepped out of the cabin with squinting eyes. His hair was already a little lighter in colour and shaggier than it had been during the school year.

His father got started: 'Jimmy's been telling us you were saying something about being in the Olympics.'

'He's a jerk. I never said I was in the Olympics.'

'Come on now, Johnny.'

Mrs Reynolds said, 'Here we go again.'

'What did you say, exactly?' Mr Reynolds said. 'I'd be curious to know.'

'I don't know. I didn't say I was in the Olympics. That's a bunch of bullshit.'

'Watch that mouth,' Mr Reynolds said. 'Come on, John, just tell us what's going on with you two, so we can all get back to having a decent time.'

'All I said was about the Pass, Punt and Kick thing in the Astrodome.'

'I see. That's all right, then.' Mr Reynolds reached into the cooler. 'You can go back now. Back to whatever you guys were doing. Anybody need another one?'

'Wait a minute,' my mother said.

'What's Pass and Kick?'

'Pass, Punt and Kick,' said Mr Reynolds. 'I took John with me to Houston

that time and we went to an Oilers game. They had a contest for the kids called Pass, Punt and Kick. Halftime thing, you know. I had a connection – McMullen’s one of our clients – so Johnny gets to go down on the field with the other kids and, *whump*, he just knocked that sucker right through the posts.’ He turned to my father. ‘From twenty yards out.’

‘Not too shabby,’ said my father. And took a swig of Michelob.

‘Twenty-two,’ John Reynolds said. ‘It was twenty-two.’

‘I’m sorry, Johnny,’ said his father. ‘Twenty-two is right. Twenty-two yards.’

‘I’m surprised Harry hasn’t told you this one already,’ Mrs Reynolds said. ‘He’s told everyone else.’

‘Wait a minute,’ my mother said. ‘Am I missing something here? Does this have something to do with the Olympics?’

‘Don’t do this, Janet,’ my father said – and he tacked on a laugh.

Mr Reynolds threw his long fingers away from his wrist. ‘It’s a fact that not too many boys get to go down on the field of the Houston Astrodome. Not to mention kicking one through the posts in front of fifty-thousand-odd people. He centred that baby. Like a shot! Even the pros, you’ll see a wobbling kick from time to time.’

My mother fixed a look on me. ‘Go back and play, honey.’

Mrs Reynolds had her eyes on my dad. ‘I think I remember you saying you played some football in college. Isn’t that right?’

‘Unfortunately. I was on scholarship – this was Rutgers – so I didn’t have much choice in the matter. It’s a rough sport down on the field. There’s things you can’t see from the stands. I’ve got the scars to prove it.’

‘You don’t have any scars,’ my mother said.

‘Not actual scars,’ my father said. ‘But my knees got shot to hell. My shoulder.’

‘Harry played soccer,’ Mrs Reynolds said. ‘He wore these cute little shorts and knee socks. Harry was a Princeton baby.’

‘I don’t believe they had soccer at Rutgers,’ my father said. ‘Not at that time.’

‘It was more of an Ivy League thing back then,’ Mr Reynolds said in a low voice. ‘It’s a damned good sport. Rough, too, in its own way.’

‘They run for hours,’ Mrs Reynolds said, ‘but they never seem to get the ball

in the goal. What was the score of that Hobart game, honey, with the overtime?’

Mr Reynolds looked at his wife with flat eyes. ‘Nothing-nothing,’ he said.

‘Unbelievable!’ she said.

‘Go back down, honey,’ my mother said. ‘Go play.’

John Reynolds and I went back down below. He asked me if my dad had a yacht. When I said no, he asked why not. Then he reminded me that his father was my father’s boss. Then we divided his baseball cards into two teams and set them up, using a table as a makeshift field, with a player at each position and one in the batter’s box. Our baseball was made of paper and spit. For a bat we used a pencil with tooth marks in it.

In the ninth inning John claimed he had won the game on a home run – but it was obviously a foul. When he refused to admit it, I went at his head with my fist. I connected with his cheekbone. My next punch landed solid on his chest. He took my arms in his hands and snaked one leg through mine. Now that we were wrestling I had no chance. Still, we fought for a long while – until I gave up, overheated and barely able to breathe, blood pounding in my face. He had got me in a headlock. I couldn’t do a thing. I left the cabin when he released me, with the notion that my father might avenge me by challenging Mr Reynolds.

By this time, in the back of the boat, I saw that it was now just my mother and Mrs Reynolds. They were silent in their bikinis. Their hair was blowing around. The men were up front. Each held a bottle of Michelob. Their heads were close together. They stopped talking when I got to my father’s side.

‘Excuse me a minute, Harry.’ My father looked down at me. ‘What is it now, Jimmy?’

‘John got me in a headlock.’

‘Did you manage to get out of the headlock?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Good man. But maybe you shouldn’t be rough-housing with John if he can get you in a headlock like that.’

‘He cheated.’

‘Hey, you win some, you lose some.’

‘He wouldn’t even punch. He fights like a girl.’

‘I don’t want to hear that sore-loser talk. John’s bigger than you. You shouldn’t be

starting something you can’t finish.’

‘He’s the one who started it.’

‘I don’t want to hear it. Not today.’

‘We might as well head back,’ Mr Reynolds said. ‘I think we’ve all had about as much fun as we can stand.’

‘Yeah, real nice fucking boat you got here, Harry.’

They laughed hard for a few seconds, and then Mr Reynolds said something about how much the boat had cost him for each hour spent on the water, and then they drank from their bottles.

The six of us were quiet and separate as we passed the Statue of Liberty and the Twin Towers on our way back to the harbour. But once we were close to the bluffs, Mrs Reynolds stood close to her husband, who was at the wheel, and she laid a hand on his butt. John was right there with them, like a pet. I saw him rubbing his shaggy hair on his mother’s bare arm. My father was in the bow, sunglasses on. Mom was in the stern, hidden in a green blanket. The engine made a blubbing sound. You could smell gas fumes. John rang a bell. He kept ringing it until his father said, ‘Cut it out, Johnny.’ I saw a lot of floating trash.

I was the first one off the boat. I had to wait a long time for my parents to get to the station wagon. On the way home my mother told me I should have said thank you. My father said he didn’t appreciate how I was acting on the boat. After a while I was half asleep in the back seat. The sound of my parents’ voices – secretive – made me queasy. The sun was on me. I opened the window and stuck my head outside.

‘Roll up the window,’ my father said. ‘I got the air on.’

Especially in the summertime we used to go to the Star Pizzeria. I loved it there. It was a big place, wooden, with pinball machines, a huge fish tank, and softball trophies on the shelves. And my father always made a big deal about the Star’s ‘thin crusts’.

One Saturday evening, after a few hours of driving around to look at houses we would never buy, I saw the Star Pizzeria sign glowing pink against the summer evening sky and I said what I said almost every time we passed it: ‘Can we get pizza?’

‘I don’t see the harm,’ my father said.

'I'm certainly not cooking tonight,' my mother said, 'but I don't feel like going in there. Place is a zoo.'

'We'll get a pie to go. Take ten, fifteen minutes.'

'Fine with me.'

She steered the station wagon into the small dirt parking lot. My father got out. Just after he got to the pizzeria door, he seemed to think of something. He came back towards us. I thought he was going to kiss my mother, but he just said, leaning into the open car window, 'What do you feel like? Should I get the pepperoni?'

'Whatever Jimmy wants is good with me.'

'Jimmy likes the pepperoni. Right, kid? Oh – I just remembered – I don't have any cash on me.'

My mother opened her purse – and then she paused.

'Did you honestly just remember?'

'Did I just remember what?'

'Did you honestly just remember that you don't have any cash on you?'

'What is that supposed to mean?'

'You know what it means.'

'I'm afraid I – I think I need help with this one. I'm not exactly sure of the charge, officer.'

'Just tell me. Did you know you didn't have any cash on you before you asked me what kind of pizza we should get – or was it after?'

'What the hell difference does it make?'

'It makes a lot of difference.'

'Let me get this straight. You're saying I knew I didn't have any cash on me – but for some devious purpose I concealed this from you? Is that what you're saying?'

'I'm saying you had no intention of getting anything but pepperoni. You came back to the car pretending to ask what kind we wanted, when all you wanted was the cash. From my purse. That's what I'm talking about. I'm talking about honesty.'

'Now you've lost it. If you're gonna be watching every little thing I do, every move, I don't know. I can't live that way.'

'Don't yell.'

'I'm not yelling. I'm calm. If you want to hear what yelling sounds like –'

She tossed a twenty-dollar bill out the window. He snatched it out of the air.

My mother threw the station wagon in reverse. We backed out fast. Dad was standing in the dirt. His body looked

large and square. We left him there.

We drove towards the slowly setting sun. Soon the land was open and empty.

Smooth pavement, a new highway. I was hungry. We passed a two-storey brick building in a small town. Mom looked at me in the rearview.

'That's where I went to high school. I was very popular. I wasn't always like this. They called me Crazy Janet.'

There was a long circular driveway in front of the school. We were on it now.

'We called it "buzzing the loop" when you went around like this, except I did it much faster. I used to play hooky and come here. I had a bell for a horn. Everybody knew who it was when I buzzed the loop. Everybody was looking down from the windows.'

We drove away from the school, into dark farmland.

'This used to be a dirt road. We used to come out here and race. Guess who the champ was.'

'You?'

'I was the only girl. The rest were all – they were all greasers.' She laughed.

'What's a greaser?'

'Come up front, so you can feel it.'

'Feel what?'

'The speed. So you can feel the speed.'

I climbed over the front seat and sat down on the passenger's side – my father's usual spot in the station wagon. She turned up the radio. The song was 'Dream Weaver', which sounded so strange and futuristic.

'Roll down the window. Your father doesn't like it down.'

I rolled it down.

We were picking up speed.

'Here's where we dragged. Back then you kicked up a lot of dust. I had a '53 Ford.'

The sun was down but the sky still had some light. The engine was running loud with an occasional knocking noise. Tall green stalks were flying past. I felt the seat vibrating beneath me as we went towards a low scrubby hill. My mother's mouth was open.

'Look!'

She grabbed me by the hair. She pointed my face at the speedometer.

'We're doing ninety-five. How's it feel?'

I wasn't saying anything.

'Say it feels good. You have to enjoy things.'

We lost some of the speed on our way up the hill.

On the downhill side we saw a police car at the side of the road.

'Oh, shit,' my mother said. 'Shit! That's a very dirty trick.'

It was late when we got back. The smell of cigarettes was in the house again. At the bottom of the stairs my mother gave me a kiss. She smelled like suntan lotion.

'Now you know. Now you know me a little bit.'

She jogged up the stairs, her body light, her long hair jumping.

I went towards the smoke, towards my dad in his kitchen cave.

I saw three Michelob bottles on the table.

The smoke was curling into the birdcage. Ringo was making little peeps.

'You two have fun?'

'Sort of.'

'Where'd you go? Dancing?'

'We just drove around. To Mom's old school.'

'All the way out there? Typical.'

Where'd you eat?'

'I don't think we really did.'

'You didn't eat anything? What the hell's the matter with her?'

'We went ninety-five.'

'Miles per hour?'

I said nothing.

'Ninety-five? In that heap? Holy Christ!'

Immediately I wished I hadn't mentioned it.

I made a quick vow, inwardly, not to mention getting pulled over, not to say a word about the thing where the police officer made her sit in the back of the cruiser for fifteen minutes while I remained in the station wagon, alone.

Dad stubbed out the cigarette.

'This is great. "Crazy Janet". The whole thing. The big routine. There's pizza in the fridge. Grab yourself a slice. Kid doesn't get any dinner and she almost kills him.'

'We got – she got pulled over. Mom had to sit in the cop car.'

'Arrested?'

'I don't know. She was in there for a long time. He checked her licence.'

'This is typical, the whole situation. So fucking typical! Grab yourself a slice.'

I was staring at the bent cigarette butts

when I heard his pounding footsteps on the stairs. After a while my mom shouted, 'I am not listening to this!' Then it sounded like they were moving the furniture around.

I plucked the longest butt from the ashtray. I straightened it. My fingers were trembling as I lit a match and held the flame to the blackened tip. I sucked in the smoke. I felt my brain lighting up. I realized I was drooling a little. I took a sip of the bitter Michelob. Then I had another drag.

A DAY OR TWO after that, my father was late for baseball practice. The other kids on the team – all of them older than me, took turns standing in the third-base box, imitating him while chanting his coaching slogans: *Eye on the ball, eye on the ball! Punch it, babe, punch it! Think like a hitter up there! Quick hands, quick hands!* And, somehow most embarrassing of all, the thing my dad shouted at the batter whenever there were men on base: *Ducks on the pond, ducks on the pond!*

He pulled up to the field in the TR7. He took the mound, started throwing batting practice. During my cuts, I began by swinging the bat in anger. I whiffed the first four or five times.

'Come on, Jimmy, think like a hitter up there. Quick hands now.'

This made the other kids do his slogans again. They laughed.

You were supposed to run out the twentieth pitch, even if you didn't get any wood on the ball. I hit it hard to short-stop and moved fast down the line. The first baseman stretched, with one foot on the corner of the bag. I leaped. As I was flying over his stretched-out body, I stomped on the centre of his back with my left cleat. We both crashed to the dirt. I clawed my way to the base. He threw off his glove and tackled me. I was overmatched, so I got in a jab to his chin. I was glad to have made that one clean blow. I didn't care too much about the punches raining down on me.

My dad pried us apart, laughing and saying, 'Break it up, fellas.' For the rest of practice I felt fine. I could smell the dirt and the grass. I noticed the shades of orange and pink that coloured the high summer clouds. Nobody was mocking my father any more.

'Listen up, Jimmy,' he said after

practice was done. We were in the TR7. Its interior smelled like cologne, leather and cigarettes. 'I would appreciate it if you didn't mention I was late for practice today. To your mom. I got enough problems as it is.'

'I won't tell.'

'You might not mean to tell, but sometimes things have a way of slipping out. So just be careful, OK? When you're alone with her. She can be pretty tricky.'

'I won't say anything.'

'Good man. You want to take a few more cuts? There's a batting cage out in Montville. We could hit Gino's on the way.'

'What about Mom? Dinner, I mean.'

'She's a big girl. She'll figure something out.'

That silver foil – the burgers at Gino's were wrapped in a soft silver foil. I loved that foil. It set Gino's apart from the other places, which wrapped their burgers in paper.

My dad and I were out of our usual territory, in a Gino's I had never seen. The people here looked odd, like your cousins' friends. I said I was still hungry after the first junior cheeseburger.

'Good man. Get some meat on those bones. Slap hitters don't drive Cadillacs. Remember that.' He went to the counter and got me my second junior cheeseburger of the night. While watching me eat, he said, 'That was a good punch you got in there. I like having fighters on my team. Scrappers. Wish I had ten more just like you.'

I felt great when he said that.

Back in the car, he said, 'There's something I've been wanting to tell you before you go off to this Wyanoke place. You feel ready for that, by the way? Being away from your mom for five weeks? Or whatever the hell it is?'

'I think.'

'Good. That's good. It'll do you good, being away. Camp. Now listen. I need you to stop me if you've heard any of this before. This thing I'm going to tell you. Because I'd rather not go into it. OK?'

'OK'

'This is the big talk. You know what the big talk is?'

'No.'

'It's when a woman – take your mother – when a woman gives birth, she experi-

ences some terrible pain. Did you know about that?'

'No. Yes.'

'It's like the worst diarrhoea cramps you can imagine. You've had diarrhoea, right, Jimmy? So imagine diarrhoea cramps, only thirty or forty times worse. They have medicine for the pain, but sometimes the medicine doesn't do the trick. Sometimes, in the old days, long time ago, they'd just knock the lady over the head. But your mother doesn't like to go under, because they brainwashed her in college.'

'Mom got brainwashed?'

'Not really. Not exactly. There were these women's libbers. But that makes no difference. The main thing is – you do know how the baby got there in the first place, don't you? Because this is the meat of the situation.'

'You mean how I got to be in Mom?'

'I mean any baby. How any baby got to be anywhere. Not just you. Do you know where babies come from? How they get made?'

'They're in the mother's stomach.'

'Well, no, it's not exactly the stomach. It's the vaginal crotch region, if you want to get technical. But I'm talking about before that. Don't you know?'

'No.'

'You mean you never thought about it, or thought to ask someone? We're talking about how people are made here. Animals, too. It's all the same. Weren't you ever curious about it? Don't kids talk about it?'

'Not really.'

'How could you not be, with all these people walking around, not to mention the animals – how could you not be curious to know where everybody came from?'

'I don't know. I just wasn't.'

'Jesus. Well, it's extremely simple. You know men and women are different, right? Men have penises, and women have vaginas. Men are ugly, and women are pretty. The men try to get the women, and you may have to go to a prom, or have a big wedding, but the point is – and this is serious – the point is everybody is infected with the urge to make babies. Even ladies. They're the same as us, pretty much, although they're a little pickier, but you shouldn't worry about it. What God did, see, to make sure that people kept surviving, was to make it feel very

good to do the action that makes the babies. Do you know what that action is?

'No.'

'Well, OK. Are you kidding me?'

'No.'

'How could you – well. What happens is, the man's penis becomes erect, which means hardened, and he inserts it into the lady's vagina. Just sticks it in, when he has a good boner' – I laughed; he glared at me – 'and he wiggles it around, and that's it. Just like dogs in the street. The man has tiny seeds inside there and they come shooting out and they turn into these tadpoles and they start swimming – because she's got an egg hiding in there. The egg is minding its own business, and one of these tadpole guys, the best one, finds the egg. He shoves the other guys out of the way. He's the toughest one. He's a winner. Then he gets all mixed up with the egg so you can't tell them apart. Funny when you think about it. Because now he's not so tough any more.'

'You mean the tadpole turns into the egg?'

'That's how everybody starts out. Me. You. Grandpa. The part about putting the penis in the vagina is called sexual intercourse. I want you to remember that, because that is the proper name. But it has many names and some of them aren't nice. Some people say "screw" or "fuck". If you're joking around, you say things like "hide the salami".'

I laughed – it blasted out of me.

'I'm being funny but it's a serious thing, Jimmy, because that's where life starts. Now, sick things happen to some people, because the urge to make a baby is so strong. Some guys can't handle it. They have to get divorced. Or else maybe they wind up in jail. But I just didn't want you hearing this for the first time up at that camp. From John Reynolds or some other character. Now. Are you shocked by any of this?'

'No.'

'I hated the idea of my parents doing that kind of thing. Just hated it.'

'I knew babies got born but I didn't know the stuff about what happened before.'

'Sometimes I wonder where you came from.' He was chewing peppermint gum with his mouth open. 'You're a funny kid.'

He was smiling at me with his cold blue eyes, and it made me feel proud of myself, that he considered me a funny kid.

It wasn't easy getting used to the mechanical pitcher at the Montville batting cage, but after a while I hit a few to the sign marking two hundred feet. Then I got a blister on the heel of my left hand, which made it impossible for me to hit, which seemed to piss my father off, and we left, driving on back roads in hilly woods. The TR7's engine made a low and constant animal growl, but you could still hear the midsummer insects going *chack-chack-chack, chack-chack-chack*.

'What I'm going to do is keep this baby in top condition so she can be all yours by the time you're seventeen. A fine car gets better with age. Remember that. Also remember: a piece of machinery like this, you've got to baby the carburettor.'

'Baby the carburettor.'

'That's right.'

You could feel the car staying right with the road. It wasn't like the station wagon, which took curves piece by piece. The headlights lit up not much of the pavement ahead. Leaves made a spraying sound as we flew past.

'How fast you think we're going?'

'I don't know.'

'Take a look.'

The speedometer's needle was pointing just below the 100.

'You can't feel it that much.'

'That's the idea. Dangerous in your mother's heap. This baby is built for this.'

A feeling of panic was creeping up on me, now that I knew how fast we were going on such a narrow road. I gripped the seat tight in one hand and held the safety belt with the other.

'Goddamn!' my father said – but he said it happily. He let the speed fade.

I was trying not to show it but I was losing control of my face. I started crying and I was ashamed of myself and the shame made the crying more intense.

'Come on, Jimmy, we don't want that crying crap. It's safe in a car like this, it's perfectly safe.'

BASEBALL SEASON ended. My mother was packing my things into a long canvas bag.

'If you don't want to go, it's all right with me. We could do things together.'

She watched me brush my teeth, then

dropped the toothbrush into a kit bag. Inside it was a new rectangular hairbrush with no handle, a bar of soap in its own plastic box and nail clippers. She told me not to worry about John Reynolds. She said I probably wouldn't be seeing him, since he was in a different age group. She said I was her baby.

Before dawn she woke me by taking my feet in her hands. Everything felt fine on the drive to New Hampshire. My father even fell asleep with his head on my mother's lap as she drove the station wagon. I was awake in the back seat, watching the sky go light. The land went from hilly to mountainous.

At Camp Wyanoke a tall thin man in a visor took the canvas bag from my father and led us down a narrow path – dirt topped with slivers of black gravel – through a patch of woods. His hair looked like a bush. Somehow he knew my name, although none of us had told it to him. He said he had heard a lot of good things about me.

A lake surrounded by pine trees came into view.

'Hope you like to swim,' the counsellor said.

'He hasn't had much experience in the water,' my mother said. 'He's not ready for the advanced group.'

'He swims fine,' my father said.

'He hasn't been in a lake before,' my mother said.

'Lake, pool, makes no difference,' my father said.

'Everybody gets the same test,' the counsellor said.

We stepped into the bunkhouse. It was dark and cool. It had screens instead of solid walls. It smelled of damp wood. A fat kid was seated, alone, on a corner bed. He looked into my eyes and told me he was from Baltimore.

'First swim is at six-thirty in the a.m.,' the counsellor said. 'We'll be hitting the lake before breakfast. Sun's gonna be peeking out over the hill. Pretty sure it's French toast tomorrow. You like French toast?'

I nodded.

'We've got a lot to do tomorrow. Archery, kickball, probably a little flag-football in there. We've got capture-the-flag. We do it in this pine grove. I'll be honest with you' – the counsellor was looking into my eyes, as if my parents

didn't exist – 'I'm having trouble seeing how we're gonna squeeze everything in.' He shook his head, as if overwhelmed.

'Water must be cold,' my father said.

'I won't lie and say it's not chilly – but it feels good. I took a swim a half-hour ago. I feel great.'

Once he was gone, my mom went into

the sack and started laying my clothes on the crooked shelves. She said it was going to be cold in the bunkhouse at night and asked my dad to tell them to give me an extra blanket. He said I would look like a fool to the other kids if I got special treatment. Then she said, in a shaking voice, that five weeks was too long for a ten-

year-old boy to be away from home, and my dad told her to quit being ridiculous.

On the bunkhouse porch they were both hugging me at the same time. My eyes were on the lake. A long pier went far into the water. It looked like you could walk all the way to the middle, where the water was deep, and jump right in. ◇

ON NEW ARRIVALS

Our Little Man

By William Berlind

One day in August, after months of anticipation and planning, we had Max. Was it only just a year ago? I can barely recall what life was like for my wife and me before Max, so consumed are we now by his every need. Back then, we were just another naïve young couple, concerned only with satisfying the demands of our own happiness. In truth, and this is not an easy thing to admit, we didn't put much thought into having Max. It just seemed like the next natural step in our relationship. Then, of course, the day came when Max actually arrived, and everything changed.

That autumn with Max we holed up in our Greenwich Village apartment, adjusting to our new life together. We lived according to the modern fashion, my wife and I sharing equally the responsibility of caring for Max. He was wild and prone to sudden outbursts of wailing in the middle of the night. But the exhaustion that friends of ours had warned us to expect was mitigated by the surge of energy that propels burgeoning young families forward blindly into the future. Probably for the first time in either of our lives, my wife and I suffered for a cause other than ourselves. The feeling was almost euphoric. My wife smothered Max with a maternal love that came naturally to her. I tossed him a miniature tennis ball, imagining whimsically that someday he could play for my beloved New York Mets.

Despite the considerable joy that Max gave us, soon after we brought him home and our initial excitement resolved into

a steady routine, I noticed a shifting in relations between my wife and me. I observed this change uneasily and with mounting apprehension. The activities we had enjoyed as a young couple – reading, travelling, going out to dinner and a movie, cooking, or simply being quiet and still in each other's presence – gradually died out, replaced by tasks of raising and managing Max. Once lovers, my wife and I were becoming mere caretakers. Even when we gave Max over to one of our parents for a day or two, he never strayed very far from our minds.

Our life together declined quietly over those first months. I watched us growing further apart but felt helpless to do anything about it. Although Max was leading us somewhere unfamiliar and, for me at least, potentially unpleasant, we had grown accustomed to the march. Besides, what could really be done? We weren't exactly about to send him back.

Then late one Sunday morning in the spring, my wife and I found ourselves seated around the kitchen table eating toast and jam, as had been our custom before Max. It was warm in the sunlight and Max was curled up asleep on his favourite blanket. As we read the paper together in silence, I was reminded of our former happier life together. 'Who's my man?' she said with unusual affection apropos nothing at all. I smiled. My heart warmed to hear my wife speak so tenderly to me. But as I looked up from the paper to return her kindness, I understood in one horrible moment that she was speaking to Max.

All at once the source of the vague foreboding I had felt for many months became clear. No longer the master of my house, no longer first in my wife's eye, I had been usurped by this little demon. Jealousy, hitherto unknown to me, followed hard upon this realization. Yes, reader, grotesque and unnatural as it sounds, I was jealous of Max.

I set out to regain my wife's love. However, even then, incited as I was by envy and wounded pride, I conceived how hopeless my situation was. Max possessed every advantage. He was cute and wily. I was old and slow. His native intelligence and cunning ran circles around my own. On those rare occasions when my wife and I found ourselves in a moment of peace or when we attempted, on even rarer occasions, to resume our physical relationship, Max instinctively knew the correct stratagem by which to draw my wife's attention away from me. He couldn't speak, of course, but that hardly mattered. A vast catalogue of looks and whimpers expressed more feeling than any of my overwrought, self-pitying appeals. When I complained, my wife ignored me or called me names. What kind of *man* was I to be jealous of Max? Mostly she simply laughed it off. I would often return home at the end of the day to find Max and my wife cuddling on the couch, in the very spot where she and I used to sit, and I'd swear Max was laughing at me as well.

Finally grasping my defeat, I became bitter and drew inward. I ceased bathing regularly. I had always prided myself on an

athletic physique but I quit my gym and grew soft. I drank excessively and ate too much pork. I developed asthma and rashes on my ankles. We stopped seeing friends. I was short and unkind with my wife. Minor household tiffs devolved without warning into ugly hostility. All the while at night Max slept peacefully between my wife and me in our bed, nestled in an absurd pile of baby toys, oblivious to or perhaps even delighted by the rancour surrounding him. Unable to sleep, I'd remove myself to the living-room couch and recall happier episodes in my life.

Dear reader, if only you had seen me a few years ago, I can assure you I did not have to beg for affection from any woman. I was one of those young gallants you may observe prowling around New York these days, unattached, concerned only with the fulfilment of his own crushing desires. Oh, to recall those nights – stalking downtown streets and bars, wind blowing through my hair, my mind flush with power, the power to seduce any woman, to possess her completely before language or thought – reader, it was an intoxicating dream. Brutally, mercilessly, I tore through the fresh ranks of New York women. Conquest followed upon conquest until after a sustained period of this debauchery, I became completely unleashed from the moral restraints that govern other men. I knew neither guilt nor regret, save that of not bringing a seduction to a satisfying conclusion. And, sensitive reader, would you allow me to share a rather distasteful observation with you? The more callously I behaved, the greater my success. The dark secrets of the godless predator were revealed to me. Terrible indeed were they to know.

Then suddenly, in the midst of this gluttony, a troubling idea affixed itself in my mind and would not be expelled. This thought, that my aptitude for seduction was eroding my capacity to know a woman in her full humanity, eroding even my capacity to know love, began to haunt me. At first merely a cloud of thought, the inner disturbance intensified with each success until it possessed me entirely. Whether this prick of moral disquietude boded good or ill, I could not determine.

One morning I awoke in a dank East Village walk-up, still intoxicated, next to a woman whose name I couldn't at that moment recall. The smell of incense,

cigarettes and red wine permeated the place. The walls were hung slapdash with exotic tapestries. It was a morning much like any other, except the merriment with which I customarily greeted such scenes was absent. Indeed, I felt only emptiness and dread. At once the girl perceived my distress. She glowered at me from across the bed, hurt and confused. The spell was broken. My senses revolted. I hastened to the front door, barely remembering to take with me my wallet and belt. Reeling, I staggered half-crazed into the street. What had I become? I was no longer a man, certainly. Was I merely a dog? Could I ever be human again? Could I love ever again?

Under the gloom of this panic, I resolved to settle down. Reader, I say 'resolved', but was it even my choice? Drawn along by invisible strings, our couplings happen subliminally, pheromonally, if you'll allow. Unbidden, our desires – to love or debauch, to play, or even, scolding reader, to settle down – pour out of us into the cosmos. To those whose senses are attuned to Nature's subtle fibrillations, mankind's desires reveal themselves absolutely, as if they were written across our very faces. Meanwhile, those whose hearts are blind merely grope and thrash about, lost in a tangle of poor choices and misinterpretation, magazine articles and clumsy advice from friends. Have you considered how, for instance, in the park two dogs spot each other from a great distance and immediately decide whether or not to play? This one may be short and fat, a real porker, while the other is tall and elegant, with all the dignity, and yet if Nature would have it so, they will commence loving one another before even a cursory inspection. Now I ask you, are we so different from our animal friends? Could we not, with proper enlightenment, understand our fellow man much in the same way as the dog knows his fellow dog?

I soon found a match, my wife now, a fetching divorcee from the town of R—. Our eyes met at a Starbucks in Greenwich Village and we both felt an immediate connection. Would it be appropriate to say, now that I have explained myself somewhat, that we sniffed each other out? In all seriousness, is it not possible that in those brief moments in the coffee queue before I introduced myself, her loneliness

and deep longing found unspoken fellowship with my own?

Weeks later she arrived at a party that I was hosting dressed all in black and carrying her own quart of Jameson's. She didn't particularly like spirits, I learned later, or enjoy going to parties for that matter, but the effect was powerful on me. (Or perhaps I was prepared to love her, regardless of the guise?) Our relationship progressed quickly through the accepted stages of courtship: two dinners, a week-end trip to the Adirondacks and finally, a declaration of love. She moved in and we soon began discussing marriage and children. We had Max four months before our wedding day. However, among our broad-minded families and loose circle of artists and bohemian friends, this was not considered an unusual arrangement. Besides which, after a few weeks together with us, for better or worse, we already considered him a part of our family.

Months passed. Eventually I became resigned to my new life with Max and resigned, too, to a new understanding with my wife. Max, however, would have none of it. Not merely satisfied with stealing my wife and vanquishing me, he seemed bent on an absolute and crushing victory. Was the beast mocking me? His behaviour grew increasingly erratic. The slightest quiver of a sound – the creak of the radiator or ding of the elevator door opening on our eighth-floor hallway – sent him into violent tantrums, lasting hours. Neighbours complained. We received a sternly worded letter from our building's managing agent. Max couldn't sleep for more than two hours at a time and, even more troubling, refused to eat his meals. Max sucked our last trace of life force. We were drained entirely, delirious and close to destruction.

Finally, even my wife's unlimited capacity for indulgence of Max was exhausted. We made an appointment with Dr Sane, who we hadn't seen since we had brought Max in for his rabies shot. After we had described our situation, Dr Sane suggested that we have Max castrated. Reluctantly, we agreed to the procedure. Even I felt for Max.

Oddly enough, the traumatic part for Max wasn't the operation itself – a common one to curb aggressive behaviour in young males – but rather, his having to wear an enormous cone around his head.

The cone was meant to prevent him from gnawing the stitches. However, it had the additional unfortunate consequence of preventing Max from licking his penis and smelling dogs' assholes on the street, two of his most cherished activities after sleeping and eating.

It goes without saying that the operation altered Max. But it altered me, as well. Seeing Max so compromised, haplessly struggling to lick his penis or pick up a twig on the street, while negotiating the enormous cone, struck me deeply. For as long as we had him, Max was an abstraction to me – at first an enemy of my happiness, and then a rival for my wife's love. Now I felt Max's suffering keenly, perhaps as keenly as my own. Seeing Max thusly, compromised, in his full humanity, almost as a brother, I sof-

tened. My wife noticed the change in my attitude and rewarded me with increased affection.

I took it upon myself to set things right with the little man. I tracked down an online purveyor of organic gourmet dog meals and ordered 20lbs, dividing it equally among 100 small plastic baggies, which I stored in the freezer next to the peas. I purchased a handsome brown cashmere sweater from Brooks Brothers and a pair of small rubber boots for the cold New York winters. When I brought Max to Washington Square Park, I picked him up and carried him over the muddy sections of the path leading to the dog run. For the first time, I listened to Max's needs. I learned to distinguish between his various barks and howls – when he wanted to be fed, when he wanted to be played with

and when he wanted to be walked. Even now, as I bend down to scratch his belly, I hear Max growling softly. He is growling with satisfaction. I feel my wife's approving gaze, like sunlight, on the back of my neck. She is satisfied, too.

The day we brought Max home was the day the romance between my wife and me ended. The particular intensity and happiness of our youth is gone. Still, as we have grown accustomed to our new roles and our new life with Max, new pleasures have revealed themselves to us. Walking Max around the block, filling his little water bowl with fresh water or combing dried pieces of bark and shit out of his fur, these things, while not remarkable in themselves, have formed the basis of a new kind of happiness, a happiness which continues to this very day. ◇

ON CHILDREN

Losing Their Religion

By Piers Paul Read

Now that the youngest of my four children is about to turn thirty, and the eldest is himself the father of a family with a son and two daughters, it is possible to look back to the way they were raised and ask where we as parents went right and wrong.

Of course, parents are distinct individuals and it has been a dynamic of my marriage, which has lasted now for forty-three years, that my wife and I disagree about most things. First and most fundamentally, we disagree about religion, and so the sense of failure I feel as a Catholic that none of my four children is now a practising Catholic, and only one admits to being a *non*-practising Catholic, would by her (I suspect, were I to ask her) be regarded not as a triumph but as a sign that, in respect to the numinous, they have adopted her agnosticism, which is only common sense.

So clearly, my failure to bequeath to my children the 'pearl of great price' – faith in God, in Jesus as God incarnate and in the Catholic Church as the insti-

tution founded by Jesus to provide 'the fullness of the means of salvation' – is a source of sorrow and self-recrimination. Did I give them too much or too little catechesis? Did I rely too much on their Catholic schools? I took them to Mass every Sunday but we never said grace before meals or held family prayers, perhaps because we never said grace and there were no family prayers in my childhood. My mother was a Catholic but my father a sceptic, and it is not easy to pray in front of sceptics when you know they are thinking that you might as well be trying to raise spirits with Ouija boards or be baying at the moon.

I told my eldest child that he had to accompany me to Mass until he was eighteen; he stopped soon after his eighteenth birthday. For my second, it was seventeen. For my third, sixteen. And when I saw my youngest at the age of fifteen looking at her watch during the Consecration, I consulted a priest who said I should let her decide for herself whether to go to Mass or not. She lapsed

soon after. 'I don't mind God,' she said. 'But I don't like Jesus. He's always talking about himself.'

Looking back, I like to think that I can place some of the blame for my children's rejection of Catholicism on the uninspiring religious instruction that they received both in the parish and at their Catholic schools. It conveyed nothing of the grandeur or the audacity of the Catholic faith, but taught the kind of insipid social Catholicism that came in the wake of Vatican II.

I also blame the dreary liturgy and the banal language of the English translation of scripture and the Mass. The ceremonial that embodied the mystery at the core of Catholicism was reduced to the banal conviviality of a chat show. It used to be said, 'Once a Catholic, always a Catholic', but because the catechesis of my children's generation was so wishy-washy, and the liturgy so dull, losing their faith was no big deal. It was a matter of stepping off an uncomfortable rock into the mainstream and going with the flow

of the zeitgeist – a zeitgeist that was not just sceptical but downright antagonistic towards religion. When I was a child, England was a Christian country; atheists and even agnostics were in the minority. Now it is the Christians who are in the minority, and just one among other religious minorities that include Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Jews. Religion itself has a bad name – Islam for promoting jihad, Catholicism for its teachings on sex outside marriage and birth control.

Having failed in the supernatural duties incumbent on fatherhood, can I claim to have met with greater success on the natural plane? None of my children is, or ever was, a drug addict or alcoholic; all have professional qualifications and are employed. All have many friends. All are affectionate towards their parents and, apart from the odd flashes of sibling rivalry, seek out and enjoy one another's company. If these bald facts are evidence

in letting children know that they are loved.

When it came to outside advice, the 'bible' of our generation was Dr Spock's *Baby and Child Care*. I remember consulting it twice – once on the question of incessant crying, in which the advice was that crying was a healthy form of exercise; and on some other matter, which I now forget, to which the answer was, 'Rely on your instincts.' As it happened, our first two children hardly cried at all whereas our third seemed to have been born with a gloomy, colicky outlook on life and never stopped. Two and a half years of broken nights ended when we spent six months in New York, living in a loft in Soho. Desperation drove me to seek advice from a friend who happened to be an eminent child psychiatrist. 'If you pick him up,' he said, 'he thinks he's been rewarded for crying.' When my warm-hearted wife

They test the limits, they rebel; but even in adolescence, children like to feel that they have something to rebel against, and in infancy tactile expressions of love are the hammer, and moral certainties the anvil, that make for happy and wholesome children. There is nothing more painful and absurd than to see parents negotiating with their small children as if the interests of the two parties were equivalent; that going to bed at a fixed time in the evening is simply because the parents want some peace and quiet, not something that is right in itself. The parent, the father in particular, should act as an agent of righteousness, not as someone who happens to share the same space. 'Honour thy father and mother' comes before 'Thou shalt not commit adultery' and 'Thou shalt not kill' on the list of the Ten Commandments.

Probably the greatest contribution that



of a successful upbringing, then much of the credit goes to their mother, who, though she worked at times as a school-teacher, journalist and translator, was always, as my younger daughter puts it, 'there for them'.

To some extent, the way we raised our children replicated our own upbringing, but in part it reversed it. My father, also a writer, hardly moved from his study, and left our upbringing to my temperamental and irascible mother. She often fell into a rage for unknown reasons, but when her mood was good she was passionately affectionate and – unlike many other children in England at the time – I benefited from those hugs and kisses which are so important

went back to England for a week, I tried cold turkey on the wailing toddler and it worked.

Did my approach to natural fatherhood have anything to do with my religious beliefs? If anyone wants evidence of original sin, observe the utter egocentricity of the newborn baby or the megalomania of a three-year-old. A parent acts in place of God, in adjudicating, punishing, reconciling, mediating; wearisome though it may be, the dutiful parent is a court in permanent session. Children respond to parental authority if they sense that those parents love them and wish them well. They like to know where they stand, and if a parent dithers about what is right and wrong, it makes them insecure.

parents can make to a child's happiness is to ensure that their marriage is happy and stable. Often the birth of a baby puts a marriage under great strain: there are men in particular who feel a sense of sibling rivalry with their own children, just as the first-born child feels a sense of betrayal when their mother has another child. And there is a whole new area of friction in the who-does-what negotiations that go on in the post-feminist household. I was fortunate in that, even as a child, I looked forward to having children; and looking back over a lifetime, I realize that raising a family, which at the time I thought ancillary to my pursuit of fame and fortune, was in fact a far greater source of happiness and fulfilment than writing books. ◊

Raising Moderately Healthy Jerks

By Peter Mehlman

One foggy night in Los Angeles I attended a party for a big birthday, one of the years when the very industry employing most of the guests sweeps you out of all demographic relevance. One clot of five or so guests stood around eating one of eighty dishes featuring truffle oil and discussing a great man. There was a general consensus that this was a great man. Not Mandela great, but run-of-the-mill great. You know, friendly, charitable, good-hearted, socially conscious . . . show-biz greatness.

Someone like, say, Martin Sheen.

However, at a certain point, a dreary ‘Oh, wait a sec . . .’ fell over the discussion because this great man does have a (talented, successful) kid who’s led a spectacularly tawdry life, even by Hollywood standards.

Sure enough, one attendee, in the voice of someone making a ransom demand, said, ‘He’s great – but he couldn’t have been a very great father.’

A hush. The attendee put his arm around his famine-chic wife who nodded and said, ‘Had to be a really bad father.’

The idiocy here doesn’t only lie in the media-fuelled presumption of the great man’s poor parenting skills. It also lies in how a person’s life, no matter how accomplished, influential, generous he is – no matter how much joy that life has provided the world – is all trumped and dashed by being a bad parent.

At this very moment (and now this moment, and this moment), there are, let’s say, five million people in America who are saying the following words: ‘Being a parent is the hardest job in the world.’

They may be right. But if it’s so difficult, why is a person’s entire being automatically and permanently blackened and voided for being a bad parent?

Neurosurgery. That’s a hard job too. There are probably medical school kids who tried but couldn’t adequately reconnect a severed wrist. Those kids

are advised – encouraged! – to try a different speciality. When they take up endocrinology or epidemiology, their ineptitude with the central nervous system is forgiven and they lead lives of great esteem.

(Unless they’re also bad parents.)

Coal mining. Another tough job. Oh, skip that for now.

This Bad Parent Syndrome casts a gargantuan net. A walk on any street or scan of any newspaper reveals endless amounts of overtly objectionable people. Some of their deficiencies undoubtedly sprung from dismal childhoods at the hands of one or two (or three or four) inept/neglectful/fill-in-the-blank parents. Summarily dumping all of those parents from the ranks of decent human beings and ignoring the rest of their existence not only is harsh but vaguely smacks of the same traits that made these people bad parents to begin with.

The inverse of Bad Parent Syndrome is equally whacked. In December 2008, rest assured, someone on the Upper East Side of New York said, ‘You know, despite it all, Bernie Madoff was a really good father.’

If you’re a good parent, you cannot be all bad. On the other hand, if you’re Paul Newman and you entertain billions of people, establish a mega-successful company in which all profits go to charity, but have a son who overdosed . . . Sorry, Paul, only the puniest of mitigating graces for you.

There but for the grace of God go I? No, there but for the grace of God go you. *I’m a good parent. I’m fine.*

This annihilating attitude is quadrupled by coming out of the mouths of Baby Boomers and Gen X-ers: the population bulge that invented the concept of blaming their pimpled lives on their parents, and the ensuing boomlet that perfected it. Good God, what’s more grinding than hearing siblings repeatedly run down the blow-by-blow evolution of their paren-

tally inflicted damage? (Uh, in which seat at the dinner table was I when all this incessant abuse was taking place?) Somehow, the same generations, who stand so self-satisfied when announcing how raising kids is the hardest thing they’ve ever done, can’t let go of their beloved crutches long enough to look at their own parents and say, ‘They tried the best they could.’ Then again, that lifelong vilification of their own parents was undoubtedly the seed of their snark-infested venom towards their imperfect parenting peers.

The fascinating outgrowth of all this is that there is now an ever-widening, bazillion-dollar growth industry devoted to making bad parenting almost impossible. No matter what symptom or aberrant behaviour your kid exhibits, there is a diagnosis telling you, ‘It’s not your fault.’ Biting, punching, bullying, cutting, bulimia, anorexia, obesity, illiteracy . . . we have an FDA-approved, NIH-researched acronym to explain it and get you off the hook because you’re good at the hardest job in the world and don’t let anyone tell you different.

And maybe you shouldn’t let anyone tell you any different. The greatest parenting in the history of the world guarantees very little. Good at the job, bad at the job, indifferent at the job, we all know that luck plays a gigantic role in how a child turns out. There are so many unnoticed moments that can tip the seesaw the other way, it’s impossible to rate one’s job performance. There are so many influences raining down from all angles, the job defies qualification. There are so many chemicals and enzymes and radioactive waves you don’t even know about when you’re on the job.

There are some horrendously bad parents out there. Some are so bad, they deserve condemnation. But there are also some bad parents who try their best and are just naturally unsuited for the job. They may know it or they may not. But no matter how undeniably good at the job someone is, deep down, every parent knows it takes a lot of good fortune to raise even a moderately healthy jerk, no less a well-adjusted pillar of the community with exceptional parenting skills. ◊

Raise Them Up Hippy

By Arthur Bradford

I was thinking about this strange thing my mother did back in about 1975. She was driving in a car with my twin sister and me – two five-year-olds – when she announced that we were going to rob a bank.

‘We’re all out of money,’ she said, ‘but I’ve come up with a plan.’

My sister and I waited dutifully to hear the details.

‘I’ve got a small gun for each of you,’ she said, ‘and some little black masks. We’ll stop at the bank in town, run in there and make them give us money.’

‘Steal their money?’ asked my sister.

‘Where are the guns?’ I asked.

I recall a familiar feeling of dread welling up inside me at that point. It wasn’t anxiety about committing a crime, for we hadn’t done anything like that before. No, my anxious feelings stemmed from the thought that our family was acting weird again. Once more, we were about to go and draw attention to ourselves like a bunch of freaks. Everyone was going to know we ran around naked and ate food that didn’t come from the stores, like strange granola, and drank milk from goats. They would know we were hippies!

As it turned out my mother’s plan fell apart under our questioning, and at some point she announced that we were not actually going to rob anyone. We did go to the bank and get money that day, but we used the drive-up window and a cheque. Apparently we weren’t broke.

I’m a parent myself now, with two small daughters, and as such I find myself re-examining these instances from my youth with a new perspective. What exactly was going through my mother’s head when she told us that yarn? As I parent, I think I finally understand. In fact, I think I understand the whole hippy parenting thing a lot better now. There’s a funny kind of wisdom that hits a person who reaches the same age his parents were back when certain memories were formed.

I don’t mean to suggest that concocting stories about robbing banks is a typically

hippy thing to do, but I do think there was something in the air back then that moved some parents to throw out the rulebook on what constituted proper child-rearing. Many of these hippy parents had been brought up in the new American suburbia where conformity was celebrated, so for them, the goal was to shake things up and raise a generation of free-spirited little children of the earth, a next generation of soldiers in the revolution. Did that actually happen though? I think back on my childhood and realize that we’re raising our daughters in a decidedly less rebellious fashion. I’ll make a sweeping general guess here and say I bet most children of hippies have chosen to eschew the chaos of their upbringings now that they have kids of their own. Maybe that’s our own way of rebelling, or maybe things are more ‘normal’ for our kids because our parents already did so much of the rebelling for us. Although I’m sure my parents would not really qualify as hard-core hippies, they definitely subscribed to the mood of the day among their set of college-educated baby boomers, which was decidedly back to the land. We lived in rural Maine in the 1970s, and the 1970s there were sort of like the 1960s everywhere else. Our mother, in particular, embraced the bake-your-own-bread, make-clothing-on-a-loom aesthetic. Our father worked for the state government at the time and probably wasn’t so enthusiastic about these new trends in parenting, but he tolerated it as much as he could, or he simply tuned out when things got too weird. Perhaps this was one reason they got divorced soon after we were born. Also our mother became a lesbian.

My sister and I attended a school out in the woods that was a grand experiment in education. The experiment was that nobody taught us anything. We just ran around and played all day long. The older kids must have had some sort of curriculum, but there really wasn’t much of a schedule. At lunchtime, when the weather was warm, we’d all gather at the

muddy pond and swim naked. There was a zip wire that ran across the pond and one time one of the older boys fell off it and ripped open his scrotum on a tree branch. That’s what kind of school it was. Well, that’s not true. I supposed we did learn things, albeit unconventionally. If anyone had a problem they felt needed attention, he or she could ring a big bell and everyone had to come together and discuss the issue. This happened almost daily, and I remember one particularly heated argument about a stolen stereo, during which a boy named Donald slammed a chair against a wall. Peace and love, my ass!

One morning at our hippy school one of the mothers drove a van full of kids off the road and into a creek. Everyone was fine somehow and we didn’t even have car seats back then. After the divorce our mother invited other single mothers over to our house to live in the empty rooms. It was a big Maine farmhouse and difficult to heat. The women learned to split wood and shovel out cars buried in snow while we kids hovered around the heating vents under blankets. Someone named Cat showed up in January and wanted to have her baby in our living room. My mother said no, and explained to us later that Cat was always taking advantage of people. That summer my aunt saved the placenta from her second child and served it with eggs to the guys who were fixing the floor. Then there was a party at our house and a drunken artist tossed a cooked crab through my sister’s bedroom window. Her rug smelled for months!

Why are these my memories of hippy childhood? Of course there were many wonderful times, and I remember those too. What about all those colourful costumes we made by hand? And the sweet molasses we ate instead of sugar? But don’t we always hear about how beautiful life was back when the hippies ruled the day? I believe that most of us who grew up around hippies remember the time as happy, but we also recall a sense of anxiety; a general sense that no one was really steering the ship, as it were. There was a lot of talk about free to be you and me and letting kids make their own choices, and how much adults could learn from the wisdom of a child, but did we kids really want to be the decision makers and the teachers?

Back in the 1960s and 1970s people especially liked to use the term *grown-ups* to describe adults. And certain hippy parents wanted it to be known that even though they were older, they were not ‘grown-ups’ at all. My friend Maxine Swann wrote my favourite book about life as a hippy kid. It’s called *Flower Children*, and in it her crazy father ‘Sam’ says:

‘The real problem, the overall problem, is that grown-ups think they are smarter than kids – when the fact of the matter is, the older you grow, the dumber you get. What happens is you start hoarding up opinions. Pretty soon you’ve got an opinion stuck to everything ...’

The quote goes on to say that if grown-ups would only listen to their kids, they might learn a thing or two. It sounds like classic hippy-speak, but now that I think about it, I believe there’s something to it.

At that hippy free-form school I was telling you about we had a teacher named Barry who played a game called ‘Peanut Butter Man’ with us. This game consisted of him chasing us around the school with huge gobs of peanut butter plastered on to his bearded face. When he caught us, we’d get smeared. Most of the kids enjoyed this game, but I found it a little intense and would usually look for a safe place to hide until it was over. My mother recently dug up one of my fall term evaluations from that school, a hand-typed letter that they wrote up for each student. I was surprised to see such documentation had even existed at that school. The last line said, ‘It seems to us that Arthur might need to be silly more often.’ Perhaps Barry was thinking about the Peanut Butter Man when he wrote that line.

I can really picture old Barry hanging out with the character Sam from Maxine’s book. They’d both be smeared with peanut butter and talking about how much we can learn from kids if we just get down on the floor and play their games sometimes. It’s true that once you become a parent you get especially attached to your opinions. I think this is because we want so badly to provide our children with security. It’s really one of my greatest goals these days just to make sure my daughters feel safe.

Recently our youngest daughter ‘Theo’ has become worried that bears will enter our house at night. I’m not sure where she picked up on this idea. There are no bears anywhere near our house. But I work very hard to assure her that this bear invasion scenario is not possible.

‘Bears live in the woods, Theo,’ I tell her.

‘In our back yard?’ she asks.

‘No, different woods,’ I say. ‘Look, if a bear saw you, it would be afraid. It would run away. Bears are scared of people.’

‘Scared of me?’

‘Yeah, right. You would scare a bear.’

This conversation goes on and on, and I realize at some point that I’ll never assure her fully that there’s nothing to fear from our friends the bears. Eventually I see that I’m just trying to convince myself of this fact anyway. I’m sticking an opinion to something, just like Sam said. I wonder what Barry would have told me about fearing bears.

Throughout my teens and twenties I can recall thinking, ‘Why isn’t my generation as rebellious and radical as my parents’ was?’ But now, with a few more years’ perspective, and the responsibility of raising two little girls, I’m not so interested in whatever that rebellion was about. It’s not so remarkable to me that young people were bucking the system and taking off their clothes at Woodstock. I totally get that. What I find remarkable now is that so many of them were doing that with kids in tow.

A few months ago I took my eldest daughter, Elsie, who is three, to watch a friend of mine play with his band at a club. It was a loud rock band and we went to the sound check first, which I thought Elsie would find entertaining. The place smelled of stale beer and the music was absolutely deafening. Midway through one of the songs the drummer stopped and said into his microphone, ‘Hey, you should really put some earphones on your little girl.’ One of the roadies found an oversized set for her and we watched the rest of the sound check in peace. My original plan had been to bring Elsie back for the show that night. I had visions of her dancing around gleefully and riding about on my shoulders. But when I asked her if she wanted to go back she said, ‘No, that’s OK.’ When I went back there on my own that night I saw no one

else with kids. I would have looked like a real dumbass dragging my three-year-old daughter to that place. Since then I’ve learned that many bands schedule mid-afternoon kiddie concerts where they play at a lower volume in family settings while practical parents prance along with their kids. I haven’t been able to bring myself to attend such a concert yet.

We children of the hippy revolution were too young to understand concepts like new frontiers and bucking the establishment back when all that was happening. We just accepted that the world was full of hippy things and if our teachers wanted us all to hop naked through a field, or our mother said we were going to rob a bank on the way to school, that was simply the way it was going to go down. But something about that unpredictable world caused us to seek, well, more traditional atmospheres for our own children – things like mid-afternoon kiddie concerts and organic juice served in little individual boxes as opposed to squashed-up apples, pressed by hand and poured through cheesecloth into a bucket. I suppose it’s not really that we didn’t enjoy all those new paradigms. It’s just that most of those ideas got sanitized as they were incorporated into the mainstream, sort of like the way the gooey bits of the apples got strained out by the cheesecloth when we made our hippy juice. If you want organic foods now, you just buy them at the store. If you want an alternative education now, there’s a whole slew of acceptable philosophies to choose from, none of which encourages swimming naked with the faculty at lunchtime.

That hippy school we attended went out of business eventually, and my sister and I enrolled in the local public school. What a shock that was! I couldn’t even read! We both gradually adjusted to the new school, saying the pledge of allegiance and happily drinking the sugary fruit punch they served at lunch. I can’t imagine sending our daughters to a place like that old hippy school now, but then again I also want better for them than the mediocre public school we attended afterwards.

Maybe my generation has swung back too far in the other direction. We’ve got websites devoted to the latest news in child brain development, and our car seats are so safe it seems like you could chuck

them off a cliff without harming the baby inside. We used to just ride up front with our parents, ready to fly out the window with the slightest impact. Now, while I drive alone in the front like a chauffeur, I look back at my girls strapped into those plastic suits of armour and wonder just what it is we've lost. I put on one of those old *Sesame Street* DVDs and let them watch it as we drive, to ease the worry. I feel like these days it's as if we're all done with the big experiments and now we just want to implement the results. Why didn't those of us who grew up with such outlandish examples of creativity end up better than the previous generations? Why aren't we all creative geniuses, super-free beings, with little happy earth children? Or maybe we should have all ended up helpless, or in jail? Certainly many of our grandparents shook their heads and figured we were a lost cause. But really, we're just middle of the road, some good, some bad, not really any more enlightened than any of the parents before us, if we're being honest. Does it really matter what you expose your kid to anyway? Why not just tell them you're on your

way to rob a bank each morning?

Last summer we returned to Maine with our daughters and stayed at the old farmhouse with my mother, who lives there still. It was nice to show the girls some of the places where I used to romp and play as a child. I especially wanted to show them that old hippy school, where some of my first memories were formed back when I was an age they were now approaching. But of course the school was gone, the crazy wooden buildings torn down to make way for several expansive houses. There was a farm nearby though, a place we used to visit from time to time. It had been preserved as an educational nature centre by some hearty folks, 1960s throwbacks. The place was on the coast and there were pathways down to the salt-water mudflats where I used to dig clams as a kid. I watched with tender pleasure as my daughters ran ahead of me, down to the bay. At the water's edge, they picked through tide pools and soon got covered in the thick, salty mud. The bugs started to bite their skin and my youngest daughter shit her pants. I'd forgotten to bring a replacement diaper so I washed her off

in the silty water and let her run naked through the broken shells and pungent seaweed. Then Elsie, the older sister, said she wanted to get naked too.

'OK,' I said. 'Go ahead.'

She took off her clothes, threw them down in the mud and went off to join her sister. The bugs were really going to town on them. When we returned to the house their mother would likely be concerned at the welts on their skin. It would take a while to get all that mud out of their hair, and I'd forgotten sun block so they'd probably get burned as well. But if it had been 1975 we wouldn't even have known what sun block was, and maybe I would have taken off my clothes too and got covered in mud along with the kids. The problem was, right then, I couldn't help but know better. I knew that after the initial rush and thrill of being covered in that wet stinky mud, there would come discomfort and reckoning. The welts from the bug bites would swell up and the salty, muddy grit would chafe my ass, and I'd be left wondering what the hell I was thinking doing something so childish, so truly silly. ◇

