

Stone Fish

In the morning, I heard Jonathan calling me.

“Good morning,” I said as I entered his room. I pulled open the blinds. “You don’t have to bellow.”

“I had a dream that I was an osprey,” he said.

“That sounds like a nice dream,” I said. “Get up.” He crawled toward the foot of his top bunk, and started down the ladder. In our old apartment, he used to share this bunk bed with Meredith, but now she had her own room. We considered getting rid of the bunk bed, but he said he liked sleeping up high, so we kept it. Some days I would wait for him while he backed down the ladder, but not on school days, not when we were running late. I moved off towards the kitchen, and I heard him head for the bathroom.

A few minutes later he trotted into the kitchen and slid onto the bench on his side of the table. He curled up and buried his head in his knees. “Too bright!” he complained. Meredith was curled up in a similar position on the opposite bench, her red-brown hair hiding her face.

“Eat your melon,” I said. He sat up. *The Burgess Bird Book for Children* was where he left it on the bench near the wall during dinner last night when I told him to put it down. He picked it up.

“Mommy.”

“Eat your melon.”

“Mommy.”

“Yes, sweetie,” I said, moving towards the refrigerator.

“Mommy.”

“*What, sweetie?*” I answered.

“When will I be able to fly?”

He was seven, too old to ask a question like that. He was past the age at which all things are possible, old enough now to understand that he is a boy, and boys can’t fly, and that he was likely to still be a boy tomorrow, and the day after that as well.

“When your bones become hollow,” I answered, impatient. “Now, do you want pancakes or waffles?”

“When will they become hollow?”

“Well, never. Pancakes or waffles?”

“If they were hollow, would I be able to fly?”

“No. Pancakes or waffles, for the third time?”

“Pancakes, please.”

I opened the refrigerator a little too forcefully and took out the milk, and the eggs, and set them on the counter. I spun on my right heel in order to catch the refrigerator door before it closed and got out the pancake mix. I cracked an egg into a small bowl. Jonathan liked to crack eggs, and was quite good at it, but in the morning there was no time.

“But, Mommy, what if my bones were hollow?”

“You’d still need wings.”

“But not feathers. You know, bats can fly and they don’t have feathers.”

“Right. You wouldn’t need feathers, but you would need wings.”

“Actually, no. Flying ants don’t have wings.”

“They must.”

“No. I think they have some kind of flap.”

I mixed the pancake batter. “Well, OK, flap, then. Something wide and flat that the wind can push up on.”

“No, the wind doesn’t push up, the wing pushes down.”

“Whatever. Something to push against the air. Skinny arms won’t do it.”

“I don’t have skinny arms. They are wide.”

“They are skinny. Eat your melon. Meredith,” my attention turned to the littler one, who had sat up, but had been singing “Teddybears’ Picnic” over and over in a whisper, and had not been eating anything. “It is time to eat, not sing. Please eat *now*.”

“I know, I know!” Meredith said.

“If you know, then do it, please. If you just did it, then I wouldn’t have to waste my breath.”

I turned back to the pancakes.

“Watch them catch their underwear,” sang Meredith softly.

“No, Meredith, it’s not ‘watch them catch their underwear,’” corrected Jonathan. “It’s ‘watch them, catch them unaware.’”

“I know, I know!” shouted Meredith.

“*Eat your melon!*”

I’d never been a patient person, although I believed I’d come a long way, and frankly, I gave myself a lot of credit for that. But I didn’t understand why getting two children to eat breakfast with some velocity, some consistent movement in one direction, should require so much ingenuity and self-restraint. Many mornings there was this

temptation to shriek and overturn the plates onto the floor. I knew there were better ways -- cleverer, trickier ways to impose my will -- I'd come across such suggestions in parenting magazines. Make toast in the shape of airplanes, pancakes in the shape of their initials. Establish a complex point system. Pretend you don't care whether or not they eat anything (since their first and foremost motivation is always to thwart you). All that was necessary was to devise a strategy and then execute it every single goddamn day.

I reminded myself that Jonathan was seven and Meredith was five, babies really, and it wasn't their fault that they seemed to have inherited a dawdle gene from somewhere. Not from me. I looked over at Daniel, a very prompt, responsible and efficient person, but yes, there was some evidence of a dawdle gene there, I thought as I regarded him reading the newspaper.

Bursts of temper were often effective and appropriate, when I was a lawyer at a midtown firm. Now, however, they were entirely counterproductive. A five year old and a seven year old will most likely remember any such unattractive incidents when they're grown and tell their shrinks about it, write it into bitter novellas. Plus, anyone standing outside by the elevator would hear everything as if it were before them on a stage, and then every time I saw them I'd have to endure their polite, cold smiles (*"there's that shrew who screams at her children"*). So I restrained myself.

I was getting better. The day before, Jonathan had spilled an entire container of nuts. Not spilled. Poured, would be more accurate. And I had managed to keep my head from exploding. He was eating the nuts out of the container, and each time he took a few, one would drop onto the floor. I was trying to finish reading an article in the

newspaper. One article! Just one! And every few seconds – tak, tak, tak, a nut bounced from the table to the bench to the floor.

“Please pick up the nuts you have dropped,” I said, calmly, I thought. He obligingly climbed under the table and rooted around for a while, and came up with five nuts, which he showed me. “Put them in the garbage, please.” He did so. “Now, please, try not to drop quite so many. Why don’t you just eat one at a time.” He resumed his seat. I resumed my reading. And the next moment, the entire containerful went over the edge.

“I’m sorry, Mommy,” he said.

“It’s ok, sweetie,” I said. “Just pick them up, please.” I fetched the dustpan.

Finally, they finished breakfast. They washed their faces, brushed their teeth, put on their school clothes, picked up backpacks and gym bags and we rode down the elevator, whirled out the front door of our building and turned to the east just in time to see the broad side of the M104 passing our street, up on Broadway.

“Shit – *shit!*!”

“Why did you say ‘shit’ Mommy?” Jonathan asked.

“Why did you say ‘shit’ Mommy?” Meredith asked.

“Because we missed the bus,” I answered. When we missed the bus we had to take the subway, because although the 7:55 bus was actually pretty regular, it was impossible to know when the next M104 might lumber along. The subway was quicker but dirty and I didn’t like the narrow platform, with trains shooting through on both sides. We used to take it every morning before 9/11. People have responded to New York’s

perpetual state of Orange Alert in a variety of illogical and idiosyncratic ways: one friend had her eyes lasered so she wouldn't have to worry about her contact lenses if she had to flee; another friend started taking her children on long walks to strengthen their legs. My personal response had been to stop taking my kids on the subway. The bus seemed safer: it was self-contained and finite, the other riders scannable, exits reachable, and besides, surely no terrorist had the patience to wait for the M104. But I rode the subway unhesitatingly by myself, and I took the kids on it if we were late. So the real reason I hated missing the bus was that I was then forced to acknowledge the total irrationality of my position. Either I truly believed the subway was dangerous, in which case I should never take it under any circumstances, or I didn't truly believe it was dangerous, in which case I should take it every day and give the kids an extra fifteen minutes to eat breakfast. But it didn't boil down to that. If you boil everything down, everything will simply boil away.

Jonathan liked to ride the subway. He gazed out the window and watched the blue and white and red lights in the black tunnels. Sometimes another train would pull up alongside our train, and then that other train would suddenly descend, while our train stayed level, until he could see the top of the other train going down and away somewhere. There were often things to look at on the tracks: bottles, for instance. He used to like to point out, when we used to ride the subway every day, whether the same bottle would be lying in the same position at 103rd Street. Once a friend of ours rode with us, and she had laughed at the way Jonathan knelt on the seat and hung on to the edge of

the window. “There’s nothing to see out there!” she had said. Jonathan had swiveled to look at her, but hadn’t bothered to respond.

When we arrived at school, we dropped Meredith off at her kindergarten classroom first, then took Jonathan to his second grade classroom across the hall. I liked looking around his classroom. It was full of those things that are a natural part of your environment when you’re seven but then you never see again. The alphabet, capitals and their lower case children, lined up in pairs above the blackboard. A tooth chart: when you lost one, you colored in a paper tooth and stuck it on the chart. Posters about the life of Johnny Appleseed. Who ever hears about Johnny Appleseed after second grade? A photograph of the Earth as seen from space. I was struck by this picture, how beautiful Earth was, and how round. I thought that such a picture seemed to suggest, on one hand, that there must be a God. But, on the other hand, if *that* is the level of magnitude of thing that interests God, then how could I hope to attract his or her attention? So – thinking that maybe He or She does exist isn’t that much comfort, really.

I kissed my boy, and smoothed his dark hair off his face. It was very straight. Every morning when he first woke it formed a smooth bowl over his head except for one tuft in the back that stood straight up. He always insisted that I put hair gel on it, and so in the very back of his head it was a little stiff. I said goodbye. He said goodbye, giving me the full force of his brown eyes, which are large for his white face, and then turned away, already absorbed in his own life, the life that was separate from mine. When he was younger, he wouldn’t say goodbye to me when I left him at school. He would cling to me, and tell me not to go, and I would hold him as long as I could, and then when he

knew he couldn't win he would release me and turn away abruptly, leaving me bereft. I asked the head of the school about this once.

“Why won't he say goodbye to me?” I asked.

“Because it's too painful,” the head of the school replied, nodding with recognition.

At the end of the school day, Meredith was dismissed at 2:50, and then the two of us had to wait ten minutes for Jonathan's dismissal at 3:00. I could see the back of his head through the narrow window in the door. I remembered how, when he was a baby, he would seem tiny and helpless in the morning, when I had the distance of a night's sleep between us and was able to place him in context against the rest of the world. By the end of the day, however, when he had been the star around which I had orbited for the past twelve hours, he would have become enormous. I still had trouble figuring out how big he actually was. When his teacher dismissed him and he walked through the doorway, my eyes meet his neck, I had been looking for him lower down, he was bigger than I remembered.

The three of us walked home through Riverside Park, holding hands. Holding two different people's hands, while very sweet in concept, was actually incredibly awkward in practice. You had to accommodate two people's separate rhythms, which was especially tricky when the two people were very short. Sometimes one child would want to swing hands, and the other, steadfastly, would not. You would be caught in the middle, your own rhythm lost. Sometimes you would trip.

“Do you know which whales can leap clear out of the water?” Jonathan asked.

“Uh, no, sweetie. Which ones?”

“Pilot whales, dolphins, porpoises, false killer whales and minke whales,” he answered. “I think that’s all.”

“And -- sorry -- those are whales that can do what?”

“Leap clear out of the water. What is your favorite toothed whale?”

“I’m not sure I have a favorite toothed whale. What is your favorite?”

“My favorite is the beluga whale. Do you want to know the other kinds?”

“Sure, sweetie.”

“Beluga whale, porpoise, dolphin, false killer whale, sperm whale.”

He exhausted me. He required me to pay attention. Once, another mother at school, whom I didn’t know very well, asked me what I “did”, and I replied that I was staying home with my children. The other mother had said, “I stayed home with my kid for a few months, but then I just had to go back to work. I mean, I love my kid, but I just have to have some intellectual stimulation.” I could think of many, many excellent reasons why a person would prefer to go to work than stay home with kids. But – intellectual stimulation?

I thought about being a lawyer. The lights in my office had been connected to motion sensors. If there was no movement in the office for six minutes, the lights would automatically go off. Often, as I dragged my mind through a contract, somewhere amid the heretofors and forthwiths I would suddenly find myself sitting in darkness, and I’d have to flail around to make the lights go on again and dispel the uncomfortable feeling

that I was being watched. I suspected the sensors really measured not motion but mental functioning, and that they had accurately detected unacceptably low levels.

I had almost said to the other mother, “Perhaps you have a dumb child.” But I didn’t say that, because that would have sounded very defensive, and it wouldn’t have been nice. In addition to not being very patient, I was also, by nature, sometimes not very nice. Being not nice and not patient had served me quite well in my Wall Street life. That sort of personality was an asset, to be cultivated. But now it only hindered me, since I was trying to raise nice, patient children. It was so hard, trying to behave the way you expect your children to behave.

“Why, when I ask people, do they think that the most feared animal in Africa is the lion?” Jonathan asked, relentless.

“Well, I guess it’s because people think of the lion as the king of the beasts.”

“But the lion is not the most feared animal in Africa.”

“Oh, what is?”

“The Cape buffalo.”

“Oh. You mean feared by people or feared by the other animals?”

“Feared by the other animals.”

“How do people know what animal other animals fear?”

“Because only lions will attack a Cape buffalo. But both Cape buffaloes and elephants will attack lions. And Cape buffaloes have horns like this,” he waved both hands in curves, “and they’re very unpredictable. Sometimes they will attack without warning. And they have very sharp hooves. So why do people think the most feared animal is the lion?”

“That’s a good question, sweetie.”

“When you say ‘that’s a good question,’ that means that you don’t know the answer.”

“Well, I guess that’s right, sweetie. I can’t explain why other people think what they think.”

It was dinnertime. Jonathan asked me, “Do you think a stone fish *knows* that it looks like a stone?”

We had seen a stone fish that summer in the London Aquarium. The stone fish lies on the ocean floor, looking just like a stone. It doesn’t look innocent -- it looks like the sort of stone that would give you a nasty cut if you stepped on it -- but it does look inanimate, except for its sly eye. It lies perfectly still, and then, when some poor fool fish swims by dimly thinking it understands the rules of this game, the stone fish shoots up like a nightmare and if its prey feels anything at all in its final moments surely it would be outrage, that subterfuge so far beyond its comprehension should be permitted in its limited universe.

“Well,” I considered. “I would say that a fish couldn’t really know that about itself, but you know, I guess maybe it does, at some level. I mean, it knows that its way of catching prey is not to, like, swim around chasing stuff, but to lie perfectly still.” I knew I was floundering. I hoped he wouldn’t challenge me.

“Right,” he said. “It knows it’s playing a trick.”

After dinner, there were so many things to do, Meredith to bathe and put in bed, dishes to put into the dishwasher, leftovers to put into the refrigerator, and he followed

me around everywhere, with his book before his face. “Sweetie,” I said, “wouldn’t it be easier to read if you just stayed in one place?” He settled on the floor near my feet.

“No,” he said. “I just want to be where you are.” I gave him a quick kiss on the top of his head. I knew this was a phase that would not last forever, and that soon, perhaps very soon, he wouldn’t want to be in the same room with me. Nevertheless, I kept running into him when I turned around, stepping on him, and that made me irritable.

Bedtime came. He was clean and in his pajamas, and I let him read in his upper bunk for a while. Some evenings I forgot about him, because he would be so quiet. But he called me when he was ready to go to sleep -- “I’m ready!” I reached up to take the book from him, and set it on the chest. I turned out the light and asked him which of his animals he wanted to sleep with. “White Tiger?” “No, not tonight.” “Yak?” “Yak is a little hard around his horns.” “Lemur?” “OK, yes, Lemur.” I tossed him Lemur. Many of his animals had come from the store with tags around their necks that said things like “Congo” and “Snowflake”, but Jonathan refused to call them anything other than what they were. I climbed the ladder so I could lie down next to him, and he took my hand and we lay in silence for a minute. Then I said good night and crawled toward the ladder. That is when he clutched at my arm. I lay down next to him for a few more minutes, and then got up to go. He clutched at my arm.

“A few more minutes. Please!”

“Two minutes.”

“OK, three minutes.”

“No, I said two.”

“OK.” This time, after the two minutes, he was willing to let me go.

Later, when he was asleep, I went to look at him. In sleep, his face was a smooth collection of curves and lines and contrasts, black lashes, white skin. He was dreaming, and whatever was going on behind there was beyond my capacity to help or harm. Once, when he was not quite two years old, I took him to the Museum of Natural History as I regularly did to break up the long days. During the week there were few people there, and we would have the entire Hall of North American Mammals to ourselves. That day, he wandered a few feet away from me to look at the American Bison, and I, pregnant with Meredith, settled on a nearby bench to watch him. I was wearing a denim shirt, untucked, over black leggings -- a standard maternity outfit -- and I noticed that a woman who walked past me was identically dressed. Jonathan turned at the sound of her footsteps, and started to follow her. I called him, laughing at him a little, but he didn't hear me, so focused was he upon the woman who was walking away. The woman was walking very fast. Jonathan started to trot, and he called to her, "Mommy!" but she did not slow down. I was up and hurrying towards him, calling him, but now he was running, running after the receding figure, heedless of all else, his small legs working hard.

And then, he gave up. He had been left behind, he was lost, and he let out a cry that echoed past all those lifelike dead animals in their glass cases, just as I reached him and turned him around so that he could see my face. A child should never have that look in his eyes, that look that I saw there in the moment before he understood that I hadn't left him, and his arms went around my neck. I had failed him. He now knew what it felt like to be abandoned.

I watched him as he slept now, and thought about the many questions he had asked me over the course of the day. Had I answered all of them? Had I answered any of them? I suddenly remembered his first question of the morning – *when will I be able to fly?* I had said something flippant about bones. The wrong answer, an answer given because of lack of proper attention, lack of care, general, all-around lack. Tomorrow I'll do better, I promised myself. I'll listen and think. Tomorrow, if he asks again, I'll tell him something poetic and comforting -- why hadn't I thought of it that morning? I'll tell him -- *In your dreams, my darling, in your sweet dreams.*