

# mommy

magazine

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# The Babbler

## Never Cried, Never Lived

There's a story by the late David Foster Wallace called "Incarnations of Burned Children" that I found myself teaching for the first time this year. I had never read it before, so, like my students, I sidled up to it with no expectations—other than what I already knew about Wallace's writing.

When I was done with it, I had two thoughts:

- a) Wallace is a genius and
- b) I never want to read that story again.

In it, a toddler is scalded by a pot of boiling water he upturns on the stove. His father comes in from fixing something outside and finds the toddler there screaming, his mother trying helplessly to calm him down. The story is told from the father's perspective. It's carried off in the space of two pages. It's literally over in a couple minutes, even if you're a slow reader like I am. And in the end, the toddler dies.

It sounds tragic, doesn't it? It sounds like one of those stories you read or that's on the news where you think—once you've been walked through the events—"Man, that'd be awful. Poor little boy!" and then after a while you go back to whatever it is you were previously doing, maybe a little shook up, maybe reminding yourself to be careful about your own pots, your own boiling water, but otherwise okay. You were at a safe narrative distance the whole time, so you aren't terrifically impacted by a) the awful fiction story or b) the awful true story of what happened to somebody else's kid.

Except the way this story is told, there is no narrative distance. The way this story is told is breathless and inevitable and way way too close. The way this story is told, you don't feel separate from what's happening; you feel like you're in that kitchen holding a dishrag while the broken screen door bangs and the toddler with the steaming diaper screams and screams and screams and nobody can do anything to help him, least of all you.

## Tears for Fears

In the middle of this story—which is chock full of run-on sentences, nary a period anywhere—

the shortest and truest sentence appears out of nowhere. In fact, if you twiddle over sentences like I do, you'd note that it is, in fact, maybe the only real sentence in the whole piece.

Wallace writes, "If you never wept, have a child."

If you are a parent, and you read this sentence (though I've stripped it of all but the most circumstantial context), you will agree somewhere very deep in the recesses of your heart that this is one single inarguable truth. Its rightness is more a quality than a demonstrable fact. Its rightness has within it the following: regret, horror, nostalgia, anxiety, beauty, experience etc. and on and on, supply-your-own-sentiment-here, because you would not be wrong, whatever you supplied, if you are a parent. If you have ever, been a parent.

## 1001

On the first day of September this year we took Willa and Jude to one of those Japanese steakhouses where they swing food around and theatrically wield knives and conjure fire from the cooktop and make your chicken slices land in their chef's hats. Of course both kids loved it. They loved the show, the aquarium lining one wall, the fake pond with the bridge and the koi shining underfoot. They loved the servers in kimonos and the complicated Japanese soda bottles. And when we brought them home and put them to bed, they were happy to go to sleep. They smelled like fried rice and Burt's Bees shampoo. I know because I kissed them on their cool foreheads before I went to bed myself. Like any night, this night.

And yet an hour later, I heard something, or thought something, or felt something, I don't remember which. I checked on my daughter for no particular reason and when I did her eyes flitted open and she said "My tummy hurts." I took her temperature like I have a thousand times before, I sat on the bed waiting like I have a thousand times before, I thought about my next moves—trip to the bathroom, ibuprofen, water, temperature check again later—like I have a thousand times before, and yet this one-thousand-plus-one time is the time she would spike a fever above 103°F and double over in pain. This time was the time I would rush her to the ER, where

she would be CAT-scanned and hooked up to an IV and then transported in the middle of the night by ambulance from one hospital to another, where she would spend the next two days recovering from a pneumonia that would leave her on two inhalers for a month and unable to recite the alphabet without gasping for air.

## Risk vs. Empathy

I don't know if you have a story like this, but you probably do. If I asked you to write it down, like Wallace, you too would fling it out in all of its headfast, sprawling horror. Because that's the way these things happen: too fast, too close. It's difficult to keep perspective, to provide exposition or psychology or space in recounting something like this. And at some point, reflecting on the moments of terror in child-rearing, you recognize that to have a child is to implicate yourself in something with protracted risk the likes of which you've never seen. It is, on some level, the boldest, most audaciously arrogant move you can make, because man are you gonna cry, and how.

When we discussed Wallace's story in class, I was the only one who found it devastating. Maybe that's because they didn't read it as closely as I did, but since they are good readers, it's probably because none of them are parents. None of them have trotted out to the cliff and gamely jumped—yet. And I'm not sure the story moved me so much because of what happened so recently to Willa. I think the moment we become parents we become large enough to not only imagine such horrors, but to feel ourselves within the ones that aren't actually happening to us. I think that's the very definition of empathy, and the real genius of Wallace's story is that he reminds you how large and generous and brave and empathic you are as a parent, all the time.



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