

## LEMONGRASS TO THE PLAINS

I never know how long the baby will nap. The time varies, an hour, ninety minutes, three hours. Sometimes the merest creak of the wooden floor and he surfaces from sleep. Other times a dog yowls, a train whistles, the phone rings and he sleeps on and on. I did not know his nap would last and still I got nothing done. Perhaps the first thing I gave up when I had a child was the idea of getting something done, anything done, a shower, the dishes, the laundry, a letter—what letter, forget the letter. Not girl, interrupted, but life, interrupted, coitus interrupted, everything interrupted. And yet what other interruption gives this much joy, this fierce tenderness and still leaves you speechless with anger, with grief, with loneliness? And it happens every day. It doesn't stop. There is no break from your life. This is your life, this small being waking up and saying, "Gor, gor," which must mean go, because that's what he does, all day long. He goes and goes until sometime during the day he falls asleep and you, foolish you, hope to get something done, a letter, a novel, something quiet, something for yourself, and often it is so much nothing, a couple half-read articles on-line, a piece of e-mail to another mother at home about toilet training, and you still haven't thought about dinner. You wish your mate would be happy with a quesadilla just as you are happy with a quesadilla, as the baby is happy with anything he puts in his mouth and spits out again, but what could be so simple as everyone wanting to eat the same thing, what fiction is that?

I used to despair at my older sister making multiple meals for her family, noodles here, beans and tortillas there, and then something grown-up and gourmet if she is lucky or her husband is cooking. Now I find myself boiling water for pasta, nuking peas, pushing the adult dinner back beyond the fence of nine o'clock when maybe the child is bathed and in bed. Oh, there is the odd dish my nineteen-month-old son will relish with us, lasagne (time consuming in the extreme), enchiladas, ditto. Yet one evening he picked up his dish to lick the red vestige of a pasta sauce I had made. My eyes watered and I knew there was nothing I wouldn't cook to see that pink tongue whisk the plate clean. Even now I am thinking it's hot, windy, time is short, will any of the useless grocery stores becalmed in our small Midwestern town have fresh basil? Wanting anything exotic here is like praying for rain in a drought and we have that too, drought, the worst in 105 years. You can pray and maybe it will help, but it takes a heap of faith to bring lemongrass to the plains. Trying to make Tom Yung Gang with fresh shrimp here is stupid and I should know better. The baby probably won't eat it, but then he might. I have seen him eat spicy homemade chorizo. I can no more predict what he will eat than how long he will nap, and still something needs to be done, dinner made.

No doubt the doldrums of many an afternoon nap account for the box dinners lining the shelves of American supermarkets. Mama is quiet, doing something, doing nothing, and dinner is not even on the back burner of her mind. Maybe she has planned a meal, and maybe she hasn't. Maybe the box dinner will pull everything altogether because she cannot—no, she's being quiet, not getting anything done, not making chicken salad with roasted chilies and fresh corn and cilantro, oh, not that at all. She is playing bridge against the computer or hiding out in a novel, or she is trying to write her way back to herself while her child sleeps, hoping the nap will last long enough for her to get back to the single, solitary, unclaimed self who could waste whole years not writing, feeling there was time, there was still time. Not knowing, yes, there is still time, but time will keep pace with the child.



Now time stretches and yawns, cramps and pinches, and another mother will say to me in the checkout, admiring my son, “Oh, it goes by so fast.” This is a persistent myth about parenting, that time passes by quickly. Maybe in retrospect, but not in the moment. I feel every second since he was born has crept by with a slowness unimaginable until now. I have regained my childhood—because when else did a walk to the park, a mere block away, turn into a walkabout tracing the dream time of birds, insects, grass? The day aches with the steadfast attention of his young eye. Everything is now, now, insistent, relentless, yet open and empty and possible. He turns and chatters toward the squirrel, saying something like “Go.” He knows what he means, repeats it, insisting and pointing as the squirrel darts behind the elm. Life flashes by in an instant and vanishes. He knows this already and every day he reminds me of it. “Go, go,” he says to the world and it does. Moment by moment everything goes and is gone. ❁

