

White: Coco and Baby Squeaks

COCO AND BABY SQUEAKS

BY

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I never held anything as carefully as I held my son. I cradled him high against my chest as though he were a giant, fragile egg with the thinnest of shells whose crack would be the end of me. I did not think he was crying because he wanted his mother, or was hungry, or had a dirty diaper, or was in pain from the vitamin K shot he had received in his heel hours after his birth, but because he was truly sad. His magnificent eyes were jay blue and almond shaped, distantly gleaming behind those lucent pools of tears. I rocked him and told him everything was all right, even though I had no idea whether or not everything was all right.

When my wife returned from the bathroom, I was still holding our son while he continued to wail. "I don't think I can do this," I said. In those first hours of parenthood I had not yet lost my wits, and I understood the implication of what I was saying. I had never experienced this particular pain in my heart—a piercing sadness caused by the certainty that my son was sad—and I was already yearning for the day when the pain would cease. Ignoring the comment, she asked me to retrieve something or other: a drink to soothe her hoarse throat

or the phone to call more relatives.

After much deliberation during my wife's pregnancy, we had decided that I would stay home with my son while she worked. For five years, I had been employed as an adjunct professor of composition, essay-writing, and comparative religion, hustling multiple sections at two universities one-and-a-half hours apart, careening around southern New Hampshire in a skittish subcompact Saturn with troves of texts and student's papers littering the back seat. It was the typical adjunct's life—hectic and lonely with little money to show for the superhuman effort. As a physical therapist, my wife enjoyed her job, made more money than any adjunct ever could, and worked nine to five, so the decision was rooted more in logic and practicality than any eagerness to be a so-called stay-at-home parent. Although I knew nothing at all about caring for an infant, I was not scared. I looked forward to the physical demands of my new job: pushing the stroller up the local hills, hauling laundry on the stairs, piecing together all the vaguely unnecessary, rigorously utilitarian contrivances—changing carts, collapsible playpens, odor-killing diaper disposal bins—that

appeared weekly on our doorstep, or toting him around in the Snuggli carrier while I raked the yard and cleared the flowerbeds of debris revealed by the newly melted snow.

We discussed the potential impact of the new arrangement on my emotional health. Twelve years ago, soon after my father died, I had sought treatment for severe depression, and in the ensuing years I had been forced to address recurring episodes of anxiety and depression with short-lived rounds of therapy and medication. For at least a couple years I had been feeling consistently well, my mind distracted and spirits buoyed by the purchase of our first home, and had seen fit to discontinue both therapy and medication, with no apparent ill effects, soon after we moved. I took great pleasure in attending to the lackluster house, a small vinyl-clad dwelling swiftly built on a mound of sand and clay surrounded by fallen trees and wetlands, and its neglected yard. So in the end we felt that being home full-time, compared to maintaining a section or two as an adjunct or taking a part-time job somewhere in the vicinity of our small town—jobs whose income would scarcely cover the cost of day-care and gas—would in fact nurture

emotional stability.

Soon after the decision that I would stay home with our son, I began to entertain fanciful thoughts about all the free time I would have. Babies slept a lot, everyone said—a lot, they repeated. I decided I would fill this time with something constructive, something I had always wanted to do, which was teach myself Latin. Before I purchased the expensive Latin texts, I thought I might confirm my assumptions about the free time. My son was eight months old before I remembered that I had intended to teach myself Latin, which now I knew would never happen, at least not until he left for college. I was so strung out and dull witted that even my native tongue was becoming elusive.

The pain that had pierced my heart in the hospital room would ebb and waver, but it never really ceased. I knew that a baby's cries were his only dependable mode of communication, and yet I could not shake the fear that his cries were an expression of something deeper than the desire for an easily satisfied need. For months I went to bed with a knot of anxiety inside my chest that was tighter than the night before.

The long days contained cycles of brief activities such as eating, bathing, strolling, playing with the squishy planet, stars, and moon dangling above his bouncy chair, and, when I was most exhausted, propping him in front of an allegedly educational video in which mechanical toys spun and clicked to a soothing narration in nearly a dozen foreign languages. He rarely napped in his crib. Instead—fearful that a lack of sleep might retard his development—I would drive around in the car, sometimes for over an hour, until he nodded off, and then, rather than risk waking him during the car-to-crib transfer, I would find a shoulder on a quiet road or a wooded turnout at a trailhead, crack the windows, turn off the engine, and close my eyes. For me it was not a restful time: I knew that any moment his cries could cut the silence.

Elijah was sixteen months old when my wife became pregnant with our second child. With the goal of conserving my energy for the new child, we enrolled Elijah in a daycare three mornings per week. It was an informal operation in a cramped ranch house where a listing swing set and slide sat in a shaded side yard. Free from his

father's contagious angst, Elijah succumbed without fuss most mornings to a nap on a blanket spread out on the floor. The patient, soft-spoken lady who ran the business imposed order in the small space, emphasized outdoor play, and provided healthy snacks. Although Elijah appeared content with the arrangement, three free mornings per week were not nearly enough to quell my turmoil or even replenish dwindling energy. I would feel no less anxious and exhausted when I picked him up than when I dropped him off, and now I could add to those bad feelings the heartache of missing him and the humiliation that I had failed.

Unlike Elijah, our daughter Lucy hardly kicked or shifted in the womb. In the weeks after her birth, however, she proved far fussier than Elijah ever was. The pediatrician vaguely defined her condition as nothing more serious than colic, or unsettled digestion, meaning she was relatively healthy but intensely uncomfortable. Her frequent shrieks could reach a prodigious pitch. Many fellow parents, normally disposed to offering words of support and camaraderie under any condition, admitted they had never heard an infant scream

quite so loud. In the midst of her blinding shrieks I would find myself sort of hunched, eyes squinting, in preparation for something like the crack of shattered glass. So it was finally colic, on top of everything else, which broke me.

The nervous collapse occurred late one afternoon soon after my wife returned from work. It had been a difficult day—no more difficult than other difficult days, but the cumulative effect of over two years of intensifying anxiety finally became too much to bear. A couple hours earlier I had driven around with my daughter, who would not stop crying, and son, who was wailing because his sister was crying, simply because I was at a loss about what to do, and told them through tears, as I watched them in the rear-view mirror, that their lives would be much better without me. My son could not have known what I meant by those words, but my tears and cracking voice were enough to make him increasingly distraught. When I met my wife inside the house I handed over our crying daughter. I was basically hysterical, inconsolable. I made my way to the cellar door and said something about going downstairs to swallow a bunch of pills. I suppose I was

referring to prescribed sedatives, but they were not in the basement—they were upstairs in a cupboard. (I have concluded that this obvious blunder was an unconscious sign that I neither wished nor intended to carry out the act, and yet at the time I believed what I was saying). With Lucy in her arms and Elijah clutching a pant leg, Tina rifled through the phone book and called Dr. Weil, a psychologist I used to see, while I sat on the top step of the cellar stairs. I was able to summon a single thought—that I was done thinking. I could not think, could not feel any emotions, anymore. I could not possibly go on. My mind was so full that I could not bear to engage my senses of sight, which scorched my eyes, or touch, which made me shudder, or sound, which felt like a hot needle in my ears. I believe I rested my head against the cement wall running alongside the basement stairs.

Experts tell us that during the day the heart of a hummingbird can beat as many as twelve hundred times per minute, but at night, when they slip into torpor, it can slow to as low as fifty beats per minute, a biological necessity that allows them to make it through the night on their measly measure of

stored energy. This is an apt analogy for the state of my mind at the time. My brain and body powered down by way of self-preservation. It crashed. I felt like a pile of inert cells whose only function was to occupy space in an impossible world. The sedation I had so often craved had now descended upon me by biological necessity.

According to Tina, Dr. Weil insisted that I go immediately to the emergency room. I shook my head. I was certain that I was untreatable, and that my life had reached its end, and I did not see the point in deepening the pain and delaying the inevitable, though I did not say this. She handed me the phone. I abhorred the idea of speaking to my psychologist, but I accepted the phone without resistance simply because I was too unglued, too thoroughly depleted, to decline. "What?" I whispered. I could barely hold the phone.

In conjunction with his conventional practice, Dr. Weil ran a hypnosis clinic for patients with all sorts of mental health disorders. He had an ideal voice for a hypnotist—deep and velvety but also, on the upper end, slightly nasalized, and therefore somehow multidimensional, as though it approached

from a single point and spread psychedelically into several blankets that finally fused, wrapping you in a soft sleeping bag of sympathy. I had always dismissed hypnotists, none of whom I had personally known, as creepy hucksters, an opinion based solely on those guys who appeared on college campuses and coaxed otherwise inhibited people to strip in front of a hooting crowd. In fact Dr. Weil was an accomplished therapist—affable, sincere, and always helpful—who happened to practice alternative healing.

Now on the telephone I was reminded of the timbre and pace of his bewitching voice. A clear, blessedly unemotional thought crossed my mind: *What a nice voice.* I knew that he had been an effective professional for decades, and that I was not the first suicidal person to whisper in his ear, but given the circumstances he was almost comically composed, as though buffing his lenses with the phone cradled against his shoulder. He said that if I did not go to the emergency room he would have no choice but to call the police. He was so gifted a therapist that this threat sounded like a favor. He reminded me that we lived in a small town where everyone read the police logs in

the bi-weekly local paper. The logs never mentioned names, but all our friends knew our address, which would have been listed somewhere after the heading: "Suicidal Person."

At the hospital I spent several hours in the emergency wing in a small room. The room had a single pane of tinted gray glass webbed with wire through which the doctors and nurses could see me sitting on the end of a gurney under a single fluorescent light. They pretended not to look—I never once saw them looking—but I knew that it would have been impossible, even unethical, for them to resist glancing my way. I waited over three hours for the crisis counselor, who travelled from a city forty-five minutes away. She was in her early sixties, soft spoken, rail thin, with heavy-lidded pale blue eyes and, under the fluorescent light, a hepatic hue that I was certain I shared. We sat opposite one another while she scribbled notes and checked boxes on a form tucked in the clipboard on her lap.

As we talked my mind began to unclench itself. Responding to her questions, I first suspected, and then believed, that the situation was not as hopeless as I had thought. Nonetheless, at the end of our hour-long meeting she informed me

that I would be taken by ambulance to the psychiatric wing of a hospital forty-five minutes away—in the same city from which she had traveled to see me. There I would be reevaluated and, depending on my progress, possibly released after about a week. "It's really a nice place," she assured me. "Honestly. People like it."

I believed her, but it had never crossed my mind that I might be sent to a psychiatric hospital—at most I thought I would be heavily sedated and ordered to spend the night in the emergency room—and I knew, absolutely knew, especially now, after four hours in that stark room where I had managed to feel slightly better, that a stay in such a place would only make me feel much worse. I wanted nothing more than to go home and hug my family. I knew that our lives had changed forever, and that I was not necessarily stable—I was still shaky, scared, undone by what had happened—and that I probably faced a long, soul-searching recovery, but I suspected that my own home was the best place to start whatever healing needed to take place. My own bed.

I called Tina, who told me that she had assumed I would be admitted to some psychiatric ward

somewhere. Initially she resisted my pleas to return, but after a long conversation she, too, believed that I could recover safely at home. Around 1 a.m., after nearly two hours of sporadic discussions with the crisis counselor, Tina and I convinced her that I was not a danger to myself, so I signed a bunch of release forms and, with a promise that I would return to the hospital if I regressed at home, was finally let go.

In a not-too-distant era, I might have had to retire to a quiet room, possibly in an institution somewhere in the hills or at the end of a tree-lined winding road where, for months, together with rounds of bloodlettings or milk cures or enemas or primitive electric-shock therapy—and so on—I would absorb daily infusions of fresh air during strolls around the grounds. More than likely, absent adequate funds for lodgings in such a place, I would have withdrawn to my own bedroom where a special diet would accompany a doctor-prescribed “rest cure” while we all waited for the return of peace and equilibrium. Before the current array of psychopharmaceuticals, including the short-term efficacy of valium-like sedatives, time was the only truly

effective antidote. Being susceptible to prolonged bouts of severe depression, I was wary of consuming sedatives, fearful that their stultifying effects might further pollute my already cloudy cognitive processes, which, as for most people, had been both cause and symptom of depressive episodes.

In the treatment of my past struggles with depression and anxiety before my children were born, no medication had proved truly therapeutic. A couple of selected serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRI's) quelled anxiety but were ineffective against depression and caused grogginess, lethargy, and—perhaps worst of all—indifference to these and other side effects. Subsequent SSRI's caused queasiness, the shakes, or irritability, and all caused drowsiness, even the ones that made me shaky. Acknowledging the ineffectiveness of these medications, my primary care physician referred me to a psychiatrist, Dr. Haines, who introduced Lamictal, an anti-convulsive medication also prescribed for bipolar disorder.

My wife took several days off from work while we waited for the medication to take effect. Sometimes I would scan the

internet for sports and news or listen to talk shows on the clock radio or flip through magazines, but for long stretches I lay with my head on the pillow and merely registered all the stray sounds that drifted through the upstairs window of our rural home. The warble of songbirds and squawk of crows; a car door thumping in the neighbor's driveway; a lawnmower droning; a weed trimmer whining. Detection and registration of sounds became my favored occupation, and I was thankful, for the first time in my life, that the world was never completely silent.

After a couple weeks of isolation I was able to take a few cautious steps out into the world. In the early afternoon I would change out of my pajamas and drive to pick up my kids, whose daycare we had increased as much as our budget allowed. Once home they consumed more processed snacks and watched more PBS than normally permitted, but our situation was far from normal. Frequently, while I observed their simple pleasures, their fondness for the pratfalls of Curious George and their playful interaction, my eyes would fill with tears of gratitude.

Three or four months after

the breakdown I realized I had felt emotionally stable, if not exactly energetic, for maybe a week. Although I could sleep no more than two or three hours at night without having to rise and make my way down to the family room and kitchen, flip on the ceilings lights, and simply survey our belongings—which in spite of their inanimate nature always struck me as reassuringly steadfast, as though they too were pulling for me—I noticed that I had begun to perceive the next day, whatever day it was, as something more than yet another challenge, something more than potential proof that I had continued to survive, and that it might very well offer a collection of unexpected pleasures, such as the sight of my children watching Curious George, however fleeting.

The world never appears quite so beautiful, so thrilling and sublime, as it appears to those who are recovering from illness. Just as when I recovered from anxiety or depression in the past, once I was well—or on the way to well—I reentered the world of beauty, laughter, and love, but I reentered with new eyes, a new heart, and with a more acute appreciation for anything that infuses me with the will to live. In

"Is Life Worth Living?" William James wrote, "It is a remarkable fact that sufferings and hardship do not, as a rule, abate the love of life; they seem, on the contrary, usually to give it a keener zest." He was writing as a psychologist and philosopher, but he was also drawing on his own experiences with multiple bouts of severe depression—"soul-sickness," in his words—during which for months he contemplated suicide.

I would guess that anyone who has been depressed has also pondered the option of suicide. As far as I can tell, this is not the least bit unusual. "We are of one substance with these suicides," James wrote, "and their life is the life we share." Depression fills its victim with self-doubt and self-loathing, horrible things, but most insidiously it casts their past in a very bad light. The depressed person feels that their present lives are pointless, and they also believe, or realize (or most accurately, believe they are realizing) that all the so-called joyous experiences and once-fond memories had been pointless, too. Naturally this causes them to wonder whether or not life is worth living.

Since the nervous collapse, I

have been in the process of compiling a catalog of experiences that reinforce my love of life or at least infuse it with a "keener zest." It is designed to sustain me especially during periods of incipient anxiety or depression. Faced with the stirrings of mental illness, the resurrection of the catalog is an act of defiance. The experiences are not extraordinary. That is the point: I must remember that ordinary life is worth living. Many of these experiences involve my children, who are now seven and five.

Four years after the breakdown, I attended a silent retreat at a Buddhist meditation center in western Massachusetts. I had been pondering a retreat for two or three years, but I was hesitant. I was not acquainted with any Buddhists. I had never met anyone who had experienced a silent Buddhist retreat. Would it be emotionally demanding? Sleep-inducing? Dismal or somber? Then an old friend visited from New York, and in the course of the visit he mentioned that his wife, who was far more social and less desirous of silence than I, had attended several five-day silent retreats, and he assured me

that she never expressed boredom or emotional exhaustion when she shared her experiences. He said without a trace of resentment that she always felt more at home on those retreats than when she was literally at home. If she could manage five days of silence, I told myself, I could manage two days and two nights, and within hours of my friend's departure, I clicked on the meditation center's website and signed up for a weekend retreat. It would begin the Friday before Christmas—on my birthday, as it turned out.

Google maps, failing to warn me about the scarcity of street signs in that part of the state, led me astray, and what should have been a one-hour trip turned into two hours. Though I was not late for the evening introduction, I was exhausted and irritated when I arrived, and my temples throbbed from squinting to read the few signs I could find in an otherwise lovely gloaming—signs upon which my line of high beams always seemed to fall about a foot short. After registration, I was given directions to my room.

My greatest fear was silence itself. Would it peel away the benign layers of distraction that

accumulated day after day, fortifying me against what Virginia Woolf called "The wastes and deserts of the soul"? As I cooked, cleaned, shuttled, shopped, told half-hearted, made-up bedtime tales, even as I worked to make sense of myself in words, had the layers become so fixed and solid that I never knew, could never possibly know, that a seething, disturbed "me" lurked inside this shell of busyness? I had reason to fear that once the shell cracked open I would fall to pieces.

After the Friday evening meal, we were told to gather in the meditation hall. We placed our dirty dishes on the dirty-dish cart and shuffled over to the hall in socks and slippers, and then waded silently into that expansive meditation space, where the dim light, so much like the last breath of dusk before nightfall, so perfect, softened the features of faces, clothes, furniture, the texture of the walls—anything that might distract us from ourselves. The hall itself, an enormous rectangle whose floor was covered in rectangular meditation mats all arranged in a single, rectangular shape, maintained a soothing symmetry.

I had neglected to prepare myself for the rigors of forty-five

minutes of motionless sitting. I had been incapable of pondering the retreat without becoming anxious about all the uncertainties involved, including the fear of falling to pieces and, because telephone calls were all but forbidden, the fear of being out of touch from my children. So I pushed the retreat out of my mind altogether. I had packed, said goodbye to my family, and hit the road without a lot of thought about where I was going. I knew from experience that sitting cross-legged produced a piercing pain deep in my hip joints, as though the joints had been soldered shut long ago and here I was trying to split them apart. At the last minute, just as everyone settled and the session was about to begin, I opted to use a meditation bench, which I slipped under my behind and sat upon while kneeling on my mat. Thus situated, I was able to sustain a mostly pain-free equilibrium.

Our teachers instructed us to focus on our breath, or sounds, or physical sensation—whatever worked best. At the behest of several mental health professionals, I had tried to focus on my breath as a calming technique in times of heightened anxiety, but the attention on something as reflexive as

breath usually made me breathe too much or not enough, causing lightheadedness, far from the desired effect. Now I closed my eyes and focused on sounds, and within five or ten minutes, feeling calm, I was eagerly absorbing those sounds, no matter how faint or intrusive—a cough or sniffle, the brush of clothing as someone adjusted their posture, a deep sigh, a car passing on the country road. The soft static in the ears that emerges in the absence of sound. As instructed, I observed sounds rather than allowed myself to be startled or annoyed by them, and each passing observation of sound carried a slightly deeper calm. For the rest of the retreat, sounds were my chosen method to mindfulness. By the end of this first session, I knew that I had nothing to fear. I was not shattered; I had not fallen to pieces. I felt happy. Happy to be here, happy to have my children, my wife, my life, waiting at home.

On Saturday afternoon, I joined a dozen retreatants for an informal question-and-answer session with Greg, one of the retreat leaders. In his fifties, slight and fair, Greg had thinning, blonde hair, a narrow face and the wide unburdened eyes of a child. Although we

were allowed to ask Greg questions, the retreatants were not allowed to speak with one another. Midway through the meeting, Greg began a discussion of the transitory nature of any experience that brings us happiness. This is one of the most basic Buddhist principles. Food, sex, laughter, a hike, a trip, a book—all of these may suggest something like fulfillment, happiness, or joy, but none of those feelings will last. You will need to experience them again and again, and each experience will leave you hungry for another experience to fill the void where the happiness, fulfillment, or joy used to be. “Only mindfulness will bring you true joy,” Greg said. “It is a joy that we nurture through meditation.”

A young man in his mid-twenties sat slouched beside Greg with his arms folded high across his chest. He shifted and sighed. “Why shouldn’t we enjoy those things?” he asked abruptly. I had met the young man, whose name was Phil, at the evening gathering on Friday night. For work he traveled from city to city raising funds for various charities sponsored by his college fraternity. “I fly around asking people for money,” he told me with a combination of weariness, humiliation, and dismay. He appeared

thoroughly exhausted—unshaven and tousled with dark hollow circles under his eyes. He was on the road over two-hundred days per year, he said. The rest of the time he either “crashed” with his girlfriend in Brooklyn or at his parents’ house in western Massachusetts. “I’m attached to my Blackberry,” he said. “I don’t know how I’m going to turn it off. I wasn’t supposed to bring it, but I snuck it in. Don’t tell anyone,” he added, laughing. I told him I wouldn’t tell anyone. Sitting in the cafeteria that first evening as we sipped our tea, I got the sense that he was at least at a crossroads, perhaps in the midst of some sort of crisis. I suspected he had come to the retreat in search of answers about which direction his life should follow. I liked him very much. He was one of the youngest retreatants, and I admired his willingness to cut ties with his girlfriend and his eventful, ultra-connected life. It occurred to me that his decision to attend the retreat might have been more difficult than my own.

“You should enjoy those things,” Greg said to Phil. “You should definitely enjoy those things. Appreciate everything worthy of appreciation. But understand them for what they are. Passing.

Fleeting.” Greg looked at the group. “You’ve all been around a long time. You know what I mean. The chocolate ice cream tastes good, but two or three hours later you want some more. Mindfulness provides lasting joy. It takes practice, but it lasts.”

It is impossible to deny that meditation and mindfulness have the potential to provide lasting joy. Sitting in the meeting that day, however, I started to day-dream about the converse of this claim—that the sources of other experiences of joy do not last. I thought about the growing catalog of experiences with my children. In the context of having had a nervous breakdown, partly as a result of my children’s infant cries, their simple happiness and sense of wonder didn’t merely reinforce my love of life. My children gave me a foothold. For months I had been trying to think of a better analogy, but nothing came close. If life was a rock-climbing excursion, these experiences were the cracks and crevices in which I fixed a belay. Through this belay I looped a rope that held me up.

After the question-and-answer session I wound my way back to my room and started writing in my notebook. We had been advised to

leave books, notebooks, and writing instruments at home, but I knew that no amount of meditation and silence could ever placate the anxiety that befalls me whenever I fail to pack any one of these items—the book, the notebook, or the pen. So it was with a sense of rebellion that I filled the pages of my notebook with a story I had been trying to tell for months.

My daughter Lucy knew how she wanted to spend the ten dollars she had received from Aunt Sue for her fourth birthday. She wanted to buy a baby. We were not surprised. Whenever she was flush with disposable cash in the past year, she had declared that she wanted to buy a baby—not a “doll,” a “baby”—usually right away. Before the desire for babies, the cash was most often spent on stuffed animals, resulting in an eclectic collection that rose nearly two feet off her bedroom closet floor. Although she still coddled and chatted up the stuffed animals, we noticed that she did so with less devotion and with a hint of superiority, and that her sympathies were shifting to her budding progeny, now almost a dozen strong. As with most children and their toys, the cost held no sway in

her determination of the value of a doll. A trodden yard-sale artifact or an American Girl with shimmering blonde hair given by her grandmother on Christmas morning: both were equally important, because they were in her care.

With ten dollars to spend the only local option was Ocean State Job Lot, a discount superstore located in the last space of a partially vacant strip mall. Job Lot sold at deeper discounts whatever goods had been cast away from other discount superstores, such as Wal-Mart. It was one of my favorite retail haunts. Where else could you buy 250 paper clips for fifty cents? A bottle of Noxzema shaving cream for one dollar? Packed into several aisles in a rear corner of the store, the expansive toy collection was a little shabby, but in fairness to Job Lot the prices reflected that shabbiness. After we climbed out of the car, Lucy insisted on carrying the money. It had begun to sprinkle, and I pulled the hood of her sweatshirt over her head. Her pockets were too shallow to hold the money, so she gripped the bill tightly in her tiny fist, thrust forward and high like an Olympic torchbearer. We held hands as we walked across the parking lot.

As depression distills surroundings into a collection of stony, soulless objects, it renders the possibility of encountering anything like joy or a love of life absurdly abstract. Anxiety, on the other hand, prevents a “keener zest” for life precisely because the mind, the senses, the ability to feel emotion are all clogged with the detritus of obsessive thoughts and a nervous system gone awry. This is why, no matter where I am, no matter the task that has my attention, I am determined to grant myself permission to pause, submit to joyous experiences, and absorb whatever they have in store for however long they last.

As the doors sighed open and we stepped into the bright capacious space of the store, a couple cashiers turned their heads, and then a dozen or so customers and clerks followed those gazes, and each one of them, as far as I could see, smiled warmly at Lucy, who was resolute with her money held high. It was then, in that unlikely store with its rows of plastic knickknacks and polyester clothing, so far removed from the natural world or some other sacred site, that I felt the deepest love for Lucy, as well as a certain affection one rung down

from love for the customers who were so bewitched by my daughter.

We discovered three dolls costing ten dollars or less. There were about a dozen each of two similar dolls. Both had ringlets of blonde hair whose boxes included plastic bottles, bowls, spoons, and rattles. I found the sole remaining doll lying on its side in a partially-crushed box, nearly hidden behind a row of big, twenty-dollar dolls. It was a bald baby clad in blue, single-piece fleece pajamas. Because it was the only one of its kind remaining, and because it was bald, I knew Lucy would want to claim this doll. Perhaps due to their apparent vulnerability, bald dolls and bald infants always received her most preferential loving care. The doll came with a blue, star-shaped pillow about the size of a half-dollar, a pacifier attached to her pajamas that fit firmly in the doll's O-shaped mouth, and a miniature blue blanket that I would later mistake for a cloth to wipe eyeglasses. An arrow containing the words "Squeeze Me!" pointed to a hole in the clear plastic box that exposed the baby's belly. Sitting on the dirty floor with the box in her lap, Lucy poked her finger through the hole, and with each poke the baby said "Mama, Dada,"

then cried, and finally giggled.

"She says 'Mama,'" Lucy said.

"She has beautiful, blue eyes, just like you," I said.

"I have one blue eye and one special eye," she corrected me.

This was true. One of my daughter's irises was hazel on the bottom half and blue on the upper, though the hazel sometimes appeared purely brown, other times purely green, depending on the light. Having made the blunder before, I assumed it revealed an unconscious wish that her eyes were the same color. Why would I want to protect her from this magnificent trait? It was something nearly everyone mentioned when they met her, and I would never want Lucy to feel different than other children, differences being those things the cruelest kids tend to be prey upon. "Silly me," I said. "But I think you have two special eyes."

"They close when I tilt her head back," she said. "Her eyes."

"When she sleeps."

"Yeah."

"It's probably time for her nap."

"She'll take a nap when we get home."

Her capacity for intuitive,

free-flowing thoughts, of which I was often envious, produced unique names for objects and pets. Her goldfish was called Hello Kitty, twin dolls Foo-foo and Fee-fee, a captured caterpillar Fuzzy. A honeybee harvesting pollen on a cluster of sedum was called Bizz, a variation of Buzz. For reasons impossible to know, Blow-blow Coconut was the name she assigned to one of her beloved stuffed dogs.

She would name this new doll—her new baby—Coco and Baby Squeaks.

“Two names?” I would ask her.

“One name. Coco and Baby Squeaks.”

In this store my daughter, whom I loved so completely, expressed the same sort of parental love which, with the blessings of good fortune, she will pass on to her own. Could life ever feel any more joyous?

The only available cashier was the gloomy teen with thin facial hair sprouting from a pimpled chin who had accepted my credit card many times before. He was usually hunched over a register, but once in a while I would notice him dawdling in the aisles, scuffing the heels of his unlaced sneakers loudly on the tiles, never stopping, as far as I

could tell, to stock a shelf or sweep the floor. As Lucy approached him his eyes widened and he leaned forward with his forearms resting on the counter.

“What do you have there?” he asked. Lucy handed him the box. “Thank you,” he said. He waved the box under a scanner gun mounted next to the register. “That’ll be eight dollars and ninety-nine cents.” He made change from the bill Lucy placed on the counter. “Here’s one dollar and one cent. This is yours. And here’s your receipt.”

With her arms wrapped around the box, Lucy was unable to take the money and receipt, so the cashier handed them to me with a warm smile, and then he waved wistfully as we walked away. It was the first time I had ever seen him smile, and I got the impression he wished to follow us out of the store and continue the exchange with Lucy that appeared to lift his spirits, however briefly.

The sprinkling rain had intensified into widely scattered drops that plopped like tiny corks popping on the hoods and roofs of the cars. Standing on the sidewalk under the awning, the rain splashed off the parking lot and sprayed my shoes with a silver shimmer. I

lifted Lucy into my arms. "I'll cover the hole so she doesn't get wet," Lucy said, referring to the opening in the box over the doll's belly. I thought she might place a hand there, but instead she curled her torso completely over the box. The side of Lucy's head was pressed to my chest, her eyes fixed on the rain-splattered parking lot. "I'm ready," she said.

I was still in the process of being lifted up by Lucy, and I wanted to prolong the experience as long as possible. Once home, I would have no choice but to crawl inside the shell of busyness where I spent most of my time. There was no Buddhist mindfulness inside that shell, only a hushed determination to get things done. No Latin studies. No reading deeper than *Amelia Bedelia*. Dinner preparation interrupted by the assembly of a *Thomas the Tank* floor puzzle. Standing on the curb, I thought about telling Lucy that we must wait for the rain to lighten up before venturing out. Then I thought, let me get on with the business of climbing higher. My daughter just gave me a foothold, so I might as well use it.