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## Press Start & Small Things

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PRESS START  
&  
SMALL THINGS

By

Brian Brown

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

Master of Arts

in

English Literature and Writing

Approved:

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Dr. Jennifer Sinor  
Major Professor

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Dr. Christopher Cokinos  
Committee Member

---

Dr. Michael Sowder  
Committee Member

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY  
Logan, Utah

2011

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## ABSTRACT

Press Start  
&  
Small Things

by

Brian Brown, Master of Arts

Utah State University, 2011

Major professor: Dr. Jennifer Sinor  
Department: English

This thesis project comprises two essay-length memoir pieces exploring the dimensions of fatherhood accompanied by a critical introduction. The essay “Press Start” explores the influence of video games on a young father, tapping his own childhood experiences to illuminate his relationship to the games as well as to his spouse and children. “Small Things” shows his efforts in preparing for the arrival of twins, an event which threatens to disrupt the family dynamic. Touching on issues of protection, separation, and control, the essays work together to comment on the complexities of the father-child relationship from a father’s point of view. The critical introduction examines the role of the father in broad terms and discusses the work of other writers who are treating the same subjects.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project could not have happened without the dedication and encouragement of Dr. Jennifer Sinor, who taught me about the rich field of creative nonfiction and guided me through the necessary steps and revisions that brought these pieces to where they now are. My profound thanks go to her for her influence in shaping and disciplining my writing.

My thanks also go to Dr. Michael Sowder and Dr. Christopher Cokinos for their willingness to be on my committee, their insightful comments and suggestions, and their encouragement in this project as well as in my work for their courses.

Most of all, I am grateful to my patient wife, Traci, whose endurance was as valuable to me as her unflagging confidence and timely pep talks – thank you for supporting me.

Without my children, there would have been no story to tell. This work is for them as much as for myself.

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## CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

### **Project Topic**

Three days before our twins were born, I put a picture of Traci on our blog. In the picture, she's sitting on the couch just below the window in our front room, her hands resting on either side of her 36-week-pregnant belly. Light from the window accentuates unusual contours – two distinct mounds separated by a slight depression running between. The upper right lump is a boy; the lower left one a girl.

This pregnancy had been different from her previous two. Even before the ultrasound revealed not one baby, but two floating around in the black spaces inside her, Traci noticed that the expected changes had been different: her weight shot up earlier on, her heartburn was more severe, her blood pressure rose earlier, she had less energy and more back pain. She also started feeling the babies move sooner. Whenever the babies started kicking, she'd call me over to feel, taking my wrist and moving my hand to the active spot. After a few moments of silently straining to detect the slightest jolt, I often wouldn't feel anything and Traci would say, "They must have just stopped. You wouldn't believe how hard he was kicking me!"

Other times I would feel it. With these, our third and fourth babies, as well as with our prior two, those elusive fetal movements were my only connection to the mysterious something in there. How surreal to feel those faint hiccups like a telegraph from the other side of that fleshy barrier, or a tiny foot pushing from inside, a ping-pong-ball-sized bump of reality. But my brief encounters during visiting hours were little next to Traci's months of exclusive custody.

For fathers, familiarity is harder come-by. Despite the ultrasounds and books, despite the changes taking place in Traci, despite even the precious trans-membranic contact, the baby never seemed real to me until that barrier was breached, and the baby delivered. Then I could see, feel, hear, and come to know the baby as more than a lump with a pulse, more than that faint telegraph signal. That was when being Dad began.

That title, though it applies to me four times over, still feels new to me. “Dad” is still my dad and the role makes me nervous. The primary source of that anxiety is the fear that any negligence or mistakes on my part may have a profoundly negative formative impact on my children, who are, after all, going to grow up and become individuals who will blame my poor parenting for their problems. Though my dad’s job seemed clear enough when I was growing up – go to work, provide for the family, drive the minivan on family trips, teach us to kids play catch and ride bikes, and keep us in line – my own experiences in fatherhood have been devoid of certainties.

For one thing, how can I be sure that my dad’s approach was really best? Growing up, I never felt particularly close to Dad. I didn’t feel comfortable talking to him about my problems or asking him questions. Phone conversations with him still require enduring more than one awkward silence. I don’t want that with my kids. I want them to feel closer to me than I did to my dad, but I have no pattern for establishing a closer relationship. For all I know, the distance between us was as much my fault as it was his. Part of it, no doubt, arose from cultural norms that discourage men from being nurturers.

Lucky for me, those norms are in flux. Lisa Belkin’s [New York Times](#) article, “The Evolution of Dad,” notes that today “Dads...are redefining the role, rejecting old expectations while still answering to them, knowing they don’t want the earlier model but not



yet certain what the new model should be.” Talking to my mom over the phone one day, she echoed this sentiment. In response to the way my brother and I have helped with the kids, she mentioned being impressed at how often we will pitch in and change a diaper. She said that, though they raised six kids, she could probably count on both hands the total number of diapers my dad ever changed. “And he changed more than his dad ever did,” she added.

While I feel lucky (yes, lucky!) to be part of this shift in parenting norms, anxiety arises from not fully knowing what is expected of me as a father. Michael Chabon writes in his essay collection *Manhood for Amateurs*, “The handy thing about being a father is that the historic standard is so pitifully low” (11). His observation opens a story about grocery shopping with his son. A complete stranger approaches them in the checkout line and tells Chabon that she could tell he was a good dad. This incident, for him, proves a discrepancy exists between fathers and mothers. Unlike fathering, “Good mothering is not measurable in a discrete instant.... Good mothering is a long-term pattern, a lifelong trend of behaviors most of which go unobserved at the time by anyone” (12). He observes that while most dads these days, including him, including me, get applauded for any degree of involvement, mothers tend to go largely unappreciated. While fathers of my generation are more involved than our own fathers were, mothers are still trying to measure up to an impossibly high set of expectations our culture imposes on their role.

And perhaps this is one of the reasons there is so much more written about motherhood. Women have been reflecting on their roles for much longer. The recent resurgence of memoir as a genre coupled with third wave feminism have given women a platform and a vehicle for telling their stories. But writing about fatherhood is a relatively new phenomenon, a trend some refer to as “Dad Lit” (Warner). A cursory search of

Amazon.com for “motherhood essays” brings up over 200 results, while “fatherhood essays” garners only 95. Written material that explores, examines, challenges, and supports the motherhood experience outweighs the literature on the fatherhood experience about two to one. Considering how fatherhood has changed in recent generations, and considering the changes imposed on new fathers, who have very little preparation – if any – for those changes, the potential for meaningful exploration is vast, and so the recent upsurge in “Dad lit” is coming none too soon.

Much of this material is being written by older stay-at-home or work-from-home dads, which makes my perspective as a young father of four young children unique. I am not established in a career, and my fatherhood experience is limited to the last three and a half years. Rather than writing from a position of stability, with a career, a home, and grown, more independent children, I am in a state of flux and uncertainty. I am still being shaped by schooling and the newness of my experiences. This lends a sense of immediacy to my work, and allows me to map the changes as they come, rather than working purely through reflection. By contributing these experiences, I can help with the ongoing redefinition of the fatherhood role for my generation, informing society at large on what it means to be a father today, exposure that many young fathers like me will welcome.

For my Plan B thesis project, I have written two essays that focus on my relationship with my children and specifically on the problem of parental control. My first essay, “Press Start,” focuses on video gaming. The essay’s through line narrates an episode in my adult life in which I come to the decision to sell my gameboy in an effort to limit the time I spend playing video games as well as control my children’s exposure to them. Into this through line are woven scenes from my childhood and adolescence, showing some of the ways my

gaming habits have influenced my relationships with friends and family. These scenes also help to reflect on the reasons I play games and the value they may have. After selling my gameboy, I resort to other video game outlets, recognizing that they are not inherently destructive and can still be part of my life. To communicate the idea that I haven't given up video games entirely, the essay begins and ends with present tense scenes of current gaming. These scenes show my game-playing as a stress-relief mechanism that, when controlled, actually helps me interact in healthy ways with my kids.

The second essay, "Small Things," takes the theme of control in a different direction as I explore the idea that children need a measure of freedom from restraint – that growing up is in fact a process of gaining more and more independence from parental control. The essay focuses on the months preceding the birth of my twins, using scenes of some of the things we did in order to prepare for their arrival. Throughout, I share my concerns about how the birth of the twins will change the current family dynamic, specifically by limiting the time I have to spend with my other children. By contrasting my family with a neighboring family, in which the children seem to me to be neglected by the parents, the essay questions how much control is necessary, and where a child's need for independence comes in. Together, my two essays illuminate the relationship between fathers and children, commenting on and complicating the issue of control.

### **Lit Review**

In writing these essays, I have been interested in what other writers have said about fatherhood. One book that was a great resource for gaining a wide view of what forms this writing can take was *The Book of Dads*, compiled and edited by Ben George. This book of

essays boasts works by a wide gamut of talented writers sharing their experiences with fatherhood.

Like my own essays, most of these in the collection focus on the effects that fatherhood has on the life of a man, whether the children are his biologically, by marriage, adoption, or some other relationship. Given the broad range of experiences, each author takes a different approach. Several write about their struggle with the role of fatherhood itself, asking what a father is and what a father must do. Some reflect on their relationship with their own father to illuminate their identity as a father. Some give practical pointers or acknowledge mistakes, while others are more reflective.

One thing many of the fatherhood essays I found had in common was a wide time range, covering events from when the children are first born to when they are anywhere from six to thirteen years old, or even older in some instances. This wide scope, as shown in Charles Baxter's essay, "The Chaos Machine," lends the essay authority in some ways, allowing the writer to examine the long-term effects of fatherhood, or how things have changed over time. In his essay, Baxter, while helping his son move out of a college dorm room after his first year, reflects on his son's birth and childhood leading up to this moment. This structure reinforces Baxter's insight that fatherhood "appears to be made up of small, mosaic-like blocks" while allowing him to also emphasize the fleeting quality of childhood.

Other essays reign in the time range quite a bit more, focusing on a single event and its effects on the relationship between father and child. In an essay titled "The Cut," Michael Chabon's narrative is restricted to a single night while and his wife discussed circumcising their second son. The narrowed narrative scope increases the reflective capacity of the piece; "The Cut" includes ruminations on the God of Abraham, genital mutilation practices,

fatherhood's inherent deception, and other topics. Many of Chabon's essays follow this pattern, using a shorter time span – visiting a museum or drawing with his kids – and focusing his attention on thematic reflection rather than using a broad range of events to show a larger pattern.

These different strategies for navigating time were instructive to me. My essay, “Press Start,” is closer in structure to Baxter's essay, using a through line punctuated by reflections from my past to illuminate the history of my video gaming and the formation of the habits my through line attempts to curb. Reading the ways in which writers like Baxter and others pivot between the through line and set pieces was helpful as I tried moving between the two. Though it was easy to miss while reading, closer examination of the ways various writers accomplished this showed how important clear time pegs and repeated scenic cues are for grounding the reader during these shifts. Some writers also used tense changes to further distinguish between their through line and the set pieces, which “Press Start” does to differentiate the opening and closing scenes' time frame from that of the rest of the essay.

My second essay, “Small Things,” was informed by another essay from *The Book of Dads*, one by Anthony Doerr. His essay about his twin boys appealed to me on a personal level when I read it, anticipating twins of my own at the time. In a vivid scene, one of Doerr's sons hits his head on the fireplace and has to be taken to the hospital for stitches. Doerr writes:

“I'm thinking about cholera, dysentery, fevers, oxcarts, and open wells – all of history's child destroyers. If you had a baby in Chicago in 1870, there was a 50 percent chance he'd die before he reached age five. If you had a baby in London in 1750, there was a 66 percent chance he'd die before he reached age five. For the

entire history of humanity, except for the past, say, eighty years, parents were losing every other child.” (83)

This moment of reflection is one of nine such instances when something about his children prompts him to think of previous generations of fathers and families, and the impermanence of human life. These instances are mainly ordinary experiences. The piece opens with a simple scene of Doerr walking home from school reflecting on some fossilized footprints he'd been reading about, which scholars hypothesize belonged to a young family. Other events, are similarly commonplace, providing a quiet narrative platform on which he is able to build his reflective work.

Doerr's use of ordinary events inspired me to give attention to ordinary things and use them for my own reflections on fatherhood. In “Small Things,” I use events like transitioning my kids into bunk beds, brushing teeth, eating lunch, and potty-training as scenes from which to move into reflections about my role as a father and the control I have. Like Doerr's, my essay includes a scene of one of my children getting stitches, the impact of which I feel is heightened when put in context of more commonplace events. By focusing on the everyday, my essay is able to give a more accurate and realistic portrayal of the daily demands of fatherhood.

Another essay that exemplifies this technique was by Brandon Schrand. In “Comparative History,” Schrand wonders whether the disturbing similarities between himself and the father he never knew mean that he is doomed to repeat all his father's mistakes. Selecting episodes ranging from his early marriage and college years through his oldest son's first five years and including discussions about his own father's history, Schrand ultimately concludes that the choice of what kind of father to be is his, and is made one day at a time.

He emphasizes that this realization did not come all at once, but was a gradual outcome of daily routines – visiting the post office, the park, or ice cream shop. Schrand concludes with a paragraph about “tuning in to those Zen moments” which abound in parenting, which are typically ordinary events, such as a time that he looked in on his kids to find his two-year-old daughter sitting in his five-year-old’s lap as they read and chatted together.

One of Schrand’s strengths is his ability to balance scene and summary in telling his story. In his essays, both scene and summary are packed with vivid descriptions, down to minute details, that render his narrative more credible and lively. Though he makes the blending seem effortless, as I navigated my own essays, I discovered it was difficult to strike the right balance. Often I found the need to turn summary into a scene, or else condense a scene into summary. In earlier versions of “Press Start” the episode in which I got up early to play Donkey Kong was told purely in summary. As I revised the essay though, I recognized that the episode would benefit from a more scenic treatment, which would do more to emphasize thematic elements. But I also discovered the critical role that summary plays in tying scenes together and making the essay more coherent.

The more I read by other fathers, the more encouraged I am by the richness of the subject matter. Reading these stories have informed both my own writing and my parenting as I reflect on how I would react – or how I have reacted – in similar situations, and what others are doing to fill this ambiguous and changing role.

### **The Future**

As my kids grow, so hopefully, will my writing. Eventually, I hope to work on essays that could work together to form a book-length memoir, which will require more working backward than forward. Though my two essays touch on some of my growing up

experiences, much of that material remains untapped. Rather than following the pattern of Brandon Schrand's memoir, *Ender's Hotel*, which focuses on his life before becoming a father, my work would probably be structured more like Chabon's *Manhood for Amateurs* or John Price's *Man Killed By Pheasant*. Price's memoir seems like an especially good model; it includes essays that tell his story from childhood, through high school and college, and into marriage and fatherhood. Price blends humor with insight and research to create a collection of engaging, thought-provoking essays that work together to show how he came to be the man and father that he is.

One of the most impressive things to me about Price's work is his use of recurrent themes and locations that bind the separate essays together. An early essay focuses on how he reacted as a young boy to his mother's miscarriage. That essay is moving enough on its own, but the memory of that miscarriage pops up again and again throughout his later essays, hanging over Price throughout his life. It recurs most powerfully in an essay about his and his wife's own pregnancy as he worries that "to be born is no small thing. It can go wrong, babies can be lost, as James was, and I know how easily hope can then become a kind of curse, following you through the years to a moment like this." This ability to show how certain experiences can continue to shape who we are in unexpected ways over many years seems to be one of the main pay-offs of a book-length work.

And for me, I think this would be one of the most daunting challenges as well. It would require me to delve into my formative years and draw out experiences that would be thematically consistent with what I've written, while also discovering even deeper levels of meaning and significance behind some of the experiences I have included. For instance, looking at my teenage years and earlier may illuminate some of the reasons that I have



become overprotective as a parent rather than lenient. Writing about my childhood is sure to help me understand more about my parenting choices while also helping me understand my kids in another light.

I don't know whether these essays will end up as part of a book-length work or not. Either one could also fit into an essay collection like *The Book of Dads*, or be published as a stand alone essay. I do know that writing these essays has been a rewarding experience, changing the way I write and the way I parent, and I do not plan on stopping here.

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## PRESS START

Curled in a ball, rolling at top speed, I dodge enormous stalactites and bombs dropping from the ceiling in pursuit of the giant piñata-like goat trotting just ahead, kicking up boulders and causing all of this debris to fall. I don't know how many laps we've made around the cavernous track now – the walls are a blur at this speed – but the sparks and smoke issuing from the goat's hind legs promise that it won't take much more to bring it down.

I weave past another stalactite and barely miss colliding with an airborne boulder to draw alongside the beast again. A hard bank to the right slams my exposed spikes into its patchwork flank. It bellows and counters with a ball of lightning fired from its horns. The projectile buzzes straight ahead, bounces off a wall, and comes right at me as I cut under the creature's belly. An unexpected bump on the ground sends me airborne right into the pulsing light, which crackles as it engulfs me, uncurls me midair, and lays me out face down on the ground. The beast gallops off as I pick myself up. I've got plenty more hearts.

Just as I'm getting up to speed again, a head appears in my peripheral vision. My three-year-old has sidled up alongside where I'm stretched on the couch and is watching the battle unfolding on my laptop screen. I turn to look at him. "I want breakfast, Daddy."

"Not yet, buddy. Let's wait for Mommy to come down." This is my typical response these mornings, so Dallin turns back to the TV without protesting, joining Audrey in watching the last episode on our Dora the Explorer DVD. Traci will be up soon. With our five-month old twins waking her up throughout the night, she's not ready to abandon sleep when Dallin and Audrey bounce into our room at 7 ready to start the day, so it falls to me to take them downstairs to watch their movie of choice (Dora every day recently) while we let

Mommy get another hour or so of sleep. And that hour is as precious to me as it is to her – it is one of my only opportunities to steal some time for my current gaming fix: an emulation of Majora’s Mask that I can play on my laptop, instead of a Nintendo 64.

Turning back to my game, I make quick work of the goat boss, which, after one or two more blows, tosses its head, rams into the wall, and is buried in an avalanche, vanquishing the evil spirit that was perpetuating winter in the mountain realm. On the game’s internal clock it’s noon of the second day in a repeating three-day cycle. At the end of the third day, the moon will crash into the earth. Until I am in a position to stop it, my only option will be to warp back to the first day in order to buy myself more time. That leaves me about a day and a half to explore the thawed out mountainside.

That day and a half translates to roughly forty minutes in real time, but I’m not thinking about that. My time for playing will be up before then; I’ll count myself lucky if I can get the powder keg, win some gold powder at the Goron race, and have my sword reforged before Traci comes down for breakfast – and before Dora gets Coquí back to his island. Outside the dungeon, I warp down to the mountain village to save time.

Almost two years earlier, I was scanning the bookshelf in my oldest brother’s room while Traci brushed her teeth before bed. Among the medical texts – *John Hopkins Internal Medicine Board Review*, *The ICU Book* – and the Wheel of Time series, which he had tried to get me to read all those years ago when we’d roomed together at college, I spotted Todd’s gameboy advance, a dull red in the weak lamp light reaching the shelf.

I picked it up to see what game was inside. Yoshi’s Island. So that was what had become of Becky’s game. A few months previous, at my parents’ house in Utah, I had asked

my youngest sister about borrowing it, but she didn't know where it had ended up. I certainly hadn't expected to find it here, 1,500 miles away in Todd's Michigan bedroom. Feeling suddenly furtive, I glanced around the room.

I wasn't trespassing – Todd and Kadee had invited Traci and me to stay in their room, it being the only room that could accommodate our small family during the brief visit we were paying them. Dallin, who would be three in just over a month, was asleep on his cousin's old crib mattress over by the glass doors to the backyard, while Audrey, two months, snoozed in a bassinet alongside our bed. This relegated Kadee to her daughter Gracie's bed and Gracie to the top bunk of Benjamin's new bunk beds, leaving Todd to sleep on the couch – if he was planning on sleeping at all. For all I knew, he might stay up all night playing World of Warcraft with his Australian guild mates before heading back to the hospital in Pontiac for an early morning shift.

Considering the extent to which I'd inconvenienced my brother and his wife, I probably shouldn't have been snooping around their room. Also as a courtesy to my brother who had slid the family minivan off the icy freeway into a ditch on his way out to the airport to pick us up in a snowstorm, I shouldn't have been planning on sneaking Yoshi's Island into my luggage to take home with me. But Todd probably wouldn't notice. Besides, it wasn't even his game.

Casually, in order to not arouse Traci's detection, I palmed the game, meandered over to where our luggage lay beside the bed and slipped the game into a pocket of our carry-on bag, before wandering into the bathroom to see if Traci was ready for bed yet.

Video games had always been a major field of competition among my siblings. Our first gaming console – not counting the Commodore 64 – was a Super Nintendo. The scene couldn't have been much different than that of many families getting their first video game system. I was eleven on that Christmas, the third of my parents' six kids. As we reached the end of the presents, one of my siblings – I want to say either Kerri or Jason – was handed an inconspicuous rectangular package, skinnier and shorter than the annual box of Sees chocolates. The wrapping came off to reveal a black box dominated by a cartoon graphic of Mario, Bowser, Donkey Kong and others riding go-karts. Red lettering along the bottom said Super Nintendo.

“But we don't have a...” someone began before being halted by an electric glance passing between us. A frenzied dash downstairs brought us to stand in an awed half-circle around the Super Nintendo, boxed and sitting on the white-washed bricks of the family room fireplace, shedding its mystique liberally into the Christmas air.

I am unaware of the conversations between my parents that had culminated in so wonderful a gift. It must have been Dad's idea, all things computer falling under his jurisdiction by virtue of his working and playing on our Amiga 2000. Whatever factors had prevented Mom and Dad from buying the original Nintendo console and whatever had kept them from buying the Super Nintendo until three years after it had been released had apparently lost arguing power against our desperate pleading.

Of course there were rules – at first. For a few years, we played in half-hour turns, regulated zealously by siblings impatient for their next turn. Homework and chores factored in the equation, but were not as rigidly enforced as at our neighbors' house, where controllers were locked up until earned. To maximize play time, single-player games like The Legend of

Zelda: A Link to the Past won out over multi-player games, where you would have to share a turn with another sibling. And that's where the competition got fierce. With six of us taking turns, it became a kind of race to be the first to do anything – first to beat a level, dungeon, course, map, or game; first to find all the bonuses or power-ups; first to solve a puzzle, uncover a side story, or other quest. And being first gave you the right to tell all of your siblings, with great relish, how to do it when their turn came along.

It proved difficult to make a lot of headway in only thirty minutes of gameplay, so we learned early to steal time whenever we could. Todd discovered that the first one up on Saturday mornings could get a longer turn. He had an advantage in this area, being the oldest and sleeping in the basement bedroom. The rest of us had Mom and Dad's room to get past, not to mention the rest of the siblings.

The earliest I ever managed –possibly the standing family record – was 4 am. Knowing I had the chance to pull into the lead and forge into uncharted territory in our newest game, Donkey Kong Country, I snuck downstairs, inserted the cartridge as gingerly as possible into the Super Nintendo, and did all I could to minimize the loud “click” of the sliding purple power switch. And my stealth reaped rich rewards.

After two hours of bad-guy bouncing action in the pre-dawn basement darkness, I had reached the wintery fourth world by the time Todd emerged from his room, wrapped in his quilt. Oh how sweet the mix of disappointment and incredulity on his face when he saw just how far ahead of him I'd gotten.

“How long have you been playing?”

“I just started,” I lied, resorting to the standard line and then playing out the rest of my half-hour turn with all the smugness a twelve-year-old can muster.



It must have been in part a memory of that competition and the smugness of underhanded victory that led me, fourteen years later, to swipe Yoshi's Island from his bedroom. Back home, I pulled the game out of my luggage and set it by my gameboy on the nightstand. The best time I'd found for playing was at bedtime. With Dallin in bed, I usually found I had some time to myself, perfect for putting in a game and playing for a half hour or so as Traci fed baby Audrey and then got ready for bed herself. Often, Traci would start telling me about her day while she took out her contacts, and I would try to listen, but dodging spiky projectiles launched by giant piranha plants or chasing down the floating bubble carrying baby Mario away often took too much of my concentration, and in the middle of her stories about what the kids had done that day, she would catch the inattentiveness of my "oh yeah?" and sigh.

Though, I had beaten Yoshi's Island at least three or four times before, it stayed fresh, fun, and even challenging as many times as I played it. It also carried with it a clear memory of a New Year's night at Greg McFadden's house in high school. It was my first time through the game, which my family didn't own, and several of our friends had gathered at Greg's. While we debated whether or not we should go to the First Night celebration downtown, I kept busy playing Yoshi's Island. I don't recall going to First Night, though some of the friends may have.

But that was the norm through most of my junior high and high school years, a scenario that would play itself again and again. Whether it was playing Final Fantasy II at Luke's with Billy Joel's "All About Soul" in the background, or playing Jet Force Gemini at Nick's, many of my friendships revolved around video games – especially games that my

family didn't have. We played multi-player games, too, like Mariokart, Goldeneye, Smash Brothers, but I wonder now how the time given to those games compares to the time I spent playing solo while my friend – or friends – watched.

I didn't finish Yoshi's Island after smuggling it home from Todd's. Around halfway through my latest visit to the island, the nostalgia factor started to wear off and I found a new game to try out. I bought Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire used with my left-over Christmas money, but obnoxious deviations from the storyline of the movie that the game was based on, as well as too-simple gameplay made the game more irritating than fun. Excruciatingly long levels kept me playing longer into the night, as I slogged through the never-ending sewer, or forest, or underwater levels. But the game would only save after I'd beaten a level, so I couldn't stop partway through. I kept playing, hoping maybe some part of the game might actually be fun. Besides, if I didn't beat the game, it would mean that the game had beaten me.

And so, after several nights of irksome playing, with a sore neck from hours of lying with my head propped up, I finally faced Voldemort and lived, beating the game. The bedroom was all dark except for the glowing screen of my gameboy, which shed its pale light onto my face and pillow as I watched the ending cut scene, all still frames and cheesy music, reminiscent of hokey Sunday school film strips from my childhood. I switched off the gameboy and blindly reached over to set it on my night stand.

Beside me, turned towards the opposite wall, Traci stirred a little, indicating that she had registered the change. In the morning she would probably ask, as she usually did, how late I had stayed up playing. It was after one. I could probably get away with telling her it had been after midnight. She might or might not probe for more specifics.

Apart from these mild interrogations, Traci was usually cautious of being critical. She had actually encouraged me to buy the Harry Potter game, perhaps to avoid playing the role of the disapproving wife, standing in the background shaking her head while her husband watches sports, goes out with the guys, or does some other incomprehensible “husband thing.” Video games were my “husband thing,” and they were perhaps the least comprehensible to her.

Traci hadn’t grown up with video games the way I had. Her family owned an Atari and a Nintendo but both were eventually sentenced to long-term storage in the shed after countless controller-throwing, door-slamming altercations. She told me once that there was a dimension in video games that she just couldn’t see. Still, she indulged me, willing to be long-suffering if not enthusiastic about how much time I spent on the gameboy and that was enough to make me feel guilty, from time to time.

Not like when I was younger. Gaming was guilt-free throughout my childhood and adolescence. I once called off a sleepover at Luke’s house just because my family got a new game – Super Metroid. I don’t think he even held it against me. I had dashed into the house to grab a toothbrush and a change of clothes, and, popping downstairs to tell Mom and Dad that we were leaving, I found everyone watching as Todd played an unfamiliar game. I sidled around the side of the TV to see a giant green sphere bobbing lazily back and forth, dropping little spores from the top of the screen. The eerie music and the motion of that sphere mesmerized me, and our sleepover plans were canceled.

The spell lasted weeks, maybe months after this, even when my mother’s parents came to visit from their home outside of Portland, Oregon. When we visited them, the vast

wooded backyard stretching from the house to a small creek that bordered my grandparents' property offered us kids hours of exploration in the damp Oregon air. We went on trips, visiting the science museum in Portland, or heading to the Oregon Coast, stopping at Camp 18, a lumberjack-themed restaurant on highway 26, for pancakes and sausage links. But when they came to our house in southeast Washington, our gaming routine remained unchanged.

“Those things are going to turn your brains to mush!” Grandpa warned after descending the stairs and finding us clustered on the couches and armchairs of the family room.

Busy as I was jumping off the ground and firing another missile into Crocomire's wide open mouth, I couldn't look up. The beast roared, pawed the ground with its long red arms, and took a crunching step back, flashing white the whole time to indicate I'd hit the right spot. After dodging a volley of fiery projectiles, I jumped again, trying to be in position as soon as it opened its mouth again. My missiles weren't actually doing any damage, but each hit forced the monster backwards onto weaker ground, which would eventually give away, dropping it into the boiling lava. I'd seen Todd do this already. The monster opened its mouth.

Just as I fired another missile, Grandpa sidled in front of the TV, arms raised over his head, his tongue hanging out. “Bleh!” he shrieked, using the voice he typically reserved for his finger-puppet-monster-out-the-nose trick.

“Grandpa!” I leaned far over the arm of the recliner and craned my neck to see past him and make sure my missile hit its mark – I couldn't afford to let this boss gain any ground. The monster's roar told me the shot was good.

Grandpa walked past the TV and bullied my siblings into getting up to give him hugs. Typically, we would have been ready to greet him and Grandma at the door, but their arrival this time had coincided with my closely-pitched battle against Crocomire, and my momentum was too good to pause it now. I'd get up as soon as I finished the hulking creature off – maybe after I saved the game.

“Look at you all! You're a bunch of zombies!” The same tirade. If we had been able to look through his eyes, maybe we would have seen what he'd meant, but the only thing on our minds at the time was getting the next turn.

Through pictures, I have seen it, that signature glass-eyed look on my siblings' faces, on my own. In one picture, taken from the same place Grandpa would have stood after arriving from his four-hour drive, I'm probably sixteen or seventeen, sitting on that same auburn recliner, the one that I would break my toe on coming around the corner too fast one afternoon. I've got a Super Nintendo controller in my hand, and I'm twisting my mouth in a goofy face for the camera, but my eyes, burned red by the flash striking them in the low light, are not looking at the photographer – they're averted, fixed on whatever game I'm playing.

There's a button, invisible in the photograph, on that plastic controller in my hands, a small rubbery black button labeled “start” that will likely pause the action of whatever is going on in front of that gaze long enough to look up, to smile, to greet, to welcome with a hug. Unwilling to press it, to suspend the fantasy for even an instant, I played on, brushing off anything outside of the colorful, insular world of the game.

By the time this picture was taken, we would have had a Nintendo 64. Upgrading our platform reverted us back to our cut-throat turn-taking, but to make the wait between turns more tolerable and allay some animosity, Dad hooked the Super Nintendo up to the old

Amiga monitor and placed it next to the TV, so we could replay games like Final Fantasy III or Chrono Trigger while waiting for our turn on the 64's new Zelda game: The Ocarina of Time.

I have no doubt that The Legend of Zelda is what got my parents to buy the Nintendo 64. The Super Nintendo's Zelda game, A Link to the Past, had been a big hit with all of us, including Mom who had given her character the nickname her teasing (and perhaps jealous) older brothers had called her: Special. Dad dedicated long hours – maybe more than the rest of us – to the quest for every last piece of heart. So the Nintendo 64's 3D installment in that same, well-loved series, was enough to push my parents to upgrading their gaming system. When Majora's Mask, the sequel to Ocarina of Time, came out, it only held two save slots, so my parents bought two cartridges in order to give more of us a chance to play.

As I lay in bed after finishing Harry Potter, wondering what I could do to make up for such a disappointing gaming experience, the Zelda series was an obvious solution. Dad had a new Zelda game, Minish Cap, that had been made especially for gameboy advance. I hadn't played it yet, but I'd heard it was fun. Dad would surely lend it to me.

Weeks later, I found myself propped against the headboard in the dark bedroom again. For hours I'd paddled up and down the waterways of Hyrule in search of Kinstones, pieces of heart, empty bottles, and especially the entrance to the next dungeon. My throat was dry.

Earlier, over an hour ago, Traci had entered the room. Without saying a word, she had walked around the bed, fiddled with the gap in the curtains that never stayed closed, and sat down on her side of the mattress. She had taken out her earrings, lotioned hands and elbows,

removed her glasses, folding the earpieces before setting them on the night stand, and pulled the covers up to her chin, all with an exaggerated quality to her motions intended to send me a signal: “This is it. I’m calling it a night.” Even out of the corner of my eye it had been obvious.

At the time, I must have told myself I was almost ready to call it a night myself. First I just had to get back to the forest where I was pretty sure I’d find a place I hadn’t explored yet with my newly-acquired raft. I told myself that after checking that one last spot, I would turn the game off. Yet once again, Traci fell asleep to the soft clicks of the buttons as I told myself over and over that I was almost done.

Hours later, I was still glued to the tiny, two-inch screen of a device that was causing my wife of four years more and more irritation with each passing night, becoming increasingly irritated myself as I wandered from screen to screen without turning up any of the things I was looking for. The raft had opened up new avenues, but each had turned into a dead end, disappointing me with obstacles I still didn’t have the equipment to surmount. Suddenly an urge that had been brewing for months bubbled up out of the texture of Traci’s silent disapproval and my own guilty conscience: I needed to get rid of my gameboy.

In that moment of clarity, I switched it off without saving the game, closed the abruptly darkened screen, and set the gameboy on my nightstand..

The decision to ditch the gameboy came suddenly, but I had been heading in this direction for years. I trace the beginning to when I was beaten by Metroid Prime 2 on the Gamecube four years earlier. I could not defeat the boost ball guardian. Or maybe it was the bomb guardian, I can’t remember clearly now, but it was definitely not the game’s final boss.

This kind of defeat was a first for me. In the same week of that summer, my months-long campaign to beat all three single-player storylines on Starcraft without using cheat codes met with crushing defeat against the Overmind in the final mission of the game.

At the same time, I was engaged to Traci and working full time. At least three times a week I was driving a half hour to Traci's house in order to spend time with her and work on our wedding plans. With marriage on my horizon, especially marriage to someone with a negative view of video games, I was beginning to take a more critical view of them myself. In order to foster a healthy relationship with Traci, I would need to be more responsible with my time than video games had historically encouraged me to be – like during my freshman year of college, when Banjo Kazooie at a neighbor's apartment had induced me to regularly skip out on my weights training course, earning me a C- in a course whose sole requirement was attendance. At one point I had been playing Super Smash Bros so much that it commandeered my dreams, subjecting me to a tedious parade of cartoony characters punching, kicking, grabbing, throwing, shooting, dodging, rolling, and jumping in which I felt no investment, and over which I had no sense of control.

I had certainly scaled back after getting married, but as I devoted more and more time to the gameboy, getting rid of it felt like the only course of action that would prevent me from reverting to my earlier levels of obsession. I couldn't afford to let video games drive a rift further between myself and my wife, and though I typically didn't play while the kids were awake, the more I got into the Zelda game, the more eager I was to get the gameboy out, even when they were up. Before leaving for work the next morning, I told Traci about my resolution. She made no effort to mask her approval. When I called my family to find out if they wanted any of my games, though, I got a different reaction.



“Really?” Mom said, “Why don’t you keep it around for a few years so the kids can play it when they get a little older?”

It was a tempting idea. I wondered what much-needed respite Mom had earned from her six rowdy kids by permitting us to play video games. What a balm those kid-quieting portable gaming devices must have been on long road trips. Far from thinking ill of her, I was just beginning to learn how badly parents need those kinds of breaks.

At the same time, it was unsettling to me to see Dallin’s early predilection for the games. I had seen him playing with an uncle’s gameboy at Grandma’s house. He lay on his back, holding the gameboy in front of his face, which was screwed up in a look of concentration much too intense to be healthy on a toddler. Tracing video games’s prevalence along my own path to adulthood, I wasn’t at all sure it was what I wished for him. I certainly never wanted to be on the receiving end of the zombie treatment that Grandpa, my parents, and even Traci knew so well.

So, in short order I was steering my car into the University Mall parking lot. The evening sun glanced off the slightly-scratched surface of the cobalt blue gameboy riding shotgun inside a Ziploc baggie it shared with two games and the tight coil of power cord. Dallin was buckled into his car seat behind me, always eager for a chance to get out of the house – almost as eager as Traci had been to send him with me. I found a parking spot near the Macy’s entrance and stopped the car.

In the past week or so, I’d posted the gameboy on Craigslist for thirty bucks. It hadn’t taken long for my first interested email to roll in from a man named Ahmed, who agreed to pay the thirty dollars and requested that I bring it to the Fragrance Hut at the University Mall where he worked. Rather than feel instant relief at the quick response, my anxiety had spiked.

I'd never sold anything on craigslist before. Would he try to talk me down when I got there? Would he give me a bad check? Would he try to intimidate me? Just what did he want with a gameboy advance in the era of the DS and PSP anyway? These reservations must have stemmed from my reluctance to give up the gameboy, but I didn't let that ambivalence slow me down. I found a parking spot, unbuckled Dallin, and held his hand across the street and into the mall.

Maybe because of the word "hut" in the name, I walked the halls half expecting the Fragrance Hut to be one of those middle-of-the-hall booths, like the Sunglasses Hut, and was a little intimidated when it turned out to be a regular store. It was a smallish square room with a horse-shoe shaped, waist-high glass counter paralleling the back and side walls. Under the lights of the glass counter, the jars and bottles of a myriad shapes, sizes, and colors looked pieces in a museum exhibit. The black and white checkered tiles and black shelves along the walls offset the fluorescent pinks, greens, blues, and yellows of the perfumes.

A small group of teenage guys standing around the cash register at the top of the horseshoe proved that people still actually shopped in this kind of store, though it didn't seem like enough to keep them in business. They were being helped by a middle-eastern-looking man who I guessed must have been Ahmed. He looked older than me; I thought I saw some grey showing in the black hair at his temples. The man looked up at me, glanced at the plastic baggie at my side, and called over the kids' heads that he'd be with me in a minute. I guided Dallin over to the glass fronts of the counters and discussed the various containers with him, trying to keep him from putting his eager hands on the glass until Ahmed beckoned us over.

He carefully removed the contents of the baggie and set them on the counter. "Is it okay if I test it out?"

“Of course,” I tried to sound at ease. Dallin continued to wander along the counters, stooping down to peer in, oblivious as ever to the business being conducted.

The power cord uncoiled like a snake, and Ahmed plugged it in behind the counter. He popped in Harry Potter, flipped the power switch, checked a few buttons, all with an inscrutable face. His emails had sounded pretty interested, especially because the power cord was included, but I didn't read that same excitement in this investigation. I projected my own doubts into his expression, thinking there was still a chance I would end up taking the gameboy back home.

“Okay, it looks good,” he said curtly, opening the till. He pulled out a twenty and a ten and handed them to me. We made brief conversation about where to find more games and then Dallin and I headed out the door. As I folded the bills into my wallet, I felt a mixture of relief and guilt. What would a grown man like Ahmed want with a gameboy?

Maybe, like me, he thought the games to be more than mere time-killers. Some games, like Yoshi's Island or A Link to the Past, were more like old friends. The pleasure of playing through their stories over and over again derived from a sense of familiarity paired with rediscovery of things only fuzzily remembered or entirely forgotten. Playing them again and again was a way of reliving experiences that was impossible in real life – these games were exactly the same now as they had been when I first played them as a twelve-, thirteen-, or fourteen-year-old. Though this nostalgia could wear off quickly, plugging in an old favorite still felt like a reunion. Sometimes the opening sequence was all it took to feel that connection.

Selling the gameboy didn't mean I would have to give up the games altogether. A Super Nintendo emulator on my laptop would keep Final Fantasy II and III, Super Metroid,

A Link to the Past, and a host of other games available to me, allowing me to play them occasionally and without the constraints inherent in playing them on the console itself. Though the games were the same, there were subtle distinctions – at least in my mind – between running a game on the emulator and running it on a gaming device. For one thing, the emulator gave me greater control, allowing me to pause or save the game at places where a Super Nintendo or Gameboy would not. The emulator also allowed me to use a keyboard in the place of a controller, which made the gaming experience feel less involved in some way.

So I didn't feel any regret at giving up the gameboy. In fact, I felt lighter, glad that it was over with, glad that I had followed through. Traci was waiting at home, no doubt anxious to hear how everything had gone. The thirty dollars was not a lot, but it would be enough to buy us a dinner out. I carried Dallin on my shoulders all the way out of the mall and to the car, where I buckled him back into his car seat, his smile reinforcing my relief that the gameboy would no longer be a temptation for me, or for him.

The iridescent sphere rotated along its invisible axis as it floated lazily towards the lowering sun which highlighted the filmy purples and greens of the otherwise transparent orb's shifting topography. It bobbed a little on subtle shifts in the air currents, and changed course slightly to drift past my daughter's delighted face and out over the grass.

I dipped the thin wand back into the soapy-smelling opening at the top of the plastic bottle in my hand, lifted it dripping to my lips, and blew again. The membrane shivered, bulged, and then exploded into a cataclysm of bubbles, bursting out in all directions. Those that survived the first few high-traffic moments became prey to Dallin's flailing arms and

legs. His excited shrieks echoed off the walls of the neighboring townhouses as he chased the bubbles around the small cement pad.

A few months after selling the gameboy, we'd moved to a new apartment, a new town where I had started graduate school. Blowing bubbles was one of my kids' chief delights at the end of the summer, and their excitement was the perfect complement to the long daylight and pleasant evening weather. Audrey didn't really care about the bubbles, but she loved being outside in her walker around Dallin's infectious enthusiasm. This was all it took to feel like a good dad most nights.

I watched the careless spirals of the bubbles. Once I breathed them out – which itself was an unpredictable effort – they were free to spin and bob at will until finally they were speared on some blade of grass or just burst mid-flight. All I or my kids could do was watch – or give chase.

It was no different with my kids. Someday they were going to play video games. Selling my gameboy had been the first gesture in limiting that exposure, but I knew it would be impossible to keep them away altogether. Prevalent as they had been already in my childhood, they were everywhere now. My own experience playing forbidden games like Street Fighter or Goldeneye at friends' houses proved that what my kids didn't have access to at our house, they would easily find someplace where I had even less control over their play.

Whether we would end up owning a console or keeping all kinds of video games out of the house for good, I couldn't say. Watching Dallin scamper after the bubbles in the last few minutes before twilight, stamping them into the concrete with his sandals, I felt confident that I would be able to lead them on a healthy path through.

‘Do you see Swiper the Fox?’ Dallin and Audrey eagerly point at the screen shouting out “There! There!” I glance up from my place on the couch to see Swiper sneaking out from behind the foliage. I’m not sure what he’s after this time, but I’m pretty sure that, with my kids’ help, Dora and Boots will stop him from swiping it.

Meanwhile, I’m standing on a beach towards the end of the third day. In just a few hours, the moon will fall, forcing me to warp back to day one. I can see an inordinate number of gulls circling low out over the water, so I plunge in and swim towards them. They’re hovering around the luminous figure of a fish-man – a zora – floating face down in the water. I get behind him, push A (the comma key on my keyboard) and start swimming him to shore. Once beached, the zora gets up and takes several weak steps up the sand before collapsing. I think I hear Traci stirring upstairs.

The zora makes me privy to the anguish of his soul: mysterious happenings at the Water Temple are murking up the ocean water and making things ecologically dangerous for his people; on top of that, pirates have stolen the eggs his girlfriend just laid. His efforts to recover the eggs have been fruitless and now he is all but dead.

I know what to do. I get out my ocarina and play the Song of Healing, which I learned at the very beginning of the game. The zora’s soul is put at ease, allowing him to transfer all his suffering into a mask and die in peace. I pick up the zora mask from the sand. Putting it on will transform me into him, giving me his abilities with which I can carry on his quests, as well as my own.

But there’s no time left on this three-day cycle to get started on that, the moon will fall in just a few hours. Dora is singing the “We Did it” song, signaling the end of the episode. I save my game right there on the sand and close the laptop’s lid. In the next few

days, maybe tomorrow, I can pick up where I left off. Getting up to put some bowls and spoons on the table, I don't feel guilty about the time I've spent on the game – rather, it's the prospect of having some guilt-free game time help me be less cranky when I first get up with the kids. Mornings have never been easy for me, and I've found video games help me start the day.

I still go through periods of attachment to the games where I spend too much time playing. When I have felt my gaming getting out of hand, I've grounded myself from the Nintendo for week-long stretches to reestablish control. From time to time I think about deleting the emulator altogether. It won't cure me of the urge to mentally check out, but it might get me using my mornings for more productive things. Maybe I will on the morning of the fourth day, after I've stopped the moon from falling.

## SMALL THINGS

The kids loved the van right off. Both sliding doors stood wide open as Dallin, three, ran from the back bench between the two bucket seats in the middle all the way up to the front, where he joined his little sister Audrey pushing buttons, twisting knobs, and pulling the levers. Traci and I walked slowly around the outside, weighing our own excitement against suspicion.

“This van’s got at least another hundred thousand miles in it,” Bob assured us. “We’ve been drivin’ it for just about a year now and I can promise you it’s a good little van.” Bob was our friend’s uncle – or maybe our friend’s uncle’s friend. He was exactly like someone’s grandpa. The worn cap over his silver hair, his grease-stained hands, and the dim wood-paneled shop we’d met him in, cluttered with car parts and fluids, a counter full of hand guns, and a stuffed coyote on display all contributed to his sincerity somehow.

Bob sold boats and recreational vehicles out of his small shop in Tremonton. He also bought cars at auction, which is why our friend had recommended him to us when we had mentioned we were in the market for a minivan. When we’d told Bob what we were looking for, he had scanned through the upcoming auction listings with us before showing us the 2003 Dodge Caravan he had on-hand. The van fit our needs and our budget; it seemed too good to be true.

We had to move the kids’ car seats over from our Camry in order to take the van for a test drive. “Look honey,” Traci called from her side where she was seat-belted Audrey’s seat, “it’s got the latch system!” We’d never owned a car that had this new-and-improved car-seat securing system, even though all of our car seats had come with the metal lobster-claw shaped clasps designed to fasten to anchoring bars hidden in the crevice at the back of a



seat. Without those anchoring bars, using a seat belt to fasten the car seats was our only option. That had always been good enough, but we were both excited to try out this new feature.

“Too tight!” Dallin protested as I buckled his five-point harness. Audrey mimicked him from her own seat, “Tight! Tight!”

“It has to be tight to keep you safe,” but even as I explained this to him, I pressed the button on the seat that would feed a little more belt through, giving him a tiny bit more slack. He was almost big enough to upgrade to a booster seat and use a seatbelt instead.

I took the first turn behind the wheel and was impressed by the van’s power as we accelerated on the highway that ran past Bob’s. Subconsciously, I’d been ready to measure the van’s performance by my parents’ ’86 Aerostar, which for fifteen years had ferried our family of 8 from our home in southeastern Washington to California, Oregon, and Utah as we visited grandparents and other family. Those long summer drives, the six of us kids shared five seat belts and, crammed in shoulder to shoulder, we would roast in the back of that black behemoth. Whenever we could, we would unbuckle our seat belts and stretch out on the floor in search of a little more room and some cooler air until Mom and Dad gave the order to buckle up again. Among that lumbering vehicle’s last works was carrying me and my belongings to college, shuddering up every hill across southern Idaho. When my parents moved to Utah the following year, the van had not been able to pass the emissions tests required to register it in Salt Lake County, and it had been sold for parts.

With the Aerostar’s whiny steering and gutless acceleration as a precedent, I hadn’t been too excited about buying a minivan of our own. But we didn’t have much of a choice.

Three months prior we'd been sitting in the examination room for an ultrasound – the first ultrasound of Traci's third pregnancy. The doctor had scarcely touched the fan-shaped wand to Traci's exposed abdomen when he said, "Oh boy, we're on a roll today." He turned the computer monitor towards us to better show us the black and white murk that, as many times as I've seen it over three pregnancies, I've never been able to decipher without a medical professional's guidance. The obstetrician's pinky slowly traced the border of a black oval on the monitor – "Here's a little sack, with a baby in it," he indicated a little grey spot, the yolk of a negative-colored egg. "And," he continued, dragging his pinky to the left, "Here's another little sack, and another little baby." He smiled.

Flat on her back on white-tissue paper, Traci turned her head and stared at me, bewildered tears already starting to glass her eyes. I squinted at the screen, at those two frying eggs, such small things floating in that window into Traci's body. Two? How could there be two? Before I could fully grasp that by some biological mischief two babies were growing where we had expected only one, I somehow realized that we would need a van. I'd been worried enough about having room for a third car seat in the back of our Camry, but a fourth was out of the question. The thought of the van kept me grounded in the corner of that examination room where I could listen to the doctor as he answered Traci's questions.

After I'd driven several minutes on the unbending highway heading west from Tremonton, I pulled over to give Traci a chance at the wheel. As she turned us around, I called my dad from the passenger seat, telling him we'd found a great, inexpensive van, and relaying Bob's endorsement about the van's potential.

"That's what they all say," Dad replied.

"He seems like a really good guy. I feel like I can trust him,"

“They all seem that way; that’s how they stay in business.”

Dad gave me a list of things to check – tires, fluids, brakes, exhaust – and repeatedly cautioned me to be careful. Buying a car, especially a used car, was a gamble. I knew this from my own experience, but Dad, knowing more about the inner workings of an engine than I did, knew more about what could go wrong. After buying the van, I drove in a state of hyperawareness, just waiting for some part of that intricate, unseen machinery to fall apart.

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Buying the van wasn’t the first thing we did to get ready for the coming babies. Before Traci was even pregnant, we moved out of a two-bedroom basement apartment into a three-bedroom townhouse so we would have room for another baby. For Dallin, the best part was the closet under the stairs that he pretended was his room, lying down on the carpet and closing his eyes as if he were ready for his nap. We all loved the added space.

Because we’d moved into the end unit, we also had a lot of room outside. We had a concrete patio outside the kitchen’s sliding glass door, perfect for a barbecue grill, sidewalk chalk, an inflatable kiddie pool, and maybe even some vegetable plants. The grassy expanse between the side of our building and the road was vast compared to the patches in front of the middle units. It was a great place for the kids to run around, though any time they did, I kept one eye on the road and called them back to our patio if they strayed too far.

Behind us was another building identical to ours but facing east rather than south. The patio of that building’s end unit was only separated from ours by a few yards of grass. Soon after moving in, we discovered that our rear neighbors spent many of their late summer evenings sitting around their patio table, and it was close enough to our patio that we felt awkward being outside at the same time, or even having our kitchen blinds open. But the

patio-furniture neighbors moved out around the time that Traci found out she was pregnant again.

It was January. We were well prepared for our third child. We had everything we needed – clothes for a boy or a girl, a crib, car seat, stroller, high chair, toys. We had two kids already and knew what we could expect throughout the pregnancy and birth. We knew every pregnancy would be a little different, but Traci was still a little nervous when, early on, she inexplicably gained five pounds in a week. “I’d be worried it was twins,” a friend at church remarked. We laughed it off; there was no history of twins in either of our families. What were the chances?

A month later, after the ultrasound, we made a new list: we needed a van, another crib, another car seat, another high chair, and possibly, depending on the genders, more clothes. We would pace out the purchases over the coming months and hopefully have everything ready before the August due date, a couple of weeks before my graduate classes started back up.

Meanwhile, the twins became the topic of every grocery store conversation. After the delicate preliminary questioning, complete strangers would tell us about how they had twins in their family, had neighbors or friends or cousins who had twins, or were twins, or how they had always wanted twins. We felt like game show hosts or documentary film-makers interviewing people to find the closest relationships to, or most engaging stories about, twins. Then they would look at our three-year-old son and one-year-old daughter in the cart, and look at us wide-eyed: “Boy, are you going to have your hands full!”

They were right, of course. Dallin and Audrey were handful enough. Traci and I had been confident we could handle them and a newborn, but we hadn’t counted on two.

Thinking of the amount of time newborns require, I worried about those first few months, how the kids would adjust to having less of their parents' time as well as how I would be able to keep track of them.

These concerns were brought to life by our new rear neighbors. Before we even knew someone had moved in behind us, we began seeing two children outside in the snow in their pajamas, sometimes without any shoes on. One time I saw the boy, who I guessed was around two – somewhere between Dallin and Audrey – walking out in the snow naked except for an unzipped jacket. Sometimes walking into our kitchen we would find one or both of the children cupping their hands against our sliding glass door and peering in. Were they checking to see if there was someone to play with? Or someone to take care of them? What were their parents doing? Should we call somebody about this? The landlord? The police?

Most of all I worried that this was what the future held for Dallin and Audrey as their own parents became helplessly overburdened by the demands of the twins. Driven by curiosity, boredom, or the need for attention, there was no telling what kind of trouble they would get into without parental supervision.

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We bought the van in May, and in early July we used it to pick up a set of bunk beds. We had bought a second crib already from an online classified listing, but Audrey was still using the other one, and she would need a new place to sleep once the twins were big enough to sleep in separate beds. Traci's parents had neighbors who were giving away a set of outgrown bunk beds, and it seemed like a great sleeping arrangement solution.

“Are your kids big enough for bunk beds?” Mom asked, when I told her the plan over the phone.

“We think they’ll do fine. Dallin’s taken naps on the top bunk down at his other grandma’s house,” I said. “He can even climb down without a ladder.”

“Well,” Mom paused, “I’m just worried about the middle of the night, if he’s not all the way awake when he tries to get down.”

“I’m sure he’ll be fine. Besides, Audrey’s been dying to get out of her crib. She’s almost big enough to climb out.” I remembered Dallin falling out of the crib when he had been Audrey’s size. Traci and I had been waiting for him to cry himself to sleep in his dark bedroom, but he’d climbed over the rail instead, falling with a heart-sinking thump to the carpet. He fell out one more time before we bought him a toddler bed. We didn’t want Audrey to get to that point. “It won’t take them long to get the hang of it.”

After putting together the squeaky blue metal bunk beds in the upstairs bedroom, we slapped the mattresses on and stood back to let the kids explore their new sleeping arrangements, which had ended up being a little higher than I had expected. Audrey crawled energetically all around the luxuriant expanse of the twin-size mattress on the bottom while Dallin climbed up the five rungs of the ladder. As soon as he reached the top, he was ready to come back down. I watched, negotiating whether or not he’d be able to do this in the middle of the night. He was hesitant at first; to him it must have been like climbing down from the moon lander: “One small step for Dallin...” Within ten minutes he must have climbed up and back down at least six times.

Not to be outdone, Audrey slid off her bed and made for the ladder. “No no, girl. You can’t climb up there.” I scooped her up and set her back on the lower bunk, but as soon as I let her go, she slid off again and ran straight to the ladder. This time I helped her climb, holding her around her waist as she clung to the bars with both hands, her feet searching

blindly for each rung and missing. Before she'd climbed two full rungs, I was supporting her weight entirely and hoisting her the rest of the way to the top bunk.

“We’re going to have to be careful with this ladder,” I told Traci, still holding onto Audrey on the top mattress.

Traci pointed out that the ladder was detachable, so it could lift up and slide under the mattress. “Maybe we can put it up during the day, and only put it down at bedtime.” Audrey started climbing back down the ladder, but her feet missed the very first rung. If I hadn’t been holding her, she would have slipped right between the bars, banging her chin on her way down.

“We’ll definitely have to put this up.”

Maybe my Mom was right and these kids were too small. But maybe it didn’t matter how big they were; the first few weeks with new bunk beds were bound to be full of close calls. I could remember falling out of my top bunk when I was at least six. There was no way to prevent accidents, but we didn’t have many options, so I told myself that the kids would adjust to the bunk beds best by trial and error. Until they were more confident, we would keep the ladder up during the day to minimize the risks.

But keeping the ladder up didn’t stop Audrey from having trouble with her own bed. The top bunk had a built-in bedrail, but the bottom’s sides were all open. Unaccustomed to sleeping outside her crib’s walls, Audrey fell out of bed at least once a night the first three or four nights. We put pillows down on the floor to cushion her falls, but that didn’t keep her from crying when she woke up on impact. Frightening tales we had heard about two-year-olds getting concussions from such minor falls and dying in their sleep kept us vigilant for

any signs of serious injury. By the time we got a bed rail for her, she wasn't falling out anymore. We put it on anyway.

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“So what can you tell me about having four kids?” I asked my mom over the phone a few weeks before the twins were due. I was sitting cross-legged on the grass, picking blades.

“Having four kids? Hmm, so that would have been Kerri,” she said, “Well, I didn't see a big difference. Once we had two, I felt like it was all the same thing, just more of it.”

“Really? A lot of people have been telling me three was the hardest.”

“Right, because then you're outnumbered.” People had explained it to me as changing from man-to-man defense to zone, a basketball analogy that I only vaguely understood.

“So, you were my third...” Mom said, trying to remember back to when she was a young mother of three small boys. Her oldest, Todd, was three when I was born. “Honestly, you and Todd, are more involved than Dad was, and he was more involved than his dad. I mean, Dad changed diapers, but only occasionally. I think I could count on all my digits how many diapers he ever changed, and that's over six babies.” She laughed. I'd probably changed as many in Dallin's first week. “So I just felt outnumbered from the start, but for you guys it will be a whole different experience. I'm sure you'll be just fine.”

I still had my doubts, though, particularly during meals. At lunch one day, Dallin had hopped down from his seat, one quarter of his peanut-butter and jam sandwich still in his hand, and was bobbing to the beat and singing along to one of his favorite songs, “Heez go- een da distance!” While Dallin's ability to pick up song lyrics made me worry about some of the selections I had on the iPod, his difficulty focusing on eating made me nervous for when we had babies to feed, too. Once the twins were old enough to eat solid foods, I doubted



whether Traci and I would be able to eat anything ourselves between spooning pureed squash or pears into the babies' mouths while also serving Dallin and Audrey's food, cutting it for them, convincing them to eat it, pouring them water, cleaning up spills, picking up dropped forks and cups, and trying to keep them in their seats.

When the song ended, Dallin asked to hear it again. I jumped on the chance to make a deal, "After you've eaten more of your sandwich." Anything could be used as an incentive, but some things worked better than others, and sometimes I just had to give up. I couldn't finally force him to eat when he was set against it. Swallowing was one thing I couldn't do for him.

As Dallin climbed back into his seat, I looked out the sliding glass door at our small garden. In old laundry detergent buckets that my Mom had given to us, we'd planted three tomato plants, four pepper plants, some peas, carrots, and radishes. A hodge-podge of other containers including milk cartons and an ice cream pail held lettuce, basil, parsley, and cilantro. One of my recent graduate courses had focused on literature related to farming and had spurred me to plant my own garden. Barbara Kingsolver and Wendell Berry had convinced me I needed to take more responsibility for my food production and ennobled the idea of gardening for me, while Rachel Carson's disturbing writing about pesticides had kept me up at night wondering how I would save my kids from those ubiquitous toxins and the farming practices that were destroying the world. I knew that, aside from salving my guilt a little, growing a few tomatoes and peppers was not likely to make much difference – especially if they all got stolen by the neighbor kids.

I had never gardened before, so the whole thing had the feeling of a grand experiment. Imagine then how thrilled I was the morning I discovered two pale green

tomatoes, no bigger than shooters, hanging together on one of the plants, and then imagine my disappointment when they'd vanished. I immediately implicated the obvious culprit – that boy who lived behind us, the one with the disheveled hair, who I'd seen naked in the snow months earlier. More than once while I was watering the plants, he had wandered over and stared at me with his blue, almost grey eyes, never saying anything. As I gazed out the window during lunch, I wondered about getting a table to set the plants on in order to get them out of his reach.

Dallin polished off the last piece of his sandwich and jumped down for another hip-shaking dance. I got up to restart “The Distance” for him as promised, making a mental note at the same time to comb through my music library with him in mind. He had one more piece of sandwich left, and then it would be nap time. Audrey, looking on from her high chair, wasn't likely to last much longer in the face of so much distraction, but so far she has been content to just watch while eating her own sandwich and grapes. Her present calm was encouraging; maybe this would be possible after all.

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I hauled Dallin up the stairs two at a time, hoping that my fingers digging into his underarms were sending a clear enough signal of displeasure. He was whimpering.

In the bathroom, I yanked down his shorts and soiled underwear and slammed the toilet seat up.

“I asked you FIVE minutes ago if you had to go poop,” I spat, not yelling but hoping he'd hear it as a yell. He didn't say anything. I dumped him ungently on the toilet seat.

“I want my potty seat,” he whined, as he had whined thirty seconds ago to announce that he'd had an accident right as I was loading him into his car seat. Traci and Audrey were

down there still, all ready to go. I pinched my eyes, trying to control what I could feel coming.

“And I want you TO GO POOP ON THE POTTY,” the last words came out as a throat-tearing shout that felt as though it had been building all morning. Dallin didn’t whine, didn’t cry, but got quiet and looked straight at me, hands on straightened knees. I turned from the bathroom and slammed my bedroom door where I stood taking deep breaths.

In order to avoid having four kids in diapers, Traci had decided it was time to potty-train Dallin. Her first effort had begun in early March, but had ended after only a few days. The second campaign had coincided with his third birthday, a month later. That time had been much more successful but now, months down the road, he was still having too many accidents. He would go for weeks at a time with no accidents, but then have a few days in a row where he would start acting like he was scared to poop on the potty, claiming to have forgotten how. Sometimes I handled these relapses well. More frequently than I could forgive myself for, I lost my temper with him. It seemed such a small thing to ask of him.

After the last accident, he had sat on the potty staring at me, indifferent to my calm requests. After cajoling as long as I could stand, I had ripped his sticker chart from the wall and thrown it in the trash – a gesture I knew would get to him. Then he’d cried – hard – and the savage part of me that demanded contrition had been satisfied.

But I always ended up regretting these tantrums of mine. I knew I should be trying to help him rather than make him feel sorry. Getting upset with him over such a minor thing never got me anywhere. In time he would get through even this.

As an infant, there were nights where Dallin wouldn’t go to sleep without being rocked. One night, I had been rocking him for twenty minutes while he stared wide-eyed

over my shoulder into the dark. This aggravated me sometimes, but that night I had stayed calm and watched the darks of his eyes absorbing the shadows in the room, watched them gradually slow and finally stop darting around. I was winning.

As his eyelids began to droop, I saw clearly for only an instant his same face, but older – a boy, a young man, grown, but still a child, my child. Then the vision was gone and I was still looking at the soft round cheeks of my infant son, finally asleep. I rocked him longer, making sure he was asleep, reluctant to put him down at all.

“I goed poop,” I heard the tentativeness in his voice. Fear or penitence? I took one more calming breath before going back in. Softly, I took him off the potty, wiped his bottom, closed the lid, and asked him to flush. We washed hands and then I hugged him and apologized for being upset. He told me he was sorry, too. I got Dallin clean underwear and we went downstairs and got in the van together.

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I can't remember what came first - whether I first heard the small, recurrent clattering outside or I saw the head leaning out the upstairs window, the broken screen open like a tent flap over the brown hair. The ceiling fan spun silently above me, faintly stirring the vertical slats in front of the sliding glass through which I peered, holding my breath.

That leaning head belonged to the neighbor boy, the one who had picked my tomatoes. Though I usually felt towards him the way I would towards a neighbor's dog sniffing around my yard, telling him to git on home, now he was just a child. My kids were napping upstairs. Traci was at the hospital, lying on a bed with monitors strapped to her belly to make sure everything was okay with the babies, standard procedure for twins, who were more likely to develop complications than singletons.

He must have been drawn by the sight of that flapping screen, found a box, a shelf, a piece of furniture to climb on. Perhaps the first toy had been dropped on accident, just something he'd been holding, something small. Then he returned with more – coins, small toys, then bigger ones – leaning a bit farther each time to observe the results of his Galilean experiment. He was going to fall.

He was going to fall and I would see it. I would hear it.

I sat a criminally long time. Part of me wondered whether it was really my place to interfere. Maybe this wasn't anything to worry about. Another part of me was afraid of confronting the boy's earringed dad, whom I'd talked to only once in the seven months they'd lived there. Though I saw him almost daily trudge from his back door to the road for a smoke, which his lease agreement prohibited on the property, the only time I'd even said hello was when I had seen the whole family locked out and he had asked to borrow a screwdriver to pry off the screen. He had told me his name, which I'd forgotten probably the same day. I imagined standing face to face with him now, his scraggily goatee jutting out from his face, dark baggy clothes filling the door frame. He would feel I was judging him, criticizing his parenting. I could see his face darken, cloud with anger, all the while knowing where I lived.

A plastic stove-top crashed to the concrete, bouncing once, twice, drawing me from my chair before it had rattled to a halt. Out the sliding glass door, I crossed the grass running between our buildings to the front door, the same green metal as my front door, in fact the exact same layout as my apartment, just rotated ninety degrees.

The big sister opened the door, but not all the way. Was she six? seven? eight?

“Hi, is your mom or dad here?”

“Um, only my dad is here.”

“Can I talk to him?”

“Uh,” she turned to glance over her shoulder, pulling the door open a fraction more, “Okay.” Behind her, I saw the back of a futon, facing the opposite wall. Over the arm I could just glimpse the top of the dad’s forehead and his frazzled hair, his right arm limply thrown across his eyes. She sidled around to where he lay.

“Dad, there’s someone at the door,” she placed both hands on his torso and shook with all her insubstantial weight. “Dad, there’s someone here. Dad. Dad. There’s someone here. Dad.” With each shake, each pleading word, I shrunk from that doorway, from the thrown-together living room within.

But before I could slink back through the sliding glass door to my own home, the dad stirred. After a moment of grogginess, he twisted around towards me. I fought down the urge to retreat and started talking without introduction.

“Hi, sorry, I was sitting in my kitchen and I saw your kid” I’d almost said ‘a kid’ “dropping stuff from the window--”

“Oh, *man!*” he slid a meaty leg over the side of the futon and vaulted up.

“Sorry, I’m not trying to be nosy or anything,” I continued in a rush while the dad headed for the stairs. Eager to escape, I reached in awkwardly for the doorknob and started pulling the door closed, “I just didn’t want him to fall.”

The dad might have said “thanks” before I got the door closed all the way. I returned to my kitchen, breathing more easily, glad to have escaped. He hadn’t blown up at me; rather his mortification had seemed genuine. I felt an inkling of understanding as I replayed the image of him dashing towards the stairs – an inexperienced father trying to keep up with two

unruly kids while his wife worked full time. I imagined him bursting into that upstairs bedroom, striding through the toys and clothes strewn everywhere to grab his son's arm, and pull that small face close to his own for a stern warning – all things I might do, acting out of fear, anger, and relief.

I remembered the day it had been my job to watch the kids while Traci left town with her mom –aggravations accumulating hour by hour, unyielding calls for attention, for help, every request for a drink, a toy, a game, a cracker, being blown more and more out of proportion. I understood the need for a respite from that. Perhaps I had judged him too hastily. He probably didn't have the same support I had, or the same notions of what a parent's job was. Maybe it was his own upbringing that led him to give his kids so much latitude, and when he looked out his blinds and saw me perched on a camping chair, never letting my kids out of my sight, calling them back from the road as though they were on a leash, he took a turn shaking his head.

Maybe I had exaggerated the danger his son was in as well. Within an hour, the boy would be back at the window, and even without my intervention he wouldn't fall. Chances were good that in spite of what appeared to be negligent parenting to me, the boy would survive his childhood and grow into adulthood, perhaps following his father's footsteps with his own children, and perhaps deviating from them. There was no telling if that boy would grow up any worse off than my own kids. For all I knew, my overprotective and smothering tendencies would lead to rebellion or emotional problems that the neighbor boy would escape. Without the benefit of a practice run at parenting, I could only follow my instincts, inefficient and inaccurate as they were.

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Two weeks before the twins were born, I stood over Audrey, pinning her arms to her chest as she shrieked on a white tissue-paper covered table. To my right, a nurse held her head still with straight-fingered hands placed vice-like on either side of her face, squeezing her rounded cheeks. A doctor bent over my little girl's head, trying to peer down into an ugly red gash on the underside of her chin. I was trying to soothe her, rubbing my thumb on her forearms as I held her wrists together, but my main job was to keep her from touching her face, ripping off the green sterile bib, or pushing away the strangers standing over her. Behind me, Traci rested one hand on our daughter's leg, the other on the curve of her own large belly.

Audrey's screams were no longer from pain like they had been an hour ago when Dallin had climbed onto the side of the cart that Audrey was buckled into, toppling it sideways. Traci and I had been ten steps away, looking at painting stools. Even before picking her up off the store floor, I had known by the quality of her cries that she was badly hurt. Traci bent to draw Dallin, who was also crying, out from under the cart while I grabbed Audrey. I thought maybe her hand, a finger broken trying to catch herself as the cart crashed down, but then I saw blood pooling on her neck. Tilting back her head uncovered a clean straight cut, maybe two inches long, fatty tissue peeking through beneath the copious blood. Even without previous experience or medical training, I knew immediately, "She's going to need stitches."

A stranger grabbed us a bag of ice and gave us rushed instructions to the nearest care center. I crouched between the middle row bucket seats to calm Audrey and keep pressure on the wound as Traci drove the unfamiliar roads to the clinic.



On the table, her chin entirely numb, she was crying out of fear. “Nooo, nooo!” she wailed over and over through clenched teeth, eyes tight shut, tears pooling in their recesses. I continued my soothing talk, which wasn’t getting me anywhere, until –

“Do you want to hear a book?” I asked as calmly as I could over her cries. The doctor told the nurse what size thread he wanted to use. I recognized the terminology from all the M\*A\*S\*H episodes we had been watching lately. “How about *Goodnight Moon*?”

I had memorized *Goodnight Moon* when Dallin was a baby and we read it to him almost every night. It had come in handy during times when I needed to calm him down, like that time he had the night terror when we were camping. After extracting him from the tent, we retreated to the car, where, sealed in our relatively sound-proofed chamber, Traci and I sang and talked softly, and recited whatever books we could remember until we were all calmed.

The nurse billowed back through the curtain, handing the thread to the doctor, and I started reciting, “In the great green room, there was a telephone and a red balloon.” The doctor pulled out a length of blue dental-floss-looking thread. “And a picture of the cow jumping over the moon. And there were three little bears, sitting in chairs.” He attached the thread to a fishhook-like needle and lowered it to Audrey’s chin, which was still jerking up and down as she screamed. I pressed her arms a little tighter to her body to stop her from arching her back.

I kept my voice level as I watched the hook enter the upper rim of the wound, dipping into the red matter between. “And two little kittens, and a pair of mittens.” “I got a moving target here,” the doctor muttered. The hook pierced the lower edge of the cut, stretching the

skin, like a tent-pole rising within the canvas, before piercing through, bringing the blue thread behind it.

It was working, Audrey had stopped crying. She was looking right at me, tears pooled around her eyes, mouth shut in a pout. Encouraged, I kept going “And a little toy house, and a young mouse.”

“Daddy’s doing real good,” the nurse’s voice sounded like she was talking to Audrey, but I knew she’d said it for me. Even under the circumstances, I felt a glimmer of fatherly pride. “Yep,” the doctor mumbled, making a loop in the thread to tie the first knot, “he sure is.”

“And a comb and a brush and a bowl full of mush, and a quiet old lady whispering *hush*. Can you say ‘hush’ Audrey?” Audrey didn’t say hush, and I didn’t push my luck. From his chair just inside the curtain, Dallin piped in, “Hush,” a contribution he’d been making to that page since before he could walk. He was being very good right now, and I turned to tell him so.

“Good night room,” I continued, “Good night moon. Goodnight cow jumping over the moon.” The doctor was pulling the thread through a second time. I hadn’t realized that each stitch would be a separate piece of thread. Though I’d had a total of fourteen stitches in my life, at the ages of four, seven, and thirteen, I had never watched, never realized how painstaking the process was. Neither had I appreciated how such small pieces of thread could bind together the raw edges of a wound. Thread and time would close and heal.

“Goodnight bears and goodnight chairs,” Audrey stayed quiet as the doctor pulled the hook through a third time. “Goodnight kittens, and goodnight mittens.” Another knot.

As I stood over her body, I remembered a story by Andre Dubus that I had just re-read in recent weeks. The father in the story had once accidentally let a screen door slam behind him, shattering the glass pane right in his daughter's face. For the father, the resultant scar on her cheek, which would migrate down below her jaw line as she grew older, had been a mark of his own negligence. I wondered how visible Audrey's scar would be in the coming years.

At least it had only been stitches. Despite the panic and fear we'd felt before getting to the hospital, looking down the long years ahead of us, it was clear that there were scarier things to come. Already that year Audrey had broken her collarbones falling off a neighbor's porch, and that had healed within weeks. We were getting better at handling injuries, but what would we do when she entered school and became prey to a completely different set of dangers? What about those teenage years, promising aloofness, moodiness, depression, and apathy? What about the injuries that weren't merely physical?

Audrey came out with five stitches, which in a couple of days looked like a little patchy beard under her chin. They looked a little clumsy, and didn't completely close the cut in the middle, but it would eventually heal and fade. Friends and strangers would coo over her, "Oh, the poor thing," bringing me a pang of guilt every time. Over time that would fade, too.

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I lift Dallin and set him on the counter by the bathroom sink, alarmed by his seemingly sudden weight. Maybe it's just because I've gotten used to hefting the babies that I forgot how heavy Dallin has gotten. Three years ago, he had been smaller than his baby

brother, who was born a whopping seven pounds – big for a twin. Now three years have turned him into this sprawling, hyper toddler kicking his heels against the cupboard doors.

Opening the mirrored cabinet over the sink, I pluck Dallin's toothbrush from the cup and squirt a bead of translucent blue toothpaste from an almost empty Sponge Bob tube. I open my mouth wide, "Say 'ah.'" Modeling exactly the same way I did when he was a two-toothed infant buckled into his high chair and I was spooning different colors of baby mush into his mouth, my own mouth hanging open the whole time of its own free will.

"Ahhhhh," Dallin mimics, irreverently. I bend my knees and lean back to see inside his upturned open mouth. He only lasts a few brushes before getting distracted most nights. We usually do arpeggios to try to keep him focused. I brush the backs, fronts, tops and bottoms. "Remember, don't swallow any," I remind him as the bubbles form around his tongue. He stares at me with wide-open eyes, waiting for the signal. "Now spit."

In the bedroom, Traci is changing Audrey's diaper and wrestling her into her pajamas while the babies wiggle on the floor and stare around at the contrast of light and shadow on the lamp-lit ceiling. After spitting I give Dallin a turn to brush. He isn't very thorough, but insists on having his own turn, which I encourage since he'll have to learn to do it entirely on his own sooner or later. In the transition, there is bound to be a period of ineffectiveness, when he won't always do a good enough job and I will need to let him get away with it. I had expected the birth of the twins to force that transition right off, but it hadn't, so for now I help him when I have the time and the energy to, and trust that his teeth won't fall out if he does it himself some nights.

He had brushed his own teeth for an entire week at his grandparents' house where he and Audrey had stayed while the babies were in the NICU. It had been Audrey's first time

apart from us for more than a single night, but she and Dallin hadn't missed us as much as we'd missed them. They barely even stopped to talk with us when we called, too busy exploring the fenced backyard and trying to keep up with their six-year-old uncle.

After Dallin's turn, he sets the toothbrush – throws it some nights – onto the counter, goes potty, and then tears around the corner to his bedroom where Traci is already reading books to Audrey. Dallin joins in, we finish the story, pray together, and give goodnight kisses all around. “Be gentle,” we tell Audrey, holding her baby brother and sister up to get kisses on their foreheads. Audrey hoists herself into her bed and Dallin climbs up the ladder, which stays down all the time now, since Audrey can already climb it perfectly.

In the morning they will be up before us, Audrey will come into our room, chattering her excitement for the new day with her impressive vocabulary and syntax. She'll toddle in with her blanket and say, “doo moan-eeen!” I'll pretend to still be asleep, but will eventually agree to read a book to her, probably *Everywhere Babies*, the library book that's been lying around the floor of our room for the last few weeks. She'll get mad if I don't. She'll get mad sooner or later that we're not going downstairs for breakfast. But she's easily placated. Dallin will come dancing into our room too, grinning and excited, needing to go potty. The twins, having been awake most of the night will sleep through all this, and Traci will try to also. Dallin and Audrey will eventually take me by the hand and lead me down into the new day, happy even though they must know the day carries joys and disappointments for them, too.

They are small things, still; we deal mainly with small things. The problems of the future are waves not yet formed: the name calling, the bullies, report cards, depression, hormones, girlfriends and boyfriends – all of that, let alone new cars, leaving home, buying homes, and that incremental stepping farther and farther from my reaching arms that I

recognize must occur. I'm not prepared to deal with those big things now. I'm not the father that can advise, console, and protect in those larger matters, but I hope by holding onto these children's hands as long as they'll permit me, that one day I will be.