

How It Works

My son came home from school and said, 'Thanks, Dad,
'Thanks for what?
'Thanks for me being the sperm you chose, he said.
I was trying to figure out what he meant. He's ten years old.
It took me a second, and then I realized he must've seen that film
in health class--the beginning of Sex Ed.-- where they show
how reproduction works. You've probably seen it.
There are millions of sperm. They're moving around.
There's so much traffic. The sperm look like they're vibrating.
They're trying to get somewhere, bumping and shoving
like bumper cars. They're on a mission. There's a voice-over on the film.
It's an epic journey and only one lucky one sperm gets to mate with the egg.
It's dramatic. What are the chances?

I didn't want to diminish a moment with the potential of so much awe
and gratitude-- and understanding, as well.
Thanks Dad for me being the sperm you chose. Yeah, it was a misunderstanding,
but a partial misunderstanding. For if you think about it-- the odds of being born--
you begin to realize that it's nearly impossible. I did some research.
A man can ejaculate over a billion sperm at one time, and over his entire life
produce over 500 billion. And when you multiply that times the number of eggs
a woman produces in a lifetime, the chances of any one sperm and egg pair
being the lucky combination are next to nothing.
And if you're getting statistical, you don't stop there. You keep dividing
by the chances of one's parents meeting, and their parents meeting
with all their billions of sperms and eggs. You get to a number
so infinitesimally small, it makes you want to hide under the bed.

Thanks dad for me being the sperm you chose.
That gave me a chuckle, but I sensed he was aware of something.
You watch the film and see all those millions that didn't make it.
All the others on their way to nowhere.
I started to say something about how random it is, but the realization
of how slim the chances are that any one particular person could be born
seemed to be more meaningful than any note of randomness.
If statistically is the way you like to go: it's a statistical miracle.
Randomness does not diminish the miracle.

Thanks Dad for me being the sperm you chose.
I sensed the opportunity to feel gratitude. But to whom to give it?
Not to me, for sure. To God? The Universe? Life?
The child who points out how amazing it is to live? At that moment,
my wish was that he would hold on to this truth his whole life
and that it would sustain him through life's difficulties.
That was my wish, but I didn't know what to say.
I knew the moment needed something.

I certainly couldn't take credit, but here was a miracle.
Well, I said, That's not exactly how it works.
It wasn't the best response, but I liked saying that.
It made me laugh.
And then I had a feeling like I wanted to give him a hug.
Hugging is what we do when we run out of words and there's a miracle.

That's not exactly how it works, I said and put my arms around him.
And then I imagined again the moment when that one lucky sperm
touched the egg.
That was a game changer, for him and for me.
I thought about that. And the chances. The luck.
Some would think this would be a good time
to go out and buy a lottery ticket.

Yeah, but that never works.

At the Circus

We were sitting in the bleachers at the circus, and my dad was acting funny. We were up there in the \$1.50 seats. They weren't bad, you could see ok. "Come on," he said and stood up and we went over to the ticket booth where he traded for the \$3.00 seats. The good ones right down in front. This was Nassau Coliseum. It wasn't huge, but impressive, and we were right there. Right there by the three rings, sitting by the center one. Inside the ring was brown dirt. The dirt made it feel real. That was where the animals were going to walk. I didn't know what animals they'd have. I guessed elephants and wondered if this was the kind of place where they'd have lions. I pictured the elephants walking and holding each other trunk to tail. I probably saw that on television. We were sitting there, waiting. A spotlight was shining on the middle ring. Nothing but dirt. It looked empty. I started to wonder why he had changed our seats. I don't think he ever did anything like that. He was a school teacher. Thrifty. I didn't expect to be sitting in the good seats. These seats were individual metal fold-up chairs. The fact that they were individual made them better than the wooden bench seats in the bleachers separated by painted lines. We were there, and there was the spotlight. If nothing else happened, it would've been something anyway.

I was staring at the dirt when my dad pointed and said, "I'll give you five dollars to go into the middle of the ring." Five dollars? Five dollars seemed like a different species of money. I was confused. I mean, I realized that he was challenging me to do something. Something that would take some courage but I wasn't sure. I'd have to leave where we were sitting. I didn't know if I would be able to look back and see where he was-- if I could pick him out from the crowd. Maybe the spotlight would be blinding. It felt like an odd thing to say especially after the surprise of changing our seats. It reminded me of the time he took me with him golfing. He told me to hide off to the side by the first fairway and join him when he and the others walked by. I did that. It was a surprise to the other men with whom my father was golfing when I popped out from the bushes. I wasn't old enough to golf. I just followed them around on the course.

After the golf, we went to a luncheonette where he bought us hamburgers and milkshakes. I started to wonder if something might be wrong since we'd never done anything like that. I wasn't a particularly nervous child but every once in a while I wondered what it might be like for my parents.

For the most part I figured it was all right.
My brother and I weren't a lot of trouble, but occasionally we'd fight
make a mess, or break something, and I could see the strain
and wondered if it were all too much for them.
He didn't say anything like that at the luncheonette.
It was just a day when my dad must've felt he had an extra dollar.
I wasn't so sure at the circus.
I don't think I was ever in a place as large as that, and he was saying
I should go into the middle of the ring.
Maybe a part of me wanted to try. Maybe it would be exciting
but the other part wondered if I were to go out there
would he stay in his seat? Maybe he would take off.

I imagine him reading this. I feel bad.
He never really gave me much of a reason to think something like that.
Although one time, when we were coming home on the bus
from summer camp where he was the head counselor, I fell asleep.
I must've been five or six years old. When I woke up I was outside
lying on the grass a few blocks from where we lived.
I looked around confused and then stumbled home.
What had happened was he had asked the driver to stop so he could
put me on the grass and I could sleep while the bus made its rounds.
As far as he was concerned, we lived in a safe neighborhood
and it was the kind thing to do, rather than have me bouncing around
on the bus.

I don't think I was consciously thinking he would leave me at the circus
but he was acting funny. Just then a small car drove out into the middle ring.
It did a few circles and then stopped and seemed to pause for a moment
and then about ten clowns climbed, one at a time, out of this tiny car.

Whenever I think about that moment, I remember the waiting,
the emptiness of that ring, and my dad's gesture of wanting to spend
a little extra and get us the good seats. And when I think of his challenge
to go into the middle ring, I know my response had nothing to do with him.
He wasn't going anywhere. We were in the good seats, and he had done
all he could do to make it a good time. He probably encouraged me
because the dirt in the middle ring was just dirt, and he was just bored.

Nevertheless, when the clowns showed up, I was relieved.
The clowns made everything seem normal again.

Truth is Beauty

We hadn't seen each other in years, but the groove we cut remained, and when I read the letter it hurt to learn how you had suffered, refusing anything that would ease the death-bound pain.

"Un-medicated," the note said, "Excruciating."
And the writer added, "She got what she wanted,"
ruining the misery and madness of a choice
to refuse any anodyne.

I try to make sense of that fury.
What compels one beyond the limits?
I remember how one time, out of the raw scrum
of our toothsome friendship we attempted the stunt
of consuming each other's flames.
Did we know then that we were players for the other team?
I think you were figuring it out, but that night, curious
and too lonely to say no to one another, we endeavored
to convert emotional closeness into physical exhilaration.
Grappling through the imposture of our dispositions
we coiled and snagged, attempting to fulfill the assignment.
Attempting what in the car of our sober selves
we would've smiled at and driven on.

We did move on from the rasp of that moment.
Though I don't seem able to un-remember that night
where we wrestled with enough friction to ignite human fiber
mounting and rubbing until the matter of our separate flesh bled.
Was it all for nothing? I remember how you straddled
and thrust, and I riveted to the living panels of your body--
encouraged by how you leaned back to drink from a bottle
you brought to bed, drawing hard as if to siphon
enough momentum to get through-- as if in that moment
time was the true menace of the body and could be
tamed and taught. As if time could be survived.

We seemed, in the rut of the moment, to find the mitt
of each other in equal shares. Though after, neither sought
reason to repeat, or had to ask the other to stay away
hold off, not attack. Just as quickly as we began, we returned
to the calm room where we accepted the distance between us
and within a year you were sharing nights with a girlfriend.

When I heard about your hard passing, I felt again
the sad understanding that desire is not something that love
can bend to its will. My wish is that at the end, something
was in the room. Something that tells us it's all worth it.

I believe it was there when we wrestled each other's flame
to exhaustion. Waking and never mentioning it again.
I think that night we got what we wanted-- if it were only
to know again and again that though the body is singular
the spirit is numinous.

A while after our collision, a woman I was seeing told me
that she would forgive me if I had been intimate with you.
I don't know if she was seeking a confession, or was simply
acknowledging something she had intuited about our friendship.

I remember that I didn't try to put anything into words.
With some it is all fuck, fuck, fuck.

Two Dollar Conversation

A man is standing on the median with a cardboard sign:
“Need money for food.” Without thinking you gauge
his status: young, mid-twenties, healthy looking, at least healthy enough
to work for a few hours for a few dollars. He has a dog that lies obediently
by his feet, as if the dog has knowledge of the hierarchy, the degrees
of subservience. This dog does not wander.
This dog presses its face to the ground.

You give a dollar to the man, who takes it and makes it disappear
into a pocket and says, God bless. The feeling of being blessed
by a homeless person seems to have special value.
It's about the poor being closer to God.
This man looks like he could use a bath, like a thin film of life grease
is coating his face. When you hand him the dollar you slow your car
but you do not stop. God bless, and the car keeps rolling.

The next day, you see a woman in the same spot.
She has a sign: “Anything helps, even smiles.”
You give her two dollars and as you reach out you look into her face
and say, “How did you get yourself into this situation?”
For some reason you feel like you can have a simple honest exchange.
A two dollar conversation. You've confused her sign, her smile, and thank you
for simple and honest. You're acting like your sister just called you
from a bar in the next town and asked you for a ride, and, without asking why
you got into your car and drove 15 miles to pick her up. She's your sister
and when you see her, and see that she is ok, you perceive that she
will appreciate the question: “How did you get yourself into this situation?”

Later on you'll rethink the privilege that you've extended yourself
but now the woman on the median with the sign answers directly
saying something about a car, a boyfriend, the hospital, traveling.

That night you have a dream. Some fusion of Cinderella and the woman.
You slow your car when you see her. She thrusts two dollars
through the window and demands to know, “What are you thinking.”
In the dream you are suddenly playing checkers with a friend
and he jumps over two of your pieces and wins the game.
A minute later a policeman is handing you a summons for driving
without using your brakes, even though you did not need to use your brakes because you
were not stopping.
In the dream, it is your birthday and you ask your Grandmother
"What does In God We Trust mean?" when she gives you a dollar.

“What are you thinking?” the woman says, and holds out the two dollars
you gave her the day before. You know what she is referring to.
The two dollar conversation. It is an agreement.

And then you have that feeling that you know you are dreaming.
You are home in bed. You are just dreaming, and in a few minutes
you will get up and forget about her. You will make breakfast.
You will feed the dog.

How Does It Get In There

After a few years of wandering around, denying the self indulging the self, pursuing light wherever it might be found the Buddha sat down under a tree determined to remain until he had arrived.

That makes sense, doesn't it, because if you can't make it under a tree where can you make it?

That's a good story. Here's another:

My son, 8 years old came home from school and sat at the kitchen table.

He stared at a salt shaker until something seemed to bother him and then he picked up the shaker, held it up to his eye and said, "How does it get in there?"

You can live your whole life, seeing all sorts of marvelous things and never wonder how something outside yourself can enter into knowing. You can live your whole life marveling at what you see, but never at seeing. Here's a question you've probably heard before:

"If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it does it make a sound?"

Being the kind of person who has a fair amount of humility I'm guessing you say, Yes. You sense that the world goes on with or without you. It's big. It doesn't depend on little old you. That fact doesn't bother you. You like that you're a part of this great big world. Like when you walk out at night and see the stars and you connect the dots, and the house of your understanding suddenly blows its roof when you are seized by the size of what you're seeing. The size of the neighborhood our world hangs out in is really something. Sometimes you close your eyes as a way of keeping the moment and for a few moments you dwell in pure darkness.

We understand that everything is known within our heads and that inside one's head it is completely dark, the same as when there is no one there to see it.

As I write that, I am aware that words can only go so far.

"I don't know," I said to my son about the salt shaker.

"I don't know how it gets in there."

I do know that it feels like a gift. Just as the word "No" in answer to the question "If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it does it make a sound?" is a gift.

No, this is not philosophy. It's just the way it is.

There is no sound. There is no forest. There isn't even a tree for a Buddha to sit under. And no Buddha, either.

At least not until you get there.