

Daddy Dearest

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN
HE DOES *MORE* THAN HIS HALF?

Laurie Abraham



HE FRIENDS, DOLLY, *two dollies . . . trot old jo, trot old jo, best horse country ohhh. . .*” The chattering travels from her crib down the short hall to our bed. The light is still gray, too early to tell whether the day holds clouds or sun, though maybe I could get a read on the weather if my husband didn’t insist on pulling the bedroom curtains closed every night. Ankles throbbing, wrists—“bone tired” is such an apt cliché. Rolling onto my stomach, I pull the pillow over my head and breathe musty sheets—I wish I could get this smell out; I want my sheets to smell like a fabric softener from my childhood, the one our neighbors used but my mother didn’t think was necessary—but wait. Is my husband stirring? Has he heard? Of course he’s heard. He never doesn’t hear. Tim is the fox of our house, ears always pricked, eyes always darting, nose twitching for baby sounds, baby movements, baby scents. I have to act quickly if I’m going to beat him into her room: “Good morning, Edie! Hello, my darling girl. How was your sleep?” But maybe this morning he’s exhausted, too; maybe he’s going to stay in our musty cave for a while. No, no, he’s turning over, he’s going. I have to get moving. Now. We roll to our respective sides and jump up.

“I want to go first,” I say as we jostle against each other in the narrow hall.

“Let’s go together,” he says.

"OK."

I don't always agree to this mutual good morning, and he doesn't either: "I didn't see her yesterday," he'll say. "OK, go ahead," I'll answer, after weighing his claim. And sometimes he lets me go first, too, after doing the same.

Today is a Sunday; the stakes are higher for me on weekdays, since I work full-time. Tim does, too, and we come closer to splitting the care of our twenty-month-old daughter fifty-fifty than any other parents I know: I spend the mornings with her, from about 7:00 to 9:30, when our baby-sitter comes, and he takes the late afternoons, until I return home at 7:00 and take over for the next hour and a half. Except that my time is increasingly overlapping with Tim's. He's leaving for work later and later, so he's around to "chase, chase Daddy, chase" most of the morning. When I come home in the evenings, he doesn't disappear. Not that I really want him to: It's good for us to be together as a family.

Today we're going on an outing, we three. I'm nervous, because I made the plan. Tim usually decides where we're going. "Do you have anything you want to do this weekend?" he'll ask early on a Friday. "Uh, I haven't really thought—" "Because I have three options," he'll say. What's making me particularly skittery today is that I haven't figured out when we're leaving, and Tim, I know, is busy factoring in various departure times and their impact on Edie's nap. I'm factoring, too; I mean, I'm her mother; I want Edie to get a good nap, too, but not with Tim's fervency. "I don't have to go," he had offered, partly, I know, so he could get Edie down at 1:00 P.M. on the nose, and partly because he isn't especially enamored of my plan. We're going to visit some river towns outside the city, with lovely grassy banks, parks. Yes, a couple hours' drive. But Edie likes the car; she can ride a good hour without displaying a twinge of restlessness. The idea is to hook up with my best friend, Lisa, who's considering a move. "You hardly ever see her," I tell Tim, rejecting his bid to stay home. Lisa and I didn't settle on a time to meet, which is what we do—we leave things open until the last minute.

In fact, it will be a while before Lisa even gets out of bed, so I'm going

to get bagels for our breakfast. It's a sunny, warm fall day, it turns out, and though every potential moment (every moment, that is, when Edie is awake and I'm not at work) lost with my girl can feel like a blow, I'm pleased to be alone—yet, as always, slightly disconcerted at my relief at getting away. Tim never seems to need a break. I've heard him use a sharp tone with Edie exactly once—and the memory of it still gives me joy. ("Did you hear what I said?" he barked at her near the end of a long drive during which Edie had grown increasingly demanding. "Stop asking for Barney!") For one shining hour, I wasn't the parent who lost her cool. The rest of the way home, I expertly and lovingly soothed a truly miserable Edie, and when Tim pulled up to the door, I outdid myself. "I'll put Edie to bed; just go to a movie," I offered, glowing with magnanimity. *This is why Tim clings to his calm, I thought. You feel so right, so righteous, so . . . beyond reproach.*

Today, I'm happy to be alight on the quiet morning street, walking to the bakery where the man will silently but not begrudgingly put the bagels in a brown paper bag, will quietly grunt out the price. In Edie's Saturday music class, the teacher says, "Tim and Laurie are my most loyal parents." Or maybe he just thinks we're weird. We're the only parents who both accompany our child. I imagine the other fathers at home contentedly munching bacon and reading the paper.

"Cowboys, watch the cowboys," Edie is screeching when I return. She is wearing only a purple cotton T-shirt, a diaper, and scuffed white baby shoes. "Read that, read that," she says, pushing *Winnie the Pooh and the Pebble Hunt* into my hands. Her eyes are large and beseeching, darkly beautiful. People notice her eyes: the steadiness, almost stubbornness, of her gaze; the way she pleads with them or opens them exaggeratedly wide, tilting up her chin, mimicking adults. Her eyes crinkle and squeeze shut when she's hugging the tiny plastic boy she's named Ricardo; they flutter as she puts her mouth on yours.

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assert your will. And it's an intricate matter, our positions on the cleanliness of baby blankets, one of which (there are five of them) Edie must at all times have available for sucking. I insist that these scraps of flannel be soaked in stain remover before they're washed so that they're not permanently blotched yellow and brown. This process takes about eight hours, which means there are times when the blanket Edie's clinging to is relatively dirty but I don't have a replacement ready. (I do the laundry because I'm particular about it, obviously, and feel that it would be unfair to ask Tim to adopt my methods.) Tim cares more about the cleanliness of the blanket Edie is holding at any one time—germs scare him—and so would wash them constantly. "But how can she get sick from her own saliva?" I ask. "Who cares about permanent stains?" he replies.

As we charge and countercharge, I feel myself putting my arm around Edie's waist, blocking out Tim. *She's mine*, I think. Does he notice? I drop my arm. *Ridiculous, Laurie, you're being ridiculous*. Tim and Edie are talking about the cowboys again (how did that happen?), who've yodeled their way into my girl's heart via a video. Should I be jealous, aggravated at Tim for pulling her in his direction? Edie and I were reading, after all. Or she was thumbing through the few heavy cardboard pages. That's how she reads. "Horsey ride," she commands. She doesn't want to wait until after breakfast, as we'd urged. She's on the floor now, almost jumping up and down in her eagerness to get to that mechanical horse outside the deli. "OK, OK," Tim says. "We'll go on the horsey first." That's a departure from our usual informal system: We'd already told her it was time for breakfast, and we try to stick with the plan, rather than immediately acquiescing to her desires. But, really, who cares which comes first? I don't want every interaction in her life to follow the same template: task, reward, task, reward.

"You can fix her breakfast while we're gone," Tim tells me. "Sure, I'll dump the cereal in the bowl," I mutter. He orchestrates our every move. "Daddy will take you now," he says, addressing her. "Or Daddy and Mommy," he quickly adds, thinking that though I've said I want some time to write this morning, my snapping at him about the cereal might

mean I want to come with them. No, no, no, I don't. I have to get going on this essay, only the second piece of any length I've taken on since Edie was born. I would never say I enjoy writing like I enjoy my job as an editor—it's fun to kibbitz with writers, brainstorm ideas for future pieces, be the boss. But in its elusiveness, its difficulty, its opportunity for discovery, writing is infinitely more absorbing. When it's working, it's a physical thing, a glorious loss of self-consciousness that I can only compare to two other experiences in my life: having orgasms and playing high school basketball.

In the Colette biography I'm reading, the author, Judith Thurman, at one point drops her omniscient narrator voice to say how difficult, if not impossible, it is to write and mother at the same time. Thurman is clearly talking about herself here—she has one daughter, who was born as she started researching the Colette book and had celebrated her tenth birthday by the time she finished. Thurman's aside, coming as it does in the midst of a section about Colette's shocking abandonment of her own daughter—she shipped the girl off to the country to be cared for by a German nanny and never looked back—is chilling. Chilling, because Thurman doesn't relegate Colette to the category of "other"; she doesn't treat her acts as singularly evil, beyond recognition to living, breathing mothers—or at least living, breathing writer-mothers. So how can I, of all people, do both well?

Edie howls, absolutely howls, when Tim tells her I'm not coming. I want to come, I do. Should I? But I must try to carve out some time to write. Tim picks her up. "It's Daddy time, Daddy time," he says over her protests. Guilt, a tugging toward her, an urge to stanch the tears. Yes, but also greedy delight that she wants me. Not that in general she doesn't slightly favor me; she does. I don't know what I'd do if the situation were reversed. I don't know what I will do, because surely it will happen when she's Oedipal, if not long before, because she is no less bonded to him than to me. An old friend told me that her passive relinquishing of the primary caretaker role to her husband (she hadn't even been sure she wanted children, but her husband knew he did; by the time she was

twenty-five they had two, and well, he just stepped in) almost destroyed her. Too many cultural imperatives ignored; each time her little boy or girl ran to their daddy for comfort, asked him to give the bath, it chipped away at her self-worth. What kind of woman was she? It's one thing to believe that children aren't necessary for a woman to lead a happy and fruitful life, as I adamantly do; it's another for a woman to have children and to refuse, or fail to be granted, the prerogatives of motherhood.

"Your position is secure," my shrink tells me in strangely appropriate martial language. Unlike my friend, I never let my husband take over everything, though he would, and sometimes it can take monumental energy to resist him, to keep "sharing" the power. *The power?* Before Edie was born, I was just worried he wouldn't share the work. I thought I wanted a child, unlike my friend, but I never had baby lust. I was thrumming with ambivalence, worried about, alternately, cheating my child and cheating my work, myself. During my pregnancy I practically made Tim sign a contract to split the parenting exactly in half. I'd heard about too many husbands who'd promised to distribute the burden equally, but then somehow didn't. From reading I'd done, I knew that studies of "co-parenting," as it's called, suggested I had about as much chance as any woman of getting my due: Tim and I earned about the same amount of money; he was going to take paternity leave for a few months after I went back to work (the key to this apparently being that men who are exclusively responsible for their babies for a time are more likely to become true parenting partners); and his office was closer to home than mine, meaning that even once we had a baby-sitter, he'd be the one to schlep her to doctor's appointments, come home if there was a problem, and so forth. But I didn't expect to love Edie as passionately as I do. And now I wonder: Is hierarchy *necessary* for peace at home, as well as at work? Are we destined to compete—in my mind, if not in Tim's—for the next eighteen years? "Three is a very hard number; someone's always on the outside," my therapist says. "Have another child." He's joking but he's not.

They're back from the horsey, and we are both being careful, trying to adore Edie as a team. As I spoon cereal into her mouth—and we

snatch bites of our bagels—he brings up Micalah, a baby in singing class. My daughter loves musical names, the curious, delicious sound of new words in general, which is a gift to me. Here, Tim, here's a gift for you, my husband, not her father: I tell him a story about my sports-addled mother, and we laugh about her together. My mother's boundless passion for football and basketball is pretty funny, but following the predictable in-law dynamic, I normally don't encourage Tim to poke fun, even gently, at my mother. Three is a hard number. "Ready, ready," Edie is saying. It's a little after ten, and Lisa hasn't called. "I'm ready, too, but we're going on Lisa-time," Tim says. "Fuck you," I say quietly. Edie is saying she's "ready" to go outside, as Tim knows, not that she's itching to go on our trip.

We decide to take Edie to the park. Tim will go first while I shower; then we'll meet and switch. This is a rare opportunity to wash and dry my hair straight, how I like it, I remind myself as they leave. I don't have to race to get done, like I do on those mornings when Edie is standing staring dumbstruck at me on the threshold of the bathroom, blanket hanging from her mouth. "Hi, Edie," I say over the roar of the dryer—buying time, straining to engage her, give me a few more minutes and my hair will be done. I only wash my hair twice a week these days, but now I deeply understand those short, perky mama-dos. I still hate them, though. So instead, I stand nearly naked—I strip off my robe, I get so sweaty—yanking at my hair with the brush.

This morning, I dry and dry and dry, I'm drying so long, I'm baking my scalp, my brain. No moisture left anywhere. Then how come I feel like crying? I lean toward the mirror and note the tiny lines around my eyes.

Minutes later, approaching the park, I see Edie toddling around the blacktop in her pink-and-white-checked sun hat. There is no one in my life whom I've ever been so grateful to escape and so grateful to see—moment to moment, day in, day out. When I push through the heavy iron gate, Edie breaks into a smile. "Mommy!" She grabs my hand. "Did Lisa call?" Tim asks. I shake my head no, and he leaves it at that. "Walk with Mommy. Walk with Mommy," Edie says. Tim follows about twenty

paces behind as she pulls me about. "Do you want to swing?" I ask. I lift her into the swing, give her a push. Tim comes up beside us. "Remember the Band-Aid on the swing that time?" he asks her.

She doesn't respond, and I'm glad. Does Tim do this on purpose, try to carve out a space for them that doesn't include me? "I see your husband in the park all the time with Edie," says Abby, stopping me on the street. Hmm . . . She'd been in my new-mothers group, with her baby daughter, and I'm sure she remembers how agitated I got when my fellow mothers admitted they didn't feel they could ask their husbands for more help. The final straw had come when a fortyish woman related how she'd acquiesced to her husband's demand that she not return to work. She liked her job, he hated his, but she was going to quit, she told us, because her husband believed babies should be with their mothers. I looked around the group to see if anyone else felt like screaming. "This is the new millennium, for Christ's sakes! What are you doing?" All I saw was mildness, we're-all-in-this-together capitulation. Unable to hide my frustration, I sputtered something about how, while I understood that traditional roles were sometimes what we actually wanted, if we didn't, we *could* resist. To my amazement, nobody seconded me, and before I knew it we'd resumed talking about the mechanics of breast-feeding and the proper consistency of baby shit. "We are for the most part more lonely when we go abroad among men than when we stay in our chambers," Thoreau said.

"Bye-bye, Edie," Tim says, waving to her in the swing. It's the changing of the guard. Edie doesn't return his wave, and when he turns and walks off, I can see the dejection in his sagging shoulders. But, Tim, you should know her eyes followed you until you were out of sight.

Back and forth, back and forth Edie swings, and time blurs. We move to the ground, where Edie arranges her hat, a leaf, and her blanket, all very deliberate. "That's better," she announces, before starting all over again, seeking some Platonic order. One of my favorite parts of being Edie's mother is watching her get lost in her play. And I'm good at not intruding, not requiring her to see me, include me. I've become a devotee

of the renowned British child analyst D. W. Winnicott, who wrote about how babies develop "false selves" when they must regularly "react" to (or manage) their mothers' moods. "[T]here is not sufficient ego-strength for there to be a reaction without a loss of identity," he wrote. Indeed, in my house, I find myself falling back when Tim moves forward—which he does so much more forcefully and regularly than I—both because I can't match his intensity and because I don't want to overwhelm Edie. I worry about interfering with the developmental project of knowing her own desires, as Winnicott would have it. Of her finding her authentic self.

We return home in the stroller at a little after eleven. Lisa has called, Tim informs me as I walk in. "What should we do?" I immediately ask. "When should we leave?"

Why am I asking him? I think as soon as the question is out of my mouth. *Why can't I figure this out on my own? I can take into account Edie's nap and lunch schedule—I'm a grown-up.* Tim is unusually impassive: This trip was my deal, and he's leaving it in my hands. Except there is watching in his cool demeanor. This man watches me make bottles (he worries that too much cow's milk will leave her congested, too much soy will hinder her digestion); he scrubs sippy cups I've already cleaned; in the beginning, in those eight long months (yes, eight) when Edie was nearly inconsolable due to gastric upset, colic—essentially a tautology for "cries all the time"—or just general unhappiness at being thrust into this world, he advised me on how to hold her, how to quiet her. He's sure that I (or perhaps our baby-sitter) has done something "wrong" vis-à-vis the application of Desitin whenever she gets a rash. He tries to stop judging, but I feel his eyes.

I flop into an armchair in the living room, stewing in indecision, knowing I should simply declare when we're leaving and move into action, but the more I tell myself to take command, the more paralyzed I become. Let's see, we could wait to give her lunch and then leave around 12:30, which would be good because she'd probably fall asleep quickly in the car and get a decent nap. But she won't be hungry now, because she ate breakfast late, so maybe we should just leave now and have lunch when

we meet Lisa—a picnic together would be nice—but what if she stays awake till the end of the trip and only gets half a nap? Well, she could sleep in her stroller . . . but she may not fall asleep again, and then she'll probably be fussy, easily inflamed. And I'll be blamed, subtly, silently, and even if I'm not, I'll still feel guilty. Maybe I should just call Lisa back and tell her we can't go. That would eliminate the potential for uncomfortable moments, keep the calm—the boring, deadly calm. No way. I want to go on this trip! Do I want to go on this trip? "When should we leave?" I wail. "Neither is perfect," Tim responds. "I'm not looking for perfect," I spit.

But I am looking for perfect, just like him. I'm like a kidnapping victim who's absorbed the values of her captors. Speaking of kidnapping, a friend of mine, the only woman I know whose relationship with her husband and child is comparable to mine, tells me she finds herself "kidnapping" her daughter to get some time with her; a half hour or so before her spouse is scheduled to arrive home from his (low-pressure) job, she spirits the girl away to a craft store. "Where have you been?" he demands when they get back. "Oh, nowhere exciting," she says casually.

This same friend also read her husband's diary, which is reprehensible, undoubtedly, but more reprehensible was what he'd written: that he was a "better" parent than she. It takes my breath away. The truth is, I don't really think Tim believes that, even deep down. Oh, sometimes he thinks he's better, but not in any all-encompassing kind of way. In fact, he acknowledges that he's overbearing; he's not proud of it. If only I could be more generous. If only I could remember that Tim's efforts to regulate Edie's existence aren't a challenge to me but a measure of his own struggles, the porousness of the boundaries in his family and the resulting narcissistic insult he suffers when he can't keep peace among those he loves. To this day, he avoids telling his mother bad news for fear she'll be consumed by his pain. As he "controlled" her—as he imagined he could prevent her suffering—he labors to control the most unpredictable and frustrating of beings, a baby, a toddler. Edie.

And what about me? Why do I so insistently see Tim as an adversary? I obviously believe that the explanation is in part beyond our little fam-

ily—there simply aren't models for sharing the work and the power and the love of parenting. But I also bring my own messy platter of experience to the table. And pondering that, I'm not sure I should be worrying about intruding on my daughter, in the Winnicottian sense. Maybe letting Edie be is Tim's work as a parent, while mine is to devour my girl. Because I probably can't do it, not in the menacing sense of that word. My mother, who lives in the Midwest, once said to me sadly but not accusingly, "I was so good at teaching you girls to be independent, to go your own way, and now look what I've got, one daughter in New York and one in L.A."

Like mother, like daughter. It comes naturally to me to give my daughter room, to back off, and there is a fine line between giving a child enough room and too much. Because what is too much but abandonment? The truth is—and I don't think I'm deceiving myself here—I haven't come anywhere close to emotionally abandoning Edie. (Neither, for that matter, is Tim in danger of consuming her.) But in the complicated way fear and longing express themselves, I wonder if my competitive feelings toward Tim aren't heightened by the fact that, first, I doubt I'll ever feel entitled to love her with the same heedlessness that he does and that, second, in my assiduousness about giving her space, I'll hold her so lightly that she'll abandon me. Like mother, like daughter.

All this drama goes on in my head, usually beyond articulation, even to myself. It's good that Tim said that word, "perfect," I realize now, because it reminds me there is no such thing. And it pisses me off that he expects perfection, which is galvanizing. Anger is a reflex for me—too much of one, I know, but there it is. And so, we'll leave now to meet Lisa. We'll risk it. And that's what it feels like, that I'm taking a risk, daring to cheat the nap gods, who may show their wrath in Edie's prickliness, Tim's censoriousness, my own guilty heart. "Let's go," I say. I scoop Edie up and kiss her, on the mouth.