

Hell. And Back.

by Joe Mulder

Dreams are where your psyche processes its hopes, fears, and anxieties, obviously. And any parent's worst fear is that something might happen to his child, obviously. Yet neither my wife nor I had ever had a nightmare in which the safety of either of our daughters was in question. Maybe other parents have such dreams occasionally, or even regularly; we didn't really know. But to both of us, apparently, the prospect of any harm coming to our kids was too horrible even for our subconscious to contemplate. The fragility of our children's lives was something that my wife's and my psyches were more than happy to leave un-processed.

So I know why I'd never had a dream in which one of my children died. And I know why I had one last night.

In March my kids turned seven and four, respectively. Every parent thinks his kids are remarkable, of course, and while our oldest isn't any sort of prodigy she has always been a bit advanced for her age. When she was an infant, her bearing was such that once she was an adolescent I knew it would be difficult to imagine she was ever a baby. Not long after she turned two she was fully conversant, speaking with adults in full sentences and following most of what they said. Now when she actually acts like a seven-year-old – yelling at her sister over a perceived slight, or crying nervously as I prepare to leave her at the house of a new friend with whom she's just decided she's not quite ready to have a sleepover – it's a bit jarring, because mostly she seems like a mature (yet miniature) adult.

Our youngest is a little different. She walked late. She didn't talk quite as much, or quite as early. At about 20 months one of her eyes started to go crossed. No one else in the immediate family has ever been to an eye doctor so the thought never crossed our minds that the little one might have bad eyesight, but she did (my wife told me she actually cried when the eye doctor showed her, through some lenses, how blurry the world looked to our daughter). No wonder the baby of the family walked so late; it's hard to walk when you can't see.

She was accelerated in some ways; after getting her glasses she went around the house pointing out the small letters on kitchen appliances that she'd never known were there. Most kids barely know that letters exist before they turn two; at that age our youngest could recognize all of them. For quite a while now she's been able to identify any number between 1 and 100 on sight, and enjoys picking them out when I'm watching football games. Her drawing skills have always been remarkable, as well; two years before she entered kindergarten, she would have been the best in almost any kindergarten class (once when she was three she was having me draw all of the characters from "Yo Gabba Gabba" on her

magnetized erasable drawing board. I did a decent job for a capable if unspectacular artist who's never been good at drawing things from memory. When I was finished, she drew the last character I'd done, Muno; and, well... hers was better. Less polished, certainly, but – and there's no other way to put it – she captured Muno's soul. Her mental picture of the character was obviously so remarkably crystal clear that the only thing limiting her was the rawness of her artistic abilities; she was three, after all. But if Muno started frequenting one of those restaurants that puts caricatures of prominent patrons on the walls, the restaurant would absolutely have used my daughter's drawing over mine).

Emotionally and linguistically, though, she remains behind. For a few years we considered that she might simply be less mature and less conversant than her older sister, as opposed to being less mature and less conversant than normal. We thought perhaps that she takes after her father as something of an introvert; you play more by yourself and less with other kids, maybe you don't talk as much. I used to joke occasionally when she played alone for extended periods of time that she was "Aspergering out" and I occasionally referred to her affectionately as "Rain Girl".

That sounds inappropriate bordering on cruel, I realize, but I never said such things front of the kids or anybody else but my wife, who by virtue of being my wife kind of signed up for that sort of thing. It was also clearly a weak attempt to mask the dread – "dread" isn't too strong a word, though not one I'm proud to have to use – I felt at the prospect of my daughter having developmental issues.

And now she's four. Almost four-and-a-half. At the rate she's going it seems unlikely that she'll be able to have a conversation by the time she's five. She's nowhere close to being able to tell you about a visit to the zoo or the playground when you ask her about it; she can answer basic questions about what she saw there, but is unable to process and respond to a question such as "how was your trip to the zoo?"

We've taken her to see a few people. So far nobody thinks she won't start "regular" kindergarten on time next year, but despite being advanced in certain areas she's quite behind when it comes to language and emotional maturity. We'll have people work with her in earnest when the school year starts and we'll get a better idea of what we're dealing with, but the last person to look at her brought up the possibility that she might be on the autism spectrum.

A good friend of mine has a daughter who was diagnosed years ago as high-functioning autistic. I remember thinking when he told me – this was before I was a parent – that the news sounded like a death sentence. Bizarrely harsh, sure; but what did I know?

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Now I've got kids, and I know better. You get a diagnosis like that – or, as in our case, the subject is broached – and your initial impulse isn't "Why, God? Why!?!;" it's "OK, what can we do for her? Let's work on this, team!"

We'll see what happens. There are countless books and websites to look at if you want to convince yourself that your child is on the autism spectrum, and there are countless books and websites to look at if you want to convince yourself that your child isn't on the autism spectrum. Half of the the "Does Your Child Have Autism" checklists that my wife and I look at seem to indicate that our daughter definitely doesn't; the other half seem to indicate that she definitely does. It ought to go without saying that it won't change how we feel about her, but I'll say it anyway. We're dedicated parents and both of our children have our unconditional love and support. We'll take challenges as they come and won't be daunted by them. My wife and I have always agreed whole-heartedly that we wouldn't wish for any children but the specific ones with whom we were blessed, and from the bottom of my heart I know that this will continue to be true.

But still.

No parent *hopes* for a special needs kid. And in your worst moments, the moments of which you're decidedly not proud, you see all the "regular" kids running around and you think "why couldn't I have just gotten two of those?"

It's an ugly thought. It's self-pity, and it's got little to do with your child and everything to do with you. It has everything to do with your silly pride. It's the expectations you had for your child colliding with the realities of the child's existence, and you not handling it well. And that's something you *swore* wouldn't be an issue – your kid could be gay or nerdy or into Wicca or get a shit-ton of tattoos or whatever, and you were going to be cool with it! That was the plan!

But it persists. At least it does in the weaker among us.

"I wish I didn't have a special needs child."

I've never actually outright wished such a thing, though like I said, a bit of "why me" may have been starting to creep in, around the edges...

I rarely remember my dreams. I don't remember the beginnings of this one very well. I have a vague sense of being in Ohio for some reason, possibly because I was there visiting my brother and his family a few weeks ago.

I don't know how, but I get the word that my youngest daughter is hospitalized nearby with some unspecified

illness.

I try to catch a subway train – are there any in Ohio? Not important – to get to the Ohio State University Hospital. I can't call and check in, because cell phones don't seem to be a part of this particular dream universe.

I finally catch a train, and ride to my stop. I'm sick with worry. I walk through some tunnels and slowly make my way to a hospital reception area. I approach a cluster of female doctors at a reception area and ask after my daughter, and one of them directs me to the appropriate room. I get on an elevator.

My mother is in the elevator. She's been crying. We hug. "Do you want to go say good-bye?"

It's a punch to the gut. Good-bye? I knew things were serious; I had no idea they were this bad.

We get off the elevator. I force myself to enter my daughter's hospital room. She's lying on her back, in bed. It's not a hospital bed, it's the bed from her room at home.

"What's wrong with her?" I ask desperately.

"We don't know," says a nameless, faceless hospital worker.

"It's always ends up being something dumb, or obvious," I say, resigned. In my waking life I've had the luxury of only experiencing illness and hospitalization through movies and TV shows.

"I know," the hospital worker says, in a consoling tone.

I look down at my beautiful, beautiful daughter. Her glasses aren't on, and her eyes are closed. She's wearing some sort of red frilly pajamas that somehow afford a view of her chest, and of a relatively fresh incision from some course of treatment that was summarily abandoned.

I get close to her. I've had a lifelong aversion to touching dead things; why would I even be thinking about that, though?

I put my arm around her, my face close to hers. My ear by her nose. I don't feel or hear anything.

I begrudge nobody their beliefs and comforts, but I find no solace in any "better place" stuff. When you're dead, you're dead.

This is no longer my child. This is her corpse.

I woke up well before sunrise this morning and slowly came to the realization that it wasn't real. Despite my indescribable

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relief, I was wrecked.

I went into my daughter's room and climbed into bed with her. I kissed her cheek. She grabbed onto my ear (it's what she does). I hugged her tight. I started sobbing.

I love you, Daphne.

I love *you*, Daphne.

Let there never be any doubt.
