

## All My Children

I began naming my children when I was four. The habit launched itself via the succession of dolls that were quickly discarded, and the numerous stuffed animals exhausted from affection. There were also objects like the secondhand family car and the rubber plant. Sometimes I named tools like pencils, or apparel like shoes. Naming was a powerful act that asserted propriety and conferred individuation. Names were poetry, sound, and color. Names were to be reveled in.

Once I learned to write, the names of my children began to adorn the margins of books, the backs of lined paper, and school notebooks instead of the assignments I should have been completing.

Like Adam, I named everything within my orbit.

It was simple enough to become addicted to the “name the baby” books my parents had purchased to assist them with each of the four children who would follow me, all in need of appellations. With each succeeding child my parents assumed might be the last, they resorted to multiple, polysyllabic names, so that my three youngest siblings carry a distinctive lilting first name and two rhythmically sonorous middle names each.

So it was that my own children bore, in various combinations, names like Artemis, Portia, Michaela, Malika, Bathsheba, Nathaniel, Anthony, Elijah, Paris, Nehemiah, Elektra, Hannibal, Cleopatra, Lucretia, Isis, and Isaac. Biblical, literary, historical, and mythological, my parthenogenic children sprang into being like Athena from the head of Zeus.

None of my children had actual fathers, or rather, they had various fathers, but not the kind that were in the picture. At least not *my* picture. What indeed did I need with a father, some vague, easily dispensable figure who was remanded to the shadow background of my imagination? I needed (and wanted) only the children themselves, the damp, breezy smell of their skin, their matted hair, the tiny clothes in need of ironing, our secret life together saturated with adventure, language, the five senses, and imagination,

as together, we relished the magic of a world so full of possibility. The moon trailing after us down the freeway like a balloon on a string, the squirrels chattering to each other on the fence posts (what do you think they're saying?), the pretense of a place where M&M's might grow on trees, or a world where dolls and stuffed animals wandered about at night when everyone else was sleeping. All the things I would teach them----to read, to sing, to love animals, to run fast for pleasure!

Over the years I conceived hundreds of children in my imagination and then, over a period of ten rocky years, four or five children of the sperm-meets-egg variety, but it was the real children who also vanished----naughty children!---- before I could hold them in my arms. Blame bad luck, biological errors, the tricks of nature. *Be glad, be glad—something must have been wrong. Try again. Having children is the most natural thing in the world.*

In my dreams I gave birth over and over to laughing, clever babies who promised me on the spot that they were real before dawn broke and they evaporated again and again. I set off in pursuit, scrambling to keep up, trailing in the wake of grief. Days spent mourning what was missing.

There are lessons to be learned from loss, perhaps the most important, the letting go of expectations. But, I railed, long and hard, what's so wrong with expectations? What's wrong with wanting children? *There are too many children in the world already. Have you thought about adoption?*

The truth was, my children had been with me from as early as I could remember, and their refusal now to show their faces bordered on insubordination. How to distinguish sadness from fury. *Come back, come back*, I would cry inconsolably, hands outstretched in the direction of their elusive forms. Male and female, of varying complexions, features, and hair textures, they were there, I knew, because I had felt them, the butterflies inside they'd set into motion. Sometimes if I stood still long enough and closed my eyes, they'd play ring-around-the-rosy before fleeing, laughing as they ran.

Today, my named children continue to wander where they choose and do as they please. They span a decade and though they should be growing up and moving on with their lives, they never seem to age. Despite long absences they are never completely lost to me; in the right mood, I can conjure them at will, and they still come when summoned—often after I have fallen asleep. Sometimes my children and I tell each other stories, like the one they've heard me repeat so often they beg me to stop, pressing their hands to their ears and crying out, *no, not that one again!*----how in my grief after each loss I stalked young and not-so-young pregnant women and mothers on the street and tricked them into talking about the babies they were shepherding in strollers----waiting for the moment when one or another would admit to what I came to call “miscarriage before success.” In truth, what I wanted to hear was my own story, the details of sadness and frustration lining up in parallel, the story that is still without an ending, but that should have gone something like this----how I kept trying and didn’t lose hope, being the determined person that I am, and how eventually, after much patience, real children showed up. Even now, years later, though I’m mostly over it all and past the point of children, there are times I will pause on the edge of a playground when a baby twists his head over the shoulder of some unsuspecting parent to stare knowingly at me, or a stranger’s child runs up to pet my dog, and in the moment our eyes connect—and I do mean, connect----there is a pang, a ghostly aura of mutual longing, and I have to fight hard not to utter the words, *Are you really mine?*

My mother once remarked that children can be one’s greatest blessing, as well as one’s greatest curse. She offered these words in an effort to comfort me after one of the miscarriages. At the time all I heard was *blessing*, like an echo in my head.

Over the years, as if to appease for their absence, my children have given me gifts: Humility. Time. Solitude. My wise children opened doors for me—I mean, unlocked and swung them open wide and shouted into the endless space of possibility beyond----“You are free to do what you want!”—graduate school, career, travel, law school, writing—choices it’s not clear I would have otherwise made quite the way I did. With no

help from me certainly, my children, it seems, have turned out to have known me better than I knew myself, urging me forward in the world, each one the reason I did something else.

They never suggest or accuse me of not having been enough for them, of lacking some version of maternal staying power. On the contrary, they have been polite and thoughtful, seeing to it, sweet things, that I was never troubled by their needs, their colds and chicken pox, their skinned knees, the worry of fever at three a.m., their slipping grades, their late-night adolescent antics of missed curfews and bad friends that would have kept in a state of paralysis. They have taken care, assuring me that they knew better than I. *We have spared you*, they chorus in unison, good little children, crowding together briefly around me as if posing for a photo.

But, obstinate little creatures that they are, they also remain steadfastly unapologetic for the sorrow their vanishings caused. My disbelief . . . even now it is difficult to imagine----where did they go, and why? For consolation, I have borrowed other people's children, even on occasion shamelessly passing some off as my own in a complex delicious lie of omission. For an afternoon I could vicariously partake of such wild joy, inhabiting the rolling, confident gait of a mother in charge, while the little ones ran ahead, glancing back to make sure I was still there.

Over the years I have learned that time spent on regret is time wasted. What's the point? And so it is that I have moved on. In truth, the ghosts of my children are the ghosts of my other selves, and whatever remorse I feel is the trace of leftover yearnings for the roads not yet taken in a life that has been marked and characterized by nothing less than surprises. These little specters, unjoined and self-terminated, linger with me in spirit----sometimes four, sometimes five or six, I lose count----and, to jolt me from sadness, their voices now merge with the clamorous voices in my head, that I am not who I thought I was, and that they have kept me free to discover who I am. Not without shock, I consider these noisy, beautiful children of various hues, faces flushed, eyes burning with excitement, and for the first time I imagine them briefly then as they might

really have been----as troubled and flawed and human as I—and it is then I am able to say what I have never before said. I thank them for all that they have done for me—the gift of a life so different from what I'd planned that it took me years to recognize it as truly my own---before they are gone again, like quicksilver.

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