

Triptych

Record.

This is Nat Darlington, age 64.

I hope this is going to help.

Where should I begin?

I guess it all goes back to the number three.

I know that few things are actually random, especially now. Everything is planned and chosen and prepared. But when I was a kid, it was easy to imagine that things like luck, chance, and coincidence really existed. And those things always seemed to bring me the number three.

I'd be playing outside, telechatting with a friend, sprawled on my belly in the grass, and I'd see a cluster of three little ladybugs smiling up at me. I'd hear distant caws and look up to see three birds with humongous wingspans flapping noisily overhead. I sneezed in sets of three. My mother always gave me three polite pecks at bedtime. There are three letters in my name. Everything was three. I think I developed a bit of a complex about it. I think that's probably how this all started.

Even as I grew older and stopped looking for them, stopped searching out these naturally-occurring triads like they were secret messages Mother Earth was weaving into her cloth, just for me, the number was still something I couldn't shake. So as I began to plan my adulthood, it was still on my mind, and after several disappointing relationships -- far more than three, if I'm honest -- I decided to see a geneticist and make these illusive coincidences something of a reality. Something permanent. Something planned. She handed me a brochure and explained the science behind the new advances in genetic engineering. She talked about DNA and isolation and vectors, and I smiled and nodded and signed where she pointed.

I got my three girls.

Their first night home, I laid them side by side by side on a soft pink blanket, its temperature rising and falling in response to their needs. I remember their tiny bellies. Their squirming feet and microscopic toenails. I counted all thirty of their perfect little fingers, wriggling and grabbing. I made them three promises.

I said, "Annora, my honor, Astra, my star, and Azura, my sweet blue sky. I promise to love you each with all my heart. I promise to never let you out of my sight. I promise to hold you close for all your days and mine." I scooped them up, and kissed their babysoft eyelids, knowing the exact shade of the irises hidden beneath. I had chosen it. I'd planned it all. I placed them in their cribs.

Then I broke each of those promises.

I need to take a break.

Pause recording.

Record.

Each of my daughters had strawberry-blonde hair and a perfectly symmetrical smattering of freckles across her cheeks as though flicked by a paintbrush dipped in India ink. Each had pouty red lips and chubby cheeks. Each was identical to the one beside her. Each was just as I'd designed.

But it wasn't just the physical, which I had so carefully crafted, that was perfect. My daughters giggled and smiled at every touch and tickle. They never cried. They never complained. They never had fevers or flus. Perhaps I remember positives the same way I saw threes, because they were what I looked for, but I swear, my daughters were truly flawless. Each just as impeccably designed as the next.

The summer before they started school, I matched with a man in one of those programs that has since gone defunct based on that same DNA sequencing that developed my daughters. They were all the rage back then, guaranteeing perfect matches based on things so deep down and microscopic, buried in your core, that you didn't even know they existed. It was hard to disagree with something like that, especially in the state of mind, that ever-present quest for perfection I was in back then, so when the alert pinged, promising it had found a match, I eagerly accepted.

After a few dates, he was anxious to meet my girls. I was eager for him to meet them, too. I thought we might become a perfect little nuclear family. He said he had a surprise planned for us, but wouldn't say more.

I dressed the girls in matching frilly dresses and their favorite fancy shoes. He brought us to the estate of a friend who was in the business of regenerating extinct creatures. On weekends, he charged visitors an exorbitant fee to experience Our Animal Ancestors, as the clandestine exhibit was called, but it was a weekday, and we had the entire place to ourselves. It really was a thing of wonder. The girls loved it! It's almost too bad it had to be shut down.

The man, pleased with how happy he'd made us, crooked his forefinger under my chin and pulled my face to his. I watched over his shoulder as Annora, Astra, and Azura linked arms, scampering around the grounds, giggling and cooing at animals, rattling the bars of their cages with sticks. Astra took off her shiny shoe and thwacked it against a cage. I could have watched the girls flit around that field, with its thick, wired bars, for hours, and I wish I had, but instead I closed my eyes and kissed him. I kissed him with wild beasts bellowing all around us and that's when it happened.

A deep, guttural roar like I had never heard. A scream. Then little tap-tap-taps of four tiny shiny shoes. Four.

I don't think I can finish.

Pause recording.

Record.

There's no other way to say this, and besides, anyone who might listen already knows. Annora's arm, her frail little limb, was torn away at the elbow. I guess it's pretty foolish,

looking back, to not have realized the strength of the teeth and jaws, but I'd never seen anything like them before. I really didn't know.

When she came to, she said that the animal looked sad, so she'd reached between the bars to pet it. She was apologetic. Sweet, honorable Annora. My sweet, loving girls. I had broken my first promise to them. I hadn't kept an eye on them, and because of me, they were no longer perfect.

The first broken promise led almost immediately to the next. I swore I would always cherish each of my girls, but when I finally got Annora home, all I could look at was her stump of an arm. It made me sick.

Still, I did everything I could for her, even if she'd never be like the other two. I got her the most expensive, lifelike prosthesis money could buy. I took her to classes and courses and therapies to learn how to hold a fork and reach for toys and squeeze stuffed animals in her cold, lifeless palm. I even painted her faux, waxy fingernails to match her sisters'.

I reached out to the man who had taken us to the exhibit. Though things obviously didn't work out between us, I wanted to know if his friend could regenerate my daughter's arm the way his lab had regenerated those animals, which had since been seized and euthanized. I wanted to know if they could put her back together and make my girls perfect again. He said it was too experimental, but when I begged, pleading and whimpering through the telechat line, he caved. He called his friend and quoted me a price, but it was far beyond what I could afford. I cried for weeks and Annora's stump remained.

Pause recording.

Record.

The girls began school the following year. I'd send them off each morning in matching sweater sets, sleeves pulled down to their wrists. They'd grow warm during the day and tie their cardigans around their skinny hips and Annora, totally unselfconscious, would shrug out of her sweater, too, just like her sisters, and disconnect her prosthesis, shoving it aside. She'd return home, backpack slung over her narrow shoulders, stuffed with crumpled pages, a dirty lunchbox, and soft fingers dangling loosely from a rubbery forearm.

I'd reattach it, ashamed. "But it hurts!" she'd cry, though I knew she had no feeling in the lifeless nub. "Please don't make me wear it!" she'd beg. "I hate you, Mommy!" she'd shriek, and I'd hate her back. My daughters were supposed to be perfect. I was meant to have three perfect little girls, and I no longer did.

The following year, the girls wanted to take ballet and swimming, activities which required them to slip their little bodies into stretchy, sleeveless outfits. I signed two of them up, but refused to let Annora partake. While her sisters whirled and twirled, Annora sat to the side, humming and singing goodnaturedly, drawing with her good hand or playing chess against an imaginary opponent. The instructors said she could join. They promised she'd be fine, but I

prohibited it, enrolling her in whatever involved one arm, allowed long sleeves, and kept her out of the spotlight.

Hold on. I need to catch my breath.

Pause recording.

Record.

I'm home as I record this, surrounded by family portraits tacked to the walls. It would take me some effort, but I could go somewhere else to finish this if I wanted to. I could record from my bedroom or the dining room, both spaces already packed up and cleaned, awaiting the inevitable, but I'm forcing myself to look at the photos. When the girls were little, we'd wear matching dresses, all of us, and they'd perch their bony bottoms on my lap, my arms wrapped around all three of them. They'd smile big, toothless grins, their cheeks the only chubby things on them.

After the accident, the portraits changed. I told myself it was because, as they grew, they couldn't all fit on my knees anymore, yet I always found space for Astra and Azura. In every picture, Annora was tucked in back, carefully positioned to hide that hideous stump. I've kept these portraits up. All of them. They are my penance.

Hold on.

Pause recording.

Record.

I'm not sure if someone will edit out all this wheezing. I'm sorry if it's hard to understand.

Anyways, my third promise to my daughters was to always be near to them. I promised that, no matter how old they grew or how little they needed me, I'd always be there for them. I thought that would be the easiest promise of all. I'd assumed that they'd always be the three perfect little pieces in my grand work of art. My triptych. Three parts that created a breathtaking whole. I haven't heard from my girls in almost a year.

It was Astra first, my free-spirited little star. She left home as soon as she was able. She visited weekly at first, and we all ate Sunday dinners together. As time went on, she reduced her visits to monthly. Then every couple months. She confronted me once, saying I'd been a great mother to her, but rotten to her sister. I told her it was none of her business and I broke down and screamed and she cried and left. I haven't heard from her since. She doesn't know I'm sick. None of them do.

Next was Azura, my sky-eyed princess. As a toddler, she'd been quiet and timid, content to follow her sisters' leads. How confused and unsettled she was when I had excised Annora from their trio. How distraught she'd become when she no longer had two sisters attached to her. Though my relationship with Astra imploded like a fiery inferno of stars, my relationship with Azura floated away like a cloud on the breeze. She lost interest in me when she finally

became interested in herself. She, too, has no idea what's happening. I imagine she'd care if she knew, but she doesn't, and she won't until it's too late.

Annora left last. My Annora. I had her so conditioned to believe that she couldn't do a thing without that limb and she became frightened of the world outside. She stayed with me the longest, but probably would have left years earlier if she thought she could make it on her own.

I offered to purchase a new limb for her when Davidson's went public, explaining to her that it was another chance to be whole, not just as a person, a body, but as a sister. As a family. She was twenty by then, and I'd saved as long as I could, but she declined. Whether it was because she thought she wasn't worthy, or because she didn't want a handout from me, I can't say, but the money is still there if she wants it. Please, can someone make sure she has access to those funds?

When I became ill, I forced her out. She was scared, poor girl. She'd never been without the protection of either her sisters or me, but I gave her no choice. I made her leave before she saw too much.

And I haven't seen her since. I haven't seen any of my daughters in months. I broke all my promises to them. I was a terrible mother. Despite how perfect I crafted them to be, the three perfectly produced parts of what I was sure would create a flawless composition, a breathtaking triumvirate with me as its composer, its artist, its matriarch, I failed. So here I lay, sucking in gulps of air, any of which could be my last, alone, as I deserve to be.

There is so much I want my daughters to know, but I don't want them knowing I'm sick. In truth, I'm worried they might not care, but also, I'm worried they might try to convince me to change my mind. There are treatments. Davidson's technology, for one. It's a variation on the same process used to create that beast that destroyed my poor daughter. But I don't want to waste the money. It should go to the girls. Everything should.

I know you can't unbreak promises. But I guess that's what I'm trying to do.

So, that's my story. It's not a good one. I just wanted it to be told so my daughters can hear it. I want them to know what I know, and always knew, deep down. I want them to know that each of them is perfect, whether as part of the collective of three, or on her own, and not just because I designed her to be, and that ...

Three knocks.

Hello? Who's ...

Pause recording.