

Before There Was a Benjamin

“Maaaaaamaaaaa!”

Benjamin’s voice streams into Melinda’s ear, a pure vibration of pain palpable even from downstairs. She meant only to check on the roasting chicken, only for a moment, but the peace of the kitchen captivated her and she lingered.

“Mama’s coming, Ben,” she calls from halfway up the stairs. She knows that the scream, as piercing and pained as it is, signifies nothing more dire than frustration. And yes, here he is, just where she left him on the floor of his room, surrounded by Lego bricks. The spire they have been working on has toppled from its base onto the carpet. Benjamin sits helpless before the disaster. He must have pressed too hard trying to add onto the top. Tears smudge his cheeks.

“Maaaamaaa,” he says again, more softly.

“Mama’s here, honey,” Melinda says, and tries not to sigh audibly or let visions of other ten-year-old boys playing with their friends cloud her mind. “We’ll make it again. I’ll steady it and you can put more bricks on top.”

The Lego Disaster leads with wearisome inevitability to the Chicken Disaster. Melinda becomes more absorbed than she imagined would be possible in constructing the delicate blue-red-blue-red-blue tower. Benjamin insists on the precise alternation of colors. Her job becomes picking out and setting aside the single blue and red bricks. Benjamin’s

fingers work clumsily—singles being the most difficult to manipulate and the most tenuously connected—and the tower collapses twice more before rising successfully.

Only when she opens the door of Benjamin’s room and smells burnt rosemary and the choking char of chicken skin does she remember.

“Shit! Shit, shit, shit!” Melinda covers her mouth, but it’s too late.

“Shit what, Mama?” Benjamin asks.

“The chicken. Dinner. Burnt to a crisp.”

“Can I see?”

“Oh, sure. Let’s everybody ogle Mama’s mistake.”

Benjamin trails her down the stairs into the kitchen, which is anything but a sanctuary now. Smoke creeps from around the oven door. Benjamin’s presence lends foreboding to the room’s ordinary objects: the knives in their wooden block, the corkscrew beside the wine rack. Melinda would give anything for a glass of wine, but it’s barely past three and there’s no drinking until six-thirty when Peter gets off work. That’s the deal they made. Peter makes the money and carries the health insurance. Melinda cares for Benjamin when he gets home from his program, makes the dinner, and foregoes mid-afternoon glasses of wine. She needs to remain vigilant as long as she’s the only adult in the house. Only now she has to figure out something else for dinner because she can see, when she opens the oven door, that the chicken is as ruined as she feared.

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Long before there was a Benjamin, Melinda saw a man playing guitar. The man's black hair rippled down his back. A silver and turquoise bracelet flashed on his wrist when he strummed.

Had Melinda believed in either divinity or retribution, she would have thought Benjamin must be divine retribution for—what, exactly? Perhaps for the abandon with which she gave herself to Peter that first night, combing his long hair with trembling fingers, or for their years-long courtship, or the years-long, fitful process of conceiving their only son.

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Nobody ever thinks theirs will be the star-child. That's what Tara calls Benjamin. Tara met Benjamin when he was just a baby. He looked up at her from his blue flannel swaddle and gave her the first smile he ever gave anyone. Later, three years old and still pre-verbal, he managed somehow to communicate that he wanted Tara to push him in the stroller. When words finally came, he asked for her, *Auntie Tata*, and Auntie Tata she remained.

Tara was from Peter's life before, a singer with short spiky hair and a winsome overbite. Peter swore up and down, even all these years later, that he'd never slept with her. Melinda tolerated Tara for a long time because she was part of Peter's life. Then she started to like Tara. Gradually, the triangle realigned. Now the two women are friends, often bemoaning Peter's obtuse male energy. These days, Melinda sees Tara during the day while Peter is at work and doesn't mention Tara to him when he comes home.

She calls Tara to report the Chicken Disaster.

“Oh, sweetie,” Tara says. “I’m so sorry. I’ll bring you a deli chicken on my way to rehearsal tonight. Peter won’t know the difference.”

Benjamin grabs Tara’s hand the moment she walks in and leads her upstairs to show off the Lego creation. Melinda stays downstairs and pours the wine, which is okay now that there’s another adult in the house.

“Ben, do you want to watch your show?” Melinda asks when he comes downstairs with Tara. He jumps and pinwheels his arms, screeching, “My show! My show!”

In the kitchen with her glass of wine, her friend, and the purchased chicken in the scrubbed-out oven, *on low*, Melinda feels for a moment like the mother she once imagined she would be.

“You think I shouldn’t let him watch,” she says.

Tara stretches her arms overhead with a cat-like languor available only to single, childfree women. “Hey, sweetie, you do what you gotta do. But he’s special, that one.”

They have some variation of this conversation every time they meet. Tara has always seen beneath the skin of the world. Her eyes, when she looks at Benjamin, seem sharp and coppery, like the colored spikes of her hair.

“You should bring him to a *real* show,” Tara says. “I’ve got some local ones coming up.”

“Are you kidding? He couldn’t sit still.”

“He wouldn’t have to. He can dance with everybody else.”

Melinda lets the idea rest without responding, but the picture of her excitable son at a Daughters of the Milky Way concert, tossing his hefty body into the swaying crowd, stays with her.

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Before there was a Benjamin, according to Tara, there was a swirling colorful energy that danced through the universe, connected with all other energies, loved and loving, empathic, in-place, at home. Benjamin's troubles began only after he was embodied, only after sperm met egg and created the specific physical manifestation that became *Benjamin* and slipped—nay, struggled—into this world on a frigid December morning a full month before he had been scheduled to arrive.

Melinda recalls those first weeks of Benjamin's life: how startled she was every time she found his Isolette in the NICU and him encased within, sensors monitoring his breath and a tube delivering him food as if he'd been hatched, not birthed. How she sat in a rocking chair beside the Isolette, hooked like a cow to the rhythmically whining breast pump, extracting milk that was fed to him first through the tube and then with an eye dropper and finally from a bottle. How, when the doctors declared him well enough to go home and Peter pushed her in a wheelchair with Benjamin in her arms down to the hospital's entrance she felt an overwhelming desire to stay in the place that had kept her child alive for two weeks, as cold and isolating as it had been, because surely at home her ineptitude would kill him.

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Melinda anticipates that Peter will think taking Benjamin to a concert is a terrible idea. She brings it up on a Sunday morning, which didn't used to be a good time to discuss anything since he would be hung over and spaced out till late afternoon. Now, as the manager of the electronics department at Great Gadgets, he has to maintain a

schedule. He gets up before Melinda on weekends and takes the first shift with Benjamin, letting his son help make pancakes.

Melinda comes into a kitchen dusted with flour. She presses her palms into her eyes.

“There’s coffee,” Peter says, partially redeeming himself.

When Benjamin was four and had just said “Dada” for the first time, Peter played his last gig and gave himself a haircut. Melinda remembers watching her husband through the open bathroom door as he gathered up the sheaf of hair and went after it with scissors. He might have needed comforting but even then, only four years into motherhood, she was fresh out of extra cheer. Peter dropped the sheared hair into the bathroom wastebasket and ran his hand through what remained on his head. He’d had to go in for a professional trim before he interviewed at Great Gadgets.

Melinda sips her coffee and wonders what happened to the Melinda who followed Peter from gig to gig, sleeping in two-star motels or sometimes on the bus. It’s obvious if she thinks about it: motherhood happened. And not just garden-variety motherhood but one defined by the revelation of who Benjamin was and what he would demand of her. She acquired expertise she didn’t want, insisting on appointments with specialists, arguing with the insurance company, negotiating the public school bureaucracy. She spent hours in plastic chairs outside the principal’s office like a naughty child. She maintained a dossier of experts and resources. She experienced the swell of hope accompanying each step forward, the subsequent evaporation of hope, the acceptance that there was no hope.

And the bills, always the bills. The arguments with Peter about whether she should go back to work to help with the cost of Benjamin’s program. Running every little bit of

her son's life, her husband's life, her own life, scripting, managing, managing, until she wasn't managing at all.

Melinda tries to picture Peter's long hair as she watches him frying pancakes. Probably better it's short; who would want hairs falling in the batter? But imagining her husband as he once was is the only way she can bring herself to talk about the concert. Maybe, if she presents the idea in just the right way, he'll think it's brilliant. Maybe he'll even come with them.

"So, Benjamin has been getting more into music lately," she says. She waits a moment before adding, "We've been listening to some of your songs."

Peter drags the spatula across the pan, no doubt scratching bits of Teflon into their food. "Oh really?"

"And he's been wanting to fool around on the keyboard."

The electric keyboard has sat for years in the corner of the living room. Peter bought it when Benjamin was a year old. He would hold his son on his lap and guide Benjamin's fingers from note to note. As soon as Benjamin could move, he slithered off his father's lap and crawled away.

"Haven't you, honey?" Melinda asks her son, who is forking pancake into his mouth. Then, to Peter, "Tara's playing in a few weeks. I was thinking he might enjoy that."

Peter jiggles the pan. "A concert," he says, as if she had suggested taking their son to a leper colony.

Melinda turns to Benjamin. "Would you like to go to a concert, Ben? And hear *live music*?"

She knows this tactic is unfair, eliciting her son's enthusiasm to override her husband's reservations, but she feels suddenly trapped and spiteful. Who is Peter to tell them what to do when his interactions with Benjamin are limited to Sunday morning pancakes followed by a cartoon marathon?

Tara's idea that became Benjamin's desire has become Melinda's need. She must take Benjamin to this concert.

"Yefff, confert!" Benjamin says enthusiastically through a mouthful of pancake. Peter says nothing, and the possibility that they might all go together evaporates.

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Before there was a Benjamin there was a flawed world hurtling toward ruin. Who would want to bring a child into such a world? Peter asked, first in his songs and then directly of Melinda. She had no good answer but the ringing imperative of her biology. Feeling more than thinking, feeling she must, *or else*, Melinda sweet-talked Peter into ditching the birth control, as women have always done who are driven by needs more urgent than their need for love.

Years later, seeking an explanation for Benjamin, she read about Indigos and Crystals and Rainbows on Web sites with names like *mystarchild.com* and *starchildren.net*. *Star Children are the hope of humanity*. Melinda went hot, then cold, then hot again with the revelation that forces other than biology might be at work. Knowing what he had the potential to become, how could she *not* have brought Benjamin into this world?

She kept her knowledge hidden from Peter. For all the mind-expanding drugs and body-shattering rock 'n' roll of his youth, Peter had turned into a person who believed only what he could see or touch or hear, only what could be measured. “Charlatans,” he snarled when she made an appointment for Benjamin with a holistic nutritionist. If she mentioned an herbal supplement that might improve their son’s ability to sit still, Peter said, “Show me the studies.” Melinda added *advocate* to the list of roles she had not asked for.

Neither had she asked to be the person standing between two worlds, and yet here she was, an umbilical cord to the universe. She sometimes played a version of the *Would you rather...?* game with herself. Only instead of the absurd dichotomies posed by her teenage friends—would you rather get eaten alive by a lion or pushed out of a plane without a parachute?— she wondered: would she rather have given birth to a son afflicted with cancer? cystic fibrosis? blood that wouldn’t clot? Melinda even began contemplating the value of a higher power who would have borne responsibility for Benjamin’s condition and could have promised a state of perfect grace.

Melinda uses her imagination, too, to project Benjamin into a future without her, as if anxiety could forestall disaster. Will he ever get a job? Find an apartment? Make friends? Fall in love? She now lives in a future she failed to imagine during that first blessed year with roly-poly Benjamin, when nobody worried that he did not speak because he was not yet expected to and the hope had still been there that he would grow into the boy of her imagining.

Before there was a Benjamin there was the potential energy of a Benjamin: drawn, lifted, poised with promise at the edge of this world.

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Melinda decides on a Friday night concert, for no reason other than it means she won't have to see Peter before they leave. When the tickets arrive in the mail, Melinda slits the envelope with a long silver letter opener and slips them under a folder of coupons in the kitchen drawer. She looks forward to going and relishes sneaking around to do it. She tries to recall the last time she and Peter went to a concert but her mind fills with a jumble of images without dates or context.

The concert will end well past Benjamin's bedtime. She tries to get him to take a nap after she picks him up from his program but he won't lie down. She runs through her little bag of survival tricks. Building him a Hot Wheels track buys her a half hour while he races every car in his collection around it. Then he requires her help for an hour picking up the cars he has dumped onto the floor. Each one must be examined and categorized and aligned on the shelf in an exact but incomprehensible order. These obligations seem less burdensome with the promise of the concert ahead. Melinda hums a song from Tara's latest CD as she lowers an orange Chevy beside a blue Dodge.

At five-thirty, Melinda feeds Benjamin dinner. Her already-knotted stomach won't allow her to eat. Daughters of the Milky Way goes on at nine, after the warm-up band, and the club is an hour's drive from their house. It seems they ought to have plenty of time, but Benjamin dawdles over the chicken nuggets and Melinda begins to worry they will still be home when Peter arrives. She glances at her watch as Benjamin pushes the last of the crumb-crusteds bits into a smear of ketchup and then hustles him to the car without even washing his hands.

Melinda plays Tara's CD as they drive. She glimpses Benjamin in the rearview mirror, swaying to the beat.

"We'll see Auntie Tata in a little while, honey," Melinda says. "We might not get to talk to her, though. She'll be up on stage and we'll be watching her."

Benjamin continues bobbing his head as if he's nodding. He needs a haircut—his bangs swish in front of his eyes—and Melinda sighs with the ceaseless effort of keeping her son anchored to this world. She has to cut his hair herself; he can't tolerate sitting in the barber chair or the feeling of the hair-catching apron cinched around his neck. She cuts in dribs and drabs, a snip here while he pushes his toy boats around the bath, a clip there while he drifts to sleep. And now it dawns on her just how stupid she may be to take him to the concert, this child whose tolerance for the unfamiliar can be calibrated in millimeters, who is driven to distraction by the everyday: the elastic of his socks, the label in the collar of his shirt. Melinda can hear Peter's *I told you so*.

But it's too late to turn back. She promised her son a concert, *live music*, and Tara expects them. Melinda clings to the presence of Auntie Tata. Benjamin will be okay because Tara will be there.

It's dark when they arrive and Melinda finds parking in the small lot behind the club. She begins to understand that the evening is unraveling when she cannot coax Benjamin from the car. She somehow failed to consider his unpredictable propensity to become an immovable object, incapable of being acted upon by any force. She unbuckles his seat belt and stands beside the open car door. The CD is off but Benjamin tilts his head from side to side as if still keeping the beat. Melinda sighs loudly.

"Benjamin. Honey."

She knows from experience that nothing she feels like doing will be effective: cajoling, reasoning, pleading, reprimanding, yelling, or tugging his arm. Reluctantly, she shuts the car door and leans against it. *I can be a star-child too*, she thinks, a being oblivious to the physical world and the constraints of time. If she acts as if she has all the time in the universe, then Benjamin will catch up with her, but it's a tricky game. If he senses her exasperation he will remain rooted to his seat.

The silvery streetlight is too faint to illuminate her watch but she guesses it must be close to nine. She looks up at the stars, which tell her nothing of the passage of time. *Good*, she thinks. *Just as well. Now we can turn around and go home—no harm done.* At that moment Benjamin opens the car door, pressing it outward against Melinda's body.

The battle is not won yet. She holds his hand and they cross the gravel parking lot, slowly, listening to every crunch underfoot. She hears something else as they approach the building: the thump and strum of the warm-up band playing what must be its final number. The journey across the gravel takes them the full length of the song. Then, just as she thinks they are home free, Benjamin stops abruptly at the edge of the parking lot.

Melinda realizes he is transfixed by an arrangement of rocks around the base of a lamp post. What does he see there? The invisible energy of stone, a sprite darting in the shadows? Again Melinda waits. The music ends. She hears a door open nearby and the grind of footsteps. A man materializes in the indigo shadow of the building only a few yards from where Benjamin crouches.

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She's afraid for only a moment. Then she begins staring at the man as intently as Benjamin stares at the rocks. He looks a little like Willie Nelson with a craggy face and a ponytail down his back. He might be an incarnation of Peter twenty years hence.

The man is smoking a joint, something Melinda hasn't done since her early days with Peter. The smell of marijuana transports her instantly the way smells do, back to one of a hundred dim clubs where she sits at the bar waiting for Peter's band to go on. If she looks away from Benjamin it is possible to remember a time before there was a Benjamin, when she was simply *Melinda*, an agent of her own destiny, a container big enough for whatever emotion might pour through her, and not buffeted by the universe speaking through this fucking star-child it sent to test her.

The man approaches and holds out the joint. Benjamin is looking so hard at the rocks that he doesn't notice the man or his offering. Melinda thinks, *Ick—it's got his saliva all over it and I have to drive home later and I've heard weed is stronger now than it used to be*. These thoughts dissolve as she reaches to accept the joint. She can't see the color of the man's eyes or his hair except that it seems to shine with streaks of silver in the streetlight and shimmers through her tears.

The smoke sears her lungs. She holds it in for a heartbeat, then lets it stream out the side of her mouth before handing the joint to the man and turning back to her son.

"Benjamin, honey," she says. "Auntie Tata's music is going to start soon."

She grabs Benjamin's hand and pulls. He's a lump, as inert and fixed as the rocks he's examining. The man takes a final toke and tosses the joint to the ground, crushes it under his boot. A cowboy boot. All that's missing is the ten-gallon hat, but he has no hat, just his long, beautiful, shining silver hair, which Melinda wants suddenly to touch.

The man's voice shocks her back to the dilemma at hand.

"May I?"

He gestures toward Benjamin.

Now she has been more than stupid; she has been irresponsible. She'll have to explain to Peter not only the bone-headedness of bringing Benjamin here but of smoking pot and standing by while some stranger abducted him.

But a kidnapper would not ask for permission, nor would he bend down beside Benjamin and stare with him at the rocks as if expecting them to move or speak. She watches the two of them concentrate on the rocks. Their forms make a constellation of shadows.

From inside the club Melinda hears the first twangs of Tara's electric guitar followed by the clash of the high-hat. The melody of the song they have just been hearing on the car's stereo now bleeds through the club wall as Daughters of the Milky Way begins the first set. Tara will be scanning the crowd for them.

Benjamin turns toward the man. She sees his face uplifted in profile. The man spreads his arms and Benjamin moves into his embrace. The man stands with Benjamin wrapped around him like a baby monkey.

Melinda looks up at the sky and sees the actual Milky Way. At that moment, she can almost believe her son came from out there, that he is the star-child she sometimes wishes he were. She can almost believe that before there was a Benjamin there was a Melinda distinct and differentiated, separate but not alone, secure in her own embodiment. She can almost believe in signs and signals, in the thrilling happenstance of a man who might

have come to her in a dream but instead comes to her in a gravel parking lot while inside her friend sings about stardust and substantiation.

The man looks at Melinda and nods toward the door of the club.

Benjamin lifts his head from the man's chest.

"Mama, come," he commands, and she does.

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