



Children ruin everything.

Right?



Sandhya, writer & musician

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(Reading time ~10 minutes)

Tomorrow I'll be picking up my son after his last exam in his first semester as a college freshman. Other than some events on Christmas Eve and Day, the 1.75-hour car ride home will probably be the only quality time I spend with him during winter break. His priority will of course be his high school friends. Despite how little he and I actually speak to each other these days, we are quietly bonded in love and friendship—a fact I will never take for granted, considering my own enraged alienation from my parents at his age. The evidence suggests that I've managed to stop at least this critical piece of unhealthy generational history from repeating itself.

My boy and I are tight, but he has always been an independent soul. It was a great boon having a sociable child who did not cling—quite the opposite. I remember taking him at age 6 to a popular and not-too-expensive summer family resort in Vermont. Its key feature is the included onsite daycare. When we arrived the first morning for drop-off, the facility was crawling with toddlers being barely supervised by “counselors” just out of middle school. For a moment his father and I worried our boy would balk at being left here in this loud mess, and we'd lose our chance to slink off to some badly needed grown-up time. Instead, the kid stood calmly looking this way and that, surveying the chaos. In his steady, authoritative, little-boy voice, and without making eye contact with either of us, he said:

“You can go now.”

We sprinted out the door.

Sometimes when he was napping as a baby—and nap he did! because I was a sleep-training tyrant—I'd stand in the dead center of my kitchen, limbs sodden, brain blinkered, incapable of

choosing what to feed myself for lunch.

I had once been a cheerful workaholic with keen intellectual and creative ambitions, a person who got paid to express original thoughts, a person who showed up five minutes early to meetings and achieved impossible project deadlines with grace. I had once been a person who studied academic Sanskrit and read Sartre in French, who practiced piano scales between 7-8 every morning, who balanced her checkbook in pencil on the back of her monthly bank statements, doing the arithmetic in her head. That woman was gone. 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. I was literally disappearing.

I'd stand dead center in the kitchen, unable to focus on my own sustenance, and think:

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.

It's true that I never stopped working entirely. As a novice jazz pianist, I played out two or three times a month, wedding gigs and embassy cocktail hours. I wrote articles for a couple of magazines. I kept a few brain cells focused on the world. But I was convinced, absolutely religiously convinced, that I had sealed my fate. Pretty good mother, but failed novelist, too-late-blooming musician, would-be intellectual with a once original mind now turning to mush. I would never again have the wide open freedom I'd squandered in my youth, or the energy to dream and push.

In solitude I tried to make peace with this reduced reality. The fierce fire of my teens, twenties, and early thirties had sputtered out. So it goes. I had a spouse with a decent enough paycheck to cover our basic expenses, and the enormous luxury of spending the next few years as a mother without a full-time job. In a world filled with trauma, misery, and grinding poverty, I had nothing to complain about.

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

At some point during his third year, the kid was giving up the last of his three daily naps, even though he still desperately needed the rest. Around 2 in the afternoon he would start rubbing his eyes violently and yelling "I NOT SLEEPY! I NOT SLEEPY! I 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. "I NOT SLEEPY! I NOT..." He'd pass out for the duration.

I'd put Radiohead's *Kid A* in the CD player and let it loop. He once woke up in the middle of "Morning Bell" and declared, "Thom Yorke is the bestest singer!"

We were doing all the usual mommy-and-me musical stuff, of course. The nursery rhymes and lullabies. I sang the requisite songs every day: "Wheels On The Bus," "You Are My Sunshine," "Itsy Bitsy Spider"... I read the dozens upon dozens of rhyming, sonically astute picture books: *Zin! Zin! Zin! A Violin* and *Rattletrap Car* were household favorites.

Maybe this is what shook something loose in my brain.

I fed my boy 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. He liked cello music, Pablo Casals, Jacqueline du Pre. The anodyne voice and mellow guitar of Jack Johnson was a favorite. Anything with some funk in it went over well: Billy Preston, Jackson 5, Stevie Wonder's *Innervisions*, Parliament's old hit "Flashlight." He liked Radiohead, Joni Mitchell, and Kurt Elling because no child of mine was going to survive to adulthood without liking Radiohead, Joni Mitchell, and Kurt Elling.

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.

That particular year of his last nap, 2006, I had three 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 of jazz musicians I'd connected with Maria a little bit in person, and wished I'd known who she was much earlier, when she might have been a role model. 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. Secretly, blasphemously, guiltily...I envied her.

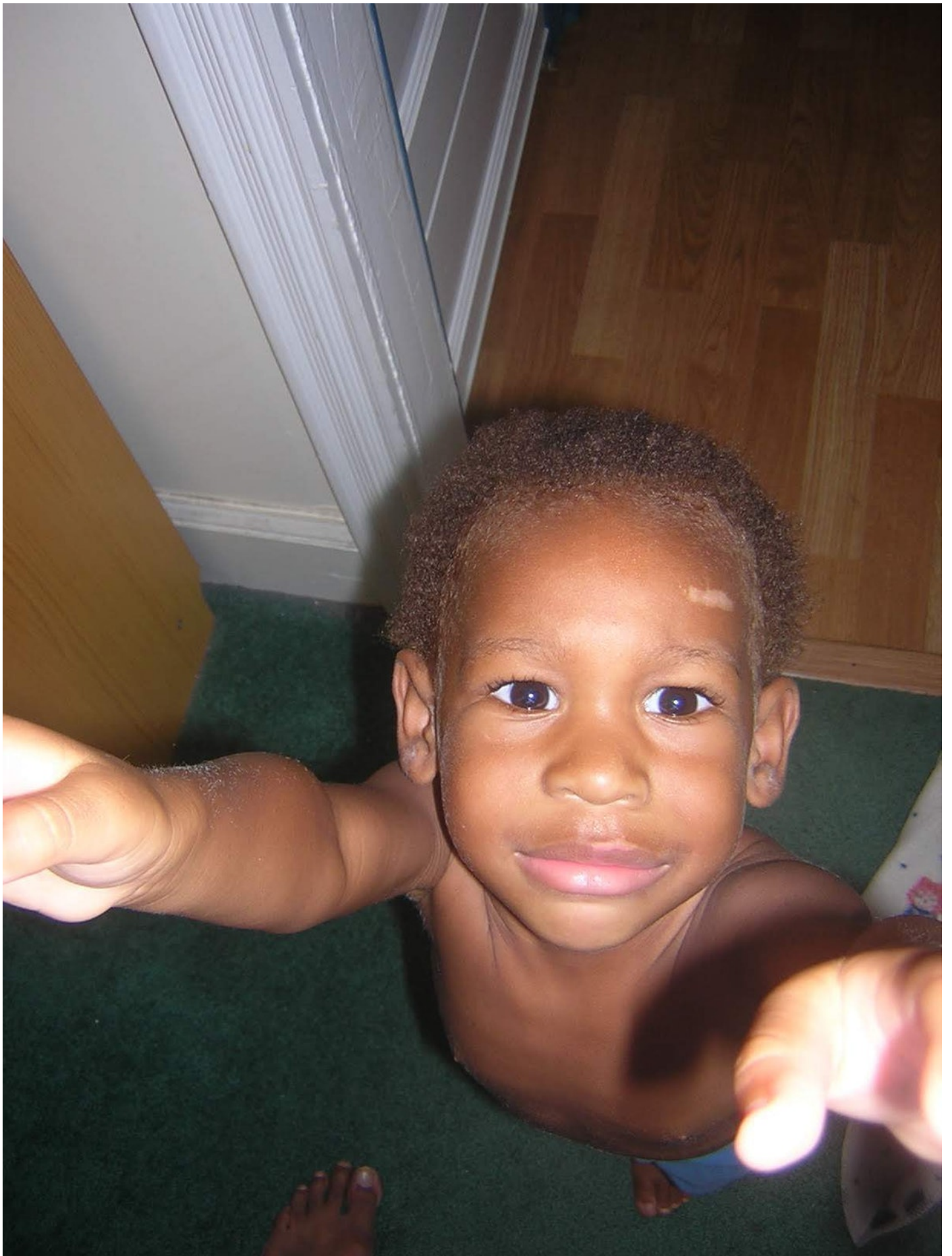
There was *Morph the Cat*, Donald Fagen's most recent solo album, his wry and dark response to 9/11, as memorable as any of the old Steely Dan recordings he had made decades earlier with Walter Becker. Fagen's songwriting had matured over time: smart-alecky lyrics full of irony, as always, but shorn 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, haunting title track had recently become a posthumous hit after Volkswagen used it in a TV spot. The commercial was a nice piece of work itself, a nostalgia-drenched flash fiction about some young people arriving in their Cabriolet outside a loud, crowded party, then deciding they'd prefer a breezy moon-lit 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 lyrics are actually filled with dread and threat. A horror movie hidden inside its folky gentleness. The whole album is 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. Only a few years earlier—in the middle of a terrible infertility struggle and before we happily redirected ourselves toward adopting—I'd stood at the edge of my own black pit and stared into its bottomlessness. I'd never become truly suicidal, but I had spent several weeks feeling utterly alienated from my friends and loved ones and the world in general. I was simultaneously terrified of motherhood and desperate for it, and feeling pressure from my husband whose biological clock seemed to be ticking much louder than mine. Three years into trying and failing and trying and failing, I came to a place where the mental anguish was almost intolerable, and I wished I could, without violence of any kind, just cease to be.

(It's a whole other story how I'd survived that dark moment and was now—despite continued fears and twinges of regret—thriving.)



The first song came in the middle of the night. The kid was sleeping soundly through the night 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.

I was 41 years old, verging on 42. Prior to this moment I had written exactly one successful song ever in my life, five years earlier when I was just starting to have professional music ambitions. Because it was followed by silence from the muses, I had come to assume it was a lark, a one-hit wonder. Instrumental music was still easy for me. It was prolific playtime. Between the ages of 33 in my first student jazz band at a community college, and 37 when the baby arrived, I'd written and performed everything from 12-bar blues heads (melodies) to solo piano ballads to classical chamber pieces to 17-piece big band charts. Lyrics eluded me, though. I figured the two parts of my imagination, one devoted to words and the other to music, were simply separate entities.

But there in the predawn darkness, a whole new song just fell into my body. I knew the basic idea came from the baby sleep-training books I'd read, alchemized from parental advice into something dark, paranoid, and weirdly sensual. Along with the lyrics I could see and hear an unusual chordal vamp under my fingers, specific keyboard shapes rather than named harmonies, with an odd-meter jazz-funk rhythm.

The next day I sat at the piano and worked it all out in a matter of minutes. Start to finish. Atheist that I was and am, it was hard not to think of this song as delivered to me by the gods.

Metaphysical or merely neurological, something was happening. A third song came 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.

I called this one "Memoir" and set it to another funky vamp, Gm to C7.

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.

More songs came in an accelerating rush. I accepted this strange gift from the universe with increasing glee and excitement. Four, five, six, seven. Was I a songwriter now? And was that something only motherhood had made manifest?

"Ode To Nick Drake" emerged in the summer of 2007, too late to make it onto my first cd, MEMOIR, but right at the tail end of that creative gold rush. I put these opening lyrics over a pretty, melancholy chord progression. The triple-meter groove was something I'd copped from 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.

One evening my son picked a particular bedtime book off his shelf, something he had not requested in a long while: Dr. Seuss's *HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO YOU!*

I exhaled and began my recitation. It was a verbally and mentally exhausting book, one of my least 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, yada yada. 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?"

I had unwittingly plagiarized Dr. Seuss. I had mimicked the book's critical refrain without any recollection of its origin.

"Um, nothing, sweetheart, I just realized something."

Not only that—I had completely reversed its contextual meaning. I took 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.

Shortly before his death, my primary musical hero David Bowie had described his life's work, his entire catalog, as containing variations on the theme of alienation. I could dig it. In the 70s I was a lonely little girl who couldn't get enough of that era's maudlin pop songs, a weird number of them about making peace with one's essential alienation or one's imminent death. Now I'd written such a song of my own.

"Keep reading, Mommy!" said my little baby boy, who'd be grown up too soon—and exactly soon enough.

"Keep reading! I not sleepy yet."

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