

## “Off to Bed”

He would not be swayed. The dense wooden alphabet blocks that he had cradled momentarily were now being arranged in a tight formation. As he allocated them across a plot of Berber carpet, my mind quickened to the great civic planners of the twentieth century. “Night night time,” I offered gently as I bent to greet him at eye level. “No. No. No.” This recent addition to Josiah’s limited vocabulary met me curtly. Rather than exert any superiority innate to my charge as babysitter, I left the room—albeit for a few blinks—to check on Rachel. The short walk to her room barely afforded me time to contemplate how next to impose sleep upon her younger brother.

The door to her room was cracked slightly. I eased toward it until my forehead came to rest upon the bridges between the slight chasm. I peered through it. My severely obscured view made the scene all the more intimate. Rachel’s small frame was burrowed into her mother, her arms wrapped around mother’s firm yet delicate neck. Rachel lay motionless, save for the gentle up-and-down moves of her back as she inhaled and exhaled and the rocking motion imposed on her body by Hope’s rocking. Rachel would be no doubt soon be tucked safely into her minimalist Ikea bed set. I sighed deeply as I returned to Josiah’s quarters down the hall. What a relief to have charge over only one of the children.

I stepped into Josiah’s room. The arch of my foot was greeted by a letter D block. I plucked it from the floorspace where a little wooden Manhattan now enveloped it entirely. I raised the block to my eye and rotated it slowly. D for dog, D for duck, D for “Damn that hurt!” I knelt down and returned the block. “Night night time, Josiah,” I directed. Gauging by his lack of response, my body language was too subtle. Rather than lean on my authoritarian role as babysitter, I lowered my whole body to the floor, making myself smaller than the boy and addressing him as a peer. “We’ll play more with the blocks tomorrow.” I knew full well I wouldn’t be seeing him tomorrow, but the decree was made before I realized its inherent fallacy. I expelled a “whew” of air. Hopefully the ease with which I could lie to myself and others wouldn’t assimilate into my nephew.

Fortunately, he wasn't listening. Josiah raised himself from the ground, but rather than turn to my arms to be jettisoned to his Craigslist crib, he scampered to a secure drawer and drew it open. "Choo choo." He swiftly navigated his way up into the drawer and stood upright and reached his arms skyward. With both hands he clasped the rim of a large plastic tub overhead and tugged with tremendous, daring force for a child so young, reminding me of his innocence to the calamity surrounding him in the larger world. Oh, to be held captive by thoughts of block towers and toy trains in light of the recent days' events!

I curled my left arm around Josiah and pushed the cantilevered tub back into the dresser before it could topple. His frame tensed as I pivoted toward the crib. I released him gently in an upright position then used a plush brown doggie and an Eric Carle cardboard book to entice him to lay on the mattress on his own accord. "No. No. No." I turned to glance at the large-handed clock on the far wall to see how much overtime I'd amassed. Before my scanning eyes arrived to its location, they keyed on Hope. She entered through the doorway and approached her son. I stepped back a few paces and listened to her as she instructed him—tonight wasn't a night for stories. This loveliest of mothers summoned forth a well-intentioned trail of edifying words that couldn't possibly be understood by a fifteen month old. But tonight wasn't a night to enlighten her to the fact. I stepped back a few more paces and reclined in a hand-me-down rocker, careful not to let the tension building within my musculature be released in a series of accented back and forth movements. Furniture wasn't meant to unleash the harsh, ugly sounds that this rocker was capable of achieving when disturbed. But the tension within me pressing against my chest cavity and tightening my throat had to be released. Hope began to recite a message about life's gravity to her young son, then thinking better of it, stopped. She quickly shifted tone as she tried to smooth over any devastating impact she'd caused.

I left the room. I exhaled. Hope lived her life to brighten the fading stars and return full bloom to autumn's decay with her encouragement. She nurtured an ill-conceived optimism, incapable of accepting let alone conquering life's unprovoked, ill-fated destinations. I, on the other hand, was well preserved for such times. The sufferings of life were not lost on me, and my personal battles were seldom fought with a cadre

of supporters. Even in times when my position in life might be deemed enviable by others, I faced without reprieve the inner bombardment of vile thoughts I deem unmentionable, issued by Satan's oily tongue—things intended to lead me to own as fact that I was without question the most despicable of creatures and unworthy of love, companionship or even measured reciprocity.

Yes, I knew loneliness. Yet it was not without benefit, for through loneliness I gained a confidence in approaching the lonely. I learned how not to flinch after a sentence spoken out of deep sadness had others shying away. And once a dark word was given a lane to travel and turned to conversation, I knew within it when to speak and when not to speak. Yes, I understood the moments when to soliloquy and when to share words back and forth, and I what postures to adopt throughout the process. I suppose it a willful desire on my part to stake my own version of the old rule which required we treat others as we deserved to be treated ourselves. Of course, I couldn't call up the means to treat myself with any degree of affection, and yet I had a surplus of love stored up for those in my midst; they would never in my presence need fear being treated like I treated myself. These and other unspoken ideas pinballed in my mind as I waited for Hope.

Even at a time such as this, a time when my thoughts should lay elsewhere, they lay with her. Naturally, my heart raced as she exited Josiah's room. The blood within me warmed my skin and loosed the clot in my throat. Hope paused directly in front of my fixed gaze. Her body breathed a sigh, her shoulders and head collapsing before me. At last, for the night, she could relax, be held irresponsible. She could let emotions escape, if she wanted. Hope had become quite comfortable around me. The previous fall when others were put off by her convictions regarding the "evil plastic diaper" I sat close by and invited them. That winter she began to encourage my presence. By Christmas it became apparent that I alone was the one who truly sat with her and listened. Yes, I was the one to offer her the gift she truly wanted—a plastic likeness of Rudolph's face, complete with red nose that could be sparkle to a double-clap—a sought prize which had others chuckling, which left her crying. I counted the tears. And I wiped them away.

It was I she turned to, and whose hand she held when her husband—my baby brother—was lowered into the earth. And knowing her ceaseless optimism could be compromised indefinitely, I sought to hold it intact

with a silly joke in which I questioned if Russ was playing a Titleist—after we heard a ball from his beloved sport of golf roll about freely in his casket.

I hurried to the bathroom and returned with a shot of water housed in a Dixie cup, stalwart beverage vessel for the infirmed. Hope smiled momentarily as she held it to her lips. Even in death I envied Russ for having successfully wooed so fine a woman. A rare, uplifting essence would persist in the atmosphere even after her departure. She was the day you forever look back upon in blessed remembrance and the rush of night experience you wished would never end. A tear. With the cuff of my long-sleeved shirt I dispatched it before it found its way to her chin, not wishing to taint her soft skin with the touch of my finger.

Hope smiled and then offered her hand. I plucked the crumpled the Dixie cup from her palm while it expanded slightly. Hope persisted, again offering her hand. This time, I didn't play coy. I took it. I directed her to her feet and repurposed her posture: chin up, shoulders back, head held high. Even in this moment when her children were not in need of a strong presence amidst absence, she needed to know for her own sake that she was not weak. Content that I'd fulfilled my purpose for the evening, I withdrew. Her shoulders and head collapsed. I leapt forward and clenched her in my arms, channeling the sort of firm, well-defined embrace my stout brother would give. I was preserving her, fortifying her. A long, uncensored time passed as I continued to hold her. Her body began to shake as sobs broke the stillness. Taking her hand once more, I led her cautiously down the steep staircase of her old twin home to the living room.

“I know that friends and family, everyone will be expecting you to return to being the incredible fixture your were previously. Just know that I don't expect that of you. I have no expectations of when or how or if you will recover from Russ's death. It was too sudden. Know, just know that going forward you can always get a hold of me—you know where to find me—if you need to decompress or talk about things, and of course, if you just need a diversion. I've always had a knack for diverting people's attentions from important matters. Remember 'Hands Across America?' When my schoolmates and I linked together with a great multitude of brethren who in all sincerity sought to form a united span across the nation, I broke free so I could make fart noises with my hands and armpits. I was my effort to break the tension, and to get a laugh out of my peers.”

I found my meandering words suddenly halted by Hope's lips. Her lips shifted my tone. Yes. Yes, her face pressed tightly against mine. Yes, I could gauge the temperature of the tears drying on her cheekbones. And yes, she purposefully pulled the whole remainder of her body tight against mine and wouldn't cede her dominant position after backing me against the stairway banister. I felt my warped edition of the Golden Rule coming into conflict. Was I doing best by her and still in so doing, doing benefit to myself? Could I allow this to continue when it was making me feel good? Sooooo good. Was I partaking in a selfless act or going down the road of THE most selfish deed, one which I'd secretly desired yet tried to deny for fabled ages?

Despite any hint of dilemma that my acro-frenetic mind might have been broadcasting via my frame, Hope was undeterred. She pulled me to the master bedroom and then toward her marital bed, a gift from her grandfather, made from a gorgeous, glowing piece of deep red cherry, hand-picked and hewn by the Delaware Valley's Wharton Esherick, a significant sculptor and dear friend to Hope's family. Was this saintly object to now become desecrated?

We stood by its side in tight formation until Hope surrendered to the mattress, rolling to the far side. "No. No. No." I whispered as she pulled back the bedspread to allocate room for me. I left the room momentarily, disturbed by the gob in my throat and the sweat trickling down my brow. I sucked in a few breaths and exhaled forcefully. "She's your brother's wife," I reminded myself. But then—I acknowledge that I must have drawn in the Prince of the Air, for I was immediately overwhelmed with carnal man's urgent necessity to take charge over another, to make it one's own, to make her my own.

And there was no resistance. Hope lay agape, an invitation. No, a decree. A summons from a princess to her royal sleeping place. I drew her petite form into my arms. Her body rocked back and forth slowly, continually, a repetition imposed upon her by my hastening movements. How much time passed I do not know. The focus of my eyes shifted in what seemed like an instant from the moonlight glow of Hope's glistening skin to the harsh spear of daylight penetrating through a slit in the drapes. Shielding myself from the light, I uncoiled and took to an upright position careful not to wake Hope, whose left arm rested across my bare chest contentedly.

I glanced ‘round the room for a clock to confirm suspicions that I’d overslept. I paused, keying on a slight crack in the bedroom door. There behind the doorway the forms of Rachel and Josiah took shape. They were peering at me from beyond.

I lurched from the bed in astonishment, scarcely able to conceal certain parts of my bare body with the bed sheets. Hope, now awake, looked to her children. She wasn’t angry at me for rousing her, nor was she intimidated by the sudden presence of two innocents. She, she was at peace. Today wasn’t a day for such lighthearted ease. The anxiety in my bones rose as Rachel swung the door open to proclaim that she was preparing breakfast for us and wondered if grape or orange was our preferred juice. I was confused. Rachel stood before me a blossomed teen, and Josiah also. “Orange juice, Honey,” Hope smiled. As she exited, Josiah questioned where his model train set might be, the one he’d been constructing for engineering class. “It was in your room just the other day,” Hope assured him before he disappeared from view. She rose from the bed quickly, robed herself and followed behind, looking every bit as vital as she had the night before. “Maybe I’ll have grape after all,” she allowed.

I stayed behind in bed. Time passed but I couldn’t gauge how much for lack of a clock. Had enough time passed to change the course of it all? White light met me again through that slit in the curtains, prompting me, at last, to get up. I staggered in the process, for my feet were tangled in the bedspread. I didn’t know how to feel about myself, about the world. But I found myself surprisingly relaxed. I surmised this might be the feeling one gets when one is treated nicely, a feeling I didn’t allow myself to feel very often. I was feeling the feeling of renewed purpose. No, NEW purpose. It was an unavertable feeling. It was the knowing that one—that I—was doing the right thing. The very right thing. This WAS the day for surrender to ease.

I took a matchbook from the dresser drawer and lit the vast array of candles which dotted the room. Small brilliant flames danced in unison. The air became the smell of honey, and vanilla, and pine. I took all them in liberally as took to the center of the bed, repositioning the candles all around me. I drew deep, relaxed breaths. The air turned. It began to smell of smoke and charred cherry. I reclined quietly, breathing them in, over and over. “Night night time,” I whispered to myself as I quietly closed my eyes.