Omniscience, or Benjamin's First Trip to the Zoo

***One**: In which I introduce Benjamin, with reservations*

Benjamin was South Korean, flown to the U.S. at the age of six months to land in the arms of a childless couple from Minneapolis. He had a serene beauty that emanated from half moon eyes and painted doll lips but what his adoptive mother, Lee, noticed after a few days was that Benjamin never used his right hand to grasp toys. He never chewed on his right thumb or lifted his right arm to reach out lovingly to his new mother. Within a month Lee had the diagnosis: cerebral palsy. At birth Benjamin had suffered trauma similar to a stroke, weakening his right side. He would require extensive physical therapy.

Lee and her husband Mark had specifically requested a healthy child with no special needs. They called the adoption agency to demand an explanation, but there was no real explanation. A few weeks of agonizing followed during which they debated the possibility of giving the boy back. Lee worried that she did not have the personality for raising such a child. Could she love a child like Benjamin? Mark thought they could handle the situation, they should adopt. This debate soon spread to the rest of the family. Lee's parents were careful to remind her that the decision was up to her. They did their best to remain neutral, not to reveal the shock they felt that one could even consider returning an innocent child like so much defective hardware. Mark's family brought a religious tone to the discussion, led by Mark's father, whose reading of Christian scripture tended to emphasize his responsibility to spread the word of the Almighty. As the right hand of God, he felt it was his (and his son's) duty to rescue Benjamin from

potentially heathen status.

In the end, Lee pushed her insecurities aside. She and Mark decided to keep Benjamin. Benjamin's brain would simply have to be rewired to compensate for his neurological losses. Immediately they launched into a rigorous physical therapy program for Benjamin, hoping to capitalize on that window of opportunity described by experts on early childhood development.

Lee was the first to notice that something appeared to be going wrong with the therapy. At age two-and-a-half Benjamin began losing speech. It became difficult to attract and hold his attention. He drove his toy truck three inches one way, three inches the other way, for hours. He took an extreme dislike to a certain pair of sweatpants or, rather, to the elastic at the ankles of the pants, which gave him a view of his shoelaces. The fear that a shoelace might come untied caused Benjamin to come unglued. Another round of tests revealed that the child was autistic. He might never in his life relate to others in a normal manner.

This was almost too much to bear. Cerebral palsy and now, autism, a lifelong affliction with no hope of a cure—this was not what Lee and Mark had signed up for when they'd undertaken the parental role. And it was too late now to give Benjamin back. Worse, it turned out their parenting styles were entirely at odds. Lee was a control freak and Mark didn't like to make waves. Soon it became all too clear to any objective observer that Lee and Mark had adopted Benjamin in order to save their marriage or perhaps to continue their battles by proxy, that all of their decisions thus far had been based on unspoken fears of personal failure and not upon logic, that in spite of their genuine tears of joy upon Benjamin's arrival at the airport—his birth, to them—they had

made a terrible mistake.

A year passed, and Benjamin—

But wait…a terrible mistake? We've been informed flat out that Lee and Mark have made a terrible mistake—but what do *they* think? Lee? Mark? Benjamin? Do they think it's a mistake? Corners of their minds lurk in shadow; the windows to the soul remain blocked by the twisted curtains of relativity. This is where omniscience falters. What we actually have here is a failure of the author's imagination, of my imagination. I have doubts. I have reservations. I'm not cut out for this omniscient business. My personal feeling is that no one likes a know-it-all.

Back to the real question: What is Benjamin, who in the meantime is now a four-year-old boy with autism, thinking? What's going on in there? The last time I spoke with him we had a conversation about buildings. We were in downtown Minneapolis waiting on the eighth floor in the lobby of the Illusion Theater (its real name). We were looking out the window at nearby skyscrapers (I'm forced to second-guess. Maybe they were skyscrapers. How tall does a building have to be to be officially considered a skyscraper?), when Benjamin asked, "How tall is that building?"

"Which building?" I asked. I was trying to get him to point, because I'd read somewhere that autistic children never point.

He pointed, "*That* building."

I wondered then if he really were autistic. Maybe the diagnosticians were wrong. "I don't know how tall that building is," I answered. "Taller than this one."

"Taller than this one." Benjamin has a singsongy sweet voice, but as part of his

therapy he is not supposed to indulge in echolalia. I knew that, but I let it continue anyway.

Benjamin leaned forward and pressed his hand on the glass, fingers splayed, "How tall is that building?"

"Pretty darn tall, that's all I can say."

"Taller than this one?"

"Well, Benjamin, what do you think? Is it taller than this one?"

"No. Shorter."

"What do you mean, shorter? Are you teasing me?"

"No," Benjamin said.

"I think you're teasing me."

"How tall is that building?"

"Eighty-seven stories. I made that up. How tall do *you* say, Benjamin?"

Benjamin looked out the window. He gazed for a long time through the V made by his second and third fingers pressed against the glass, or perhaps he was looking at the glass itself.

"Benjamin. Hey, you. Ben." He wouldn't turn from the window. "Ben?"

"Green light," he said sadly.

"What does a green light mean?" I asked.

"Stop," Benjamin said.

***Two**: In which I reveal what all the therapists should have known*

Lee was a favorite with all the therapists. She performed miracles with Benjamin

because she never let up. Not once. Benjamin could talk. He could walk a balance beam forwards and backwards. He could play hide and seek, even though he never once found a new place to hide but always went to the same closet in the same bedroom. He wore the aforementioned hated sweatpants without protest, adapted to those shoelaces, all because Lee would not give up on Benjamin.

The therapists knew what lay behind the Benjamin story of success, the effort, the unrelenting energy, the fanaticism. They had nothing but praise for Lee when Mark tried to hint at his worries about borderline abuse. The therapists were used to squeamish parents and didn't pay much attention to Mark. To be fair, Mark's low-key nature forbade him from being too specific. He didn't describe, for example, his distress at Benjamin's breakfast routine, designed and implemented by Lee, and carried out with what seemed to him to be a barely concealed hostility. Not so much hostility, Mark quickly amended to himself, as a lack of affection. But (his other half argued) sometimes impatience, definitely. He was used to Lee speaking this way to him, as if he were some sort of incompetent butler, but it was different hearing her turn that tone on the boy. Ben was required to balance on one foot (his weak one, from the cerebral palsy), with his strong hand bound and useless in an Ace bandage, while consuming Cheerios one at a time with his weak hand, perfecting the pincer motion by also grasping a pen top with the unused third, fourth and fifth fingers. The Cheerios were placed in a line just barely within Benjamin's reach. At the same time, Benjamin had to remember not to eat too fast and not to lean against the table and to make steady eye contact and to respond in complete sentences when Lee spoke to him.

Mark doubted he himself could follow all those instructions and he was, quote,

normal.

"The trouble with Lee is," Gran said once, "That she never cuts anyone any slack. No matter if you are four years old. No matter if you have cerebral palsy. No matter if you are autistic." No matter if you're seventy years old, she added silently. No matter if you're her mother. "And she never cuts herself any slack, either." It was true. Lee lived her life like one big, grim punishment.

The therapists knew. What I mean is, the therapists *had to have known* what toll the therapy took. Here, again, the bird's eye view fails me. The therapists *should* have intuited Mark's uncertainty. They *should* have sensed Lee's furious frustration, her mask for despair. They *should* have felt Benjamin's struggle. The therapists *should* have shown more compassion, but they didn't. I'd have to talk to some real therapists to understand the mindset. Was it deliberate, this blindness? Or were they clueless? I suppose if I were any good at being omniscient I would just decide what the therapists knew or did not know and condemn or not condemn. But in reality their motives remain beyond me. What could they possibly have been thinking?

I can only conclude that the strength of a therapist lies in his ability *not* to empathize. What must be done, must be done. If you think too much about hurting the people you cut, you make a lousy surgeon.

Mark should have known that Lee was doing the best she could. She was a brilliant choreographer and ballet coach, not a drudge. She was used to dealing with the honed and supple bodies of kinesthetic geniuses, not with muscles in spasm due to gaping

holes in the brain. Lee, in turn, was overly exasperated by Mark's apparent ineffectiveness, how Benjamin seemed to regress any time Mark was left in charge. One day she told Mark to get out. Actually, she shrieked it with her hands clenched into white fists and her overlapping incisors fully bared, "Get out! Just get out!"

Mark got out. He went to his parents' house for the weekend. They bowed their heads and prayed for guidance. Mark prayed that Lee would come to love Benjamin, that he would see tender moments between mother and son. He wished Lee would turn it all over to God. It was God's will that Benjamin was screwed up and there wasn't much they could do about that central fact. Once when he had voiced similar sentiments to Lee, she'd said, "If Benjamin's care were left up to you, he'd be the village idiot." He winced now, remembering. Lee could be harsh. He doubted, for example, that these days one should say "village idiot." And maybe she had a point, but weren't even village idiots loved? He pictured Benjamin plopped in the dirt outside a hut. Palm trees swayed in the breeze. Villagers wandered past, one stopping to tousle Benjamin's black hair, another offering him a bite of a banana. A stranger came to the village and gave Benjamin an amazing stone, perfectly round and smooth, amber, with darkened bronze threads running through it, like a tiger's eye. A marble. Benjamin scooted the marble through the dirt, three inches this way, three inches that, three inches this way--

"Amen," Mark's father said.

"Amen," Mark echoed.

Then Mark went golfing and invited a friend out to dinner. They split the bill. When Lee found out that Mark had enjoyed his weekend in exile, she called her parents and told them that Mark had run out on her leaving her with the kid, had played golf all

weekend, had invited a slew of people to dinner at the fanciest restaurant in Minneapolis and charged the whole amount to her credit card. (She wasn't exactly lying. To her, that's what it felt like.) Her parents were shocked. It didn't sound like Mark, not the Mark they knew. Perhaps things were worse than they'd thought. All Lee needed was a reminder of normal family life. They resolved to visit Minneapolis.

Besides, they couldn't believe that Benjamin, their only grandchild, had never visited the zoo.

***Three**: In which Benjamin visits the zoo*

Benjamin had never been to the zoo. Lee had been to the Toledo Zoo, the Detroit Zoo, and some zoo in Florida, but not the Minneapolis Zoo. Mark had visited the Minneapolis Zoo several times as a child but he was not invited on this particular excursion. "These are *my* parents," Lee told him. "Stay away. You have your own parents." To avoid a fight, he stayed home and wandered down to his basement studio, where he worked on an acrylic painting of stampeding buffalo transforming into dark thunderheads--perhaps it was thunderheads consolidating into buffalo--nothing to do with his own state of mind, but for a book jacket based on Native American mythology. (Later, when they got back from the zoo and complained that there didn't seem to be many animals there, Mark would ask, innocently, if they had gone upstairs. Upstairs? Lee would rage. What kind of zoo had an upstairs? What did they put up there, the giraffes? The elephants? She thought that it was typical of Mark's passive/aggressive style to omit telling them ahead of time that the zoo had an upstairs, filled, apparently, with the best wild animals.)

As they arrived at the zoo, Lee wasn't sure where to park, what the best possible space would be with respect to the zoo's entrance. How far could her mother walk with that arthritic knee, how long would Benjamin last before throwing one of his autistic temper tantrums, how long could she stand being in this life? Her father rode in the front seat beside her, wearing that same tweedy cap he'd worn since 1812 even though it was already a steamy seventy-five degrees outside at ten in the morning. He also had tucked a plaid wool scarf in his jacket pocket, and wrapped in the scarf was a stone and a scrap of sandpaper. It was one of his theories that if you polished a stone more or less constantly in dull moments, a subconscious polishing, an unconscious polishing, you would end up almost magically with a finished gleaming stone.

Lee drove slowly up and down the rows of parked cars, accompanying herself with a running monologue, "Well, Dad do you like this?" she asked. "Here I am going up and down all the rows in order to find the exact perfect parking spot, just like you, Dad, searching and searching for the perfect place. I have high expectations, Dad. Whoops, that guy fooled me by pulling in so far. Not a space after all. Looking and looking. How do you like this, Dad? Are you enjoying this? So, Dad, are you *happy?"*

Dad Sr. registered this string of words as an unpleasant buzzing, the familiar drone of his daughter's discontent not unlike the steady rasp of sandpaper on rock, until he had the simultaneous realization that the words were aimed at him and that she'd been driving the wrong way, counter to the parallel slant of the slots.

"I'm not happy that you're going the wrong way," he said, just as she paused for breath.

As if this were what she'd been waiting for, Lee swung to the left suddenly, and

parked.

"We're here!" Gran announced brightly to Benjamin. In the confusion of disembarking from the van, all the doors were shut, leaving Benjamin briefly marooned in his car seat. Gran reopened the back. "Did you think we'd forgotten you?" she asked Benjamin.

"Don't say that," Lee said. "He's not like normal kids. He'll think that I'm forgetting him every single time and I'll have to hear about it endlessly."

"Oh, dear, endlessly," Gran said to Benjamin. She had to resist the impulse to reach out and lift him and give him a big hug. She would hug Lee, too, if these days Lee weren't so...angular—but part of Benjamin's therapy was to unstrap himself from the car seat without help, then to back out of the vehicle, moving his weak foot first, probing toward solid ground.

While this was accomplished, Gran leaned forward to pull her knee brace into place. Was it such a bad wish to wish they could all just get along? She could see already that Benjamin would not be allowed to enjoy his trip to the zoo, just as her son-in-law had not been allowed to participate. It was such a shame, Benjamin's first trip to the zoo. A trip to the zoo was a wonderful adventure. A trip to Africa to see real animals in the wild was much better and in fact had spoiled zoos for her somewhat—she remembered a leopard, or had it been a cheetah? slung across a tree branch munching bones, the actual loud thrilling crunching of bones—but still, a trip to the zoo was a marvelous thing for children, even Benjamin. Especially Benjamin, who had so few pleasures.

"What's your favorite animal?" Gran addressed Benjamin's back. He was being towed at a brisk pace by Lee. "What do you want to see at the zoo?"

He half turned toward Gran and stumbled slightly.

"No," Lee scolded, misinterpreting, "You have to hold my hand in the parking lot, whether you love me or not."

"Tigers."

"Full sentences, Ben."

They'd reached the line for tickets. Dad Sr. was fumbling for his credit card and AAA card and senior citizen ID. Too many cards, he thought grumpily. Why am I always paying?

"What animal do you like at the zoo?" Lee prompted Benjamin.

"Tigers."

"Tigers, excellent choice," Gran said quickly.

"Ben, you know how to do this. Full sentences. I can't believe he's going so backwards," Lee said to the others. "Pretty soon his hand will be all curled, like this, next to his face." She demonstrated.

By now Gran was sorry she'd ever asked, but she continued to make an effort. "Why tigers? Because they growl? They have stripes?"

"They have stripes?" Benjamin murmured, an exact mimic.

Dad Sr. gave the receipt to Gran. "My goodness," she said, looking at it before putting it into her fanny pack. "Better be a good zoo."

"Better be a good zoo."

"Oh, zoo zoo to you, too," Gran teased Benjamin. She wondered if that qualified as a complete sentence.

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It has occurred to me in my lack of omniscient confidence that this process of entering minds is similar to taking pictures at the zoo's dolphin show. All I have to show for my efforts are disappointing snapshots of splashes and blurry tail ends, no clear shots of gray muscular grace, nothing captured in mid air. The crowd waited on the wide concrete steps that served as bleachers. Dad Sr. spread his scarf for Gran to sit on. The half-polished rock fell, he picked it up, then set his hat on his knees. Lee remained remote behind dark sunglasses, tall and rail thin. Benjamin watched not the pool, but the pool's periphery where chaotic water met slick concrete. An informative film of the birth of a dolphin appeared on a wide screen above the pool—a wrestling of dim shapes under water, sudden cloudy stains, tiresome voiceover—before the real dolphins surged into view and the show began. One of the dolphins had a crick in its spine. What's wrong with that dolphin? Gran thought. Scoliosis, the trainers explained, as if reading her mind, doling out fish to dutiful rubbery grins.

After the dolphin show it was time for lunch. They investigated the food court. Lee had brought Benjamin's meal: tofu and cheese in chunks, lima beans, raw cauliflower and broccoli florets. His diet consisted of vegetarian foods reduced to pellets for practicing the pincer motion and avoiding choking. Benjamin ate like an old time gambler feeding a slot machine. Once, to confirm a theory of hers about human nature and self-indulgence, Lee allowed Benjamin to eat all he wanted. Just as she had suspected, he kept going and going until he threw up: jackpot. Lee herself was, for all practical purposes, anorexic. For lunch, she had hoped to supplement her tiny Tupperware dish of fibrous twigs soaked in skim milk with some sort of fruit plate.

Unfortunately, but perhaps predictably, the food court at the zoo was out of fruit. There were plenty of hotdogs, however. Dad Sr. made a show of checking each stand for fresh fruit while Gran pointed wordlessly at an arrangement of plastic bananas and apples decorating the burrito display. When Lee left in disgust to find a table Gran nodded toward the lemonade stand.

"We could get her a lemon," she suggested to Dad Sr., who shook his head, looking worried. He didn't just look worried, he *was* worried. Lee had an excruciating history of exploding into rage in public eateries, and Dad Sr. was a self-effacing fellow, not inclined toward drama. He and Gran got in line for their burritos made Minnesota style, which meant full of bland white rice. Still, their stomachs churned.

***Four**: In which we experience a telepathic moment*

The woman selected a table outside in the courtyard overlooking the duck pond. She was about five foot ten, maybe one hundred pounds, maybe less, with long straight hair, thick but dull blond, worn pulled back in a ponytail with bangs. She was attractive in a gaunt way, with the regal posture and slightly splayed walk of a ballet dancer. Her palms had an orange tinge and her arms were downy and sinewy, laced with thick veins. She had with her a small Asian boy that she lifted onto a chair and set with a firm bounce.

"Look at me," she commanded in such a tone that a man sitting nearby glanced up. The boy, however, refused to look. "Benjamin, look at me." She gripped his chin and turned his face toward hers. Grudgingly, he looked. "That's better," she said with false cheerfulness. "We are going to wait to eat until Dad Sr. and Gran get their food. We are going to sit here and wait."

“Are we going to eat?” the boy, Benjamin, asked, when she released his chin.

“What did I just say?”

“Are we going to eat?”

“I said we are going to wait. We’ll wait as long as it takes. Even if it takes forever, we will wait.”

“Are we going to eat?”

“Are we going to eat? I don’t think you mean that, Benjamin. I think you mean, gee, Mom, I’m starting to get hungry, but I don’t mind waiting for Dad Sr. and Gran to show up with their food because I *like* waiting for everyone to show up with their food so we can all eat together.”

The boy began to speak but she cut him off. “I’ve had it, Benjamin.”

They waited. The boy called Benjamin didn’t fuss. Chairs at nearby tables made a grating sound as their metal feet scraped on concrete. People laughed. A girl seated closer to the water threw a crust that fell short of the mark.

“Are we going to eat?” Benjamin asked.

The man at the nearby table opened a map of the zoo and took a sip of his drink. A robin hopped between tables, zeroing in on a French fry, while a toddler in a stroller pointed to the miniature train that circled the park. Endlessly.

“Are we going to eat?” Benjamin asked.

The man bent frowning over his map.

“Are we going to eat?”

The woman cocked her head and froze, a deer sensing danger, then focused on the boy.

"What's the matter?" she asked him.

The kid wants to eat, the man at the next table thought.

"Benjamin," the woman said, "What's going on? Is it your shoelaces? No? Right hand, Benjamin. How many times do I have to tell you? Is it the airplane?"

The silence that followed made the man risk another look. The woman and child were staring at each other, engaged in some intense struggle, the boy with a pleading expression, his eyes filling with tears. It was a telepathic moment, apparently, because the woman suddenly sounded sure, triumphant, or relieved, "It's the holes. Is it the holes?"

Benjamin nodded.

"Don't worry," the woman said. "It's OK. The holes are very small. Nothing can fall through. Here, feel." She reached for his hand and together they stroked the mesh of the table's surface.

"Very small?" Benjamin asked.

"The smallest things." The woman shook her head in wonderment. "Very small. Smaller than you can believe."

***Five**: In which I provide a denouement, sort of*

Gran had to stop at the restroom after lunch, so they agreed to meet in a few minutes at the tiger exhibit just up the path. When Gran emerged, she saw Dad Sr. ahead of her on the path, waiting at a crossroads near a small bridge. Dark silhouettes on the far bank turned out to be sculptures, she saw as she got closer. Lee and Benjamin were nowhere in sight. "Where are they?" she asked, puffing slightly.

"They left me in the dust," Dad Sr. said. "I couldn't keep up with them."

They continued along the trail. No tigers, and no Lee and Benjamin. After waiting about ten minutes near a fenced overlook that promised tigers they consulted the map and noted the tiger pavilion, an enclosed platform overlooking the habitat, and there, finally, they spotted a tiger in the distance, barely visible, resting in deep grass under a tree. Those stripes really make for good camouflage, Gran thought. She took a photograph using the zoom lens.

"Well," Dad Sr. said. They debated what to do next, turning the map first one way, then the next. Which way was north? It didn't matter. If Gran headed one direction and Dad Sr. the other, they would eventually run into Lee and Benjamin somewhere along the loop. It was a long loop, though, and they were tired. They walked past camels awaiting riders, still deciding. Gran took another photo, this time of someone else's grandchild up on the saddle, the boy's face partially obscured behind the long, disdainful muzzle of the beast. "I thought we were going to take the train," the boy said wistfully to the man holding the reins.

They had decided to separate. Gran had gone back to the main courtyard near the zoo's entrance while Dad Sr. continued along the path. A butterfly, an Eastern Tiger Swallowtail, landed on a clump of clover. Funny how butterflies always showed up at the end of stories--a symbol of beauty or someone's soul, seen by the dying soldier or by the teacher right after the death penalty has been enacted. What was it about butterflies? The idea of metamorphosis was irresistible, he supposed. He wished suddenly, fervently, that his daughter would change, would just be--happy. What would make her happy? For one thing, she would have to give up the idea of fixing Benjamin, making him perfect. Did

that mean that he, Dad Sr., would also have to give up the idea of Lee, fixed and perfect? A scientist studying a butterfly might seek to capture it, kill it, and pin it in its proper place in a collection. That was the problem with scientists as compared to, well, engineers. Scientists observe creation while engineers create solutions. He didn't much like answers, though, they were like visitors who showed up too early. Rude to be early, rude to be late. Rude to vanish. Just be there, on time, like this butterfly in motion, this slow fanning of wings, once, twice, and it flitted away, leaving behind only a memory. And a lavender clover blossom. Just as well. Dad Sr. searched for a four-leafer for good luck, his hand in his pocket, polishing the stone.

Back at the courtyard Lee contemplated the end of herself. How would she do it? The exact method of her own termination remained vague in her mind, which is a good sign, according to therapists. And yet The End, a way out of the trap, was also temptingly real, which is *not* a good sign. Nearby, Gran licked an ice cream cone. She was not thinking about anything. She had given up wishing, almost, except for the token, formless, ceaseless wish that everyone she knew would be OK forever. The ice cream was absolutely, supremely delicious. *It* consumed *her*. Benjamin wouldn't even think of asking for ice cream, not even a taste, or would he? She considered Benjamin, who was making a funny face.

Benjamin has the habit of pushing out his lower jaw and biting his upper lip. This fish-like expression will not be as cute when he is twenty. I also have seen Benjamin take in a gulp of air and puff out his cheeks and wait. His cheeks are so perfectly rounded that I can never resist touching one gently. He doesn't seem to mind. "Are you a balloon?" I

have asked, “Are you going to pop?” It’s a game we have, the two of us, but it makes me nervous. His eyes widen with effort, he doesn’t laugh or let go. He turns pink, and pinker. What is he thinking? How long can he go on like this, refusing to breathe?