

Feeling for Wings

I chose to be a teacher because I am enchanted with the facts of the world. I'm like a garbage picker let loose at the dump, scrambling over heaps piled high with tidbits and trinkets, wispy threads of thought that float by in the light, lost ideas that gleam and wink in the darkness like crumpled scraps of tinfoil, the vast accumulation of matter that litters the bare soil. I run on, looking for treasures.

For example, did you know there are snakes that fly through the air? Big ones, ten to twelve feet long, that coil up and spring, leaping from tree to tree, sliding sinuously through the breeze. Or get this: when an elephant dies, the other elephants in the herd refuse to desert the dead. They go back to the decaying carcass and carry the exposed bones, tenderly, wrapped in their trunks, to a ritual burial ground somewhere deep in the trees. Doesn't that make you stop for one moment of ponderance in an otherwise trivial day? Doesn't that Knock Your Socks Off?

I explain these things to the kids in my class, who are precariously perched on the fine line of pre-adolescence. They're fifth graders, and the direction of their gaze is just beginning to turn inward. They are beginning to realize that their bodies, which have carried them so sturdily through kick-the-can, hopscotch, softball and swimming lessons, will, inevitably, betray them.

It makes them crazy. They Go Through Moods. They begin to ask themselves questions, and as likely as not, they hear themselves answer and do not recognize their own voices. I remember that age. It was terrible.

So I tell them little stories of the world. I am an actress, a raconteur. I am the South Side Suburban Elementary School Trivia Queen. And they love me.

I love the perplexed look on their faces when some little snippet sinks in. The sheer amazement, the wonder. It's more satisfying than watching little kisses of rain pucker the spring puddles, or drinking a icy beer on a white hot summer day.

There are other things about being a teacher that give me great pleasure. I love the way the year is divided into events. I love how the bulletin boards carry relics of our great American rituals: the mad, grinning pumpkins of Hallowe'en, the arched black cats. The festive greens of Christmas, the staid Menorah. The flutter and flurry of construction paper hearts that pump up the grey days of February. Just last week we made paper hyacinths — little circlets of yellow and

lavender gracing stubby green stems. And every year we plant marigold seeds in Dixie cups and watch that little miracle unfold with all its pungency and flare in the southeast corner of the room.

I love the smell of the place, a curious mixture of gym shoes, Ivory soap and dusty chalkboards. I love the thundering stampede of shoes down the hallway, the high shrieks, the groans of embarrassment. I especially like to sit at my desk during recess and hear the fine orchestration of play: the even creak of chain swings, the methodical slap of the rubber ball on asphalt, and over it all, the sweet, high trill of their voices.

They bring the air in with them when they come back in, little bursts of it that have been trapped in collars, in pockets, under their arms. They are so young yet, and so fresh.

When they first come in, I stroll up and down the aisles while they wiggle and squirm and settle in. And I pick one — a different one every day — and I feel their bony little shoulder blades and I say, are those wings sprouting there? Are you really an angel? They giggle and snort and roll their eyes. They're old enough to be embarrassed, but young enough to still like it.

I try to explain this to Duane, who is my husband. He has his own contracting business and is doing quite well at it. He's a wonderful man, the Quintessential Man of My Dreams, and I've been happy to be with him now for a significant number of years. Duane is a robust specimen with dark, mournful eyes and a full dark beard that is just now beginning to be flecked with grey.

When Duane was eight or nine, he had a month of dreams — each night a different episode, and each episode introduced by Andy Devine. Duane says he can't remember the dreams, but even now he can remember the introductions, they were so detailed and informative. That's one of the facts about Duane that caused me to lay my fears of marriage aside like a rusty old skate key and go sailing into it with no kneepads, no crash helmet, no anything.

I talk to Duane about my kids, they are so funny and wonderful, and Duane takes an active interest in who they are and what they do. He'll go so far as to ask me, how's Adrienne getting along? Or, what did Benson do today.

He's good with them, too. Once a month I do a specialty Saturday with four of my kids and I take them someplace new and different. One group served out soup at St. John's breadline and then we rented paddleboats at City Park and

drifted around on the water while we ate Chinese food out of sturdy white cartons. Another group handed out government-surplus cheese and butter to a line of senior citizens who teetered in under poverty guidelines. Then we went to the zoo and feasted on popcorn and Hershey bars and cotton candy.

I say to them, isn't this wonderful? Think how far back these people remember; they were alive before you were born. I say, be curious. Ask about the lives that go on outside of your own, you are the center of the universe and everywhere around you are orbiting planets, pale moons, stars!

One old guy in workpants told us about going to the local tavern to buy a bucket of beer for a nickel. My mother greased down the rim of the bucket with butter, he said, to keep the foam down. You got a lot more beer that way, it was a lot of beer for a nickel, but then I was only five years old.

Isn't that something?

The point of the story is that Duane comes along on these specialty Saturdays and he knows what a treat this teaching business can be. He's heard my kids tell knock-knock jokes and then laugh hysterically at themselves. Knock, knock, who's there, a Polish burglar. HA!

Duane sees it all. I know he does. I've seen it reflected in his dark eyes when we're out on the paddleboats and the sun is backlighting the kids' hair. I know that he knows what I'd be giving up if I stayed home to have a baby. He knows that I know that he knows. But more and more frequently, he suggests it.

So, I have gathered the facts.

Over a hundred-million sperm jerk like whiplash through the convoluted tubing of the vas deferens. In a moment of joy or boredom or carelessness, they explode into the dark, inner space of the cervix. One little sucker, overburdened with an infinitesimal spiral of genetic traits, strung along molecular threads like so much laundry, plugs in. It Connects. After that, there's a quick fizgig of cells, more spectacular than the Fourth of July — two, four, eight, sixteen — and already, the skin resiliency, the shape of the inner ear, the intellect, are In Place. Another human being has arrived.

Meanwhile, the two bumbling adults who've achieved this feat are kept in the dark. It's a game show: behind one door a girl, behind another a boy, one's an athlete or a brain or maybe both. One might have colic and cry for eighteen

months. One might be a perfect baby. And there's the big mystery of door number three. The jackpot or the dissonant buzzer. The incalculable fact. The Big Risk.

By the time the embryo is six weeks old, it looks like a little guppy. The double hemispheres of its brain begin to glimmer through the translucent skin of the forehead. It has cauliflower paws that unfurl into fingers. I think of whales, with the vestigial finger bones in their wide flippers. No one, not even Jacques Cousteau, has ever seen a baby whale be born.

At four months, the fetus can hear.

If it hears, can it remember? When does memory begin? Sometimes at night when I can't sleep I try to think back as far as I can remember. I listen for the steady plodding of my mother's heart, for the angry murmurs and gurgles of heartburn. Jung says there is racial memory, that if we could only gain access to the unconscious, we would remember the first primal howlings of the Olduvian Gorge. But my first memory is of riding around in a little toy car, pedaling furiously. I wore white ankle socks and little red sandals with leather straps. I can see my feet going up and down, up and down, up and down. And that's all.

I know that a woman's body is puffed up — stretched and pushed and pulled like so much taffy, that a baby can wedge its foot in up under the ribs, that labor is horrendous and that most women forget it. I know the pros and cons of natural childbirth and breast feeding. I know the horror stories of daycare — sexual abuse, neglect. And I know there are teachers like me.

Duane says, you'd be a wonderful mother.

I don't know that.

I say, but what about my kids? What about Adrienne and Benson and Linda and Christopher?

Adrienne is maturing at a phenomenal rate. Already, her breasts are overflowing her first bra, and her hips have swelled out like a blooming tulip. She is, temporarily, out of grace. She has lost the lean packaging of girlhood and it has knocked her off balance. When she runs, she splays her feet out to the side and her hands flutter helplessly in the breeze.

She sits at her desk, daydreaming.

The boys don't know what to do. They're still tittering over *National Geographic* and yet, they know something's up. I swear, the metaphysics of true love comes down to scent — like the pheromone in certain insects. It's just that we humans are overcultured, we don't even know that we're smelling it. So the boys hang around Adrienne as erratic and confused as moths in the patch of cabbage. They are silly and shy and impossibly tough. They stutter. They swagger. They Line Up.

A female chimpanzee in heat will take on every male in the clan. Her only discretion is a question of rank. The males fight for dominance, baring their yellow teeth and yowling. The female sticks her hiney up in the air and the clan leader climbs on. When he's finished, the next in rank takes a turn. She takes them all on, one by one, and then lets the little ones climb on for practice.

When whales mate, it is gentle and gamboling play. They applaud themselves, they slap the surface of the water with their wide flippers. Sometimes, when it's hard to achieve leverage in the water, a third whale will swim up alongside the female to shore her up. It sounds so, I don't know, *friendly*.

I worry about Adrienne.

And what about Linda? She's my quiet one. She is overly serious. Her hair is a long mop of split ands and bangs. She has chipped a triangle out of a front tooth and it gives her voice an added wisp. It makes her sound wistful and insecure. She is ponderously smart. Not just bright in a quick-as-a-wink sort of way, she is heavy with intellect.

One day she asked me this: if a man led a good life and did good things for other people and never committed a sin, but didn't believe in God, would he go to heaven?

I said, if a man didn't believe in God, would he *believe* in heaven?

She looked puzzled.

But where would he go then, she asked.

I said, I don't know.

She put her little eyebrows together and looked at me coolly.

I cannot imagine giving this up. I love this life of mine right now, without any changes in it. But lately it's been hard with Duane.

Just yesterday, it was Sunday, and it's spring, you know, so all the flowers are busting up out of the ground like something out of a science fiction movie. Their stems are sturdy with turgor pressure. The crocuses nod and sigh, the daffodils go sticking their noses into the wind's business. We were out in the garden, and the smell of the earth was heady and strong. We strung little lines behind the proposed peas, pushed up mounds of dirt for squash and pumpkins, buried the mummified heads of onion bulbs. The sun snuck into all the crisscross wrinkles of our skin, which turned tender and pink as a baby's.

For dinner we made popcorn and margaritas and cuddled up on the bed to watch *60 Minutes* and when it was over Duane said, let's make a baby. If we made a baby right now we'd have it by Christmas.

We've lived together long enough that Duane can talk to me the way I talk to my kids. I tell them, don't always think in a straight line. Don't go from point A to point Z without stopping off at Q and J. Take side trips. Go on adventures!

On Interstate 70, past the eastern plains of Colorado, the land becomes endlessly repetitious. It is flat, gritty land that extends colorlessly for miles beyond sagging fences. It is barren, except for tangled clots of tumbleweed that stumble aimlessly over the sand. You can drive and drive without ever meeting a single fresh perspective.

Somewhere east of Goodland, Kansas, there's a dirt road leading off into the distance, shadowed by a peeling sign painted with bid red letters. It says, World's Largest Prairie Dog. And underneath it, in smaller print, Rattlesnakes, Coyotes, the World's Natural Wonders.

I would want my students to stop there for a Coke.

Duane said, teasing, this is linear thinking. Are you just going to be a teacher the rest of your life?

I pointed out that the perceived linear route is to grow up, get married and have children, and that I was off at a lively road-stand, enjoying myself.

He said softly, what are you afraid of?

He went on to tell me the story of a tiny tree frog in South Central America. They are so small that the female can lay her eggs in drops of dew that collect in the dimples of bromeliad leaves. The eggs hatch minuscule tadpoles that live in

silver puddles the size of a dime. The mother visits once a week and lays infertile eggs for food for the little buggers.

Isn't that amazing? he said. Don't you think there's a question of instinct here?

I proceeded to tell him about the cowbird, who always lays her eggs in some other bird's nest. She never sticks around to raise them, and some poor robin or blue-jay or sparrow, who's so exhausted by the demands of motherhood that she doesn't even *notice*, raises the orphaned cowbirds as her own.

But then Duane got serious. Honey, he said, it's important to me. Someday, you and I will both be dead. We have a wonderful, inventive chemistry here that shouldn't be lost to the world.

Someday, I said, our baby would be dead.

That hurt his feelings.

I don't want a baby. I don't want one.

We went to bed without touching.

So now it is Monday, and I can't get into the rhythm of things here. Everything I talk about comes out like a horror story.

In health we talked about caffeine, and I got off onto the heart. The heart is as big as a fist, give or take a few centimeters, and it beats an average of 3,110,812,000 times in a given lifetime. It is the engine of the body and caffeine will cause gaping lesions to appear between the striations of muscle.

You have to get into drama with these kids. After all, you're competing with You Tube and the Internet. Their attention spans are geared to television reality shows — eight minutes and then a commercial.

We talked about the French Revolution and all I could think about was how, when a man is beheaded, his brain stays alive for thirty seconds or so, or long enough for him to look up and see his dead body.

Jesus!

After lunch, I always read to my students for half an hour to give them a chance to settle down. Today I read from *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* — an amazing

collection of facts and speculations by Annie Dillard. She even knows the name of those tiny white specks that float across the eye; they're called *muscae volitantes*.

Linda had been quiet all day. When she first walked in this morning, she looked weary and driven. She had purple half-moons under her eyes and her eyelids were all pink and puffy. While I was reading, she crossed her arms on her desk and put her head down.

I was reading the part about praying mantises, and how, when they mate, the female slowly devours the male. It's pretty graphic stuff and she goes into spectacular detail. The class had started to settle down, what with the afternoon sun and the calm, steady drone of my voice.

Suddenly, Linda started to whimper and jerk at her desk. She'd fallen asleep and was dreaming. It must have been a nightmare.

The rest of the class came to attention and a quick titter rippled through the room. Benson reached over and slapped Linda lightly on her upper arm.

She sat straight up in her chair, screaming. Her eyes were unfocused and wide with panic. Her mouth was wet and glistening and opened up so wide I thought we might all fall into it.

The class was stunned into silence. I went right over to her and put my hand on her shoulder and led her out of the room.

In the hallway, she stood there and cried. She told me, in between sobs, about the dream. She'd been in the park playing when suddenly the sky darkened and warplanes droned overhead. At the very edge of the park, they dropped bombs, and every single tree went up in flames. People were screaming. Then everything went black. She couldn't see or hear anything.

It was like being in nothing, she said. I couldn't find my mom or my dad anywhere.

I took her down to the nurse's office. I gave her a Coca-Cola and gently smoothed the hair away from her face. It was just a dream, I said. You're OK. And she calmed down.

But I walked back to the classroom in a state of absolute panic. It all flowed right out of her and straight into me. My knees kept threatening to buckle and there was a gaping emptiness in the region of my diaphragm that I kept taking quick,

shallow breaths, trying to fill. Back in the room we had a brief discussion about nightmares and dreams. I tried to tell them about Duane's dreams with Andy Devine, but my voice faltered off like a bird with a broken wing.

They looked up at me in horror.

Somehow, we made it through the afternoon. They were considerate and quiet and overly polite. Their little faces were pale and drawn.

Finally, the bell rang.

They filed out solemnly, relieved. Out on the playground, they let loose, and I sat at my desk until the last little voice had vanished.

I have been sitting here now, for hours. The building is quiet and dark, the rest of the teachers have gone home. It's a warm night, and the air that slips in over the windowsill is full of darkness and promise. What does it all come down to? What does it matter, really, if I have a baby or not?

I have this sense of everything flying apart, like an explosion of sun, or the birth of a new universe.

I've got to get home. Duane will be worried about me. But I don't want to go. I want to take these trembling hands and anchor them on someone's — Linda's? — shoulder blades and say, in my calm, professional voice, are these the wings of an angel? Are these things real?

