

## DIFFERENCE MAKER

*The childless, the parentless, and the Central Sadness.*

BY MEGHAN DAUM



The first child whose life I tried to make a difference in was Maricela. She was twelve years old and in the sixth grade at a middle school in the San Gabriel Valley, about a half hour's drive from my house, near downtown Los Angeles. We'd been matched by the Big Brothers Big Sisters organization, which put us in a "school-based program." This meant that Maricela would be excused from class twice a month in order to meet with me in an empty classroom. On our first visit, I brought art supplies—glue and glitter and stencils you could use to draw different types of horses. I hadn't been told much about Maricela, only that she had a lot of younger siblings and often got lost in the shuffle at home. She spent most of

our first meeting skulking around in the doorway, calling out to friends who were playing kickball in the courtyard. I sat at a desk tracing glittery horses, telling myself she'd come to me when she was ready.

Several months later, it was determined that Maricela saw me largely as a way to get out of class and therefore needed "different kinds of supports." I was transferred to a Big Brothers Big Sisters community-based program to work with fifteen-year-old Kaylee. She had requested a Big Sister, writing on her application that she needed "guidance in life." I found out that Kaylee had mentors from several volunteer organizations. Each had an area of expertise: help with college applications

and financial aid, help finding a summer job, help with "girl empowerment." Nearly every time I asked her if she'd been to a particular place—to the science center or the art museum or the Staples Center to see an L.A. Sparks women's basketball game—she told me that another mentor had taken her. So we often wound up going to the mall.

I was thirty-five years old when I worked with Maricela and thirty-six when I met Kaylee. I came to see these years as the beginning of the second act of my adult life. If the first act—college through age thirty-four or so—had been mostly taken up by delirious career ambition and almost compulsive moving among houses and apartments and regions of the country, the second was mostly about appreciating the value of staying put. I'd bought a house in a city that was feeling more and more like home. And though I could well imagine being talked out of my single life and getting married if the right person and circumstances came along—in fact, I met my eventual husband around the time I was matched with Kaylee—one thing that seemed increasingly unlikely to budge was my lack of desire to have children. After more than a decade of being told that I'd wake up one morning at age thirty or thirty-three—or, God forbid, forty—to the ear-splitting peals of my biological clock, I would still look at a woman pushing a stroller and feel no envy at all, only relief that I wasn't her.

I was willing to concede that I was possibly in denial. All the things people say to people like me were things I'd said to myself countless times. If I found the right partner, maybe I'd want a child because I'd want it *with him*. If I went to therapy to deal with whatever neuroses could be blamed on my own upbringing, maybe I'd trust myself not to repeat my childhood's more negative aspects. If I understood that you don't necessarily have to like other children in order to be devoted to your own (as it happens, this was my parents' stock phrase: "We don't like other children, we just like you"), I would stop taking my aversion to kids kicking airplane seats as a sign that I should never have any myself. After all, only a very small percentage of women

genuinely feel that motherhood isn't for them. Was I really that exceptional? And, if I was, why did I have names picked out for the children I didn't want?

For all this, I had reasons. They ran the gamut from "Don't want to be pregnant" to "Don't want to make someone deal with me when I'm dying." (And, for the record, I've never met a woman of any age and any level of inclination to have children who doesn't have names picked out.) Chief among them was my belief that I'd be a bad mother. Not in the Joan Crawford mode but in the mode of parents you sometimes see who obviously love their kids but clearly do not love their own lives. For every way I could imagine being a good mother, I could imagine ten ways that I'd botch the job irredeemably.

More than that, I simply felt no calling to be a parent. As a role, as *my* role, it felt inauthentic. It felt like not what I was supposed to be doing with my life. My contribution to society was not about contributing more people to it but, rather, about doing something for the ones who were already here. Ones like Maricela and Kaylee. I liked the idea of taking the extra time I had because I wasn't busy raising my own child and using it to help them. It also helped that if anyone, upon learning my feelings about having children, lobbed the predictable "selfish" grenade, I could casually let them know that I was doing my part to shape and enrich the next generation.

When Kaylee graduated from high school and went to college, I didn't take on a new mentee. The reason I gave the volunteer coordinator was that my life had got busier and more complicated. This was true. I had got married at thirty-nine, my mother had died shortly thereafter following a brutal illness, and I'd finally managed, after years of troubling inertia, to publish a new book. More true, though, was that being a Big Sister seemed almost categorically to call for activities that I normally avoided. I'd grown fond of Kaylee. Beneath her taciturn aloofness was an intuitive kindness. When I bawled my eyes out at the end of the movie "Charlotte's Web," she kindly passed me tissues from her purse. But I had also come to believe that what-

ever satisfactions were to be gleaned from youth outreach did not offset the soul-numbing torpor of the Beverly Center parking garage on a Saturday afternoon.

When my husband and I married, we both saw ourselves as ambivalent about having children. Since then, aside from a brief interlude of semi-willingness, my ambivalence had slid into something more like opposition. Meanwhile, my husband's ambivalence had slid into abstract desire. A marriage counsellor would surely advise a couple in such a situation to discuss the issue seriously and thoroughly, but, wrenching as it was to not be able to make my husband happy in this regard, it seemed to me that there was nothing to discuss. I didn't want to be a mother; it was as simple as that. And as if to prove that my reasons weren't shallow or rooted in some deep-seated antipathy toward kids, I decided to return to kid-related do-goodism. This time, though, I would not be going to the mall or buying useless art supplies. I would not stumble through the motions of being a role model. Instead, I would go where I was really needed, where the mall was beside the point. So I became a court-appointed advocate for children in the foster-care system. It was there that I met Matthew.

There is very little that I am permitted to reveal about Matthew, starting with his name, which is not Matthew, as Maricela's is not Maricela and Kaylee's is not Kaylee. I cannot provide a physical description, but for the sake of giving you something to hold on to I'm going to say he's African-American, knobby-kneed, and slightly nearsighted, and had just turned twelve years old when I met him. I cannot tell you about his parents or what they did to land their son in the child-welfare system, but I can say that it's about as horrific as anything you can imagine. They were permanently out of the picture, as were any number of others who'd tried at times to take their place. Matthew lived in an institutional group home with about seventy-five other kids. He'd lived in quite a few of these places over the years, and, bleak as they were, they'd come to represent familiar interstices between the pre-adoptive placements

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that he inevitably sabotaged by acting out as soon as he began to get comfortable. Like many foster kids, he felt safer in institutions than in anything resembling a family setting.

Court-appointed advocacy is a national program designed to facilitate communication among social workers, lawyers, judges, and others in particularly complicated foster-care cases. The advocate's job is to fit together the often disparate pieces of information about a child's situation and create a coherent narrative for the judge. This narrative takes the form of written reports submitted to the court and is supplemented with actual appearances in court, where the advocate can address the judge directly. Sometimes the information is simple: this child wants to play baseball but needs transportation to the practices and the games. Sometimes it's

gothic: this child is being locked in her bedroom by her foster mother because she's become violent and some glitch in the insurance plan has temporarily stopped coverage of her anti-psychotic medication. Though advocates are encouraged to develop a relationship with the children they work with, they are not mentors as much as investigators.

I'd been told that Matthew's problems were neither as simple as needing a ride to baseball practice nor as dire as being locked in his bedroom. During our first visit, he told me that what he wanted most was for me to take him to McDonald's. (The Happy Meal, it turns out, is the meal of choice for the unhappiest kids in the world.) But I wasn't allowed to take him off the grounds of the group home, so we sat in the dining hall and hobbled through

a conversation about what my role as his advocate amounted to. (He already knew; he'd had one before.) In my training sessions, I'd learned that it was a good idea to bring a game or a toy. After much deliberation, I had settled on a pack of cards that asked hundreds of "Would you rather" questions: "Would you rather be invisible or able to read minds?"; "Would you rather be able to stop time or fly?" Matthew's enthusiasm for this activity was tepid at best, and when I got to questions like "Would you rather go to an amusement park or a family reunion?" and "Would you rather be scolded by your teacher or by your parents?" I shivered at my stupidity for not having vetted them ahead of time.

"We don't have to play with these," I said.

"Uh-huh," Matthew said. This turned out to be his standard response to just about everything. It was delivered in the same tone regardless of context, a tone of impatience mixed with indifference—the tone people use when they're waiting for the other person to stop talking.

The next time I saw him, I was allowed to take him out. I suggested that we go to the zoo or to the automotive museum, but he said he wanted to go shopping at Target. For his recent birthday he'd received gift cards from his social worker and also from his behavioral specialist at the group home. He seemed upbeat, counting and recounting the cash in his pocket (he received a small weekly allowance from the group home) and adding it to the sum total of his gift cards, which included a card worth twenty-five dollars that I'd picked up at the advocacy office. He wanted something digital, preferably an MP3 player. The only thing in his price range was a Kindle. I tried to explain the concept of saving up a little while longer, but he insisted that he wanted the Kindle, even after I reminded him that he'd said he didn't like to read and that he would still have to pay for things to put on the Kindle. He took it to the checkout counter, where he was twenty-five dollars short anyway. The cashier explained that there were taxes. Also, it appeared that one of his gift cards had been partly spent. Matthew cast his eyes downward. He



S. GROSS

"He had a magician!"

wouldn't look at me or at anyone, and I couldn't tell if he was going to cry or fly into a rage. There was a line of people behind us, so I lent him twenty-five dollars on the condition that he pay me back in installments.

"Do you know what installments are?" I asked.

"No."

"It's when you give or pay something back in small increments."

I knew he didn't know what "increments" meant, but I couldn't think of another word.

"So now you haven't just gone shopping—you've learned something, too!" I said.

Once we were back in the car, I found a piece of paper, tore it in half, and wrote out two copies of an I.O.U., which we both signed. Matthew seemed pleased by this and ran his index finger along the perimeter of the Kindle box as though he'd finally got his hands on a long-coveted item. I gave him command of the radio, and as he flipped from one Auto-Tuned remix to the next I found myself basking in the ecstatic glow of altruism. When I dropped him off at the group home, the promissory note tucked in his Target shopping bag along with the Kindle and the greasy cardboard plate that held the giant pretzel I'd also bought him, I felt useful. I felt proud.

It had been a long time between accomplishments. At least, it had become hard to identify them, as most of my goals for any given day or week took the form of tasks, mundane and otherwise, to be dreaded and then either crossed off a list or postponed indefinitely (*meet article deadline, get shirts from dry cleaner, start writing new book*). Little seemed to warrant any special pride. And though I wanted to believe that I was just bored, the truth was that the decision not to have children was like a slow drip of guilt into my veins.

My husband was patient and funny and smart. In other words, outstanding dad material. Wasting such material seemed like an unpardonable crime. Besides, I've always believed that it is not possible to fall in love with someone without picturing what it might be like to combine your genetic goods. It's almost an aspect of courtship, this vi-

sion of what your nose might look like smashed up against your loved one's eyes, this imaginary Cubist rendering of the things you hate most about yourself offset by the things you adore most in the other person. And, a little over a year after we married, this curiosity, combined with the dumb luck of finding and buying an elegant, underpriced, much-too-large-for-us house in a foreclosure sale, had proved sufficient cause for switching to the leave-it-to-fate method of birth control. Soon enough, I'd found myself pregnant.

It was as if the house itself had impregnated me, as if it had said, "I have three bedrooms and there are only two of you; what's wrong with this picture?"

For eight weeks, I hung in a nervous limbo, thinking my life was about to become either unfathomably enriched or permanently ruined. Then I had a miscarriage. I was forty-one, so it was not exactly unexpected. And though there had been nothing enriching about my brief pregnancy, which continued to harass my hormones well after vacating the premises, I was left with something that in a certain way felt worse than permanent ruin. I was left with permanent doubt.

My husband was happy about the pregnancy and sad about the miscarriage. I was less sad about the miscarriage, though I undertook to convince myself otherwise by trying to get pregnant again. After three months of dizzying cognitive dissonance, I walked into the guest room that my husband used as an office and allowed myself to say, for once and for all, that I didn't want a baby. I'd thought I could talk myself into it, but those talks had failed.

As I was saying all this, I was lying on the cheap platform bed we'd bought in anticipation of a steady flow of out-of-town company. The curtains were lifting gently in the breeze. Outside, there was bougainvillea, along with bees and hummingbirds and mourning doves. There was a grassy lawn where the dog rolled around scratching its back, and a big table on the deck where friends sat on weekends eating grilled salmon and drinking wine and com-

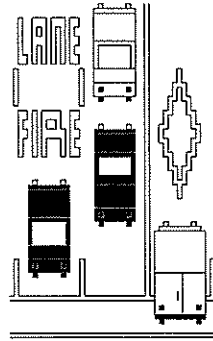
plaining about things they knew were a privilege to complain about (the cost of real estate, the noise of leaf blowers, the overratedness of the work of more successful peers). And as I lay on that bed it occurred to me, terrifyingly, that all of it might not be enough. Maybe such pleasures, while pleasurable enough, were merely trimmings on a nonexistent tree. Maybe nothing—not a baby or the lack of a baby, not a beautiful house, not rewarding work—was ever going to make us anything other than the chronically dissatisfied, perpetual second-guessers we already were.

"I'm sorry," I said. I meant this a million times over. To this day, there is nothing I've ever been sorer about than my inability to make my husband a father.

"It's O.K.," he said.

Except it wasn't, really. From that moment on, a third party was introduced into our marriage. It was not a corporal party but an amorphous one, a ghoulish presence that functioned as both cause and effect of the absence of a child. It had even, in the back of my mind, come to have a name. It was the Central Sadness. It collected around our marriage like soft, stinky moss. It rooted our arguments and dampened our good times. It taunted us from the sidelines of our social life (the barbecues with toddlers underfoot; a friend's child interrupting conversations mid-sentence; the clubby comparing of notes about Ritalin and dance lessons and college tuition, which prompted us to feign interest lest we come across like overgrown children ourselves). It haunted our sex life. Not since I was a teen-ager (a virginal one at that) had I been so afraid of getting pregnant. I wondered then if our marriage was on life support, if at any moment one of us was going to realize that the humane thing to do would be to call it even and call it a day.

Compared with this existential torment, foster-care advocacy was almost comforting. Though it was certainly more demanding than Big Brothers Big Sisters, I found it considerably easier—or



## A Critique of Pure Reason



at least more straightforward than traditional mentoring. For one thing, advocating for a foster kid mostly required dealing with adults. It meant talking to lawyers about potential adoptive placements and meeting with school administrators about Matthew's disciplinary issues and sitting around the courthouse all day when there was a hearing. Despite the mournful quality of it all, I found not just gratification but actual enjoyment in my efforts to help. I liked spending hours on the phone with my supervisor, a more seasoned advocate, lamenting the labyrinthine bureaucracy of the child-welfare system. I liked sitting around the tiny attorneys' lounge outside the courtroom, where there was always a plate of stale supermarket pastries next to the coffee maker and clusters of lawyers grumbling about the judge, their clients, the whole hopeless gestalt. I was moved by the family dramas playing out in the courthouse waiting areas. Everywhere, there were children with women—relatives, neighbors, foster mothers—who had taken custody of them. Occasionally, there would be a physical altercation and an officer would have to intervene. The courthouse was its own little planet of grimness and dysfunction. By contrast, I felt bright and capable.

Matthew was smart in the way a lot

of longtime foster kids are smart. He was a quick and reasonably accurate judge of character, and as soon as he determined that someone was not a threat he began the process of figuring out what the person could do for him. As much of a downer as this behavior could be for people with romantic ideas of helping troubled kids, it was a perfectly understandable survival mechanism, and I grew to respect it. Much of the work I did for Matthew took place behind the scenes. I made sure that his highly competent, crushingly overworked lawyer knew what his less competent, also crushingly overworked social worker was doing. Working with an education attorney, I got Matthew out of his raucous, overcrowded public school and into a calmer learning environment. But though Matthew was vaguely aware of my efforts, what he seemed to most appreciate was my ability to transport him to places like Target and GameStop. In turn, I grudgingly appreciated his G.P.S.-like knowledge of any such place within a twenty-mile radius of wherever he happened to be at any given time. Not that we didn't have our teachable moments. One afternoon, after taking Matthew out for giant burritos, I gave my left-

overs to a homeless man sleeping in the alley near the restaurant. At first, Matthew was confused about why anyone would do such a thing, but as we continued down the street he said he wanted to give his food away, too, so we turned around and walked back toward the man. Matthew was shy about approaching him, even whispering that he'd changed his mind. But, after he set his food on the sidewalk and skittered away, his look of surprised delight suggested that he'd momentarily stepped into a different life, one in which charity was something he could provide as well as receive.

Still, I knew better than to think I was a major role model. I certainly wasn't a mother figure. I was more like a random port in the unrelenting storm that was his life. And that was enough. Matthew's lot was so bad that it could be improved, albeit triflingly, with one mini-pizza at a food court. A kid with higher expectations would have been more than I could handle.

By then, more than a year had passed since my miscarriage and my subsequent declaration that I did not want to have a child. Though my husband had been supportive and accepting, he now began to say out loud again that he wanted to be someone's father—or, at least, that he might not be O.K. with never being someone's father. He wanted to use what he knew about the world to help someone find his or her own way through it. He wanted "someone to hang out with" when he got older. He didn't necessarily need the baby- or toddler-rearing experience. He didn't need the kid to look like him or be the same race. When I asked if he'd consider mentoring or even being an advocate, he said he wasn't sure that would be enough.

The seeds of a potential compromise were planted. Maybe we could take in, or even adopt, a foster child. This would be a child old enough that we might actually qualify as young or average-age parents rather than ones of "advanced age." (If I adopted a ten-year-old at forty-three, it would be the equivalent of having had him at the eminently reasonable age of thirty-three.)

We knew that any child we took in would surely need intensive therapy. He would have demons and heartbreaking

baggage. But we would find the needle in the haystack, the kid who dreamed of being an only child in a quiet, book-filled house. I probably wouldn't be a great mother, but my standards would be so different from those set by the child-welfare system that it wouldn't matter if I dreaded birthday parties or resorted to store-bought Halloween costumes.

I knew that this was ninety-percent bullshit. I knew that it wasn't O.K. to be a mediocre parent just because you'd adopted the child out of foster care. A few times, my husband and I scrolled through online photo listings of available children in California, but we might as well have been looking at personal ads from a far-away land that no one ever travelled to. There were three-year-olds with cerebral palsy on ventilators, huge sibling groups who spoke no English, kids who "struggle with handling conflict appropriately." Occasionally, there would be some bright-eyed six- or seven-year-old who you could tell was going to be O.K., who had the great fortune of being able to turn the world on with his smile. So as the Central Sadness throbbed around our marriage, threatening to turn even the most quotidian moments, like the sight of a neighbor tossing a ball around with his kid in the yard, into an occasion for bickering or sulking, the foster-child option placated us with the illusion that all doors were not yet closed.

One day, while my nerves swung on a wider-than-usual pendulum between empathy for Matthew and despondency over my marriage, I decided to call a foster and adoption agency. Actually, I asked my husband to call. I'd been told in my training that advocates are not supposed to get involved with fostering children, even those who have nothing to do with their advocacy. Matthew was not allowed to go to my house or even to meet my husband or any of my friends. I didn't want to do anything that might be construed as a conflict of interest. When my husband and I arrived at an orientation meeting, I signed in using his last name, something I'd never done before.

"I've got to be incognito," I said, rather dramatically. "Let's not draw attention to ourselves."

Each of us was asked to say why we were there. When our turn came, my

husband spoke briefly about how we were exploring things in a very preliminary way. Then I spoke about how I was ambivalent about children but that this potentially seemed like a good thing to do. I then proceeded to dominate the rest of the meeting. I acted as if I were back in advocacy training. I raised my hand to ask overly technical questions about things like the Indian Child Welfare Act and the Adoptions and Safe Families Act and throw around their acronyms as if everyone knew what they meant. I asked what the chances of getting adopted were for a twelve-year-old who had flunked out of several placements.

"Maybe this isn't the right setting for these questions," my husband whispered.

As the meeting wrapped up, the woman from the agency announced that the next step was to fill out an application and then attend a series of training sessions. After that, she said, prospective parents who passed their home studies could be matched with a child at any time and be on their way to adoption.

Her words were like ice against my spine.

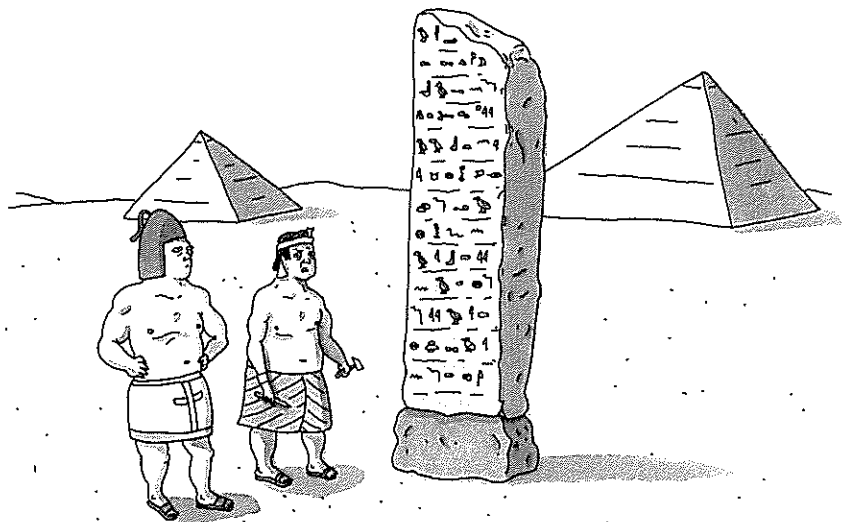
"We're not at that point!" I said to my husband. "Not remotely close."

I suggested that he apply to be a mentor for "transitional-age youth," kids who are aging out of the system but still need help figuring out the basics of life. He filled out a form, with the slightly

bewildered resignation of someone agreeing to repair something he hadn't noticed was broken. The woman from the agency said she'd call him about volunteer opportunities. She never did.

A phrase you frequently hear in the foster-care world is that a child has "experienced a lot of loss." It comes up in the blurbs accompanying the photo listings. *Jamal has experienced a lot of loss but knows the right family is out there. Clarissa is working through her losses and learning to have a more positive attitude.* These appear to be references to the original loss of being taken away from the biological family, but often they mean that the child has got close to being adopted but that things haven't worked out. With Matthew, I suspected that the trauma of being removed from his biological parents had been dwarfed by the cumulative implosions of the placements that followed. He seemed to know that he'd lost his temper too many times or let himself lapse into behavior that frightened people. But when I asked about this, which I did only once or twice, he tended to offer some rote excuse on behalf of the estranged parents, which he'd probably heard from his social workers. He'd say that they lacked the resources to sufficiently meet his needs. He'd say that they didn't have the skills to handle a kid like him.

About eight months into my work with Matthew, a couple who had been visiting him at the group home and later



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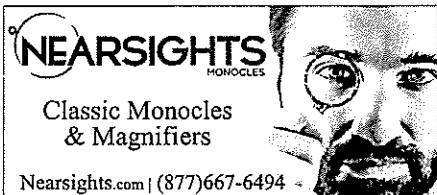
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hosted him at their home on weekends decided not to pursue adoption after all. He'd been hopeful about the placement, and, when I saw him a few days after things fell through, I found him pacing around his cinder-block dormitory like a nervous animal. The prospective mom had given him a used MP3 player, perhaps as a parting gift, but the group-home staff had locked it up for some kind of disciplinary reason. He sat down on a bench outside the dormitory with his Kindle, bending the plastic until pieces began breaking off.

"I know what a huge bummer this is," I said. "I'm really sorry."

"I don't care," he said.

Every possible response seemed inadequate, maybe even capable of doing long-term damage.

"I know you probably do care," I said finally. "But sometimes we care so much about stuff that it's easier to pretend for a while that we don't care at all."

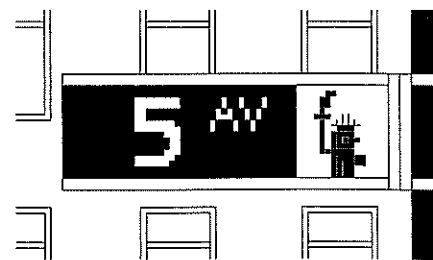
The temperature was in the high nineties; the choke of autumn in Southern California was in full, scorching force. The Kindle was practically melting into soft, curling shards as Matthew tore it apart. I thought about the twenty-three dollars he still owed me for it and wondered which was worse, letting him destroy it or lecturing him about how money and the stuff it buys aren't disposable. Both tactics seemed fairly useless, but the latter seemed almost like a joke. The kid's whole life was disposable. Like most foster kids, he kept many of his things in a plastic garbage bag so he could grab and go as needed.

Through angry tears, Matthew declared that he was never going back inside the dormitory and would sleep on the lawn until he could live in a real home. He said that he'd got mad at the prospective mom for not buying him something he wanted but that he hadn't done anything too bad. He said he'd kicked over some chairs but they weren't broken or anything. He just wanted another chance but they wouldn't give him one and it wasn't fair. After a while, I suggested that he put his feelings in writing, a suggestion that was based less on his own predilections than on what I would do in his situation, but it was all I could think of.

"Let's go inside and get a piece of paper," I said. "And you write down what you want and how you feel."

He agreed, which surprised me. We went inside and into his room, where blue industrial carpet covered the floor and a low-slung twin bed was draped with a thin blue blanket. He got out a spiral-bound notebook and lay on the floor on his stomach, legs spread slightly and elbows propped up as he began to write. He looked more like a normal kid than I'd ever seen him. I left him and headed down to the common room, where about six boys, some of them older and as tall as men, were sprawled in front of a loud television. I asked a staff member where the bathroom was and, without looking up, she directed me down a corridor that ran through an adjacent dormitory.

I passed another common room, filled with younger children. They were seated at a long table set for dinner and they squirmed in their chairs and fiddled with their utensils. One kid shouted above the others and held a basket of breadsticks over his head so that no one could reach them. I slowed down as I passed the entryway. It had been a while since I'd looked through the state photo listings, but, seeing the small, open faces, the feet that barely touched the floor, the institutional food heaped onto institutional plates, I was reminded of the tiny spark of hope those listings had given me and the few occasions when the conversation with my husband about adopting from foster care didn't necessarily feel like



bullshit or a pacifier but, rather, like a viable antidote to the Central Sadness.

I returned to Matthew's room. He was sitting on the bed, reading over his statement. He handed me the notebook.

*I want to live with ——— and ———. I'm sorry I got mad. If you give me another chance I promise I'll never get mad again.*

"Will you give that to them?" Matthew asked me.

"If I can," I said, even though the decision had been made. Later, I realized that telling Matthew to write that note was the cruellest thing I could have done to him.

There are times when I harbor a secret fantasy that one day my husband will get a call from a person claiming to be his son or his daughter. Ideally, this person will be in his or her late teens or early twenties, the product of some brief fling or one-night stand during the Clinton Administration. My husband will be shocked, of course, and probably in denial, and then suddenly his face will blanch and his jaw will grow slack. He will hang up the phone and tell me the news and I will also be shocked. Eventually, though, we'll both be thrilled. This new relation will breeze in and out of our lives like a sort of extreme niece or nephew. We'll dispense advice and keep photos on the fridge but, having never got into the dirty details of actual child rearing, take neither credit nor blame for the final results.

I thought I'd undertaken volunteer work with kids because I was, above all, a realist. I thought it showed the depth of my understanding of my own psyche. I thought it was a way of turning my limitations, specifically my reluctance to have children, into new and useful possibilities. I thought the thing I felt most guilty about could be turned into a force for good. But now I know that I was under the sway of my own complicated form of baby craziness. Wary as I've always been of our culture's reflexive idealization—even obsessive sanctification—of the bond between parent and child, it seems that I fell for another kind of myth. I fell for the myth of the village. I fell for the idea that nurture from a loving adoptive community could erase or at least heal the abuses of horrible natural parents.

I'd also tricked myself into believing that trying to help these kids would put the Central Sadness on permanent hiatus, that my husband and I could find peace (not just peace but real fulfillment) in our life together. Instead, we continued to puzzle over the same unanswerable questions. Were we sad because we lacked some essential element of lifetime partnership, such as a child or an agreement about wanting or not wanting one, or because life is just sad sometimes—maybe even a lot of the time? Or perhaps

it wasn't even sadness we were feeling but, simply, the dull ache of aging. Maybe children don't save their parents from this ache as much as distract from it. And maybe creating a diversion from aging is in fact much of the point of parenting.

Matthew got transferred to a new group home shortly after he turned thirteen. It was practically indistinguishable from the old one. I took him to Target to spend a twenty-five-dollar gift card I'd mailed him for his birthday, but, like the other times, when we reached the front of the checkout line the cashier said there wasn't enough left on the card. Matthew claimed it was defective. On the conveyor belt sat several bags of chips, a package of cookies, and boxes of macaroni and cheese that he wanted to keep in the kitchen at the group home. I pulled out my credit card and paid. I knew he was lying and I told him so. He said he wasn't. He said no one ever believed him. He said he had nothing, that no one cared about him or ever did anything for him. He said no one ever gave him a chance or cut him a break. He said everyone in his life was useless.

We got in the car and he ate his chips as we drove in silence. When I pulled up to the entrance of the group home, he gathered his loot without looking at me.

"Happy birthday," I said.

"Uh-huh," he said.

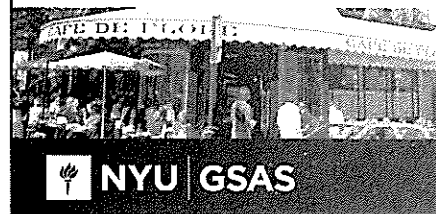
Back at home, my husband and I sat down to dinner around our usual time of eight-thirty. We looked through the magazines that had come in the mail. The evening air was still cool, but the daylight was beginning to linger. Soon it would be summer. Friends would start coming over to eat on the deck. After that, it would be fall and then what passes for winter. I would continue to work with Matthew, and he would grow older in his group home while I grew older in my too-big-for-us house. My husband would make peace with the way things had turned out—except in those moments when he didn't have peace, which, of course, come around for everyone. Our lives would remain our own. Whether that was fundamentally sad or fundamentally exquisite, we'd probably never be certain. But if there's anything Matthew taught me it's that having certainty about your life is a great luxury. ♦

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