

I'm Just Here to Eat the Bruises

We're at the beach in this one. This is the summer I had a sprained hand, from a car crash with a texting driver just ten days before our scheduled beach week. The crash was the real deal — airbags, seatbelts ripped from the upholstery in the performing of their duty, noxious fluids leaking from the steaming scrambled front of the totalled car. The kids walked away unharmed, their booster seats put to the test. I was unharmed except for a little garland of contusions on my arm and chest, and a badly sprained right hand.

I rented a car and drove the kids and me to the beach, the same as usual except for the rental car, to do the moms-and-kids week with Fran as we'd done for years. But this became my one-handed summer. On the second day, Lou and Leo ran for the bumper cars at Funland, hastily pairing off with Fran and her kids. Leo slowly realized he was left without a partner. The youngest of the group, he was at least a summer away from being able to reach the pedals and drive on his own; so, after having joked with a friend before the trip that the bumper cars were the one ride I would definitely skip this time, I rode with Leo. I cradled my splinted hand against my chest as laughing youths T-boned our little car. No one took pictures of that moment, when I sat hollow-eyed and grimacing, Leo beside me. I never checked in with him about whether he thought that

post-real-life-crash bumper car ride was fun. I was too busy warding off nausea. I had seen the silver sedan pull out. I had braked, but I had known what was coming. “Oh my God,” had torn from my mouth, not theirs.

So this picture is from after the bumper cars. The kids are on the boardwalk with the ice cream that wouldn't stop melting. I had skipped the ice cream for myself, the better to document, one-handed, the kids' genius at licking the melting mess into submission. They went to work on the ice cream in spite of the fantastic distraction of the people one bench over, who with their tossed french fries were the darling of the seagull ball. It was a frenzy, but Lou is looking away, up at one brazen bird, captured rising from a victorious dive. She analyzed the gulls' personalities and movements. She called that french-fry victory flight the “upwing.”

It was early in the trip. I hadn't unclenched and allowed myself to lean into letting the kids and Fran help with everything, from opening bottles to carrying beach chairs to cutting up the enormous watermelon, the one which had seemed like a good thing to let the kids pick out and haul to the car from a farm stand on the way to the shore. Everything was overwhelming at the beginning, and yet that summer it was just my hand. I didn't know it was practice for later.

Here's one where I'm holding a banana to my ear, with a theatrical curiosity on my face. This is from about a year earlier. The light from the kitchen window is bright and lucky, breaking up into star-lines which only the camera lens could see. I was about to peel that banana and slice it and put it on hot toast with peanut butter, with a chocolate chip under each banana slice.

“So that its butt can melt!” Leo said with glee.

“That's right.”

“It's not going to melt on a cold banana!” he said with the firm cadence of party dogma. I smiled. I could tell I must have said this exact slogan in the past.

“You got it,” I said. “You've really got your finger on the pulse of banana dynamics.”

Leo watched me as I sliced it. I got to the mushy, light brown end of the banana, and I popped it in my mouth. He made a face.

“I'm just here to eat the bruises,” I said.

“Ew Mom!”

“Well, who else is going to eat them?”

He couldn't answer that. He thought a moment, and a faint recognition-moonlight rested on his face. The moon waxed, and in a time-lapse the light rushed over him at once: the realization that, maybe, parents do things they'd rather not do. They'd rather not take out the garbage. They don't like yelling at the kids in the backseat. They might not like cleaning up, or cooking meals, or killing centipedes, or turning socks right side out, or waiting in the carpool line.

And then, sudden and total, an eclipse. “But Mom,” he said flatly. “You don't have to eat them. No one has to eat them!”

Little boy.

When I was in elementary school, I got a scolding from a lunch lady with the most conically-brassiered breasts of all time, mountaining forth under her burgundy polyester button down dress. She caught me throwing my cup of district-issue chocolatepudding—everyoneknewittastedlikesoap—intothebig cafeteria trash can. She might not have seen exactly what I'd

thrown as I threw it, but she'd been close enough to the trash can to sense the precise wet density of the object as it thudded deep against the inside. She had her finger on the pulse of trash can dynamics. She asked me if I knew how many starving children there were, halfway across the world, who would appreciate the food I'd just thrown away. I replied, from my good heart and so-smart brain, "Well, can we send it to them?" Her bosom heaved in outrage. There's no picture of that, either. That was from a grainy, underexposed time.

So no, little boy. Maybe I don't have to eat the bruises. But, I do.

I look up a video from that sprained-hand Funland summer. (I know videos are a rabbit hole. I know I shouldn't.)

I couldn't stomach the bumper cars, but since I'd had a near-death experience just one week before, I rode the Superflip 360. Fuck you, scariest ride in the park, I thought. When am I ever going to feel this gloriously contemptuous again? It was a compulsion perverse and complete. I handed Lou my bag and Leo my flip-flops. Lou didn't say a word, no protest or plea to see if she was tall enough to ride too. Leo stood very still. He held the flip-flops like a bouquet and looked up at me with wonder. I wanted to throw myself around him, sob and smother him. Instead, I handed myself over to the Slovenian teenager named Magda whose job it was to help me into one of the ride's awkward hanging diaper thrones and click my shoulder harness into place. The kids sat down nearby, on the bench by the helicopter ride. Leo held the flip-flops, and Lou solemnly held up my phone and made a video.

I will never, of course, ride it again. Like chickenpox

and inappropriate crushes and a list that unspools ever longer, it's best dealt with when young. Some of the sensations offered by the Superflip 360 are of the brain leaving the skull and the soul leaving the body and the body leaving the diaper-throne. But the dominant sensation, as you hang upside down, rotating lazily and catching a glimpse of the upside-down ocean before shooting into free-fall, and then swooping up again, all the while holding your splinted right hand rigidly just outside the padded chest harness, is unspeakable pressure pushing you through a dark channel, squeezing you, forcing you to a place you've never been before.

It was the sensation, I felt certain, of being born.

This picture came later. We're at a petting-zoo type farm. It had to have been for Sidney's birthday — Mark and Janelle's baby — when she turned two, and the kids basically did me a favor and came to this thing. I couldn't go alone, and lots of relatives wanted to see Lou and Leo. This birthday party was about everybody but the two-year-old, who I'm pretty sure would have taken as much delight in pulling the dog's tail at home as in petting a goat at a farm. This particular party was about Lou and Leo and me. And you.

Anyway I could barely do it, I was just raw meat that day, and the kids were not thrilled, and I didn't help by yelling at them in the car about I don't know what stupid thing. But Leo was in a rare light mood in spite of everything and oh, Love. This picture. Leo and Lou are gawky and lovely, holding Sidney's hands as she toddles in her purple dress, her hair in little puffs. They're walking along a road with trees on one side and a fenced field on the other, and they're swinging her between them. They're

stooped over, their three bodies making a calligraphic W. I followed them, snapping pics. I was thinking that's one of the perks of the first-born: being swung between grownups — or these dear proto-grownups. We did it with Lou. I don't remember doing it with Leo. Then (I know it's so stupid) I added swinging Leo between us to the list of things we'll never do. It's hard not to think about things like that. It's hard not to go down rabbit holes. Leo's taller than me now. Are they grownups yet? I measure Lou by me: she's like a three-quarter-size me. How do I measure Leo?

I was the record-keeper all along, making our little photo books. I'm sure I was looking for certain things when I chose which pictures I wanted to print and put into collections — variety, focus, an even distribution between the two kids — but I can't remember that process now. I just know that the printed ones were always the highly favored ones, our permanent record, our Gutenberg Bible. Did I print them because they were special, or did they become special because I printed them? (Did I choose enough pictures with you in them?) These little albums are the ones I made for our parents, so they'd have books, devotional texts on their grandchildren. They were our devotional texts too. The kids would run to the table next to Grandma's couch and pull open the drawer to reveal decks of cards and the little photo albums. These kids have scrolled and swiped through hundreds of thousands of pictures on screens, but they prize the ones in books. Someday, so much of our lives will be in the cloud, long after we're all gone. But we want a thing to touch, pages to turn.

You've got Leo in your arms here. He's long enough, leggy enough, that he doesn't look like a baby, but he's in his little white underpants and he's got his legs wrapped around your

waist. You two are in the kitchen, a few feet from where I stood later with the banana in the gorgeous light. You're looking at Leo — into him, scooping him up with your eyes. He's talking, looking up through the Victorian fringe of his eyelashes as he tries to find a word or a memory, and you're listening and watching. You look as if you might have dressed hastily, or as if someone else dressed you, possibly by force. It's probably just the way Leo is slung around you, but it looks like your shirt is misbuttoned. This is definitely your classic ruffled look, but exaggerated. Maybe I thought it was funny, and that's why this photo got my attention and I threw it in the to-print folder. More likely though it's your face, the way you did for Leo every day with your simple attention what I couldn't do — like when he was standing there clutching my flip-flops — which is love him extravagantly. You were always more in love with him, with both of them, than I was.

When I was pregnant with Leo, I was prickly hot for 42 weeks in a row. (You know this. You bore it too.) That baby would not leave the luxury hotel that was my uterus. Around week 41, in order to complete some task like folding dishtowels one morning, I lowered myself to the kitchen floor, because standing hurt so many of my bones, and sitting on a chair hurt different bones. Leo caused me to become unnaturally acquainted with my bones.

When I tried to stand up again, none of my undignified shenanigans got me upright. I sweated and swore. I gave up. I rested on my hands and knees amid the dishtowels, and I wept.

On the rare occasions when I would do a set of pushups — before pregnancy or since — the cat would invariably appear and walk under my body and make me laugh and fall. It wasn't the

cat just then, but two-year-old Lou who came to me, when I was on my hands and knees on the floor, not to walk tail-tall under me (my belly left no room anyway), but to lay her arms across my back and ask brightly, “Mama okay?”

There’s no picture of that, either.

There are so many no pictures.

When you were gone, the kids seemed to know what to do. When I cried on the kitchen floor again, they came to me, again. They put their arms across my back. I don’t know if they were at a developmental pivot point and they found some new gear of graceful maturity; or if they’re like you, and they have reserves of gentleness and love that I don’t understand, because I am hard, because I have never been an extravagant lover. It’s a terrible possibility, that I may have put you in the ground without having loved you extravagantly.

This is the last one, for now.

This one is the kids in the barf seat of the Sea Dragon. (Okay, every seat on the swinging Sea Dragon is the barf seat.) I mean one of the end-most benches, the one most likely to induce, and fling far, the vomit of motion-sensitive children. We’re back at Funland. It must be the same sprained summer, when Fran and her kids would leave later in the week and you would drive on your own to meet us, and stay a few days and then we’d caravan home. When, all during the week, we would save up things to tell you about, and shells and drawings and puzzles to show you, and at that point in the week what I wanted most was to sit in a beach chair and watch the three of you battling the white broken tops of the waves. I snapped so many of those wave-battling pictures, and all the other ones: Leo the meatball baby in the

sand, Lou standing in the chest-deep hole she dug as she held high her shovel, Leo looking hilariously sour in the moment he realized that flying a kite is much more about discipline than about imagination. Always under a dense, cloud-etched Atlantic sky.

Back at the Sea Dragon, watching the kids, I sat on the nearby bench between the basketball hoop game and my old friend the Superflip 360. I could hear screams coming from it, and even — I’m sure I could hear it — the shocked, sucking silence of people being born.

Not tall enough for the bumper cars, Leo was tall enough, for the first time that summer, for the Sea Dragon. Leo is electrified, just beaming, the camera can plainly see. A little harder to see in the picture is Lou’s hand on Leo’s arm. I can’t tell whether that’s Lou protecting her little brother, or Leo being the solid presence against which Lou is steadying herself. Either way, they’re doing okay. They were okay in the barf seat of the Sea Dragon, headed for the upwing; and I think they’re okay now.