

Father's Day

Encounters with Everyday Life



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Bedtime Story

The baby's crying had just turned to sobbing. He was shouting "Mommy!" in a plaintive, pathetic voice. He had been doing it for half an hour.

My wife was in tears, too. We were behind the closed door of our room lying on the bed. I was looking into her face, reminding her, "We can't go!" She looked away from me.

"Remember the doctor's advice?" I said. "We've been doing it all wrong."

For the first year of his life we went to him as soon as he made the slightest sound. My wife had anticipatory hearing. She could hear sounds before they happened. "He's about to cry," she would announce, and jump off the bed and into the darkness.

We made the excuse that at first he didn't have his own room, and that we were concerned about the neighbors. Our apartment building suffered from vertical noise, the cause of serious disagreements among the tenants.

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But the facts were that no one had ever said the slightest thing to us about the crying. We were the ones it bothered, because we couldn't bear to think that there was something he needed that we weren't giving him.

"Mommy!"

By looking at her I knew one more "Mommy" would break the dam.

"He's got his own room, now," I said, trying to sound reasonable. "He's got to learn how to fall asleep on his own. "The doctor said..."

"Did you ask the doctor about his own baby!" she asked. "Well, he does the same thing we've been doing," she said. "He doesn't follow his own theories when it's *his* baby crying."

"Mommy! MOMMY!"

He was reaching a new level of desperation and so was she. In my mind, I saw him imprisoned in his crib, holding onto the bars, falsely accused. This was his one call for justice, and we refused to answer it. His own parents.

"Mommy!"

She looked at me pleadingly, but much as I would have liked to trash the experiment, I held my ground. "We can't go," I said.

And then he just stopped. The same look of fear came over both of our faces, the same thought entered both of our heads. Had he stopped breathing entirely? Had he collapsed in despair?

We paused and listened. We wanted to hear something -- whimpering, rustling -- anything to tell us he had given up the fight but would live to take it up another day. We were like the citizens in a western begging for some sign as the gun smoke cleared that our hero still stood.

And then it happened.

"Daddy!"

I looked at my wife.

"Daddy!"

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Hearing it gave me a peculiar feeling -- pleasant and painful at once.

"Daddy!"

"Daddy!"

And then I heard myself say, "I've gotta go... I've never been called before."

"Daddy!"

So I walked to his room in a trance-like state. He was my son and he needed me. Sure it had taken him awhile to realize it. After all, he saw so much more of Mommy. Mommy fed him and clothed him and bathed him. Mommy picked him up when he fell, and Mommy was there most of the time.

But now he needed Daddy, and Daddy was not going to let him down. What was one night in a lifetime of nights? He could learn to fall asleep on his own tomorrow.

The room was dimly lit. He was standing exactly as I thought he would be, with his hands on the bars. He was bruised and tear-stained and toughened by the ordeal. I walked towards him to make amends, to reach down as his father and lift him out of his despair.

He said two words: "Get Mommy!"

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