

I Can Breathe Better in the Shallow End

Sitting at my kitchen table, I observe the odd collection of images created by Fruit Loop crumbs as they tiptoe across the placemats in random disorder and collapse into small puddles of milk. The background babble of my children's voices rises and falls in intensity creating a wave of sound and ending as a drumming in my ears. It isn't an altogether unpleasant noise. I can't make out actual words, just a sliding hypnotic singsong pattern of sound. It isn't loud or intrusive; only vibrations pulsing against the thinnest layers of my ears. The children are playing with cars on the wooden floor just beyond the kitchen—rolling them back and forth, back and forth—click click, click. I'm pleased to hear them playing contentedly with each other. They aren't fussing, crying, or demanding, at least not yet. For now, there are only glissandos of sound as they urge one another on at some imaginary road game they've created.

I'm glad they're involved in something inventive and creative—not locked on mindless television drivel. I've unplugged the set, so as not to lure them with temptations of fantasy worlds punctuated with come-ons for all those pricey electronic gadgets. They're way too young to understand the dangers of wanting things that they can't have. Hearing them, though, reminds me of the good times when Ben and I were kids. We'd purely love to get those dented metal cars out of the shoebox and run them on warped and stained linoleum of Granny's kitchen floor during long hot summer afternoons—back and forth, back and forth—bump, bump, bump. We played long and hard until sweat would roll down our faces and plaster our silky slick hair to our foreheads. There were places on that kitchen floor where pieces of linoleum swelled and buckled, even busted loose, and it was hard to get those cars to go any distance at all on their own. When

we tired of running them back and forth, we'd give them big shoves, and once released, they'd stumble along like lame and broken bugs until they hit one of those chunked out places.

1

Why is it, I wonder, does the house we live in now have a perfectly unblemished wooden floor? Fake, of course. It seems like all the new houses have fake wooden floors. They weren't like that in the houses I lived in with Papa and Ben. We lived in different houses at different times, more of them after Mama left, but some of them had wooden floors—oak or pine usually scratched and scuffed, suffering from long hard use. We didn't stay in any of them too long. Just long enough for Papa to lose whatever job he had before we moved on to the next one—the next job, the next town, the next house.

When we did have wooden floors, though, Ben and I would scoot on our socked feet and pretend we were like those skaters we saw once when we had a television. We quit when I got a big splinter in my big toe. Granny poured raw whiskey over it and plucked it out with the tip of a paring knife. They have fancy names for new non-real wood wooden floors, at least from what I see in magazines, engineered oak or manufactured maple; all the same, they're fake. I can tell from the pressure of my bare feet against the spongy face of the grain that these floors aren't real.

I need to tell the kids to keep their noise down. It's getting too loud. My eardrums feel the sound pulsing and drumming harder. They're beginning to hurt. Somewhere, I have some little orange earplugs, little hard plugs, but I forget where the hell I put them. I tell the kids in a perfectly controlled polite mom voice to keep the noise down. They don't act like they hear me. Don't they listen when I try to tell them anything? Why don't they listen to me? After all, I'm the parent here.

If I was not to have listened to Papa when I was their age, I'd get my butt smacked good.

Either he would or Granny with hand, belt, or hickory switch. It didn't matter much to them. It was usually Ben more than me because he was the boy. Of course, Granny always told me that she whipped me, so that I'd turn out to be a lady; she wouldn't hear of me turning out like Mama. I wasn't one that she'd raise to run off with a fast-talking truck driver, no sir. When Papa or Granny told us to do something, they didn't have to tell us but just once.

I try again. I tell them just a little louder. I stay calm. I don't raise my voice. I just barely raise the volume. I'm not rude or angry, just the volume raised up a notch. The words are coming faster now leapfrogging over one another to escape my mouth. The children look up at me. Their silence is total and absolute. Their mouths are slightly open, especially Rose's.

She was always a mouth breather, even as a baby. They both have this edgy look to their faces. Rose looks at me her eyes round and wide. Quickly, her eyes drop. I know she hopes that I didn't see her look. Even though a good distance separates us, she begins to scoot further away from me the heels of her little sneakers making sad squeaking noises, like small timid mice. Ethan looks at his older sister, and then moves to follow her. Why won't he look at me? After all, I am his mother. Rose is only 13 months older. He should realize, even at the age of three, that I'm the one calling the shots around here. Not a snot-nosed four-year-old.

I'm so tired. I just don't have the energy to get up and discipline those kids the way I should. I know it's because I haven't slept well in four— well, maybe five nights. I'm so tired I can hardly breathe. My breath feels raw and ragged in my chest. I guess I'm just worn out. I get a lot done, though, in the nights when I don't sleep. My body is alive and twitching with the most ferocious energy. William should be proud of me. This time, night before last, while they were all lying sprawled in their beds, I cleaned the house, pulled armloads of junk out of the garage, and tossed stuff out of closets that I hadn't seen in months.

I don't know why Rose cried so much when I took all those broken outgrown toys to Goodwill, yesterday. She didn't make a sound, though, just tears sliding down her face in little silver tracks and then just dropping off her chin. Lord, I thought she'd never stop. No matter, heaven knows that we don't have the space here to store all that shit. And the outgrown clothes. I got rid of so many. William asked me why I didn't save some of the clothes for his sister's baby. Amy can buy clothes for her own damned kid. What am I, a storage dump for his deadbeat relatives? Who does he think I am, his mother? He was mad because I didn't get a receipt from Goodwill for the taxes. I know he was mad. His mouth got that straight-line look. Ethan gets that from him. Both kids have that muley stubborn streak. They don't get it from my family.

What we did have in my family was lots of energy—at least I can say that about Papa and Granny. I don't remember about Mama. All I can remember about her is that she smelled really nice—a lilac kind of smell. She wore pale pink lipstick that reminded me of the underside of a shell that she got from the beach once. Of course, Granny, Papa, and me we paid for it when all that energy got used up. Yeah, of course that's the strange feeling with me today. I'm just tired. I'm so worn out from all that work—all the cleaning and lifting. Those kids, now they are back with those cars. They are so loud. Why don't they ever listen to me?

William asked me about the stupid pills. He is always bugging me about them. Of course, I've been taking them. They don't seem to work anyway, so what does it matter if I do or not. When I do, I coast around in a fog. I hate that feeling. I feel like I've got a blanket stuffed around my head and over my nose. I know that William thinks he's better than me. Well, why shouldn't he? After all, he gets to be out all day with adults. He isn't stuck in the house with kids. Sometimes, I can't think that I ever had a life away from whiny kids, no matter how much I love them. A life where I was a real person with thoughts and dreams. I do love them, though. I do. Of

course, it was much easier when they were babies. Just breathing in the warm sweet smell of them made me happy. I would love to just hold them, rock them, and inhale their rich clean scent. Hmm, let me look here in the cabinet; I'm almost sure I took those pills earlier this morning, didn't I?

Oh well, if I did or if I didn't, it doesn't really matter. Maybe I'd better go outside and sit by the pool a while. My teeth are clenched together so tight it feels as if they will grind right up through the top of my head. Sitting out by the pool, I can relax and take my mind off the kids. William put that pool in last summer. He thought that we'd all enjoy it. He never stays at home to swim in it, though. I wish we could go out for dinner some time, just William and me. It would be nice for the two of us to have dinner by ourselves—a real date night, maybe. We could maybe talk a little about—well, I don't know what about, but we would talk. We used to talk. Talk for hours and hours. I loved to watch the way his eyebrows would arch, and his eyes widen when he was excited about what he was telling. Now, I don't know. Maybe I'd be too tired to get dressed up to go out to dinner; I might be too tired to talk. Besides, I don't know who would keep the kids if we were to go off by ourselves. I wouldn't trust either of his sisters to watch them.

The kids are quiet now. At least I think they are. I can't really hear them out here. It looks like they are back to playing with those stupid cars. I can see them through the glass door. At least, they aren't staring at me anymore. In fact, they're not even looking in my direction. It is so quiet out here. Now, I can think. The sun is awfully bright, but the heat feels good. That blue jay is squawking its head off, but other than that, it's peaceful—tranquil almost. I can think here with little trills of sunlight puckering the skin of my arms and legs and the warm feeling on the top of my head. I might get in the pool. I don't actually need a swim suit. These shorts and tee shirt are almost the same. If the kids weren't around, I'd pull them off and go without. The hem

on these shorts is starting to unravel, anyway. I could pull this little thread, and the whole thing would come apart.

William and I used to do stuff like this, go skinny-dipping before the kids came along. That was when we still lived in that apartment that was so small. Those apartments were just cramped little boxes, but there was a nice pool. It wasn't deep, and we could sort of wade and splash around the edges at night when nobody else was there. The concrete around the edges still held the heat from the day, and I could feel cool and warm at the same time. I felt so free and clean and pretty. You wouldn't catch old Mr. Proper William doing anything like that now.

William thinks that I need to get involved in some kind of organization with other people. It might be nice to get out of the house with other adults, well, occasionally, anyway. He could stay home with the kids, or maybe I could take them to a Mother's Day out. I don't imagine that I would have to say anything to anyone. I could just sit quietly in the corner, and nobody would even notice that I was there. I might even wear a dress and comb my hair. I wouldn't have to wear lipstick. It isn't like I have to jump off the deep end.

"She'll learn to swim that way." That's what Papa said when he pushed me in. It was in the deep part of an old pond hidden behind the woods at Granny's. He'd take Ben and me fishing in his old rowboat sometimes when he was feeling good. We had had several days of hard blowing rain, and the fish weren't biting. Papa acted like it was something personal. The fish weren't biting merely to spite him. I said something about being tired of fishing. I wanted to go back where it was shallow, so I could wade along the bank.

All of a sudden, I could feel the water rushing in through my mouth and spewing up through my nose. It burned like everything, and I kept taking big gulps of that clouded oily tasting pond water. Then I coughed and puked until my chest ached, and my throat was scorched.

The punishing weight of that cold muddy water rushed and pulled at me, but I thrashed and struggled and stayed afloat until Ben grabbed me and pulled me out. Papa yelled at him to leave me be. He said that if I wanted to wade in the water, he would damn well give me my wish. Ben acted like he didn't hear even though he knew it would cost him later. He just wiped the water out of my face with his hands and finger-combed the hair out of my eyes. Papa just gave us both a disgusted look with the side of his mouth torqued up. He turned away from us and rowed back, but he didn't say anything else. I just sat there cold and shivering, and I didn't say another word, either. I wasn't about to open my mouth.

But, I don't guess I have to do everything Papa's way. No, I don't think I really have to. I will do it the way Ben would tell me if he were still around. I can start off easy like. I'll just get in slowly. I can take a deep breath and start off a little at a time. Sometimes, it works out better to go slow. You notice how the water laps around your feet and legs, and it feels kind of soft and sharp all at once. Your feet get all tingly with the cold, but it is still warm on your head and shoulders.

I can see little bits of a green leaf floating slowly. It seems to be drifting back and forth, back and forth, not rushing, just keeping its head above water. It floats along so gently, so quietly as if it has no trouble at all getting its breath. It is always easier to get your breath in the shallow end. I can breathe better in the shallow end. I could try it. I could. I could start with a nice calm deep breath. After that, who knows, maybe I wouldn't have to bother to breathe at all.