

Open Letters.

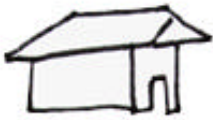
[parenthood (and childhood)]



August 13, 2000 (Vol. I, No. 8)

This week,
Open Letters features the collected letters of:
Sharon O'Connor,
Lillie Allison,
Nick Davis,
and X. (twice).

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Open up.



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Dear Readers,

You hold in your hands (or on your hard drives) the final issue of volume one of *Open Letters*. Beginning tomorrow, the magazine will be going on hiatus for three weeks, until Labor Day.

I first mentioned this hiatus in my email to subscribers last weekend; after that issue went out, I heard from some readers that they were concerned, upon reading of this pit-stop, for our future.

It's certainly true that our future is uncertain, as is the future of everything having to do with the Internet. One of the reasons that I wanted to publish *Open Letters* via the Internet, and not in a more analog format, is that I wanted to embrace this medium's uncertainty. *Open Letters*, as many of you have heard me say, is an experiment, one in which we want to keep trying new things, one where we're constantly reacting to the responses of readers and depending on contributions (of letters, primarily, but also of other kinds of help) from readers and writers we've never met.

But these next three weeks aren't related to that uncertainty – or at least no more related than the eight weeks that have passed since our launch. This is, in fact, only a semi-hiatus: we will cease posting new letters and conversations every day, and no new issues of the weekly will go out to subscribers – but there will still be a mild fever of activity here at OLHQ, as we redesign the web site (www.openletters.net) and the weekly; upgrade our technology, so that we can better handle our growing daily and weekly mailing lists; and introduce some new features, like a discussion board where readers (and letter-writers, I hope) can have an unmediated dialogue about the letters, or anything else.

As always, I'd like your input on all of this. Reader feedback is the chief way we've come to understand what we need to change, and how we might change it. If you have ideas for what we should do next, and how the magazine and web site should evolve, please write me, at editor@openletters.net.

Over the next three weeks our web site will be up and running, and the archive will remain fully accessible. Please continue to direct new readers our way – there will plenty for them to read – and stop by yourself if you can, from time to time, say if you happen to pass your computer on your way in from the wading pool to the fridge. We will be posting occasional notes to readers, keeping you apprised of our progress.

As for this issue: our first letter comes from X., our anonymous correspondent in Winnipeg. It's the fourth in her ongoing series of letters to her ex-boyfriend Mike, about their thirteen-year-old son. (A fifth closes out the issue.)

I've received enthusiastic email from readers about each of the letters we've published, but I have to say that no one produces a volume of response quite like X. I'm not sure if it's the episodic nature of her letters, her quixotic choice to address them to someone she hasn't heard from in a decade, or just the fact that her literary aim is so true.

X.'s letters anchor another issue of letters connected by a theme. This week, our theme is parents and children, and the things they do for, and to, one another.

Yours truly,

Paul Tough

Storing It Up

A letter from X., on her son, his father, and the anger thing.

Winnipeg, Manitoba • August 7, 2000

Dear Mike,

More really big news. Last night O.'s school had its sports banquet and awards evening, which included dinner and dancing, and O. got *three* trophies which were: the Coaches' Award for junior boys basketball, which basically means hardest-working and most versatile (he's a wing, like Vince Carter and Kobe Bryant are wings), M.V.P. for junior boys volleyball, and, get this, Male Athlete of the Year for grade eight. It's amazing how focused he is when it comes to sports, and when he comes home from school he gives the barking neighbor dog the finger, slams the back door, drops his four-hundred-pound backpack in the middle of the kitchen floor, screams that he's starving, hurls his socks and shoes around the living room, plays a very loud CD, gets the dog all riled up, then sprints himself all over the entire couch reading *ESPN* magazine, and then when that thrill wears off goes downstairs with a drink he spills on the keyboard to check out Hoopstv.com to have his anti-Canada thing reinforced by reading about Artesia High in California, where all the hot high school basketball players have to go to be discovered and where he will never, ever go because he's stuck in Winnipeg, home of Winnie the Pooh, thanks a lot. Once, a few years ago, G. made a really nice birthday card for him with pictures of him playing different sports and inside it said to my brother the joke. Which was supposed to be jock. She had a problem with spelling certain words when she was little. She used to write things like I rule, you suke. So, anyway, you see? I can't even explain how wrong it is that you don't know this stuff, unless of course you're reading this letter, which you probably aren't, which makes me wonder why I bother with this exercise. That's right, tell the void how much your son rocks. Talk to the void.

C. told him how proud he was of him and that he didn't have to do sports if he didn't want to, if he wasn't having fun, and that if

he quit all sports today we'd still love him, still be proud of him. And C. told him how great it was that he was controlling his temper in games when he lost, or after a bad call, or whatever, and O. said, I'm just storing it up. And C. said, oh what are you going to do, explode on the court some day, and O. said ooooh nooo, worse than that. And C. said, spit in the ump's face? And O. said ooooh nooo, way worse than that...okay, he was joking, but it reminded me of when you said you used to lose your temper all the time and then, around twelve or thirteen, after throwing a plate or a bottle of ketchup at your older sister who had taken your ski-doo suit or something, you just went okay, that's it. I'm not gonna get mad anymore, it doesn't help me, it makes it worse, I get in trouble, I look like an idiot, and it's stupid. And then, sure enough, I'm trying to think of one time you got mad, and I can't. You never got mad, even when I was such a jerk and stuff was happening, you just put on music and cooked meat and smoked cigarettes and what? Remember when I freaked out and drove myself to the hospital to have O. because I thought you were too relaxed about the whole thing, and you ran all the way, all those miles of city blocks to the hospital, and came in all sweating and red and purple and I was already dilated, and the nurse said you looked like John Lennon and you said, I'm here, I'm here, and I said some asshole thing and you said, C'mon, look what's happening here, this is big, don't be mad now. All right, that made a lot of sense. But Mike, it's still big, he's still here, still happening. So don't you be mad now.

See, I'm trying to learn more about O. by remembering what I can of you. It's a little uncanny sometimes how some things are really similar, like this anger thing. Just out of the blue, the kid stops losing his temper at the same age you decided to stop losing your temper. So where does it go, when you stop

losing it? Was that what that benign tumour was all about, the one you had removed from your head? Should I be checking O.'s head for tumours because you had one? Were you ever Athlete of the Year? Remember when we just sat around in that empty dive apartment drinking, smoking, listening to music, being young and soooo cool and undernourished, and now we have a kid who's Athlete of the Year? Is that not the funniest thing? Me in 1983: Oh yeah, someday (cough, cough) I'll have a kid who's a real jock (pass me that roach). You in 1983: Yeah, yeah, me too (wheeze)...hahahahahah.

It would be so cool if you'd get back to me, really. I mean not me, him. Or me first, or whatever. Not for some romantic thing, don't get the wrong idea. C. and me are great, and you're probably married with other athletic kids. Sometimes I wonder if you just decided that it would be best if you slipped away for-

ever, best for O. and me and that you really, really believed that. Remember when I stood on the sidewalk in front of my house with O. on my hip, he was about two years old, and I screamed my stupid head off at you while you walked away without saying a word? Maybe you were thinking, this is nuts, this poor kid, I've gotta go. That would have made sense at the time, right? But, you know, I've calmed down since then, even though I was a lot older than thirteen when I figured out that losing my temper wasn't getting me anywhere.

I'm feeling kind of sentimental for some reason, so one last thing before I go outside to toughen up: why don't you reconsider? Drop us a line, no questions asked. No swearing, no freaking out, I swear. He's the grade eight Male Athlete of the Year fer fuck sakes.

X. in Winnipeg.

A Letter from the Editor • San Francisco, California • August 8, 2000

Our second letter about being a parent is by Sharon O'Connor, a mother of two daughters who lives in Cabot, Vermont.

I first encountered Sharon four years ago, when Lisa Carver, the editor of the groundbreaking zine *Rollerderby*, reviewed the first issue of Sharon's zine, *Ajax Maple*. I sent Sharon a few dollars, and she began sending me *Ajax Maple*, which told the story, issue by issue, of a young, cool mom (that's Sharon) who was watching as her life was transformed by the new life of her daughter, Mazie.

I loved Sharon's writing in *Ajax Maple*: she captured both the joyful and the melancholy side of motherhood, and of growing up – and of Vermont, for that matter: three things about which I knew little, but came to understand better thanks to Sharon.

When *Open Letters* began, I remembered

Ajax Maple, and set about trying to find Sharon. It wasn't easy: she'd moved, and my letters to her were returned by the USPS, with rubber-stamp stamps on them. I emailed Lisa Carver, who knew someone who knew Sharon, and eventually we found her, in Cabot. She and I began to correspond about *Open Letters* and about Mazie (who is now five); the result is today's letter, which Sharon wrote to Mimi, her best friend, and cc'd to *Open Letters*.

Sharon hasn't published an *Ajax Maple* in a while, but she's working now on issue number five. *Ajax Maple* now has a web site (www.ajaxmaple.com); as you'll read there, issues one through four can be yours if you send two dollars and a few stamps to:

Ajax Maple
P.O. Box 221
Cabot, VT 05647
USA.

The Merry-go-round

A letter from Sharon O'Connor, on explaining Mazie.

Cabot, Vermont • August 8, 2000

Dear Mimi,

As I sit down to write this, Mazie is up in her room screaming through the grate down into the kitchen, "Mom, I want you out of this house!" She is not even five, but already she sometimes has the wrath of a misunderstood teenager.

Yesterday we went to the local carnival – a midway, about five rides, barrel races, a petting zoo, and cotton candy. It was fun. I took the girls on the merry-go-round and stood between their two horses while it spun around. I held each girl in the small of her back, my almost-five-year-old to my right, my two-year-old on my left. They bounced up and down like some crazy scale, unable to level out, me in the middle. And somehow it seemed both sweet and melancholy. All I could think of was the days invested in these lives. Mazie is nearing on 2,000 days – Clementine not even 800. When I looked at Mazie she literally looked to me like she could have floated right off the ride into the clouds.

I guess I've been trying to decode Mazie's sensitive nature more now that she's making the leap from pre-school to kindergarten. Her teachers have brought it to our attention that she's academically exceptional but emotionally fragile. Duh. I mean don't get me wrong, I love that she's at a small school where they notice the students. But the other night Charles and I were talking about our weird suburban school experiences and how if you were a freak, which we were, you kind of got by, and in the end I think it was character-building. Mazie is and will be a freak. Her old pre-school director called her "eccentric" in her meetings with me. On the other hand Clementine, even at two, seems oddly normal, suspiciously normal. I have weird little flashes of her as a teenager playing field hockey with a healthy glow, like some J. Crew catalog person. There is no question that she's well adjusted to being Clem.

Mazie's teachers said that she was "overly sensitive," and said that they thought that she should stay in pre-school next year, instead of moving on to kindergarten. That way, they said, she would get a chance to mature socially and gain confidence. I said that I thought it would actually be a real blow to her confidence to see the children she had started getting used to move on without her. She already wanted to be in kindergarten, and she's the only one in the class who knows how to read and do math (she gets multiplication and negative numbers already). The kindergarten teacher said, "Oh, she might mind for a week or so, but then she'll be fine." That's when I knew I had to try and explain Mazie to them, because they didn't really know her at all.

Charles and I think her sensitivity has to do with the way she's wired. She's brought to tears by so much, but her tears are never really inappropriate. I think she just has this brain that fills in the gaps too rapidly. She can become paralyzed by even the potential of a tragedy. When we try to watch movies these days, even ones she knows turn out all right, she gets agitated and turns off the TV. If I'm sweeping and a toy or sticker ends up in the pile she is frantic to collect it before I might absent-mindedly throw it away. Recently she woke up from a dream saying, "We have to get the bath toys out! We have to get the bath toys out before they go down the drain!" I tried to get her to describe the dream more but by the time she was fully awake it had left her. But now, if I don't get every single bath toy out before I drain the tub, she's frantic.

If a glass or dish breaks she is in tears, reassuring me that, "It's okay, Mom, Jill can fix it." (Jill is our friend the art restorer, who fixes broken art for rich people.) It's not worth telling her that something isn't fixable, or isn't worth fixing, because she just chokes up with a new wave of tears.

She reminds us almost daily that we're all young and that we won't die for a long time. Just the other day when we were gardening she asked me why plants die in the winter but then come back in the spring and people don't. I didn't know exactly where to begin but I started to tell her something along the lines of some people believe that the body is kind of like clothes and there's something called a soul that's the you inside of you, that can come back to



a new life with a different body. Her reaction to this was to put her hands over her ears and say, "I don't want to talk about this any more."

The deaths of both of her grandfathers has really affected her. One of the episodes that disturbed her teachers the most was when she became very upset about a book they read aloud in school, in which a boy's parents pretend he's a pizza and lay him down on a table to put on the cheese and sauce. The page that made her flip looked suspiciously like the laid-out body she saw at Charles's father's viewing last year, when she was three. And my father's car accident, which happened four years before she was even born, still consumes her. Mazie fixates on the fact that he was fifty-four, and she asks us to tell her the ages of all of her nearest and dearest so that she can figure out some mathematical formula that absolves us from the inevitable.

We wrote this three-page letter to the school in hopes that they'd understand she isn't going to all of a sudden be this happy-go-lucky, eager-for-the-next-task type of kid. In the letter, we told them about this night that we got a cord of wood delivered. There were a few people here, and we got into this line and lifted it up the steps and stacked it. Mazie had a gray wool scarf wrapped around her neck, her face all wrinkled up

with the concentration necessary to maneuver up the steps with her heavy load. We named her Queen of the woodpile at the end and lifted her on top. I have pictures of the girls from that night. Mazie absolutely glows with happiness. Charles and I have analyzed that night so often. We don't know if it was the teamwork, the physical effort, or the sensation of a job well done. But she felt so good, and in daily life, reaching that state of satisfaction is a struggle for her.

Anyway, the whole picture, if truth be told, is that her sensitivity, while it breaks my heart sometimes, is who she is. She's incredibly sweet and insightful, and I don't want to numb that out of her. Not that the school was suggesting that. But the implication is that who she is is not normal, and she picks up on that.

I'm probably struggling with the heavy truth that we've chosen this little piece of land, and a house, in a small village where both girls will go to the same school from pre-school to senior year. As well as celebrate every holiday, eventually get drunk at the shelter up at the rec. field, and have sex in some kids pick-up truck. It's small here. People know your business. They'll know Mazie's.

I keep thinking about the merry-go-round: watching Mazie, with her fragility around her like a cloak, and Clem, so solid and densely content, rising back and forth with their accumulated days, leaving me as the fulcrum of a scale weighing things not measurable, the component that does indeed balance them but that cannot control what each side will do.

All my love,

Sharon

Dear Readers,

Today's letter is by Lillie Allison, a twelve-year-old girl who lives in Woods Hole, Massachusetts, on Cape Cod.

I don't know Lillie very well, though she and I have been corresponding by email for the past couple of months; in preparation for the creation of this editor's letter, I sent her an email last week and asked her to fill in a few blanks. Here's what she wrote back:

I don't know what I can tell you about myself. I live in Woods Hole. I'm a solo

and synchronized skater. I live right on the water. I haven't read the fourth Harry Potter, but I read the other ones. Oh and I'm 12 I'll be 13 in September. I'm going into 7th grade. I love Woods Hole. It can be really boring in the winter though.

I first wrote to Lillie Allison at the suggestion of Ira Glass, host of *This American Life*; he had aired a dialogue between Lillie and her dad on his show, and he thought she might be a good correspondent for *Open Letters*. I think he was right.



A Big Wall

A letter from Lillie Allison, on knowing a secret.

Woods Hole, Massachusetts • August 9, 2000

Dear Paul,

What's new? There's a lot going on in my world. The main thing is that my aunt and uncle are having problems with their marriage. When I told my cousin I was going to write this she made me promise not to use any real names. I'm going to change them. I'll call my cousin Emily (her request), her brother Tony, her father Mark, and her mom Sarah.

The worst part is Emily is my best friend. I can't imagine being in her place. I see her all the time. We're like sisters. We're always together and at each other's house. Up until now we've also shared all our secrets. I found out about her parents before she did. I thought that when she found out she'd call

me and we'd talk about it. She might be crying and I'd help her feel better. But when she really did find out it wasn't like that at all.

After I found out, I called Emily up. She didn't mention anything about her parents. Everything seemed totally normal. We made the same jokes. We talked in the same weird voice we have been using for the past three years and still find hilarious. She invited me over and we sat in her van for what felt like a very long time listening to music. Neither of us mentioned anything about her parents. I didn't know if I should say something. I really didn't want to upset her. I knew she was going through enough.

Maybe she wasn't talking to me about it because so much in her life was changing that she wanted our relationship to stay the same. It was rather awkward sitting there, just her, me and the music, with what felt like a big wall in between us. I knew we were both thinking about her parents and neither of us knew how to approach the subject or if she even wanted to at all. About a half an hour went by sitting in the hot van.

Then her mom came out and told us the family was having one of its weekly cook-outs on my great-grandmother's lawn and it was time to go. Then she said, "Lillie, you know Uncle Mark left for a while." I answered yes. Then she told both of us that Mark still loved Emily and Tony and that he always would. Emily got upset at her mom and asked her why she just came out and told us that in the middle of nowhere. Then she made a joke about the whole thing and we both laughed.

Then Emily said she had to get a jacket and she'd meet me at the cook-out. She went inside and her mom followed her in crying. Emily didn't talk about it at the cook-out either. I didn't know how to approach the

subject. I decided I would just ask her how her mom and brother were doing. That night I talked to Emily on-line and asked her. She said better. And that's as far as it went. She changed the subject.

After I finished writing that last sentence I called Emily and asked her if she wanted to read this letter. She said yes, so I printed it out and she ran over and got it and brought it back to her house and read it. She called me and said she loved it and now we talk about her parents constantly. About her father, mother and how she feels just in general. It's almost all we talk about. Now I can ask her how she is or how her parents are. I think now Emily looks a lot happier. She even told me about something she told her therapist. I never thought she'd be that open with stuff like that. Words can change anything.

Sincerely,

Lillie Allison

p.s. b vnbv bvbvbg bgbgbg that's what happened when I banged my head on the keyboard trying to think of a last sentence.



Dear Readers,

Today's letter is by Nick Davis, a filmmaker and writer who lives in New York City. His is the fourth letter in our weeklong series of open letters about parents and children, and the first that concerns both a parent (in this case, his mother) and a child (his daughter).

I don't know Nick Davis, apart from what I've read in his letter; his editor at *Open Letters* is Stacy Abramson, a radio producer at Sound Portraits Productions. I do know, thanks to Stacy, that Nick is the writer and director of *1999*, a movie that stars Amanda Peet and Buck Henry and is described on Amazon as "the ultimate party movie of the millennium"; he is also the author of a novel, *Boone*.

You'll notice that the date at the top of Nick's letter is today's date, August 10; but that in his first paragraph he says that he's writing it

"today - on July 25th." For the record, it's the latter date that is the accurate one: Nick actually wrote his letter on July 25, the twenty-sixth anniversary of his mother's death, and sent it to Stacy that afternoon.

The dates at the top of our open letters are, I confess, a small fiction, but one I like. I tried to convince Nick, via Stacy, to take out the reference to July 25 in the first paragraph, in order to make the fiction proceed a little more smoothly. He told Stacy, politely but firmly, that July 25 had to stay. As he put it,

For me, July 25th is like a kind of reverse December 25th, or July 4th or something. I feel pretty strongly that my life is divided in half at July 25, 1974.

Stacy and I found that quite convincing. And so we struck the compromise you see below.



No Getting Away

A letter from Nick Davis, on an anniversary.

New York City • August 10, 2000

Hi Stacy –

Hey there, how're things? We're back from Maine, which was great, but we decided, following my therapist's advice (which I think may have been misguided) that it would be better for me to be in New York City today – on July 25 – than up in Maine with my Dad.

Twenty-six years ago today my mother died. She was killed in a freakish car accident here in New York City, in the Village, at the corner of Bleecker and Charles

Streets. There is now a stop sign at the corner. There wasn't twenty-six years ago. Two taxis came tearing down those streets – the drivers were named Aderinto and Baeradi, the most wonderfully musical names – and collided. One of the cabs spun around and slammed into my mother, who was standing with my brother at the corner. I think my brother and mom were waiting for a friend of hers – or maybe they were walking over to the friend's house. Earlier in the day, she

and my brother had gone bowling. My brother, then eleven, bowled a 168, breaking his previous record of 163. I'm not sure if he's ever bowled higher than 168 since then. My father and I had gone to the New York Public Library for the day. He had research to do, and I tagged along. I was nine years old and spent most of the day reading a biography of the baseball pitcher Bob Gibson. The only thing I really remember is that Gibson seemed like an unusually angry man. And that he played with the Harlem Globetrotters for a time. And he may have come from Omaha, Nebraska.

Anyway. Back to the taxis. My brother says he can still remember watching the accident – it happened, as all accidents do, in slow-motion – and thinking that it was going to be cool, that they were going to collide. And then as he realized how close they were going to be, he jumped back, and reached for Mom, grabbed at her. (Our neighbor, a man with the name Yudell Kyler who, when I saw him last, about twelve summers ago, when I conspired with the gods to spend the month of July on Charles Street, had an unusually dark little hair growing out of the middle of his nose – Yudell Kyler saw the accident and used the word "clawed" to represent Timmy's action in jumping back and reaching at the air for my mom.)

But, of course, one of the taxis slammed into Mom and threw her into the air and she landed on her head on a mailbox. I have never been particularly persistent in trying to conjure this part, what it looked like. But Timmy, who had run a few steps down Bleecker, came back, and the taxis had stopped, and a crowd gathered, and somebody put a pillow under Mom's head, and somebody else got Timmy an ice cream cone, I don't know what kind.

As Dad and I approached from the Sheridan Square subway station, we became aware of flashing lights and sirens. Some kind of commotion. As we got closer, Dad gripped my hand really tight, and I remember thinking that he was being silly. Then an old woman came up to us and said, "Mr. Davis, are these your wife's pants? I think these are your

wife's pants." And she had these folded-up black pants in her hands and I thought she was insane, but Dad started running down the block toward our house, pulling me.

Timmy was upstairs – in Yudell Kyler's apartment. It strikes me now that I had never before been to his apartment, though he lived right upstairs from us, but at the time I do remember thinking what a soft and nice place he had. Timmy told us about the accident, which didn't seem too serious to me, and Dad went off to the hospital, and another neighbor, Dick Meryman, a close family friend, came by and took us – walked us – back to his house on Horatio Street.

It was on the walk to Horatio Street that I think I must have first sensed that something serious was going on, because I remember I told my brother one of the worst lies I've ever told in my life. We were big Mets fans, all of us were, and as we walked along, silently, the three of us – me, Timmy, and Dick Meryman, stalwart family friend – I became seized with the idea that I had to cheer Timmy up. And so I told him, "Tom Seaver pitched a perfect game today." As soon as I said it, I realized how transparent it was. There had only been about twelve perfect games in baseball history, what were the odds on something like that happening? And I thought, "Jesus, why didn't I just make it a shutout?"

We must have been at the Merymans for a few hours. We ate dinner with their two daughters, and they served us hamburgers and baked beans, our favorite. And at some point during dinner, we turned on the TV. And there was a Mets game on. I was mortified. They hadn't even played yet! I was too horrified to even say anything.

When Dick Meryman came in and said that our father was upstairs, was back from the hospital and wanted to see us, I was already feeling pretty bad. Timmy had said at dinner, "You know, Mommy could die," and I thought, "No, she'll come home with a big bandage on her head, but she'll be fine, and she'll tell funny stories about the whole thing." But the feeling was not a good one as

we walked up the stairs to the Merymans' living room – they lived, and still do, in a very nice brownstone – and there was Dad with the news.

So now it's twenty-six years later, and my therapist is telling me that it's better to be in New York with these memories on this day than up in Maine under the clear blue sky. Well, my therapist has other reasons – I have other reasons – for not wanting me to be up in Maine on this particular day. But I'm not so sure. I'm awfully glad that we're headed back there next week.

Because this memory – these memories – well, there's no getting away from them in New York in the summer. Jane and I live in the Village, and this morning, I took Lily, our eleven-and-a-half-month-old girl, out for a walk. Men don't get to be pregnant, but we do get to wear our children in those front carriers – mine's a Baby Bjorn – and without a doubt the closest times I've had with Lily are on these early morning walks. So the sun's just coming up – Lily is, euphemistically speaking, an early riser – and I'm walking down Fifth Avenue to Washington Square park. The city's looking great, the Washington Arch is glowing proud, the doormen are nodding at the beautiful smiling baby on my belly as we go by. All is right with the world, and I'm reflecting on where I was twenty-six years ago, and how wonderful it is to have a daughter all these years later, what a redemptive kind of place this planet can be –

And then my heart has stopped beating because just as I'm stepping down off the curb of the Washington Mews – that little alley that empties onto Fifth Avenue between

Eighth Street and the park – my new shoe, the left one, a fat little wallabee kind of thing with a sole that is way too thick for someone who has basically spent his whole life in sneakers, has buckled under me, turned over, and at the same time a little blue minivan has been pulling into the Mews, and I'm off-balance, and it all passes very quickly, and nothing happens, I should be clear about this – absolutely nothing happened, no one was ever in the remotest kind of danger, not Lily, not me, not the Aderinto Baeradi type who was driving the minivan...

But suddenly the world isn't looking so good, and the park when we get there feels muggy and dirty, and the kid playground is sticky with old soda and Lily doesn't really want to be in the swing and before long we're leaving – retreating – from the park, and scurrying back to the comfort of our home. And at every light and stop sign – the Mews, do I have to tell you, has neither – I'm looking both ways and holding Lily tight as I cross and basically reminding myself of a teacher I had in the seventh grade who was the first and only agoraphobic I ever met, who when I saw her on Broadway one evening looked as if she'd seen a ghost.

So I think maybe it wasn't the best decision to come home from Maine. Whatever problems I may have up there, I'm rarely assaulted by the kind of fear that routinely grips me in New York in the summer. Especially today.

Lying low till midnight,

Speak to you soon,

Nick

Out of the Blue

A letter from X., on her son, his father, and an unexpected phone call.

Winnipeg, Manitoba • August 11, 2000

Dear Mike,

Well, summer's almost over, and as usual odd things have been happening. Odd things happen here in the summer all the time, I don't know why. What I do a lot these days is foul O. He decided that his main activity this summer would be playing basketball, and when his friends aren't around I have to go across the street to the basketball court and foul him. Foul me, foul me, he says, and so I stand there and kind of shove him just when he's about to make the shot. It's kind of fun, although at first I wasn't shoving him hard enough and then I was shoving him too hard. He's taught me, in the meantime, how to foul properly, and has stopped laughing his head off when I do foul him. Now we're serious. I foul him as he takes the shot and if he makes it he says "and one" and slaps my hand in the air. He's there right now, shooting hoops across the street, with a couple of guys from the Cyclone, and trying not to get eaten alive by the goddamn mosquitoes that have invaded our city. Mosquitoes make him crazy, they drive him right out of his mind, but he refuses to wear repellent because he once read an article that said mosquito repellent can cause sterility in boys.

A couple of days ago, a group of girls called him up while he was watching a movie called *Three Kings*, and for about half an hour G. and I heard him say, uh-huh, uh-huh, I guess, uh-huh, I dunno, uh-huh, and then the conversation was over. Who was that? G. asked him and he said I dunno. Girls? asked G. Uh-huh, he said. Girls that you like? she asked. I guess, he said. Last weekend he went to Toronto with my mom to see the Jays/Red Sox series and when he came home he gave G. a stuffed monkey that he had bought with his own money. Later, I told him that was a nice thing to do and he said well, he'd thought she was feeling a little down lately and he'd realized while being away that he loved her way more than he had originally thought. Wow,

O., I said, that is so sweet. He said, Okay mom but can we not go overboard in the talking about it department?

Have you ever watched, from a distance, a bunch of thirteen-year-old boys yacking away, laughing, swearing, insulting each other, just basically shooting the shit, and then as you get closer to them, they clam right up and stare out in the distance like they've just had electroshock therapy? Once, the mother of one of O.'s friends and I talked about the last time we saw them cry. I really had to think about it. The last time, aside from the time he read a very sad book about someone he knew, and the time I really chewed him out for being rude to my aunt who had come all the way from B.C. to help take care of my mom after her surgery, was about a year ago at the end of grade seven. He came home from school and after an hour or two he mentioned that some kid had taken his slurpee away from him. Well, that sucks, I said (or words to that effect). And he nodded. Then, several hours later, in the car, he said that it was actually a bunch of guys, older than him, that had surrounded him and asked for money. Oh man, I said, this time more concerned. Then what? I asked. He told them he didn't have any money. Then how'd you get that slurpee, one of the older guys asked. Well, O. said, that was all the money I had. Then give us your slurpee, the guy said. And by now they were all staring at him and then one of them knocked his slurpee out of his hand and it spilled all over him. Then what happened? I asked. He said one of the older guys told one of the kids his age to hit him, and the kid his age did. He what? I asked, ready to slit the guy's throat from ear to ear. He hit me, said O. And that's when he started crying and couldn't stop. He just sat there in the car in the parking lot at the mall and cried and cried and I held him in my arms and stroked his hair like I'd done

when he was three or four and every time I said that must have been really scary or I'm so sorry that happened to you, he'd cry even harder. He told me a little more, that the kid had knocked him down, that they'd all laughed at him, and then that one of the older guys said, okay leave him alone, and then they took off.

Well, I said odd things were happening here this summer as always. This is the latest: Your dad called here, right out of the blue, haven't seen or talked to him since O. was an infant and you and I took that road trip when you barfed in that hotel bathtub, and he told us that he lived in Australia now but he was in town and would really like to see O. if O. would like to see him. (O. said no, not because he didn't want to see him really, but because he just didn't know why or what purpose it would serve.) And your dad totally understood and said if O. ever changes his mind, he'd be glad. He'd wait. I asked him if you were happy, and he said

yes, very. That you live in Tokyo, that you're a very successful chef, an executive chef, he said, in a hotel with five hundred and fifty rooms, and that you're married to a wonderful Japanese woman and that you have a beautiful three-year-old daughter and that you'd probably never leave Tokyo. He said he'd send O. a picture of you and your wife and your daughter. He called her O.'s sister. He also said you were a lot like him, a wanderer, a bit of a loner, and that you often went off by yourself for stretches of time and didn't talk about it much. But he sounded very proud of you, very protective, as though he was worried I'd slag you to bits or something. And of course I wouldn't do that. Like O. says, what's the point? You're lucky, Mike, to have a father standing up for you. Have you introduced your famous penny wieners to the Japanese?

Sayonara,

X

