

grim(m)

ACT NOW!!!

These were the first coherent words to pass my son's lips. Not some proto-lexic nickname for the milk-producing binary stars that were so briefly the rightful center of his universe. Not the petulant no with which the toddler so adroitly circumscribes its organic sovereignty. Not even one of those phenotypic hard palatals (*da, dada, dad*) so often

mistaken for evidence of the father's exalted role in the social hierarchy.

Act Now!!!

His first words. His first complete sentence. The call-to-arms of Ron Popeil. Even then, I had mixed feelings about it.

There was embarrassment, to be sure. It was clear he was spending a little too much time in front of the television. That is, it was clear I was placing him in front of the television a little too often. Still, I couldn't help feeling a little bit of relief that, at least in the early stages of the battle for his soul, the forces of progress, however dubious, had beaten those of reaction—religion, primarily—to the punch.

I had, I told myself, a progressive outlook: television, whatever its numerous shortcomings, is at least *of our times*, a true product of science and technology and therefore a perfectly suitable component of a contemporary child's upbringing, whereas religion, still thousands of years old even in its most recent manifestations, is nothing but a collection of dusty untruths, punitive and mean-spirited, an insidious engrammatic shackle from which he would eventually have to chew his way free. I would—*so I told myself*—have none of its guilt and fear for him.

Such was my aspiration, in the beginning: for him to be without sin.

“Dad?”

“Hmmm?”

“Do you like to draw, sketch, or even just doodle?”

He didn't wait for my response—a blank stare, as usual—before continuing. Instead, he simply inserted the standard

infomercial conversational delay, the artificial hiatus designed to disguise the fact that the person on the television is not actually talking to you, *could not possibly be addressing you personally.*

“If so,” he went on, “then you might have what it takes to embark on an exciting career as an artist, illustrator or even draftsman.”

These are the times when I most wish his mother were here. So that maybe, just once, his mania would get the attention it deserves. *Gee, I don't know, she would say. I've always loved to draw—you know, horses and hot air balloons . . . and I can do an elephant seen from behind in ten seconds flat—but do you really think that means I could be an artist?*

They would go on and on, taking it to the point of absurdity, before finally breaking down in laughter. I would shake my head in mock chagrin, then laugh too.

Instead there is just the silence that marks our being-together. The questions that aren't really looking for answers, the hollow gestures that try to be those answers anyway. We sit stranded on either side of the table, on either side of a bottomless divide between the impersonal and the impossible.

Like that between the television and its audience.

I looked up at him briefly, smiling weakly, then drowned an overcooked broccoli tree in the thick orange lake of melted cheese languishing in the upper half of the Dip-Mor double boiler.

It had been some time since I'd bought a *fantastic modern-convenience device*, since I'd succumbed to one of

his parroted sales pitches. Perhaps it was the timing, some beatific resonance generated by the act of tucking him into bed, that weakened me, made me vulnerable.

“Dad?”

The head on the pillow, the only part of him not tucked safely under the covers, seemed so small, the voice so far away.

“Yeah?”

“Did you know that with the Dip-Mor double boiler, not only can you make mouth-watering, chocolate-covered confections, you can also whip up delicious, piping-hot dipping sauces and savory fondues in next to nothing?”

I furrowed my brow thoughtfully, then nodded in agreement, as if the implacable logic of his offer left me no other choice. He smiled and closed his eyes. The next morning, thanks to the miracle of overnight delivery, a shiny new Dip-Mor double boiler—along with instructional video, recipe booklet, four bars of chocolate, dipping tongs and plastic fondue forks—was sitting on our doorstep.

Not that he showed the least bit of interest in it. The first week, I dipped everything I could find in chocolate, tried every sauce recipe in the booklet, made four quarts of fondue, always solo. To be honest, he never acknowledges the presence of any of the products he’s sold me. It’s as if his share in the matter ends as soon as I give my credit card number to some anonymous late-night operator.

At least the Dip-Mor double boiler has actually proven useful, *usable*, unlike all the other things I’ve fallen for—the Infinite Lint Roller, the Twenty-Tools-In-One hand drill, the Jerusalem Juicer, the Smoke House 2000, the Magnetron Home Masseur, the pair of Pocket Fisherman—every one of

them back in the box, stacked in the spare closet behind the vintage overcoats and homemade hats and once-fashionable party dresses.

Early on I had theories—they were more like *positions*, really—that allowed me to defend or explain away certain discrepancies between the trajectory of *his* education and those of the other little kids at the park.

When it turned out that none of the other four-year olds watched two hours of *Teletubbies* a day, for example. Immediately, the cabal of mothers closed in around me, interrogating.

Teletubbies? Are you kidding? Those little colored . . . things? God, they're creepy! And the show is sooo dumb, I can't stand it! I mean, sure, maybe it's fine for twenty-four to thirty-six months, but a four-year old? You watch it with him, at least?

It was like I was feeding him carcinogens, or devolving his DNA. I didn't mention that my son was actually five, or that the show was British.

I sat up on the park bench, pulling my hands from my pockets as I did so, making as if to leave. But for some reason, instead of leaving I said, "It makes sense that you don't get the show. It's not for you. It's a modern folk tale, basically, and it's for the kids, not for us. As far as the *Teletubbies* are concerned, we're already a lost cause." Not quite sure of where I was going, and therefore unprepared for possible objections, I hurried on. "You see, *Teletubbies* performs a purely didactic function, similar, say, to that of the Grimm Brothers' fairy tales, just for a post-capitalist audience."

I scanned the ring of faces, calculating, based on a quick tabulation of open mouths and blank expressions, the window of time left for whatever it was I was doing.

“Recall your Grimm’s,” I said. “*The Mouse, the Bird, and the Sausage*, for example. At the outset of the tale, Mouse, Bird and Sausage live a happy, simple life together, as we must assume has been the case since time immemorial. This happiness is dependent on the faithful performance of a clearly defined role: Bird gathers wood for the fire, which Mouse tends, in addition to drawing water and setting the table. Sausage handles the cooking, going so far in the performance of his duties as to use himself to stir and flavor the broth. One day, while out collecting wood, Bird runs into another bird, who tells him that, as he’s doing all the hard work in his arrangement with Mouse and Sausage, he’s getting the short end of the stick. Bird returns home and demands the three of them swap duties. Sure enough, they’re all dead by the end of the next day, Sausage eaten by a dog, Mouse boiled alive in the pot, and Bird drowned at the bottom of a well.”

The faces around me, though beginning to show traces of suspicion and impromptu allergies, told me I probably had just enough time to wrap things up.

“I know,” I continued sympathetically. “Another story that doesn’t make sense. That’s because it’s not for us, either. It was for 19TH Century German kids. It instructed them, subconsciously, that if you happened to be a bird—i.e. a poor, worthless peasant—nothing good would come of coveting the role, ordained by God and Nature, of a mouse or sausage—i.e. a craftsman or burgher. It also warned these little German kids about the dangers of radicals and outside

agitators, told them that only bad things happen when you listen to those who question the natural order of things.”

Mouths were now tightly screwed, jaws set, day packs testily prepared for departure.

“Well,” I continued, perhaps rushing it a bit, “*Teletubbies* is doing the same thing for our kids, conditioning them to the world they live in, preparing them for the world to come; you know, the world they’ll inhabit when they’ve grown up. In the near future, you see, devices for accepting one-way transmissions from the global communications network will be implanted directly into the human body. And most satisfactions will be virtual and informational, so there won’t be much need for gender distinctions. Exposure to *Teletubbies* is therefore essential, since it will help them recognize and accept this future when it engulfs them, even partake of it happily.”

Not long after, we stopped going to the yellow park and went to the purple park instead. Following our exile from the purple park, we started hanging out in the plaza, eating our lunch on a weathered, gum-pickled bench and playing tag in the dusty fountain.

These days, we spend most of our time at home, inside.

The nice thing about a double boiler—especially the Dip-Mor, with its patented NoStik surface—is there’s really no way to burn anything. This makes for easy cleanup. No soaking, no scrubbing. So far, the only dilemma posed by the Dip-Mor has turned out to be what to do with all the unused melted cheese.

Standing in front of the kitchen sink, I tilt the upper chamber about forty-five degrees. The cheese lake, now possessed of completely indeterminate properties—it occupies a state somewhere between the liquid and the solid—slides slowly out of the pan, falling in a single quivering piece to the sink before slithering, seemingly of its own volition, down the drain. It's easy to imagine this cheese creature making its way calmly through a labyrinthine network of plumbing and sewage pipes before emerging, silently and under cover of darkness, in some industrial estuary and floating off to sea.

I rinse the inside of the Dip-Mor and set it upside/down on the counter to dry. From the small kitchen I can see into the living room, where he's lying on his stomach in front of the TV, his chin resting in his hands, his legs bent up from the knees, feet waving aimlessly in the air. He's in his pajamas, which I now see are thin and faded, and probably two sizes too small. The TV, I know, is too loud, his face too close to the screen.

This is what it's like, accusations of failure inscribed everywhere.

As always, the feeling comes at me from all sides, an uncanny yet familiar heaviness, like when you're reclining in the dentist's chair and they lay the lead apron over you. And strangely enough, this weight, far from keeping me more firmly anchored to my customary bodily inertia, seems to encourage floating. I leave my body and drift into the living room, the better to watch him slip further away.

Amaze your friends, the TV's saying. I wonder what this phrase could possibly mean to him. *With the incredible Blow d'Art, you can create your very own original works of art. Fantastic creatures, brilliant landscapes, your own Noah's Ark!*

On the screen a little boy, seated at big wooden table, is blowing colored powder at a dinosaur stencil sitting on top of a sheet of craft paper. Blow d'Art. It's the same technology, basically, they used to make the cave paintings. The boy's sister, seated next to him, is putting the finishing touches on a "free hand" rainbow, her eyes maniacal in anticipation of the impending satisfaction. Their mother's face beams down from above.

. . . you get the carrying case, the set of eight One-Way blow tubes, twelve packets of Blow and the complete stencil library. It goes on and on, relentless. They've bought a full minute of airtime. But that's not all. If you order now, you'll also get . . .

He's tucked tightly into bed, the blankets wedged beneath his chin, the way he likes. His head is once again small and distant on the pillow. He didn't seem to mind my taking so much longer than usual, didn't seem to notice that I was stalling. I hadn't yet devised a refutation for the Blow d'Art.

"Dad?"

Here we go.

"Hmmm?"

"Did you know that you can also make . . . that with the Dip-Mor double boiler you can also make caramel apples?"

I turn my face to him. I know that this time it shows honest surprise, heartfelt interest. "You know, I never thought of that?"

"Yeah I know. We should make some. Good idea?"

"Yeah. Yeah it is." For once, I think he sees my real face, hears my real voice. I reach out, just like that, and palm the top of his head, tussling his wavy brown hair.

“It’s a great idea.”

The contact is too much. Already, his smile has faded, replaced by a near absence of expression. And already, my own thoughts begin to wander.

I find myself thinking about the worn, too-small pajamas, stretched tightly over him like a second skin. For some reason, this thought calls to mind the fate of the Grimm’s Sausage. In the tale Bird, filled with remorse when Sausage fails to return from his new woodgathering responsibilities, sets off in search of his plump, savory companion. Eventually, he comes across the dog that had so recently devoured his unfortunate comrade. In response to Bird’s overwrought accusations of injustice, the dog calmly justified his actions by pointing out that Sausage had been carrying forged papers at the time of their encounter and therefore deserved to die. I have never been able to figure out what this could possibly mean.



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