

Song for Unbelievers

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Mine was an unusually percussive household growing up. The *chck-pffst* of our father's beer cans cracking open every half-hour from the tangerine velour armchair in the living room. The *thunk-chck* of eggs whacked into a bowl or pan in our backwoods country kitchen for nearly every meal my mother made (thanks to the massive chicken coop out back)—scrambled at breakfast, hard-boiled at lunch, and casseroled at dinnertime. The tinny *bam-bam-bam* of any one of my six younger siblings colliding a wooden spoon handle into an upended soup pot throughout their collective fifteen-odd years of toddlerhood. And me, the eldest son, perpetually ramming a tennis ball against the beams of my attic bedroom to quiet my own mind by drowning out the commotion below. If you had nerves when you were born into my family, you'd have to have stripped yourself bare of them—renounced their existence entirely—just to carry on.

In part as a reaction to this lifelong blitzkrieg of sound, I was reluctant to start a family myself, but my wife Aoife was ultimately

persuasive. “We’ll just be starting with one,” she pointed out. “We don’t have to go beyond that if it’s too much chaos for you.”

So it’s with some degree of amusement and a greater degree of amazement that my own tiny daughter (sixteen months tomorrow) barely makes a peep. She *hates* to make noise. She hates to hear noise made by others. Even as an infant, she resisted the entropy of crowds and parties. She has flat-out refused to unite spoon handle to pan bottom despite universal toddler imperatives to do just that (xylophones, tambourines, maracas, and jingle bells, all similarly eschewed). I tell her, “You would’ve been eaten alive had you grown up in my house.” She gurgles softly but doesn’t listen.

Still, I appreciate her affinity for stillness and quietude; I like to think that her antipathy for turbulence is somehow related to my lifetime of enduring pandemonium. They say that epigenetic changes to our DNA can transmit the effects of trauma down through generations, so why not aversions too? Wouldn’t that be something.

I will say this, she has a remarkable attention span for the kinds of things she *is* interested in. When deposited on the floor with legs scissored open to a clumsy V, she twirls her little elfin feet in circles and pants in the presence of dust particles, bits of string, lint. The other day she fixated on a clump of dried mud on the floor, rotating her feet inward and chuffing out, “Duht! Duht!”—over and over again until I acknowledged her discovery. It strikes me that she has a remarkable vocabulary for a sixteen month old who abhors sound.

It’s not just noise, though, it’s everything. I have a hard time keeping her entertained once she’s had her fill of fuzz and yarn, considering she expresses an actual fear response to most new toys, foods, and common objects, and as her increasingly baffled stay-at-home father, I have my concerns. Her insistence on the quiet and familiar verges on bonkers, so we recently had her evaluated by a specialist to see if anything was officially “wrong” (although we knew in our hearts that something was; she once burst into tears when presented with a Koosh ball, which should’ve been toddler crack, and she shrinks—quaking—at the sight of bubbles). Truly, we just wanted a label, because therein lies a diagnosis, and implicit in a diagnosis is a treatment plan. And we got what we were looking for—at least, part of it, anyway.

“Your daughter seems to have Sensory Processing Disorder,” announced the social worker who evaluated her for the county’s Infant and Toddler Program. “What you perceive as background noise, she perceives as a microphone wailing feedback. What you perceive as interesting textures, she perceives alternately as spiders on her skin or needles jamming into her body, depending on the situation. What is normal for us stimulates the fight-or-flight response in your daughter.” She handed me a sedately illustrated brochure, muted in gentle tones of sepia and lavender, as if I were the one who couldn’t handle the sensory overload.

My initial response to the diagnosis was relief, then concern. “Isn’t that associated with autism?” I asked, plainly upset at the possibility.

“There’s co-morbidity with autism spectrum disorders, yes, but she doesn’t have any of the markers for those. They can just as well occur independently of one another. One is not caused by the other.”

Again, relief. She offered a list of books on the subject and another list of local occupational therapists who specialized in treating the symptoms. I welcomed the information, said thank you, then added on our way out, “I wouldn’t use the word ‘morbidity,’ though, with parents. It sounds too much like you’re talking about death.”

I carted our daughter back home for a lunch of pureed spinach dal with a touch of applesauce for sweetness. While most of her peers had graduated to sandwiches by now, Sibby still gagged on and regurgitated solid foods. I marveled at the mutability of these other toddlers, whose parents universally complained of the same exact problem: “The only thing that stays the same is that every three months they completely change on you, and you have to figure them out all over again.” Not our Sibby. She was precisely the same creature we’d met on the day she was born, but the trouble was, I didn’t have the slightest idea who that was. Her eyes, which ranged from carob to beetle-black depending on the light, possessed an opacity that was vaguely alien. I couldn’t decipher her at all.

Around the same time we got the diagnosis, Aoife tried to convince me—begged me, really—to agree to raising chickens in our miniscule, suburban backyard in Redwood City, and to this, I would not relent so easily. If there was anything about my upbringing I hated

more than having six younger siblings, it was the incessant squawking, prattling, and pooping of our many resident chickens. Aoife (it’s pronounced EE-fuh, by the way—her family has a thing for incomprehensible Irish names) ostensibly wanted them for the fresh eggs, but I knew she believed chickens would protect our little Siobhán against the debilitating allergies Aoife has fought against her entire life. (Again, I feel compelled to explain that Siobhán=Shih-VON. “Why do you want to maintain your family’s tradition of forcing their daughters to over-announce their unreadable names?” I asked my wife when we were deciding what to call our firstborn. “Because it’s a rite of passage,” she’d shrugged. “Don’t you ever get tired of ‘Joe?’”)

Anyway, I argued with her about eggs.

“Even if you buy the seven-dollar eggs at the farmer’s market, it’s still cheaper than keeping chickens. You have to feed them. You have to buy a chicken coop. It is never cheaper or more convenient to buy live chickens unless you’re going to eat them and breed them. Plus, you know I hate eggs and lost a taste for chicken a long time ago.” I grew up in the mountains southeast of San Diego (in not quite a border town and not quite a mountain town because it wasn’t even a town), and aside from canned beans and the occasional hot dog, our main source of protein was our chickens.

“Yes, but eggs aren’t the only reason or I wouldn’t have asked.” She recited research suggesting that kids need to be around farm animal feces—not just dogs and cats—to build their immune systems up against allergies. “And I’m not talking the internet, here; *National Geographic* did a feature on it! You don’t want her ending up like me, do you? Asthma, Epi-pens, crazy-expensive air filters from The Shaper Image. Come on, I’m practically a girl in a bubble for how little of the year I am able to comfortably spend outside.” This was true. “It’s no way to live, and we still have time to prevent that. Please?”

She had a point. And though I loathed chickens, I was warming to my own inspiration that a clutch of baby chicks might actually encourage Siobhán to deal with her newly-identified sensory issues. Our first appointment with an OT had been fairly pointless—apparently the main recognized treatment for sensory problems is to

literally brush your child all over their body to desensitize them. Regularly. With an actual hairbrush. (Seriously.) So when that didn't go over too well, I figured, who can resist baby chicks?

But nothing ever goes as planned, does it. What's that awful, trite saying? "Men make plans and God laughs." It should really be, "Wives make plans and laugh at their men." Wives who work all day making sure the Internet doesn't break so that you can stay home and read poetry during nap time and raise your daughter without having to put her in a daycare center before her immune system works where she might get, I don't know—the *plague*, or at the very least Hand, Foot, and Mouth Disease (whose name conveniently omits that it also causes sores on the genitals (!!!)). You, who can't even fix the Wi-Fi without calling your wife for help if it involves anything other than switching it off and then on again.

So no, it didn't go how I thought it would. Sibby hated the chicks. They were "ouchy." Sharp beaks, scratchy claws. They relieved themselves inconveniently often in inconvenient places.

"But they're *chicks!*" I tried to reason with her. "They're adorable!" Nope, no dice.

The other day, though, Sibby finally seemed interested in what I was doing. She pointed to the chicks in their incubator while I was refilling their water and said, "Eat! Eat!" At the time I thought she was being prodigious.

"Yes," I confirmed, rather impressed. "We *do* eat chickens!" But I'd misinterpreted. How could I have thought she was capable of that mental leap from animal to food having never witnessed any of the steps? There's nothing new under the sun when it comes to parenting (it only ever seems that way): we all think our own kids are savants.

She raised her barely-there, peach-fuzz eyebrows and widened the apertures of her eyes, then lowered her lips into a profound pout. Her chin wobbled, she cried, then tottered away.

I regarded the chicks, who pecked among the wood shavings for their spilled feed, gobbling up invisibly small crumbs. She'd meant the *chickens* were eating, not that we'd eat the chickens, and here I'd probably guaranteed she'd be a vegetarian for life.

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I asked my mother once when I came back to visit from college

(cross-country scholarship to Cal-Poly San Luis Obispo—*Go Mustangs!*) why she'd felt compelled to have so many children. We weren't religious. She was educated—San Diego State, class of 1977. She'd had access to birth control. And they only had the one income from my father's job as a rural mailman for the U.S. Postal Service. It wasn't in anybody's best interest for her to have seven kids.

This is what she told me: "After I had you—that first night you were alive, in fact—I woke up in the night certain that you were dead. We'd put you on our bed between us so you wouldn't fall out and so I could nurse you easy enough in the night, and I woke up with a start for no clear reason but then saw that our blankets were covering your face. And you were so little, so new, that I thought surely you had suffocated. I didn't want to find out. I had only ever wanted the one—you, that is—maybe two, but I felt then that perhaps it was hubris to just have one, that it was tempting fate. I decided that if you were alive when I pulled back the covers, I'd have as many children as I could to sort of nudge fate in the opposite direction, hoping that it would keep you all alive and well on a lark as sort of cosmic penance for me having so many kids, because I'd have to find a way to care for all of you, and it wouldn't exactly be fun, would it. Motherhood made me superstitious as heck, I'll freely admit it."

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There's something people have got all wrong about mothers, by the way, and I'm just going to come out and say it. Mothers aren't obsessed with their children because of any biological predisposition or instinct. They are obsessed because they are bored, and their kids are the only things around with any degree of animation or entertainment value. We—yes, "we"—are obsessed because there is nothing else to do.

I didn't set out to be a stay-at-home dad. Hell, I didn't even set out to be a dad. It's funny how it works out that way. I liked poetry but wasn't inclined to write it, so I taught English instead, and frankly, it sucked. You reach maybe one kid out of a-hundred-and-twenty, and those are terrible stats. Those are the kind of numbers that make people jump off a cliff. And the grading took over my life—weeknights, weekends, didn't matter, I couldn't go out. Math teachers, science teachers—they all have computers or assistants do their

grading because the answers are just right/wrong, but English? It was forty papers a week, and you had to actually *read* them to do the kids any good. People who teach English are saints, and I don't include myself in that category because I couldn't hack it.

So here I am doing this thing I never thought I'd do, but you know what? It's fascinating. You get this weird window into human evolution by watching a little being develop from nothing into something, and linguistically, it doesn't get more thrilling than this. For instance, first they might start with the word "blue"—but to them it doesn't mean what it means to you, to them it just means "color." They'll point to a fire truck and say "blue" because it has a bright color, and they're trying to point out to you that it's striking, but they don't have any of those words yet—they don't even have "red." Then within a month or two of you correcting them ("No, the fire truck is *red*."), they have maybe four more colors, and now "blue" actually *means* "blue"—though sometimes it means "green" because those are close together. But then you'll see them look at something in between, maybe aquamarine, and want to label it but not know how, and you see the little gears churning in their heads processing that, and you don't want to confuse them with an advanced word like aquamarine so you jump in with, "It's sort of a blue-green, isn't it?" And they just look up at you with this flash in their eyes, like, *you can just do that? You can just put two words together and it means something completely different?* And you can see that happening in real time, and it's like you're back in the Pleistocene. You're right there in the cave, and they point at the aquamarine thing and repeat what you said—"boo-gean"—but with cognition this time, and you want to hold them up in the cave-light with both of your shadows flickering on the cave-wall and announce "My offspring is a genius! Behold! The new generation is all *right!*"

So yeah, I'm somewhat obsessed. It's kind of incredible to watch.

But Aoife, she's not that interested. Sure, she loves Sibby to pieces, but she comes home from work seeking affection—tickles, snuggles—that sort of thing. I've tried to tell her about the little observations while we're lying in bed at night going over our day, but her eyes glaze over and I can tell she's just chomping at the bit to tell me how they kept the Russians out of their servers at work that day or broke up a spamming ring in Estonia. She doesn't want to hear about

the tenth time I elicited a tantrum by trying to introduce Sibby to string cheese.

So tonight I was letting her tell me all about the patches they put on the servers that day until I started drifting off to sleep, but then suddenly what was initially the soothing report of rain on the roof in the background shifts abruptly to a thunder of hailstones, and I open one eyelid to interrupt with, "Did you happen to close the chicken coop?"

The baby chicks have developed into kid chicks by now, and they graduated last week to the small coop that I ordered online and assembled out back, complete with a heat source for night time. They were getting bored and rambunctious in their indoor enclosure, pecking at one another and whatnot, so it was time to broaden their horizons (plus, the house was beginning to smell like a latrine).

All we have to do is herd the little buggers into the coop at sundown and shut and latch the hatch, but we've managed to forget the last three nights in a row until one of us remembers only as we are falling asleep and has to then drag him/herself out of bed, head downstairs, and stumble outside to corral the little guys into the structure so they don't get eaten alive. One of them already *has* (by cats or owls or raccoons, or whoever preys on chicks at night in the suburbs of Silicon Valley), and we only started off with just the six.

So this hailstorm is about as intense as it gets, a full-on drum circle on the rooftops, but by the time I've made it to the back porch, it's already letting up. The yard is white with ice—*inches* deep and each as thick as shooter marbles. The patio umbrella is in shreds. I hold my breath before checking the coop but can't imagine they'd have been wandering around in the rain at night. For whatever reason, though, the coop is empty. Maybe they're under the deck? I grab a rake and scoop gingerly among the ice balls so as not to impale a potential surviving chick.

By the time Aoife has put on a robe and come down to join me, I have mounded piles of ice pellets around the yard beside the bodies. All five of the remaining chicks are scattered limp and inert across the lawn.

"Oh dear," she says, as she covers her mouth with the fuzzy cuff of her robe.

“Yes,” I say. “Oh, dear.”

Then, from behind Aoife in the open threshold of the sliding glass door, Sibby appears in her footed fleece pajamas, presumably roused by the hailstorm. We’d only recently switched from the crib to a toddler bed, and it alarms me to see her up and about on her own recognizance without any help from me.

“Seep?” she asks us. “Seep?” Sibby points to the chick lying closest to the back door, splayed out at the base of the porch steps.

“Yes, they’re sleeping,” Aoife tells her and looks at me with this broken-hearted expression that I want to wipe off her face with ice balls because I didn’t even want these fucking chickens to begin with, and here she is looking at me like I am somehow responsible for all of this. If you can’t handle the world being shitty and indiscriminately terrible—I want to tell her—then you shouldn’t have children, because the one thing they are guaranteed to do is feel loads of pain and eventually die on you, and the best scenario possible is that you get to die first.

While Aoife and I are giving one another the evil eye, telepathically blaming each other for all the awfulness in the universe, Sibby comes out in her footie pajamas and ambles down the steps to pick up the fallen chick at the base of the deck. It’s much larger than a baby at this point, about the size of a rag-doll.

She holds up the dead chick for us to see and we try to hide our alarm. “Seep!” she declares again, then runs into the house with her find.

Aoife makes a move as if to chase her in order to extract the chick from our daughter’s grip, but I stop her. “Wait! She’s never gotten this close to them before. I’ve been trying to get her to touch one for weeks and she’s flat-out refused. Let’s at least see what the deal is before we pry it out of her hands. This could be progress.” I know it’s a dead bird, but it’s not like some decaying corpse that’s been rotting on the streets and infected with parasites; this is a thing that until moments ago was alive and kicking, and it was killed not by disease but by blunt force trauma. Aoife looks at me like I am crazy and probably I am, but still she follows me in after Sibby with a degree of deference.

We get to her bedroom and Sibby has crawled back into bed with

her dead chick. She is clutching it gently by the neck and holding it under her chin and cheek, the universal resting place of beloved teddy bears and blankies.

“Seep, nye-nye.”

“Night-night, sweetie,” I say as I kiss her on the forehead, pull up her duvet, and smooth back her raven hair. I put on her lullaby music so she’ll go back to sleep quickly and duck back into the hall where Aoife is fuming by the doorway.

“We are not going to let her sleep with a dead chicken.”

“No, of course not. But look how triumphant and happy she was! She took a risk and did something she has generally been unwilling to do, and I don’t want to slide backwards by telling her she can’t. I’ll stay up and wait till she drifts off and remove the dead chicken while she’s sleeping.” That I would jump through such hoops for our daughter’s maddeningly incremental developmental progress either makes me seem nuts or noble in my wife’s eyes—I can’t really tell which, but her posture softens a little.

“Well, I’m not going back to bed until that dead chicken is out of her room, so I’ll put the kettle on for some tea while we wait. Maybe I’ll clean up the corpses outside and then take a shower too so there’s less to do in the morning.” She yawns, then trudges into the kitchen and—*tik-tik-tik*—ignites the burner on the stove, and I return to our daughter’s room to glide in the corner.

I get into a groove with the glider, which squeaks out a faint, rhythmic plea for WD-40, and then start to frankly wonder about our future. Will we have a drug addict on our hands someday? a mountain climber? a kid with ADHD? a Nobel-prize winner? a daughter who gets raped at the prom? You go into this thinking you have so much sway, and as long as they don’t have a genetic disorder of some kind (and you’d deal with that if they did), you’ve got it pretty much figured out.

But that’s not the world we live in, is it. You might just end up being the guy who’s let his kid get into bed while clutching a dead chicken, and now you will never *not* be that guy, but if you had asked me a year, a month, a week ago if that was possible, I’d have said no fucking way. Parenting is seeming to me to be more and more of a spectator sport, now. You think that all your cheering, your fandom,

your verve has some tangible effect on the outcome, but mostly you get to just sit there and pay a lot of money to watch it unfold.

I wake up abruptly with a searing pain in my chest and realize that I've rocked myself to sleep in the glider. My bathrobe's flopped open, and it turns out that the pain isn't in my chest, it's *on* my chest. There's a young, spry chicken standing on my bare belly—the chicken, the one from Sibby's bed (the formerly dead chicken)—and it's tugging out my little black chest hairs with its beak as if they are grubs. I want to squeeze the little guy out of pure joy but don't want to asphyxiate the damned thing because everyone knows you only get one miracle in a generation, maximum, and I doubt it'll come back to life twice in one night.

I glance over at Sibby, who is sound asleep, and then I smell something distinctly unpleasant. There's a smear of chicken shit on my pajama bottoms, which is easy enough to remedy. I take them off and stand there in my boxers and bathrobe, cradling the hungry chick in the terrycloth crux of my elbow. It must have just been stunned or in shock from all the ice, and the warmth of Sibby's body revived the poor creature. The others, I realize, are probably too far gone now to save.

And just as this sad fact is beginning to sink in, the kettle comes to a piercing boil in the kitchen. I hear the shower running in the adjacent bathroom, the kettle's now shrieking, the smell of chicken shit's fresh on my mind—and just like that I'm back home in my attic bedroom, back in the day.

Little Krissy's got croup.

Mom's in the bathroom with Krissy and the shower's on as hot as it can go. The kettle's on, too, to make a steaming bucket of Vaporub to open up her airways. Dad's finished off his six-pack for the night and is snoring on the couch through all the noise (he's the only one who can—none of the rest of us have slept in days from all the coughing). By some quirk of design (our home is not exactly up to code), the steam and sounds from below always vent into my bedroom. Krissy's cough comes through as more of a howl than a bark and is so unnatural that it conjures the image of torpedoes launching from a submarine way down deep in the sea.

The kettle starts to scream.

“Joey!!” Mom cries up into the vent, knowing I am awake and can't help but hear every little thing. “She's turning blue!!”

I am seventeen and slide down the wooden ladder fireman-style without even taking the rungs, collecting more than a few splinters in the process, one of which will become infected later on.

“I'll run and get the doc!” We are in the hills in the sticks and the woods, closer to Tecate, Mexico by mountain road than any American town with a hospital. “The doc” in this case is in fact a veterinarian, primarily for horses, and lives on a proper ranch a half-mile up the way, but he's always there in a pinch for us human neighbors.

I'm seventeen and pissed at the world and don't believe in anything at that point except getting the fuck out of Dulzura, California (population: not freaking enough)—away from the woods, my folks, and all their little snot-nosed rug-rats. But I also very emphatically don't want my 23-month-old baby sister Krissy—the seventh and final snot-nosed rug-rat—to die. Not tonight, not ever.

Given the driveway gates at both ends, it'll be faster to run than to drive, so I bust out of there in my boxer shorts like my ass is on fire. The only shoes on the porch are either for little kids or my mother's galoshes for wading in all the chicken shit around the henhouse, so I yank those on. I am scrawny for a seventeen-year-old boy, and my mother's boots fit me all too well.

It's just me on a country road at midnight now with the *glub-glub-glub* of galoshes clapping on the pavement. If it weren't so damn awful it'd be hilarious. Soon enough it starts to rain, a rare September storm, and I am relieved because I'm quickly soaked through and you can't tell that I've been crying like a blubbering idiot. I'm thinking what grownups everywhere must be thinking all the goddamned time: *Yes, we're all gonna die, but please don't let it be soon.*

The boots are weighing me down, tripping me up, but I'm in track and can run a five-minute mile unencumbered, so I double-down and summon the fastest song I can think of, “The Kids Aren't Alright” by The Offspring. This song is my anthem, and I wail it often enough when feeling sorry for myself in my bedroom (which is always), convinced that “Jamie” from the song, who dropped out and had a couple of kids, and “Mark” who stays home and smokes pot, are somewhat emblematic of my chronically fecund mother and

vaguely alcoholic dad. I frequently belt out the final lines at the top of my lungs—“What the hell is go-ing on?! / The cruelest dreeeeam, realityyyy!!” to the beat of a broom handle knocking on the ceiling below intended to shut me up. I am usually triumphant in my expressions of teenage misery and ennui.

But now I deploy this punk-rock ode to fragile lives and shattered dreams out of the irrational fear that if I express even the slightest fragment of hope for my sister, even just in my mind, she’ll straight-up die on me. Mothers aren’t the only ones prone to superstition.

So I sprint to the breakneck beat of this bleak song pretending our baby is already gone so that we might earn her back from the brink. And hell—who’s to say that it didn’t work?

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