

ESP

During the few weeks of summer the Thursday night routine was for the man and his son to go for pizza, walking the mile or so from their house through their neighborhood along sidewalks and back alleys discussing every topic the man could pry out of the boy; how glad he was about the end of school, who he would play with that summer, was he looking forward to camp. The boy had finished fourth grade and the summer was short, just over two months long, and the man, the boy's father, enjoyed taunting the boy about how short his summer was, that in the man's boyhood summer stretched out three full months from Memorial to Labor Day, those holidays standing sentinel at summer's ends sandwiching it, guarding its length with inviolate certainty as a sacred privilege of childhood.

But now somewhere between the man's and boy's youth that had been abandoned in the name of improving competitiveness and paranoia over Asian economic ascendancy, and even though the man knew it was cruel, the way he kept pointing that fact out to the boy, he could not resist on occasion reminding the boy he was getting screwed, unable to keep himself from disappointing the child over something he would never have known in the first place if the man hadn't pointed it out, and even while he was doing it the man wondered about himself, why he could not stop from disappointing his own child drawing a perverse and guilty pleasure from it.

All the way there the boy had spoken in an uninterrupted stream about a video game he was playing involving Japanese anime and battles with swords, high screaming kicks and boldly emotive dialogue, each word an overwrought challenge or final ultimatum. The man had watched the boy play the game and knew it somewhat but wanted the boy to tell him everything, testing his knowledge, the boy's ability to disgorge everything, so that when the boy paused the man urged him on in small again taunting ways saying, "is that all you know, are you sure there isn't anything else," challenging the boy so that the boy would think hard, putting his fingers to his mouth looking away high into the trees pressing himself as he walked along to think of something more then gushing forward with that, each

instance of this carrying them further and closer to the pizza parlor until they were there inside feeling the air conditioned darkness away from the late day sun, nestling into the padded red booth opposite each other ordering pizza then when the waitress was gone the man urged the boy on again, asking “are you sure that's all there is, you can't think of anything else,” until finally the boy, exhausted cheek dipping toward the cool flatness of the table admitted, “yes, that's it, I think, yes that's all, I can't think of anything else,” defeated and spent his voice trailing out like blood oozing from an open wound across the table.

Then the Coke came for the boy. The man's beer arrived and soon after that the pizza. There was new energy about all of that. They had ordered pepperoni and sausage, the boy's favorite, and each time one of them took a slice from the pan a few chunks of sausage would roll free from the clutch of the cheese and they would duel seeing who could grab these morsels fastest, popping them into their mouth pleased to have been quicker, grinning in satisfaction, the boy especially proud or disappointed depending on how this went. The man just as competitive, never letting the boy have it if he didn't get there first earning it, believing all along the best way to teach the boy was to not give anything away easily, make him work for all of it, make him be the fastest to the piece of sausage or anything else, teaching him to see opportunity and act upon it, learning how to spot a prize and move quickly, and also taste the sting of having let it pass and not to let that happen again. The man would seem to enjoy the richness of the sausage too much facing the boy saying, ”umm, that is good, man that is good sausage,” eyeing the boy and smiling, watching him grimace looking back sour faced becoming more determined. The man could tell it, that he was learning not to let that happen again.

The game on the way home was one of their own invention. They called it ESP, which as the man explained meant extra sensory perception, or the ability to know things without seeing them, feeling something without having first hand knowledge gleaned from the primary senses, the usual and accustomed way of knowing everything. It was an exercise in opening the boy's mind to intuition. They

played it with candy bought with quarters from machines beside the cash register that raised money for charities, muscular dystrophy or juvenile diabetes. The candies came in two types for the purpose of this game, Mike and Ike's which were capsule shaped gelatine candies in a rainbow of colors, and Skittles shaped like M&M's but sweeter made of a hard candy coating over a granular sugar gel also coming in the spectrum of primary colors.

The man and the boy would each get a handful and open their palms releasing them tumbling into the man's shirt pocket, the colors mingling randomly. On the way home through the same back alleys and fading sunlight each in turn would put a hand in that pocket taking out a candy and without looking guess its color, using all of their powers, mustering all available psychic energy through the scrunching of brows and the holding hard shut of eyes, bringing to bear all mental energy to discern the color of the candy sight unseen.

If either one of them somehow, using said psychic powers, correctly declared the color of the candy, this being revealed with a springing open of the palm, then that person ate that candy and more importantly demonstrated their ability to see the world using extraordinary means. They had known the unknowable, discerned what could not be perceived by the less aware. If it was the the wrong answer then the other one ate the candy, snatching it cleanly uncontested from the open palm, enjoying it with that same relish as the sausage before, spoils of their gamesmanship when they sat in the booth leaning their heads back savoring the flavor as much as the victory, both being just as delicious.

All essential colors were available, green for lime, red for cherry, yellow for lemon, purple for grape, orange for orange, even pink approximating watermelon. As a result most guesses were wrong. But on the occasions when one was correct it was not a guess but proof of supernatural prowess. Early on the man took the lead, having three to the boy's one. As the boy fell behind in the count he drifted behind in the darkening alley sad it seemed to the man who urged him on saying, "you can't give up that easy, we are only half way home, there's still time and plenty more chances, I'm not going to let

you quit, I won't have it," using a tone to shame the boy into trying. It worked because the boy began to come back, perking up improbably getting one right after another, at one time three in row taking a five to three lead as they rounded the last corner for home.

Beginning down that last stretch of road it was the boy's turn again, the man having guessed another wrong, and he was saying as the boy took another candy from the man's shirt pocket dropping behind, "if you get this one that's going to be it, I won't have time to catch up." As these words left his mouth he turned to look at the boy who was looking at the candy in his palm unfurling his fingers bending his head close seeing it in the darkness.

"You're looking at it," the man said stopping looking at the boy his voice rising. "You're looking at it aren't you, you're cheating, I can't believe you're doing that, why are you doing that." The boy stopped and closed his hand suddenly looking at his father, his face caught in shock and surprise for a moment unable to speak. "Why are you doing that," the man repeated, his voice clearly full of disappointment, "I can't believe you're doing that, that makes the whole game no good, that means none of it counts anymore."

"But I wasn't doing it the whole time," the boy protested, "that was the only time, I promise."

"Well how do I know that, how am I supposed to believe you, I mean if you do it one time it's the same as lying, cheating like that is a form of lying, why should I believe you haven't done it already."

"But I haven't," the boy said confused stumbling over his words, not understanding how lying and cheating were the same. That was the first time, I promise."

"I doesn't matter," the man said, "once you've done it once how can I believe you. You don't have credibility anymore. It makes you a liar, doesn't it, would you trust me if I did that and you caught me and then I said I didn't, would you trust me then."

"Yes, I would," the boy said his voice slow, scattered with hurt. "I would trust you if you said it was true, I would believe you."

“Well that's not the way the world works,” the man said, taking a serious tone answering the boy's sincerity which took him aback and so he paused stumbling in his answer, all that sincerity being in the way of how he wanted the boy to think about this now, about lying, about cheating in a game, how once you started doing this where would it end, how no one would trust you anymore, that's what he wanted the boy to know, that was the important lesson here and what needed to be made clear.

“Your win doesn't count anymore,” the man said stopping looking at the boy blocking him so the boy had to look up in the darkness solemn and quiet. “When you cheat nothing you do matters anymore, no one believes you, your wins don't count, that's the way people are, that's what you need to know, do you understand.” The man put his hand on the boy's shoulder. “Does that make sense to you, do you see it now,” and the boy looked at him nodding slowly but the man could tell he was not getting through. The boy didn't like it, he was not satisfied. That because he had been wounded he could not be satisfied by anything the man said.

They walked the rest of the way home in darkness and silence. When they came to their front door the boy dashed ahead pushing it open vanishing inside. The man followed closing the door behind. The boy had withdrawn into his room and the mother asked the man how it went sounding cheerful assuming the best, wanting to believe that between them it could only be that way. “Well, did you have a good time,” she said certain they had, “did you have a nice walk,” and the man lied, carefully guarding his tone, saying it had been very nice, answering yes to all questions then going quickly into the bathroom swinging the door hard behind him because the beer had passed through him during the walk home and he had to go. As he stood over the toilet he took deep thinking breaths staring into nothing.

After a time measured by the man pacing the house wondering what to do finally deciding to do something, he crept into the boy's room and found him lying stomach down on his bed reading, or appearing to read, his face aimed into a book. The boy did not look up as the man sat down

beside him on the bed rubbing his back with his open palm which was still tacky from the candy catching on the boy's skin. The man did not know what to say or how else to leave it. He felt that he had to get this right, this was important, a turning point, future criminality could be stopped here, a teaching moment he had heard it called. He felt his heart quicken, nervousness and consequence rose in his chest. He had to be careful that honesty be woven into his boy, became part of his basic nature. But the boy was cold. He did not respond to the man's hand which kept rubbing him as if the boy were an inanimate object, unfelt, having nothing to do with him as his own flesh. The man struggled with what to say, there had to be something clever that could pull the boy back in, would let him know that he loved him and at the same time teach him that cheating and lying and stealing were all of the same cloth, bad, leading to suffering and humiliation for him and just as much so for his whole family. He felt the need to come up with something quickly, full of anxiousness now, before it was too late.