

**Nathan Leslie**

Tanglewood Days

We are united in our hatred of slackness, in our loathing of loose morals. No, “morals” doesn’t quite capture the notion—let’s call it “understanding.”

We are precise.

We live in a house of 2,346 square feet. We have 2 ½ bathrooms, fifteen windows, three doors. We have eleven chairs—far too many chairs really. (How many chairs do I actually use on a regular basis?) We own three bottles of squeezable hand soap. Two peelers. Six lamps. This is my son and I.

My sweet, mute son. Well, not exactly “mute” exactly. Quiet. Subdued. He just seldom speaks. He is blonde and bug-eyed and dormant—like a volcano about to erupt.

We live on an eroding yard, overlooking a drainage ditch. The drainage ditch is dry, scabbed with cracked mud as a result of the drought we are currently suffering.

I call my ex-wife. She lives one thousand three hundred and ninety eight miles away. She has renounced her motherhood. “Renounced” is my way of thinking about it at least.

She has removed herself from what she calls the “shackles of society.”

This is better than the alternative—a life of quiet desperation.

--Jack. How is Jack doing?

--I’m fine.

She likes to refer to me in the third person—takes the sting out, I suppose. She exhales through her nose vociferously.

--Brenda is enjoying the wind here. This is her. She is cultivating. I try to think, not feel.

She's in New Mexico.

--I'm keeping my head together, I say.

--Yes, yes.

--Giles will be five next week.

--Oh, well that is not my obligation. Is it? Kiss his head for me.

--Brenda, I say. Do you listen to yourself? He's not going to know you. You're okay with that?

--Yes, yes. The wind is good here.

This is the way it goes.

I step out onto the deck, look out over the drainage ditch. Brenda called it a water-front property. She has a way of lifting her top lip to expose her teeth. This reminded me of the behavior of orangutans.

I feel the wind here.

Giles will be home soon. Next year he will be in kindergarten. The solstice is coming. If we were in Alaska it would be light all day and night. I think of this.

Canadian geese pluck at the grasses by the muddy water.

Giles is making foam castles. With the money Brenda sends I buy him one toy a month. This month foam blocks—like Nerf Legos. I parent by entertainment. I suppose I'm not alone in this. We count the foam blocks first. Both of us.

--It helps to know how many we have, doesn't it?

Giles nods. He's glad to be done with school. I never let Giles draw, however, lest he draw his mother. I have placed sticky notes over her face in all the photos in the house.

We seldom speak. Sometimes she crafts a gnomish letter. It usually takes me days to work up the nerve to read them.

There's Mike. Mike eases the nerves like a glass of Shiraz. Best of all Giles and Mike get along smashingly. Mike has a well-developed sense of childishness. This helps. They "fish" in the "lake" with twine and plastic worms. Giles tells stories about the fish he saw. He stumbles over his words and stutters with excitement. I can't complain: my son speaks.

On Giles' birthday Mike spends the night. He smells of strawberries and almonds—neither of which are unpleasant.

Brenda calls a week later and I let her ring through to the voice mail.

--Giles, honey. Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you. I love you, Mommy's flamingo. And I hope you do too! Happy birthday, munchkin. I'll see you soon.

I erase the message. I tell Giles we are going to the park. We eat peanut butter, English muffins and mandarin oranges. Mike drives.

Giles initially wants to climb the purple dinosaur, but we coax him to the whirligig. I hated spinners when I was a child, yet perhaps Giles will be different, stronger than me. Perhaps he will make better choices. We spin it slow. Giles laps it up.

--Daddy, I want to count the trees over there. Can we? And I want to count the birds, too.

--Do you know what a flamingo is?

--No.

--It's a big, pink bird. Do you know where they live?

--No.

--They live in the salty marsh.

--What's a marsh?

--Let's go count the trees.

He swings on Mike's arm. We walk into the woods.

Why am I so needy? Why must I constantly put myself at the forefront of every single thought? What kind of father am I?

It rains in torrents. For fourteen straight days it rains. The orange ditch spills over into Huckleberry Road. Cars have to slow down to make their way through the impromptu creek.

Dogs howl in the afternoon.

I wear thick socks frequently. Hiking socks.

I take up swimming—first at the local Y, then I install a small lap pool in what was the den. I do laps four times a day. Giles watches. He makes bird calls, eats strips of Swiss cheese.

Mike calls occasionally, when he's not with James. I try to keep Giles involved.

Those are tanglewood days.

Giles resurrects my spirits, without necessarily trying. He tugs on my shirt. He makes diagrams. He recites the alphabet in French. Despite it all he's a smart kid.

I dream the roof leaks, but it's fine.

I feel as if the house is crumbling.

One dry night we shoot off fireworks. We're a week from the fourth of July, but it feels good to initiate something.

I go to work, I come home.

Brenda writes a postcard, says she'll be back this summer. She has been saying this ever since she left.

I hide my stash of dirty magazines in the crawl space, tucked behind the Christmas tree.

I would keep a diary, but it would be far too boring to recount.

--Look, honey. It's a boy. She sits upright, surrounded by green—sheets, pillows. Her face is puffy from tears or medication or bloating or all-of-the-above. My son is Giles. He is the size of a cantaloupe, ruddy and burbling.

Brenda is a voracious reader. She could plow through two books a week. She shames me.

My wife is happy; we both are. We have a young infant; we are starting a family. We have a beautiful new home in a beautiful new development. We eat well. We listen to beautiful music. We drink exquisite wine, make love to the sounds of wind high through the atmosphere. We are lying in bed. A candle flickers on the night stand. I watch the shadows it makes.

--This is everything, she says.

--What is?

--I can feel it becoming. Brenda has always spoken this way—in non-sequiturs. She assumes you can keep up with her thought stream, and if you don't she leaves you in the dust. It used to annoy me, then I found it endearing, then I found it worrisome. “Worrisome” is where I land.

--I'm not sure what you're—

--*This*. It's a growing sensation. I tried to ask her what she was referring to, but she said she just wanted rest, just wanted to sleep for a long time.

I hold her. We hold each other. In the morning she squeezes orange juice. We eat English muffins with homemade jam. On the deck we hold hands in the morning light.

--This. This is heaven, I say.

She stares over the drainage pit. The wind picks up, scudding the muddy water. The weeds on the bank of the drainage pit lash in the gusts.

--It's windy. It's so windy, she says.

I look up at her. Her eyes look up over the choppy drainage pit. Far beyond.