

Sleep

I swear, if the baby dies up there I'm going to sue the pants off this Doctor Marc Weissbluth! I was on the kitchen telephone with Patrick. Our boy, at that point just 4 months old, was crying in his crib upstairs. Wailing, actually. We'd been following the protocol in a book called Healthy Sleep Habits, Happy Child, which was even more hardcore than Ferberizing. The cry-it-out method was mildly controversial, but based on the book and my son's temperament, it felt like the right choice. Contra the attachment parenting gurus, Weissbluth argued that young ones had to be taught how to fall asleep on their own, in much the same way as they eventually had to be taught to brush their teeth and use the potty. Once their brains had developed to receive and enjoy stimuli like parental attention, there was too much fun to miss and they'd resist their own tiredness. A parent was to spend the child's earliest weeks and months being insanely vigilant about the signs of impending tiredness—to get to know your baby's circadian rhythms as well as you knew your own. It was a different form of extreme attachment: emotional/intellectual rather than physical. I gave myself over to him and this process with the earnestness of a hard-science graduate student, literally charting my son's alternating periods of wakefulness and exhaustion on square-ruled graph paper.

And now was the moment of truth: leaving him in his crib. I'd read him a story, sang him a song, kissed him, put him down on the crib pad, walked out and closed the door behind me. He began expressing his unhappiness, loudly. I went downstairs and called Pat at the office for moral support. Within four minutes the baby had gone silent. It took all my strength to stay out of his room. I imagined disaster. I imagined he had not fallen asleep but had stopped breathing entirely.

An hour later I checked on him. He was awake, his eyes bright. He smiled and stretched his arms toward me, with enthusiasm but no angst. In the months that came we made it through several more operatic crying jags but soon the boy became a champion sleeper, down fast and easy within a few minutes of our bedtime routine. I wouldn't have to call a lawyer after all.

The days could be long, enervating. It was a struggle, to have once been a person with ambitions and thoughts, to put my entire self aside so that I could teach him to sleep, teach him to eat, teach him to refrain from experimentally punching his little friends in the park. Sometimes when he was napping I'd stand in the dead center of my kitchen, limbs sodden with exhaustion, brain blinkered, incapable of choosing what to feed myself for lunch. (As the baby gained weight week after week, I managed to lose 15 pounds without intention or effort—a kind of vampiric transfer of mass, even without breastfeeding.) In clearer moments I'd ruminate:

Well, my life is effectively over now, but I love this kid more than anything in the world, so it's okay.

Sometimes when he was asleep in his crib, I'd catch myself avidly watching Teletubbies without him.

I never stopped working entirely. I gigged, I wrote articles, I kept a few brain cells focused on the world. But I was convinced, absolutely religiously convinced, that as I approached age 40 I had sealed my fate. Pretty good mother, but failed writer, stymied musician, would-be intellectual. I would never again have the wide open freedom I'd squandered in my youth, or the energy to dream and push. I'd be a obscure person in Baltimore, not a member of the Manhattan cultural elite. Even though we soon decided not to add another baby to our lives, I

was ensconced in the duties of family. Fifteen to seventeen years into the future when our one boy had fledged, I'd be approaching genuine old age. In solitude I tried to make peace with this reduced reality. The fierce fire of my teen era had sputtered out. So it goes. In a world filled with trauma, misery, and grinding poverty, I had nothing to complain about.

Years earlier when I'd voiced the fear of ending up exactly in this ambition-less place because of motherhood, Patrick had said to me, *You'll change, your priorities will change*. I guess he'd been right all along. I could shrug it off, right? The tradeoff—this marriage, this little family—had been worth it.

On the other hand, sometimes I was so full of regrets and recriminations that I wanted to scream and break things.

Our champion sleeper was in transition, giving up the last of his three daily naps even though he still desperately needed daytime rest. Around 2 pm the boy would start rubbing his eyes violently and yelling *I'M NOT SLEEPY! I'M NOT SLEEPY! I'M NOT SLEEPY!* I'd rush him out the door and strap him into the carseat. In the light traffic of midday it took about 40 minutes to drive the entire Baltimore beltway. Sometimes I'd circumnavigate it twice in a row. *I'M NOT SLEEPY! I'M NOT...* He'd pass out for the duration. I'd put Radiohead's Kid A in the CD player and let it loop. Once the baby woke up in the middle of "Morning Bell" and declared *Thom Yorke is the bestest singer!* Thank you, my work here is done.

I fed him a steady diet of sounds, paying attention to what grabbed him most. I wasn't trying to turn him into a musician—I just wanted to create a common language. The anodyne

voice and mellow guitar of Jack Johnson was a favorite of his. Anything with some funk went over well: Billy Preston, Jackson 5, Stevie Wonder's Innervisions, Parliament's old hit "Flashlight." I had a couple of current obsessions that I turned into our mutual obsessions. The first was Maria Schneider Jazz Orchestra's Concert in the Garden, a drop-dead gorgeous collection of modern big band compositions, partially flamenco-inspired, bursting with color and rhythm. Through the small-world network of jazz musicians I'd actually connected with Maria a little bit in person. She'd apprenticed with legendary composer/leader Gil Evans and had emerged as her own strong and idiosyncratic visionary. Somewhere I'd read an interview in which she hinted that she'd left her husband, a trombonist, because she wanted to prioritize her art over being someone's caretaker—or at least that was the subtle implication. I admired her with great passion but tried not to let it shade into envy.

There was Morph the Cat, Donald Fagen's most recent solo album, a brilliantly wry and dark response to 9/11, as memorable as any of the old Steely Dan recordings he had made decades earlier with Walter Becker. Fagen's songwriting had matured over time: smart-alecky lyrics full of irony, as always, but shorn of art-college pretensions and obtuseness. I admired his musical maturity almost more than his prodigious youth.

Finally there was Nick Drake's classic 1972 album Pink Moon; its plangent, hauntingly quiet title track was a late-blooming hit after Volkswagen used it in a TV spot. The commercial was a nice piece of work itself, a nostalgia-laden short story about some young people arriving in their Cabrio outside a raucous, crowded party, then deciding they'd prefer a quiet, breezy moonlit drive along a coastal highway with the top down. If you looked and listened no further, you might imagine that the visuals were perfectly paired with Drake's lilting song, but you'd be

wrong. The song's brief lines are actually filled with dread and threat. A horror movie hidden inside its folky gentleness. The whole album was like this: song after song of obscure nightmares cached in delicate beauty.

Riveted, I looked up Nick Drake's story. He was a prodigy and depressive who hated live performance, refused to do interviews, and retreated to his parents' house after making Pink Moon. Shortly thereafter he died from a possibly intentional overdose of the antidepressant Amitriptyline. He was 26 years old. The dread and threat was art to us but had been real for him. In a small way, I understood. I had once stood at the edge of my own black pit and stared into its bottomlessness.

Other parents would sometimes ask me for recommendations on "kid-friendly" music. I could hardly parse the question. *Just play them the stuff you love*. I suppose if someone had said their favorite band was the German death metal outfit Necrophagist, I might have offered some alternatives.

The first song came in the middle of the night. The kid was sleeping soundly these days but his mother suffered from chronic insomnia. At 3 in the morning, lyrics gently assaulted me.

I'm wide awake.

Thoughts billow like flame.

Night bleeds into day.

All hours the same.

Teach me to sleep.

Teach me to sleep.

Cradle me down, into my deep.

It had been more than five years since I'd written "Your Silence," and although I'd made several instrumental compositions since then but hadn't come up with any good lyric ideas. I had tried a few notions, a few starting lines, and failed to extend them. My age-old problem with words: having hit the mark on my first try, I'd begun expecting too much from myself, and ending up with nothing.

Now here I was in the predawn darkness, lying prone, and another whole song had fallen into my body. I knew it came from the Weissbluth philosophy, transformed from childrearing advice into something dark, paranoid, and weirdly sexy. Weissbluth plus Drake. Along with the lyrics I could see/hear an unusual chordal vamp under my fingers, specific keyboard shapes rather than named harmonies, with an odd-meter jazz-funk rhythm. Weissbluth plus Drake plus Fagen?

The next day I sat at the piano and worked it all out in a matter of minutes. I now had Pretty Good Song Number Two, called "Sleep." It sparked something. Number Three came me in winter 2006, when memoirist James Frey was caught having exaggerated and even fabricated significant events in his alleged life story, [A Million Little Pieces](#). The biggest lies surrounded a relatively peaceful, uneventful arrest of Frey for minor offenses and a few hours in a rural Michigan lockup. The author had blown out this anecdote into a full-blown violent confrontation with the cops and a nearly 3-month prison sentence. Nonfiction fabulists were nothing new, but I found myself intrigued and maybe even appalled by the way Oprah Winfrey first greeted the news of Frey's lies: she defended the author for having inspired millions of readers with his story of addiction and recovery. Later on she brought him back to her show to pillory him in public,

but her first instinct was to say, in effect, factual accuracy didn't matter so long as his book had touched people's lives.

It bugged me, this nonchalance about simple, verifiable truth. (In ten short years we'd be gifted with a President who bullshits and confabulates as a matter of habit, who calls real things fake and fake things real. We should have seen it coming.)

Utter lies, she demanded.

Tell me what I want to hear.

Let the others be reprimanded.

Here you have nothing to fear.

I don't want something as simple

As to know what's really real.

Just the beautiful story that won't contradict how I feel.

I called Pretty Good Song Number Three "Memoir" and set it to another funky vamp, Gm to C7. As I worked it out at the piano, it felt almost like a rock song, or jazz-influenced pop. I tested it for my live-in classic-rock fan:

Wow. That's not bad. Write a bunch more like that and you might have a solid album.

I smiled for the confirmation. Patrick was right: it was a damn good song.

The songs then came in an accelerating rush. I accepted this strange gift from the universe with increasing glee and excitement. Four, five, six, seven. I'd begun taking piano lessons from time to time with a great composer and bandleader named Fred Hughes, who urged me to start arranging these new pieces for a full band and offered to record them in his living room. Pat asked *How much would it cost us to make a CD and put a thousand copies in our*

basement? I told him I thought I could do it for about \$5,000. Later I had to revise that upward a bit to include the costs of photography and professional graphic design. But it seemed doable, and worthwhile. With a project of original music, I could get back into the music business as an *act*, as an *artist*, instead of an oldies jukebox. In the hours when the kid was napping or at daycare—he went two days a week to an inexpensive, community-college-based program—I got down to work. Researched DIY album production. Drafted a budget. Wrote arrangements. Sketched out a tentative song order. Called and scheduled rehearsals and recording sessions with the best side-persons I knew, including bassist Amy Shook, drummer Frank Russo, trombonist Jim McFalls, trumpeter Tom Williams. More songs came to me. I was on fire again. We recorded in Fred Hughes' living room, using well-placed directional microphones that captured a nice intimate sound but didn't pick up the occasional barking dog or police siren. I played his Kawai grand. Two tracks, including "Your Silence," were solo piano/voice arrangements; I did three or four live takes each until Fred said *Time to stop, you don't want to lose the freshness*. The rest were multi-tracked over the course of two weeks. "Friday Night with The Elephant Man" was an odd thing, dark lyrics but bouncy rhythms, that had come to me one morning as I was driving toward my gym, with the boy in the back. In the parking lot I had to scabble in the glovebox for pen and paper before the lyrics escaped me. *Mommy, aren't we going to go in?* "Home With You"—the first stanza was something I jotted down in a little notepad, then forgot about for months, then found again and finished. This batch of songs tended to have short lines—Nick Drake's influence, I suspected. "What Have You" came when I was standing in our bathroom anticipating some house rehab plans we had. I thought, *Well, it'll be nice, but it won't look like a magazine spread*. A few hours later I had imagined a little song-story about a woman whose

lover has chosen to chase money over companionship. I thought of it as my secret homage to the greed-driven 1990s NYC I'd left behind. "Under Water"—a kind of goofy love song, something I knocked out without much emotional investment, but months later one of my friends called it her favorite of the whole album. My debut album, ten original songs, three covers. Residing in our basement, a thousand copies manufactured by Oasis CD, an actual product that I—a 41-year-old neophyte singer-songwriter—would have to figure out how to sell. Memoir, I called it. The thing I'd written in lieu of a novel.

"Ode To Nick Drake" came to me in the summer of 2007, too late to make it onto the CD. I put these opening lyrics over a gentle triple meter and pretty but melancholy chord progression slightly reminiscent of David Bowie's "Five Years":

Every man feels the sun belongs to him, and him alone

Guiding him through his days, restless star.

But not me.

I presume no one will reach that telephone.

No one turn me back when I've gone too far.

I am I....along the periphery.

I am I....among the menagerie.

I am I....just a drop in an endless sea.

I am I, alone in my skin.

Once upon a time I had assumed that I could never write an original song. Why had I told myself that? Why had I believed me? Clearly I was not a reliable judge of these things. I had also

once said *I could never improvise a jazz solo* and *I could never play by ear*. It was probably time for me to retire the phrase *I could never* for good.

One evening my son picked a bedtime book off his shelf, something he had not requested in a while: Dr. Seuss's HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO YOU! I exhaled and began my recitation. It was a verbally and mentally exhausting book, not one of my favorites.

I wish we could do what they do in Katroo.

They sure know how to say "Happy Birthday to You!

In Katroo, every year, on the day you were born

They start the day right in the bright early morn

When the Birthday Honk-Honker hikes high up Mt. Zorn

And lets loose a big blast on the big Birthday Horn

I proceeded through the piled-up dactyls, duh DA-da-da, DA-da-da, DA-da-da, DA, page after page of triplet-filled lines detailing all sorts of crazy Katroovian birthday antics, a special birthday bird, a special birthday train, a special birthday smorgasbord. I'd gotten good at "reading" out loud without really reading at all. Mouth was moving but mind was elsewhere. Then I turned another page and came to this:

So we'll go to the top of the toppest blue space,

The Official Katroo Birthday Sounding-Off Place!

Come on! Open your mouth and sound off at the sky!

Shout loud at the top of your voice, "I AM I!

ME!

I am I!"

I stopped reading. Blinked a few times. Let out a sharp laugh.

Mommy, what's so funny?

Um, nothing, sweetheart, I just realized something.

I had unwittingly stolen from Dr. Seuss. I had mimicked the book's critical refrain without any recollection of its origin. Not only that—I had completely reversed its contextual meaning. I had taken a celebration of selfhood and repurposed it as an existential lament, a paean to self-abnegation. In retrospect, this seemed exactly what I had always been meant to do. What I had been built to do. The little girl who couldn't get enough of maudlin 70s pop songs.

Keep reading, Mommy! I not sleepy yet.