

CHILDHOOD ISSUES

“Good morning you hunky chunka meat,” I greet myself in the bathroom mirror. If only I could wrench my eyes free from this sleep I could get a proper glimpse at that hair – is it still miraculously postured after a night of restless sleep? Wouldn’t be surprised.

“How vain; how hilarious,” I chuckle to myself. Is it weird to crack yourself up? Oh well, I’m already cracked, I figure. Now to get prepared for noticeable cleanliness.

But no. Right about then my 7 month old human being starts squawking – piercing talons of sound aimed straight for my eardrums. I am the baby’s prey.

And this vicious assault occurs just as my left toe was about to touch the tub, steamy shower water already having drenched my right side. Left side cold, right side warm – which do I give in to? Ah I go with the right side, contrary to linear education, and pull the shower curtain closed sharply in defense of my independence.

Having a baby is tough. How am I going to handle the Terrible Twos?

“Terrible *you!*” my conscience screams, trying to distract me from the soothing warmth. I try to ignore it, cos it’s bi-polar anyway. It has issues. But it’s relentless: “Surely you can’t let this defenseless little infant empty her lungs in the confines of her crib while you bask in adult revelry? In your perfectly concocted balance of cold and hot,” it taunts.

“But, on the *other* hand,” my conscience’s rationalizing alter-ego steps up to play, “maybe she needs to learn that the world doesn’t revolve around her. And anyway, she’ll figure out that she can calm *herself* down, which is empowering. And freeing for you. Yes, *you* are taking one for the team – you’re bearing the screeching assault to your eardrums in order to

impart a valuable gift on the waa-ing princess: self-sufficiency.” Good boy. I pant, and resume getting prepared to notice the cleanliness.

The shushing water drowns out the lowest octaves of the screech now, calming me down. The power of the shush and the five S’s huh. I guess we’re all just older babies. Then the assault seems to subside to sleep altogether. Oh good, she’s stopping now, I can wash my face and bare closing my eyes. Circular motions of soap, the eyes first, followed by simultaneous cheeks – ah the convenience of automated routine. Somehow it’s like I’m washing away whatever lies behind my closed eyes.

But no. My morning refuses to start out peacefully. I have to be dropped into frieken Twilight Zone just when my eyes were saturated with soap bubbles. The bathroom door creaks open... There shouldn’t be anyone home!

I fling my eyelids open, and yank back the shower curtain, bearing the burden of the inevitable soap sting on my corneas. But my eyes are stung with something more profound than soap: delusion! It must be. A 7 month old can’t climb out of a crib, can’t walk, and can’t turn a door handle anti-clockwise. And yet there Nala is – standing all erect like a jolly Homosapien, or some creature that resembled one!

“Nala!” I begin to speak to her in the same tone I used yesterday. I notice immediately how inappropriate it sounds.

She stands there in her pink pajamas with built-in socks, pacifier dangling from the cord we attach it to her with. Her feet are going to get wet. She’s a real mission to take care of when she’s sick. But it looks like she can take care of herself now, I figure.

I feel guilty suddenly about how I'd been babying her condescendingly, shoving bottles in her mouth like there was no tomorrow. But there *was* a tomorrow, and it's turning out to be weird.

"Nala...how did you reach the door handle?" I don't know what else to say. Some sort of question had to be asked. But she takes over the reins from then on, so I could go back into my box.

"Daddy, we need to talk," her sweet innocent voice is like a tulip or something. But more like one of those Alice in Wonderland kinda tulips - bigger than it should be, and with the subtle suspicion that the thing could turn on you at any minute.

"Ok sure Baba, just hold on." The sting in my eyes presents itself as I reach for the handles to turn off the water. But then the pain is abruptly shoved back into its inferior hierarchy of priorities. Because when I turn back around, there she is - propped up on the edge of the bath, drool dribbling out of her lippy smile. I startle and almost slip. "Nala you're freaking me out man, what the hell!"

"Daddy, language please." Her little pajamas don't look like they should be propping themselves up like they are. Her flawless posture makes me stand up straighter, like I'm in trouble or something. But then again, maybe *she* is. Little girls shouldn't be sneaking up on Daddies like that. But I concede.

"I'm sorry my girl, Daddy's just a little confused. You're little, and I'm confused."

I step out of the bath and she hops down with me. I don't want her to slip on those silly built-in socks. Still freaked out, I'm careful not to cover my eyes with the towel while drying in

case she disappears, or pulls a knife on me or something. I suppose it's natural to feel uneasy about the situation, but I don't know why I'm assuming that violence from my pumpkin is an imminent threat. Little Chucky with giraffe pajamas, or some subconscious nonsense.

"You see the thing is, Daddy," she begins, "you can't understand my language, so I've given up trying to get you to. I decided to learn yours!" She beams her one-toothed beam, eyes smiling. "It's not that difficult really Daddy, if I just set my mind to it. You've used all these words before, so I just listened. And you used even *more* words than these Daddy," and then she whispers, "but I'm not going to use *those* words because I don't want Mommy to give me the same look she gives you."

My face goes a little red; it's probably the steam getting to me. Man, she's been *comprehending* everything all this time, like a real person or something! Here I am feeling like a right klutz. There's no time for apologies or anything though. Like I said, she has the reins. I get the sense that it's not an apology she is after anyway; she wants to teach me, impart some understanding. I'm kinda basing this off the fact that her facial expression is similar to when she has gas – she needs to get something out - and I wonder if she needs to be changed. Or maybe she thinks *I* do. Well *I'll* squirm just like you do, I think.

"You see, Daddy Ga, in a way," she continues, "I am you, and you are me." She's hugging my left leg now, looking up at me. But I'm still a bit wet, and I don't want her to get sick. It's cute though. "I've just come from where you are going," she says, "and right now you are living where *I* am going. So that's why we've been given to each other. That's why Daddy. But I needed to learn how to talk so quick 'cos you were learning my language sooo sloooowly that I don't think we have enough time."

I'd only half been listening. Which is ridiculous. When your baby starts articulating truths about the universe, it's time to focus. To pull out your phone and record it so that you can play it over and over and glean every ounce of insight out of it. Or at least make your fortune with a viral YouTube video which would ultimately be labeled fake, but which would allow you to quit your job and spend all your time contemplating the loss of your sanity. Writing it goodbye notes and stuff.

I picked up the end of what she said anyway, and I spew it into a question that half makes sense: "Enough time for what little one?" She seems to buy it, as if I had been paying attention. You're your mother's child, I think, that works on her every time.

"Enough time to help you grow up before you begin life Daddy."

"*Begin* life," I exclaim, half thinking she is telling me I'm going to die or something.

And then she does.

"You're going to die Daddy."

Geez kid! "When?!" I blurt out. "What do you know Nala? Tell me!"

"Everybody dies silly. That's what they told me."

She's being generic. A 7 month old being generic. I have questions about who *they* were, and what education *they* had been giving my child...and especially how it relates to me. But I am thrust along into the next phase before I can articulate anything. She tells me she wants to take me for a walk, and before I know it she is helping me put my socks on, her podgy little

arms shorter than each sock. She doesn't need socks to go outside, 'cos they are built I, remember. She's ready to go, it's *me* who needs the preparation.

Little Nala is helping me get prepared, and I see now that that's what she had been doing all along.

Baba looks up at me expectantly when we reached the front door. You got up there to open the *bathroom* door, I think, don't be lazy now. Practicing opening doors would be empowering for you, would open doors for you. But I don't wanna get into a battle of wills just now, so I turn the handle anti-clockwise and then open the gate for us.

She runs out with sputtering footsteps, jelly legs flopping. Inefficient running style – too much wind-drag. I'll have to work on that with her. I'm almost taking it as an insult to my parenting that she's so excited to get out. What, I never take you anywhere? The garden's been here the whole time and just yesterday...

My thought train is ground to a halt by saucer eyes that stopped to look back at me. Enough of the rationality, enough of the left brain. I pause long enough to notice that the grass is yelling about its greenness. Maybe it was 'cos I looked down to meet Nala's open soul gaze that I noticed it. Normally, you know, I just head straight for the car, thoughts adrift about whatever monstrosity I have to get accomplished that day. But today I see that the grass had grown nice and long. And green.

“Look Daddy, a blue bird!” She tries to point but she still can't coordinate her fingers properly; she hadn't learnt that yet. Maybe I hadn't been making enough finger gestures for her to mimic or whatever. I feel like I point a lot, but oh well. So she just kinda thrusts her arm up

in the direction of the tree. Primitive of a gesture that it is, it works - I see the bird. I can't miss it, really: a vibrant Azure blue creature, painted like a misplaced dot on the tree's bareness. It sees us too, and I wonder what it thinks about us. Day in, day out, caught in the curse of consciousness.

In a flutter of purposeful wings it plunges straight for our faces. The thing must not have liked that I called it a misplaced dot. Don't blame it. I duck down, cowering beneath extended arms, sticking one palm out to protect Nala, giving her my hand of protection. But the bird is bright, remember – it swings right passed my protruded limb, and slaps its wing straight into Nala's outstretched hand before flying off. The cheeky creature had just given her a high five! Of a sorts.

Wow, that was awesome, I said. I wanna do it! I noticed myself sounding like a kid. I cough, and then stick out my hand and call, "Here birdy birdy birdy." I recognize how stupid it was that I repeated it three times. The bird seems to share my recognition, cos the rebellious thing just squawks in my face, like "Geez guy, back in your box."

It's fine, whatever. You're a bird, and I eat your placentas for breakfast. That whole experience was cool though, and it was thanks to Nala.

"Daddy look how bright the sun is today. It's really nice to live here, isn't it?" Ya it is but just you wait and see what our *next* house will be like, *then* we'll be living it up! I make a mental note to follow up with Sean about the refinance. Nala sits down cross-legged in the grass, again perfect posture. I copy her. I forgot you can do stuff like that, and she's right, it is beautiful outside.

She is helping me notice stuff. And I see now that that's what she had been doing all along.

“See, what I needed to tell you Daddy, is that we're in this together, you and me. We're on this like really, really nice stroller ride through the park. Like those ones we sometimes do on Sundays. You're pushing me around now Daddy, and then soon I'll push you. I wanted to tell you before I forget. Cos I can feel that all this new stuff I'm learning is pushing out what I already know. I wanted to tell you that I love you Daddy. And I really don't like those peas, or when you use that squeegee thing on my nose.”

Well fair enough, but you can't blow your nose yet, so I have to use the squeegee. Forget you being empowered, I'm gonna help you clear yourself of your mucous, child.

Just then the wind blows calm power through the leaves of the lone tree that stands in my garden. Somehow the blowing seems to clear my *mind* of its mucous. I feel the tension drop out of my shoulders and breathe in the remnants of that fresh gust. Nala's swaying back and forth now, her attention focused on eating these little pieces of bark. Normally I'd be irritated that I have to stop whatever I'm doing and wrench those husky choking hazards from her clenched jaw. But now, as I feel the wind draw its breath in for a second gust, I'm still.

Have you experienced this type of stillness? The one with this weird ability to transcend time. Time just exhales, or my mind rises above it, or something. But the strangest senses begin to sputter on the screen of my consciousness, visions: my dad's face, wrinkled with a perpetual frown. Distant. As the wind unleashes its second gust, it seems to blow me into a time that has been etched in the ether. It's like the tree is sharing its memories with me. Or maybe I'm just

tripping. I feel browns and yellows, sepia-toned colors animating my upward view of my father. He's carrying his briefcase out of the front door, forcing a smile. The same front door Nala and I have just come through. The one I opened for her, or was it for myself?

We've been living in this neighborhood for too long, I think. I begin to get sidetracked by rehearsals of what I need to say to my mortgage company to make the next move happen. But the wind draws me back afresh when I let it. Back to the scene from my childhood. My dad's briefcase is swinging purposefully out the door, his suit looking immaculate, his son looking up to him. But his distant eyes look through me. They always have. Now the Alzheimers is the cause; back then it was the duty of being the man of the house - putting bread on the table and buttering it from left to right. Left to right. I hear the tings of forks on plates now as a different scene blows in. An eating family. And the clanking of my mother doing the dishes in the kitchen sink. There's dad, reading the paper - trying to stay on top of business. Always on top of things, but never in them. The same wind blew in his face, but his mind's mucous had already solidified. Stale mindset. Could this be a glimpse of myself from the future? The spotlight of my mind illuminates a weird reality of the genetic cycle.

No. I shake my head as if to make the decision tangible, and I'm brought back to Nala.

She's not saying anything, but always speaking to me non-verbally. Words don't cut it. Nevertheless, her message has cut through to me, and it causes me to remember who I am again. It's like the purity of her worldview and untainted eyes evaporated the societal fog that I have been groping around in. And I see which way I'm supposed to go again. I see which way home is again.

I stick out my hand for a high five from the tree. It hangs in the air for a while; nothing happens. And then I pull it back. 'Cos it's a tree, duh, and it clearly can't high five. But I'm not ashamed to be left hanging.

No time has seemed to pass at all. Or we've been outside of time or something. But then before I know it we are walking back upstairs, and Nala's clambering in front of me, her whole body heaving from step to step. I pick her up 'cos it is my turn to carry her, right?

She convinces me to finish my morning routine; these things are good. But she insists I take a bath instead of a shower. I guess it goes with the whole slowing down thing that I sense is part of her message. So here I am, in the bath, with her perfectly postured stance right beside me. Her chubby face leans over and splashes the water with her hand flaps, getting it in my eyes. But it's just clean water, pure water, so it doesn't sting.

And I realize then that she is helping me become clean. And I see now that that's what she had been doing since the day she was born.

Anyway, I go see a psychiatrist the following Tuesday. 'Cos clearly I have issues.