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Future Presence



October 1997, Day 18

About a year ago Tom looked into a Waldorf preschool for River. It was too far and too much money. We let it go and settled for a daycare close by. Tom sunk a little with that. He wanted assurance that River's fertile imagination would be nurtured and his innocence spared from the cultural push of early academics. Neither of us said it then, but we both knew it was another attempt to make up for the collateral damage River would suffer from possibly losing his daddy at such a tender age.

Making this happen now is a tall order, but I am on a roll of gathering successes as offerings to Tom each time he touches down into this world seeming anxious. Sometimes his brow smoothes out and he rests quietly, in response to the news I bring. Occasionally, he'll even be conscious enough to ask details, though names haven't returned. Other times, he doesn't seem to even hear me and goes about his waking nightmares revolving around losing money and being falsely accused. The game plan is to reassure him that our earth-bound future is secure so he can fully focus on his transition and feel the love part. This is for me as much as it is for him. I, too, need to believe we'll be okay without him. I make an appointment for River to visit the school and say nothing to Tom until it is a go.

River is giddy on the drive there. It's another change for him and I'm gambling the improvement will be worth it. A cottage at the edge of a forested park matches the address scribbled on a sticky note attached to my dash. *Sweet.*

A middle-aged woman with a French accent introduces herself and welcomes us in. She is older than I pictured from her voice. It causes me to wonder how she keeps up with so many kids when I live in chaos with only two. About ten children are at play. Some skip around in pastel capes and felt crowns and others are on the floor earnestly building a tower with wooden blocks. Monique makes room on a couch for me to nurse Oceanna and returns to playing softly on her flute as she moves around the room. It's a small space, with a strong feel of order and a soothing buzz of little people at the work of play vibrating in the air.

River spots his play-buddy and sputters, "There's Conrad!" He bounces over to him like Tigger does Pooh. Conrad merges him into the fold. A group of them ride pretend horses around in a circle acting out some storyline I can't quite follow. River seems to know exactly what is going on. He's completely engaged in being a child. I'm certain we've found a place that can hold our son through hard times.

By the time we leave, I've maneuvered logistics allowing him to attend on a part-time basis. River can't wait to get home and tell Daddy about his new school. I'm just as eager to tell Tom he had been right—it's the kind of place River needs right now. His face will light up equally over the synchronicity of Conrad being there. All the way home, River is caught up in wonder, humming the melody Monique had played on her flute. When we get there, he unclips his own car seat and bolts into the house.

"Daddy, Daddy!" I can hear him shout, stomping up the stairs. Unlatching the baby-carrier, I trail in behind. Monica gives me a heads-up.

"He's way out there, right now," she says.

I sigh, marching heavily up to our room where River talks excitedly at Tom, who swats at the air, looking pained.

"C'mon, River," I say. "Daddy can't hear you right now, he's in a dream."

"No, he's not. His eyes are open!" he insists. "Daaaaaddy!" he shouts in Tom's ear. "Daddy wake up, wake up!"

"Stop it!" I yell, scooping River up and running him out into the hallway. I'm not sure whether it's Tom or River I'm protecting.

"We'll tell him tomorrow. Promise," I say, searching for a soft tone of reassurance.

He bites his lower lip and runs downstairs. Oceanna is screaming, overdue for her feeding. This time, I opt for her first. Once she dozes off, I place her in the crib. Our bed isn't safe when Tom is hallucinating. It's quiet; too quiet. I rush downstairs with a dull gnawing in my gut and find the slider open.

"River!" I holler out into the yard. Nothing. I check the front door and gate. *Locked—good, but no sad little boy.* The gnawing turns to adrenaline.

Forming my hands into a megaphone, I yell: "RIVER! I'm counting to three. No cheese doodles for snack if you don't come out! One . . . two . . . three!" Still nothing, except for the sound of demolition next door.

Frantic searching ensues and becomes increasingly irrational as I go from slapping open cabinets to yelling into the washer and throwing off the couch cushions. Outside, I check for holes in the fence. Anything bigger than the size of a baseball

warrants a search. I check the gate again. It hasn't unlocked itself over the last five minutes. In the silence between breaths, I hear a muffled voice. Images of my son buried alive or trapped under piles of laundry, struggling for breath, fill my fertile imagination. I hold on inhale, straining to hear his distant voice over my thudding heart. The source comes from the corner of our tiny back yard, where Kizma pokes a nose out of her doghouse.

"C'mon, Kizma!" She won't budge. I pull at her collar and she backs further into the house. Too late, the cover for her ally is blown. I spot River's pant-leg. The relief is short-lived. Rage follows in quick succession.

"God damn it, River! Don't you *ever* . . ."

Just as I start in on him, something plucks me up abruptly and shuttles me into the living room. The invisible force has me pick up a pillow from the floor and unload a primal scream into it. Meanwhile, River's little voice continues on, singsong, likely telling Kizma all of what he can't tell his daddy or his mamma. Whatever it is that keeps me in line, I give great thanks for.

At bedtime, I tell him the truth. "Daddy is getting ready to die . . . to leave his body behind. He's practicing right now, so he's not always there even though we can see him," I say over the book River is pretending to read. "I think his spirit visits other places, kind of like in a dream. If he comes back before his body dies, I'll make sure and tell him about your school, okay?"

"Tell him about Conrad!" he says, putting his book down and sputtering in my face.

"I will," I promise.

It's eleven by the time Oceanna is through her evening round of colic. My thighs are burning from holding her while I bounce on the gymnastics ball for hours. Despite being utterly fatigued, I can't sleep. In the low light of candles, I pull out my drawing pad and sketch Tom's profile, willing him to wake up so I can carry out my promise to River. He turns to me suddenly, opening his eyes.

"I want you to write this down," he says.

"Okay, okay. Go ahead," I flip over the drawing quickly, feeling lucky to be here when he has touched into this world.

"I want it to be known I will return in a form that you, or our descendants, can recognize," he whispers monotone like he's reading scripture. "If they are still existing, which I think they will be, I'll communicate."

"How?" I realize he's bridging worlds.

"By mail," he answers, from his world where logic is a lower function.

"Won't work. What if we move?" I ask from earthly logic.

"Newspaper," he says, finishing the thought I interrupted.

"None of those are permanent," I argue. "What if I don't get the paper the day you communicate? How about dreams?" I'm hopeful that I've found a possible eternal link to him.

"Okay, I'll try. If I make it through the night, I'll try for another . . ." His eyes float out of focus.

"Wait, Tom-Button, I need to tell you about River's new school," I plead, wanting to secure a future plan for him to release us into.

“There are people on my chest traveling very fast. They’re joking, telling me to answer the phone,” he trails off, his eyes shift rapidly behind partially closed lids.

Too late, he’s off between worlds somewhere. I sigh, looking down at the drawing pad and read over the strategy he has just given me. I realize he’s been making plans too, only his are for a future in spirit form. We’re both rushing to get it all in before he touches down for the last time. So much so, we sometimes miss the few moments we have left. I’m torn between being completely with him in this bubble of slow-motion time holding his passage and preparing for what’s ahead.

Nick knows this place.