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The 7 Stages of a Parental Visit

Stage 1. Relief

They made it! You were concerned about the plane, turbulence. It's April, but still you feared ice on the wings because if you worry about even the things that can't possibly go wrong, your parents are more likely to arrive unscathed. Well, here they are, no worse for wear.

Relief is the briefest of the stages, but also the most intense. Let it wash over you. Enjoy the release of your stress. Breathe deeply and say quietly to yourself: They are safe, I am safe, we are here. They are safe, I am safe, we are here.

And say it once more: They are safe, I am safe, we are here. Yes.

Now. What do you see?

Their doughy bodies are whole. Stuffed between a couple of power suits armed with briefcases and a young family of squealers, they navigate the stairs that descend from the middle of the airport. Their eyes are on their own rubber-soled shoes, and each has a hand on the railing.

Remember those hands? Hers always fluttering, patting, tucking, stirring. Remember how you wished for stillness? His callused and stained, each finger tipped with a ruined, blackened nail; hands crafted by fifty years of construction work,

too many years to allow for high school. Held you in thrall. Held you.

When they get to the landing they look up, both catching sight of your wave. Now they're grinning at their feet and their steps are hurried.

Stage 2. Joy

Acknowledge it. Let it flow. From your scalp to the end of each, individual hair. From your hair to the curve of your neck. Do you feel the joy filling your lungs, inflating your chest, dipping into your belly? Cradle your belly. Hold the joy in your arms.

This is a time for similes. Say, "I am as joyful as a child with a double-scoop of Rocky Road." And say, "I feel like a new spring flower, opening its petals to the golden sun." Good. Now it's your turn:

I am as joyful as _____.

I feel like _____.

Fantastic. Now breathe and feel the joy. Breathe . . . and feel the joy. Breathe. Feel the joy.

Joy is a simple emotion. Draw strength from the purity of your pleasure, because the coming stages are more complicated. You will need to move into these phases from a position of

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strength. To prepare, you must now focus your joyful attention on your parents. Who are these people?

This is the woman who listened to your report of every clue Nancy Drew encountered, every turn in the path of detection. You approached each retelling as a test. Why?

Her: At the kitchen sink, rinsing. Is she listening?

You: "And then . . . And then . . ."

Do you notice how she nods and smiles at the wrong details, the boring ones? But frowns when you've just explained a tricky bit of detection, frowns again when you've snagged a shining detail *Nancy herself missed*, when here you are, pulling tight on the story?

Her: Pushing into the sink, her back bowed, peering into a mug, scraping at something with her fingernail.

You: "Wait, no—first she found an old vase in the cellar, and guess what was engraved on the bottom! And then . . ."

You are smarter than Nancy and deserve your own slim skirt and a book cover, but your mother doesn't notice. She presses her washrag into the bowl of the pan and sighs just when you're getting to the pumped-up finale. You've added a struggle, a karate chop. You shout and hold your fists above your head. Mom? Still frowning. *Who is she?*

They have managed the stairs and here they are. She flings her arms around your neck and presses you to her massive chest. Before you have been released she's telling you about the friend

she made at La Guardia. Your mother always makes a friend. (That's a clue.) "I asked for two bags of pretzels," your father says, when you want to know if they need to eat right away, "and when they poured my ginger ale I asked if I could keep the can." He shakes your shoulders and calls you Sweetie-Pie.

Stage 3. Disbelief

All morning they have been stuffed into the love seat, slow-sipping mugs of coffee while you try to ignite their interest in . . . anything. For months you looked forward to this visit. For weeks you envisioned the day trips, the memory-laden conversations, the treats you will bestow upon your sweet, loving parents, who have come all this way just to see you. You made *plans*.

But you forgot to take their needs into account, didn't you? You forgot that you and your parents long ago stopped liking the same things.

Right now breathe five long breaths. Remember to release your abdominal muscles. Take in air while your belly inflates. Release the air as your belly collapses. Again, inhale. Again, release. Inhale. Release. As you release your fifth breath, ask yourself: Do you need five more? Because he meant it when he said he doesn't want to go anywhere, see anything.

You again outline the many delightful options you researched, but he shrugs at them all and she won't go without him. "We're here to see *you*," she says, beaming. He pats her knee. "That's right, Sweetie-Pie."

He will go out if it means going out to eat, but

you have deleted restaurants from the agenda, because he has developed some embarrassing habits. He taps his fingers on the table every time he drains his glass of diet cola or eats the last piece of bread in the basket. He interrupts the waitress every time she passes the table, whether he needs her or not. He teases her—"Look, someone ate our food!" He believes his bad jokes show a kind interest in the waitress, add texture and levity to her shift. The waitress at that last place took it very hard. She wore the hatred of your father in every line of her over-worked face. So now you're stuck—you cook or get take-out. And though your mother offers to help in the kitchen, mostly she uses the chopping knife to gesture and the cutting board as a resting spot for her elbows.

Stuck? Banish that word. In truth you are free. Free to accept your mistakes. That's right—*your* mistakes. Free to embrace the real needs of your parents. Are you ready? How about five more breaths?

Ask yourself again: Who are these people?

This is the man who could read only road signs and food labels, but while you were helping him puzzle out the pronunciation of a new brand of creamed corn, he was teaching you the real pleasure of words.

I wouldn't do that for a hatful of assholes.

That girl's got the face of a hot biscuit 'n honey.

Did I ever tell you about Luthea Gumball? She had just one tooth in her head, but it was solid gold and dripping with peach juice.

You still think of Luthea the one-toothed wonder, don't you? You muttered that "hatful of

assholes" line just the other day.

Your shining moment with your dad: the day you stumbled into a hornet's nest. Think of it now.

You: Standing still as a fence post, letting the hornets buzz around your head, land in your hair and on the softest skin in the open crook of your arm.

Him: Watching. Nodding. Saying softly, "That's right. That's right."

One crawls into your palm, rooting around in your lifeline while you hold your fingers stiff and pray for stillness, the hornet's stinger hovering over your pink skin. You see Dad's approving nod and that makes you smile, which prompts the hornet on your cheek to sting your mouth.

Your lower lip got big as an egg and stayed that way for three days, and a pink freckle still marks the spot. Occasionally your lip pulses with the memory. It pulses now as you wonder: *Why did he just stand there and watch?*

Stage 4. Resentment

This is the hardest stage. Do not try to move through it too quickly. Say this: Pout today, smile tomorrow. Don't just say it, do it. Pout today, smile tomorrow. Breathe deeply and picture your pouting self. That's right—scowl. Clench your fists. Screw up that mouth and think black thoughts. Pout today, smile tomorrow. Pout today.

Because she never stops stirring, stirring. Her spoon slaps the sides of her coffee cup over and over, long past the time it takes to marry cof-

fee with cream and sugar. Clappity-clap—like an alarm clock that works because you have to get up to smash it—clappity-clip. Of course this drives you crazy.

Too many of his sentences begin with, “You know, plenty of people,” as in, “You know, plenty of people work full time while they go to school,” and “You know, plenty of people are very happy with our president.” Plenty of people never speak to their parents. Plenty of people *hate* their parents. Excellent. Let the black thoughts course through you, but not before you’ve held them on your tongue, not before you’ve tasted them. They don’t taste good—they taste *necessary*.

When was your father diagnosed with diabetes? You were in the eighth grade, right? At that age you could barely stand to speak to either of them. She liked to follow you up the stairs when you got home from school. She hovered in the door of your room while you moved with exaggerated slowness to turn down your music, while you answered her questions with abbreviated, crisp sentences. She could not possibly misunderstand your wish to be alone, yet there she stood.

He never followed anyone anywhere, because that would mean shoveling his increasingly rounded self out of that grubby recliner, where too often he slept into the night. Before he got sick he puttered and drew up plans for various projects. He hummed while he taped things, nailed other things, dabbed or brushed or polished. But he grew listless and glum and diagnosable and then began his career of jabbing at the television’s remote control.

He is that same man now, that jabber of buttons, diminished in spirit but plumped in body. But he never used to interrupt so much, that’s true. And she never used to talk so much about money. Your point is?

If I could change one thing about my mother:

If I could change one thing about my father:

Because you’re doing all the cooking or picking up food, that makes you the waitress. Mushrooms? What kind of mushrooms? “Plenty of people eat spaghetti with no meat in the sauce,” you say. He wrinkles his nose and replies: “Plenty of people make spaghetti sauce with no garlic *whatsoever*.” After every meal, he makes the same joke. “That was great, now what’s for breakfast?” Or lunch or dinner. “That was great, now what’s for lunch?” Or a snack even. Every meal.

And still they will not admit that you are a disappointment. He just rubs his head like a genie might pop out of his mouth and grant him a trip to the restaurant, a meal that never ends, a syrup-sweet daughter, while she blinks and blinks and *stirs her coffee again*.

Take a moment. Let this resentment over who your parents are *today* wash over you without leaving a stain.

Were you not told to focus? To prepare?

For all future conversation, you may refer to this list of permissible topics:

*The price of any object recently obtained by anyone in the family.

*Anything your father learned from *Nature*,

Nova, or *The History Detectives*.

*Any relished meal since the last time you saw each other.

*The antics of pets.

*The stupidity of your least favorite sister-in-law.

Stage 5. Self-reproach

In the last stage you were told you would smile today, but that was just to get you through your resentment. You will not smile today. You will focus on your guilt.

Picture yourself, standing tall. Now think about how small you've been, how you've nurtured that resentment coursing through you. Remember your childish pout? Very nasty, that scowl. Now watch yourself slump. That's right, just succumb to gravity. Let it pull you down, from your chin to your dangling arms. Because your heart is heavy, your head is heavy. Now reduce your size. Again. Now you're just a fraction of yourself. Just fade out. Fade. Out.

You're not sleeping well because he coughs through the night. He has been doing this all week—you're tripping over your own feet, so just think how tired *he* must be. And your mother—she gets up no fewer than four times every night to use the bathroom. You have just drifted off during a rare absence of coughing when you hear the toilet flush. He is on at least eight medications—construction work is not kind to diabetes. She eats cereal a goat wouldn't touch and drinks long draughts of citrus-flavored gunk every day to stave off some intestinal disorder that will only

get worse.

So. How long do you suppose they'll be healthy enough to take planes and stir coffee and tease waitresses? When will you get the call from your sister?

You have relished many meals and your sister-in-law's stupidity is bottomless, so why are you so quiet? Why, when you speak, do you stray from the list of permissible topics provided in the previous section? Any other subject, and your father removes his hat and caresses his bald head, sighing; stray again, and your mother blinks at the rate of a hummingbird's wings until she can revert to one of the permissible topics.

Why are you unwilling to believe these people are your parents?

You must step away from that picture you like to carry around with you, that one with your mother circa thirty-five years old, your father energetic and whistling. Yes, those are your parents, too. But it's time you lingered over some new pictures.

Your mother yesterday: Pointing at the man at the grocery store and commenting on how very bald he is. As the man stops and turns to you both, you shush her and smack at her pointing finger. "What?" she practically yells, "He can't hear me!"

Your father this morning: Sitting at the edge of the bed, staring at his rigid, arthritic feet, shrinking into his graying T-shirt. Doesn't notice you in the doorway. Mumbles, "What did I do to deserve this shit?"

Know these people.

Stage 6. Infantilization

Don't enjoy this stage too much.

When you need to study they are silent—not a cough, not a sigh while you read and take notes. Touching, yes? When you're done they are so happy that you can put your books away, and full of assurances that you have done your work well. "Tell us," they say. "We want to know what you're learning." Go ahead. Take the stage and launch into a monologue on your favorite subject. "And then . . . And then . . ." Do not add a karate chop.

She washes all the dishes. Makes you cocoa. He describes the sort of house you should buy, outlines the questions you should ask the realtor. She chops the onions for dinner while he fixes the leak under the sink.

You're having flashes of Sunday afternoons when you were a child. You're remembering your favorite casseroles—food you wouldn't even eat, now. It's a good feeling, but is it real?

Make it real with similes. Say, "I am as content as a toddler in a sandbox." And say, "I feel like a child on a trip to the candy store." Good. Now it's your turn:

I am as content as _____.

I feel like _____.

You settle into the sofa to watch old British mysteries you've all seen before, one episode after another while the sun slides along the window. He keeps looking at you in the climactic mo-

ments, when the detective removes his pipe and twiddles his mustache right before turning to the murderer to say, "You thought everyone would be convinced you were at the theater when it happened, didn't you?" Your father grins and points at the television. "You can't get nothing by him," he says, or "She's a smart one!" You curl up in a blanket and put your feet in her lap. You wink at him, nodding too, then watch Lord Smarmy run his fingers through his gelled hair, take a slug of his highball, and tug at his crimson smoking jacket before confessing to triple murder. He'd do it again, a thousand times.

Stage 7. Re-emergence

You remember the stairs, the too-bright light, the murmuring announcements. Your parents look just the same as when they arrived, though now your mother is crying and claiming to miss you already.

Now you remember who you are, who they are. Right? Now you can go back to the way it was. Because their doughy bodies are whole and safe, and through security without a hitch. They wave and she blows a kiss, and then they take the turn that blocks them from your sight. You watch for a moment anyway.

She was so dear, wasn't she? And he was so handy around the house. You mustn't wait so long to see them again.

