

PROLOGUE

IT GETS BETTER



You know how you feel when you see the RUNAWAY TRUCK RAMP sign on the highway? Like there must be an eighteen-wheeler barreling massively behind you, on the brakeless verge of destroying your beautiful, doomed life? You can picture the tiny, rosy-cheeked children screaming, clinging to you since you are, of course, riding in the back with them, the better to distribute string cheese and hand-holding and the occasional contorted breast, bared and stretched toward somebody's crying face, but only if they've been crying *for a long time*. About to be crushed—all of it. But “runaway truck” also feels like a metaphor for something. For you, maybe, with your impulsive desire to careen off alone to Portugal or Applebee's, just so you can sit for five unmolested minutes with a ham sandwich and a glass of beer. Just so you can use the bathroom *one time* without having a concurrent conversation about poop with the short person who has to stand with a consoling hand on your knee,

looking worriedly up into your straining face. Later, it won't be like this. You'll see the sign, and the nearby gravelly uphill path, and you'll think, "That's a good idea, for the runaway trucks." Also, you will go to the bathroom alone.

You know how you know by heart the phone number of the Poison Control Center? Because the children, your constantly imperiled children, like to eat the ice-melting salt and suck batteries and help themselves to nice, quenching guzzles of cough medicine? One day you won't know that number anymore.

One day, the children will eat neither pennies nor crayons nor great, gulping handfuls of sand like they have a powerful thirst for sand, sand, only sand. They will no longer choke on lint and disks of hot dog or fall down the stairs, their heads making the exact, sickening, hollow-melon thump you knew they would make when you *knew* they would fall down the stairs. They will still fall out of trees and off of trampolines. They will still scrape their elbows and knees and foreheads, and you will still be called upon to tend to these injuries. And you will be happy to, because they will so rarely need you to kneel in front of them anymore, to kiss them tenderly here, and also here.

Rest assured, though, that there will be ongoing opportunity to be certain of imminent doom and destruction. Ticks will attach their parasitic selves to the children's scalps and groins. Rashes and fevers and mysterious illnesses will besiege everybody. You will still go on a Googling rampage of the phrase "mild sore throat slight itchiness coma death." The kids will still barf with surprising frequency—but competently, into tidy

CATASTROPHIC HAPPINESS

buckets, rather than in a spraying impersonation of a vomit-filled Super Soaker on the “Drunk Frat Boy” setting.

You know how you see germs everywhere? Every last microbe illuminated by the parental headlamp of your OCD? One day you won't. One day you will cavalierly handle doorknobs and faucets and even, like a crazy person, the sign-in pen at the pharmacy. Plus, in a public bathroom, the children will no longer need to touch and/or lick every possible surface. Seriously.

You know how you're tired? So tired that you mistake talking in an exhausted monotone about your tiredness for making conversation? You won't be tired. Or rather you will sometimes be tired, sometimes rested, like regular people are. You won't blearily skim the passage of the novel you're reading—where the protagonist lies down on her soft bed, between crisp, clean sheets—as your own eyes fill with tired, envious tears. You won't daydream about rest and recumbency, lawn chairs and inflated pool rafts and white hotel comforters. You won't look forward to your dental appointment just so you can recline alone for forty heavenly, tartar-scraping minutes. One day, you will once again go to sleep at night and wake up in the morning. You will sleep as much as you want to. You'll actually be shocked if you don't get to because a child is ill or can't fall asleep, even though now you lie wedged into various cribs and cots, night after night, still as a button, while a small somebody drifts off and snaps awake gropingly and drifts off again. “How did we use to do it?” you will ask, and your husband will shake his head and grimace. You will no longer be constantly schem-

ing to lie down, tricking the kids into another round of Sick Patient, so you can be dead on the couch while they prod you therapeutically with plastic screwdrivers and the doll's bottle. "I'm still not better," you mumble now, but you will be. You really will.

One day, you'll be sitting on the couch with your husband, reading the Sunday paper, and around the time you're getting to the book review you'll think to ask, "Are the kids still sleeping?" And he'll shrug without putting down the sports section. The kids might be sleeping or they might be reading in their beds, playing with LEGOs, stroking the cat, bickering gently, resolving their differences. And you will be awake, *even though you don't have to be*. I swear it on a stack of attachment-parenting books.

Speaking of the newspaper: you will one day climb back into bed with the heavy wedge of folded sections and an unspilled mug of hot, milky coffee. You will even do the crossword puzzle—and all the puzzles you've been saving. It's okay. I know about the newspaper that still arrives constantly now, either because you're in denial about the way you recycle it unread or because you cannot recall your account password and don't have the intelligence or emotional resilience to figure out the cancelling of your subscription. I know you still tear out the Sunday crossword and stuff it into the drawer of your bedside table with the crazy idea that you might get to it *later*. And you will. You'll open the drawer one evening (to ferret out some birth control, no less) and you'll find the archaeological evidence of your optimism: hundreds of puzzles spanning a sizable

CATASTROPHIC HAPPINESS

chunk of the early millennium. And you'll lie around doing them in a kind of leisurely, ecstatic trance, eating bonbons and weeping with happiness.

You will have time to run and bike and do yoga and floss and have sex. And sometimes you won't, but it won't even be the children's fault. It's just that you're lazy. Or doing a crossword puzzle.

You know your body? How it's like a baggy, poorly curated exhibit about reproduction? You know how your weaned bosom looks like a cross between a pair of used condoms and Santa's sack the day after Christmas? All empty and stretched out with maybe one or two lumpy, leftover presents that couldn't be delivered? It will all get better. The bosom will never again look like a bursting, gift-filled bag of awesomeness, that's true. But it will look less harrowed by motherhood. The breasts, they will tighten up a bit. All of it will tighten up a bit and be yours again to do with what you will. For example, your husband won't gesture to you at a party after you've been nursing the baby. "What?" you mouth back now, sticking a fingernail between your teeth. "Spinach?" He shakes his head and points at your front, and you look down to see the elastic edge of your tank top, and how your left breast is hanging over it. That won't happen anymore.

Even though you're older you'll actually be *less* hunched! One day, whenever you arrive somewhere, you will all simply get out of the car and walk inside! You won't be permanently bent over to deal with the car seat/seat belt/shoes/socks/sippy cups/diapers/turd on the floor. Why, you wonder now, does so

much of your life take place *below* you? (It's because the kids are small.) One day infants and diaper bags and hemorrhoids and boobs won't be hanging off your person like you're a cross between a human mobile and a Sherpa and a performance-art piece about Dante's *Inferno*. The flip side is that there will be fewer cuddles. Lots still, but fewer. For example, every morning you will have to kiss your twelve-year-old good-bye not on the school walkway but in the bushes before you get there, like you're sneaky, chaste teenagers.

You know all those things you thought would be fun with kids but secretly kind of aren't? Going to museums, making biscuits, watching the Peter Sellers *Pink Panther* movies, ice-skating, swimming, singing in the rain—how they all end in tears and pooping and everybody needing to be rocked to sleep in the sling? All those things really *will* be fun! You're just doing them too soon because you're bored of Hi Ho! Cherry-O and the diaper-smell children's room of the library and those hair shirts of conversation about *Would you stay partners with Daddy if he turned into a mosquito and was always buzzing around and stinging everybody but had his same face?* One day you will watch *Monty Python* and *The Princess Bride* with the kids instead of *Arthur's Big Valentine's Day* *Guilt Trip* and *Caillou by Mistake Draws on a Library Book*, and you will hardly believe your good luck. At the dinner table you'll talk about natural selection and socialized medicine. You'll arrive at your campsite and the children will carry wood and play beanbag toss rather than cramming pinecones and beetles into their mouths before darting into the road to be run over by a Jeep. Your vigilance will

CATASTROPHIC HAPPINESS

ebb away until you actually take for granted how it feels to sit by the fire with a beer in your hand, looking unworriedly up at a sky full of stars with a lapful of big kid.

They will still believe in fairies. Sort of.

They will buckle their own seat belts and make themselves toast and take their dishes to the sink instead of flinging them from their high chairs to the floor like the drunk, tyrannical fathers from Irish novels. They will do most, if not all, of the important things that you worry they'll never be able to do, ever, such as follow the pendulum of your finger with their gaze and wade in the neighbor's inflatable pool and ride the merry-go-round. Speaking of merry-go-rounds: the years will start to fly by surreally, the seasons recurring like you're captive on a *deranged* carousel of time. The dogwood will bloom, it will be Christmas, the dogwood will bloom again, the children will start middle school. This is how it will be.

They will stop doing most of the annoying things that you worry they'll always do: they won't sob into their cottage cheese for no reason. They won't announce guiltily, "Floss isn't for *eating*," or make you sing the ABCs like a lullaby, *No, not like that, like this*. They won't ride the wheeled xylophone around the house like it's a skateboard or lick spears of asparagus before leaving them, mysteriously, on the couch. They won't talk about poop all the time. *Kidding*. They will still totally talk about poop all the time!

Not to be all baby-out-with-the-bathwater, but they're also going to stop doing some of the things you love. They will no longer imagine that the end of that "Eleanor Rigby" line is *all*

the lonely peacocks. They won't squint into the darkness and marvel at the *moon beans* or hold their breath when you pass the *gravetary*. They will no longer announce odd questions into the darkness of bedtime. "Mama, Mama—how do cats turn into *old cats*?" And you will no longer sigh and say, "Time." But they will be funnier, and on purpose. "Is that a robin?" your daughter will ask one day, pointing to a bird hopping along the hedge. When you say, "No, robins have red breasts," she will say, "Plural? *Breasts*?" and use two index fingers to pantomime a bosom. They will make you laugh all the time, they will make you think, and they will be exactly as beautiful as they are now. But with missing and giant teeth instead of those minuscule rows of seed pearls you so admire.

You know how you secretly worry that this is it, that it's all downhill from here? I know you do. You worry that the children will turn into hulking criminals; their scalps will turn odorless. You lie in bed now during a thunderstorm, two sleeping, moonlit faces pressed against you, fragrant scalps intoxicating you, the rain on the roof like hoofbeats, heartbeats—and the calamity of raising young children falls away because this is all you ever wanted. Now you boo-hoo noiselessly into the kids' hair because life is so beautiful and you don't want it to change. Enjoy it. But let me tell you—you won't believe it, but let me tell you anyway—you will watch them sleeping still and always: the illuminated down of their cheeks, their dark puffs of lips and dear, dark wedges of eyelashes, and you will feel exactly the way you feel now.

Only better.