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Song for a Boy Not My Own

by

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I am rolling around with Lucas on the floor. I'm planting rude raspberry noises on his firm little stomach and he is shrieking with delight. His legs clasp my neck and his butt bounces up and down, while his arms flail and pound the floor. We are both giggling insanely. His mother—my sister—is nearby, watching this with the wry, I've-seen-it-all-but-am-still-amused attitude of mothers. I look into Luke's eyes, blue and sparkling and deeper than oceans; he looks into mine. I wonder what he sees. What does he create there, in my eyes?

Aunthood is a funny thing. Motherhood is a choice, but becoming an aunt is a decision someone else makes for you. It's not talked about much, compared to the attention-fest of motherhood. Aunts are vague in our culture, because, I suppose, the role comes with no definite responsibilities.

At two-and-a half Lucas apprehends a certain role for me, but is too young, surely, to grasp the family tree thing, though somewhere in that dynamo developing brain of his, the fact that I am his mother's sister is understood: just as he has a baby brother, his mother has sisters.

Luke adores me, largely because I adore him back. I have been here as long as he can remember, although, at this age, he does not remember, not the sorts of lucid, detailed pictures we call memories; I will become part of those later. I am his aunt—some of the genes in me are in him, a neat idea when I stop to think about it, though I don't think about it much and in fact my love for him at this point is so thickly woven and complicated I could forget we are blood kin—though I don't, because Lucy is standing there, watching us giggle on the floor, and she is my sister, and Lucas is her son.

I kiss his soft blond hair. I look into his eyes. Eye contact, that most elemental of human exchanges, that most potent of nonverbal connections. What does he imagine in me?

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I know what I made of my own aunts, and in trying to figure out aunthood now, my thinking has taken me back there.

Most of our cultural images of aunts are negative—lonesome women out in left field where nobody ever hits the ball. Spinster aunts, maiden aunts. There's a shelf in the closet of our collective imagination that is filled up with them: little old ladies in musty houses full of breakable things; stiff-haired, large-busted women in tweedy suits who break into big smiles around small children; Emily Dickinson types, in dresses that

look like nightgowns, so pale and expressionless as to be transparent, so shy they are invisible.

I have several specific ones in my memory, from when I was on the child-side of the equation, looking up. There was Auntie Vi, short for Violet, who smelled the same color as her name. She had a rock garden out back, where I went to imagine pixies and fairies, and inside, her dark rooms were full of Persian cats and heavy furniture and were silent except for the ticking of clocks. There was Beverly, a friend-of-the-family aunt as opposed to a real one, who lived with her husband in a plush-carpeted apartment and gave organ lessons; she had red hair and always wore green. My mother felt sorry for her and was impressed by her cheerfulness. I didn't understand why at the time. My mother's occasional remarks about how Beverly did not have children of her own fell on uncomprehending ears. I was just a kid—having or not having children was beyond irrelevant.

I had a pair of ultimate aunts, Gladys and Edie. They were twins, non-identical in every way—one round and dark, the other skinny and fair—except for the way they doted on us. These little old ladies had helped raise my father in the foster home in Manchester, England where he grew up. They lived on the top floor of a public-housing high-rise, with their flats at opposite ends of a long balcony that had apartment doors all down one side and a dizzying view of Manchester the other way. The view below was of a neighborhood that had replaced, literally, the one where they'd lived their whole lives, a coal-smudged Industrial Revolution slum that had been bulldozed into oblivion, not just the houses but every street and lane and bridge, and the names of all these things dead with them. When Gladys and Edie walked back and forth down that long balcony to see

each other—shuffling along in their little old lady way, knocked by the winds that buffeted the top floor of that high-rise—down there, far below, was all that was left of their old lives, and what was left was precisely nothing. I would pick this information up with my child-radar, though not until I was close to teenagehood. Before then, Auntie Gladys and Auntie Edie appeared to exist solely to spoil my sisters and me when, every couple of years, we would spend the summer with them.

My memories have hazed in the way that childhood moments—which you don't know at the time you need to save for later—often do. I remember lots of food—roast beef, boiled potatoes, Yorkshire pudding, bread and butter—and people coming and going, the cousins and aunts and uncles, a great raft of family. I remember the little electric fire, the oh-so-English pseudo-fireplace, that was the heat source in the living room of each of my aunts' identical apartments, and I can feel myself sitting in a big chair in front of it, eating the treats that had been snuck to me by one or the other of my aunties—chocolate, cookies, chewy fruit candies. They were forever pressing subversive foods, and coins to buy more, into our hands when our parents weren't looking, swearing us to secrecy so that we felt part of an ongoing, great conspiracy—this is, perhaps, what I remember best, this feeling of being in cahoots with them.

That's what aunts are for. They are mysterious allies who cannot get in trouble with your parents. More than this, they keep *you* from getting in trouble with your parents. They are not real people with complex lives but rather are warm and welcoming simple characters who spend their time waiting around for you to show up. The truth, of course, was anything but, though I was not to comprehend this for many years, oblivious in my naïve and selfish way to the complications of my dear aunts' lives.

And so it must be between me and Lucas, between me and his baby brother Max. I will be an uncomplicated person to them, a pair of open arms and a smile. This is fine with me, in fact it's perfect, and I understand now, exactly, the kick Gladys and Edie got out of it—out of spending all their time waiting for me to show up.

It is different from a grandmother's role. Lucas and Max have a wonderful grandma, their father's mom, who is there, there, there for them. If I am an electron orbiting this little nuclear family, their grandmother Kathy is right in there with the protons and the neutrons. She is practically a daily occurrence, whereas I appear every few weeks, although the distinctions between grandmother and aunt go beyond exposure time. Kathy has a manic gleam in her eye which comes from seeing her own genetic material, the stuff of *her*, pulled through her, through her son, roaring into this new, tiny person. That look in her eye is the gleam of recognition, of desire, of possession.

The route to the grandmother is linear, straight up through the parent. The route to the aunt goes off crazy sideways. You go up and hang a left. A grandmother, despite her role as ultimate indulger, is taken for granted. She is a caretaker, a kind of back-up to the mother, whereas the aunt can be pure fun.

An aunt can invent herself. When I was a kid, we only checked in with my miscellaneous aunts and uncles every couple of years because we had to travel a long way to see them. They saw us primarily in terms of the changes in us, so that I associate them strongly with "look how you've grown" comments. Some of our aunts were the honorary variety—aunt wannabes. It was understood the title "auntie" could be used merely to betoken respect for the elder. In my own case, Lucas calls me simply by my first name. I'm a postmodern auntie. I don't know if this choice of name will affect

anything about the relationship—it's what we do with it, not what we call it, that will guide it.

You might, as happened to me, spend many years struggling with issues of childlessness, pouring untold quantities of the sweet liquor of life into the questions of what, and how, and the endless why, and then wake up one day and suddenly you're an aunt. In my case, through much of my adult life, my ambivalence about childbearing was exceeded only by my husband's. Then we stumbled into fertility problems, but clumsily, and too late, and we could not address them because the resolve—the kind of resolve we needed—was not there to address them, a failure that threw us into a dark, estranged time that took years to find our way out of.

And then, one day, I was an aunt. Aunthood is not a substitute for motherhood, but it can be an alternative. Like most alternatives that come to us with age, it does not shout its arrival but slips in from the back porch, the screen door slapping softly behind it.

But I know very well, by now, what I never knew as a kid about my wannabe aunt Beverly, the nice red-haired lady who played the organ in her high-rise apartment. I know why my mother said “poor Beverly.” I know the ache that was hiding behind those smiling, kind green eyes.

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I have a confession. It was me. I got my sister Lucy pregnant.

I had dragged her along on a trip to Arizona, and we ended up in a small museum of Indian artifacts someplace, and there was nobody there except me and Lucy and the

caretaker, a friendly, twinkly woman who, in hindsight, had a great deal of the mother-goddess about her. It came up in our discussion that there was a certain quite large, mysterious, very old item in the back, hidden from display. Legend had it, according to the twinkly, kindly caretaker, that physical contact with this thing—which, not coincidentally, was shaped like a very large penis, size of a streetcorner mailbox—could remedy infertility. Lucy, at the time, was trying, without success, to get pregnant. But after she was led into the back of the museum, with a nod and a wink from our avatar, who pointed the way past shelves of dusty fossils and pots, and once she touched, for herself, the massive stone phallus, lo and behold, Lucy got pregnant. She had rounds of infertility treatment to go through, many tears and sighs, but the point is she did get pregnant. And as so often happens with these things, after Lucas came along, little Max appeared, bam, presto, quicker than instant pudding.

When I was a kid, like any kid, I thought my family started with the moment of my birth and not a minute sooner. So something else I didn't understand about aunthood when I was a child, piling up memories good, bad, and indifferent, was how my aunts would have had family memories of their own that they were working through. Gladys and Edie, like Sally and Lucy. God knows Sally and Lucy have their share of family Samsonite to lug around with them.

Children have no use, really, for their elders' memories. When, long ago, my mother held my hand on some pebbly beach in England, and told me that the long sets of frothy breaking waves were called white horses (which I rejected out of hand, because the analogy seemed, frankly, preposterous), it did not occur to me that she had been told

the same thing as a child, or that my believing it would validate her own long-ago belief, and give her back something—a whiff of her own childhood innocence and faith.

In my role now as Auntie Sally, I find I too am being denied something of my memories, losing claim to them, at least in the way I used to know them. My memories of Lucy, formerly cherished in the knowing, intimate way between sisters—for instance, how, when she was five years old, everybody thought she'd started wetting herself when in fact she was merely trying to imitate our cousin Christopher whom she'd observed standing up to pee—these have ceased to be remembered treasures from my immediate and vital childhood past, but have become, instead, folklore from some distant time, stories an aunt might tell a nephew: *this was your mom, can you believe it?* Diluted a little, in the translation.

And even memories of myself, of my own experience, are affected. Like the time I was out in the kitchen getting everybody ice cream and, on impulse, licked the freezer door and got my tongue stuck, this while my fourth grade teacher was over for dinner (another surrogate aunt figure whom I remember for her good-looking legs and shiny pantyhose, who everyone kept saying should go to law school, though I didn't know why—she was unattached and childless, so I guess I get it now). I invite you to imagine the conversation through the wall between the dining room and kitchen—*what's taking you so long?* To which I, in response, tried to shape convincing vowel and consonant sounds, with my tongue stuck to the door. My own childhood memories, formerly a place where my identity dwelled—a sort of key, in my own mind, to understanding myself—have become something for Lucas and Max to laugh about—their crazy auntie, when she was a little girl (a million years ago).

I guess it is part of growing up, of becoming a real adult, this giving over of one's fond, intimate stories to a younger generation who was not there, for them to make over for their own purposes. It is the smallest sort of loss, I suppose—a trifling consequence of love.

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Alas, aunthood, for me, I may as well admit right now, did not begin with Lucas and Max. My man Luke was not the first, there was another boy before him, many years ago. It is not easy for me to admit that my first go-round at aunting, in the beginning, did not take. My older sister's kid, my nephew Martin, now twenty-two, came into the world when I was about the same age he is now. I was preoccupied at the time—self-absorbed—plus Martin was not living nearby, not available to me in the way Lucas and Max are.

But his availability was not really the issue—mine was. Like a teenage mother, I was too young. An aunt, it turns out, is made, not born. An aunt is an opening, a window of opportunity, and my window was stuck, the frame painted shut. It took a little chipping with a chisel, which I didn't have time for just then. I love my nephew Martin, and his wonderful mother Jane, and will be there for both of them, whenever they need me. But I never got to roll and squirm and tickle and tumble with him the way I do with Lucas, whose face lights up when I walk into his house in a way that is so brilliant, so ecstatic, so unequivocal it is better than—dare I say it—motherhood, because it's all the joy, none of the toil. Well, not *all* the joy. And perhaps a little of the toil, not so much physically as emotionally, because any bond of love carries risk.

The fact that aunthood is novel to me, the fact that I am writing about it at all, is a reflection of our nuclear-family-focused society; in an extended-family culture there would be nothing to say. We may be nostalgic for extended families, it's a comforting image for people who live lightly tethered, highly mobile lives in which they must invent their own family wherever they go. I wonder, though, if we would really want all those relatives around, if it wouldn't seem, to our modern sensibilities, stifling and intrusive. Still, without good support from the outside, a nuclear family can explode like an atomic bomb. Lucy and her husband are lucky to have Kathy and me and all the other people who are involved. She reminds me, when the latest smelly diaper wafts our way, that it takes a village, to which I protest that I'm the village idiot. But I am glad to help, grateful to be able to. This aunthood fills a space I knew was there but until Luke came along, did not know could be soothed this way.

It must be like that for other people too, though no one talks about it. And it must have always been so; the aunts have always been among us. The childless aunts, that subset in which I count myself—the maiden aunts, as they were once quaintly, virginally thought of—are excluded from one club, but form another, an old and venerable sisterhood. I share something in common with all of them, the extended and the nuclear, the faraway, the long-ago, and the close by, just across town—riding on buses, doing their shopping, coming home to dark apartments in the evening and turning on the lights. We share some irreducible essence of aunt-ness. We share the knowledge that we are not mothers though we are, instead, this other thing—sing this other song, a melody that goes off by itself, looking for its own way.

The song I sing to Lucas goes like this: bringing gravel in the scoop of the tiny bulldozer, dropping it in the dump truck (my job), watching Lucas dump it out again (his job), letting him send me off for more stone, over and over and over. Playing tea party, likewise over and over, you pour and I'll sip or I'll pour and you sip, let's both sip, oh that's so delicious. Offering my stomach as a drum, and a boom-boom tune to go with it. Reading three books at bedtime—only three! Okay. One more.

He will not remember these things, but I will. Looking into his blue eyes, wondering what he sees in mine. Knowing there is much hidden there, behind my eyes, that he cannot see, but that he does not have to see. It does not matter, not here, not now.

Showing him where the dandelions are, and how to blow off their seeds, so they go spinning into the air, into the sunlight, off on the wind, disappearing.