Gorgeous Boy

Loving a son at nine, the disappearing dictionary of a family, the small rituals a father memorizes, and the recognition that fatherhood may be the truest thing a man is given

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May 2026

He comes to my door in the gray light of early morning before the house has fully woken, before the coffee and the faucets and the small machinery of another day, and he stands there at the crack of the doorway and I cannot even see him, but I can picture him exactly, his face arched toward the narrow opening, his lips nearly against it because he is too respectful to barge in and somehow even a knock feels too abrupt at this hour, and he whispers in the smallest, softest voice in the entire world, a voice I sometimes think only I am meant to hear, some private frequency available to fathers, a father's sonar, "Papa, can I get up?", and what he means is may the day begin now, may I pad down the hallway and curl beneath a blanket on the couch and watch a show before school and have some peanut butter toast and some water and ease myself gently into the morning, and what I say back to him every single time, half asleep and wholly undone, is "good morning my love, yes of course gorgeous boy", and I lie there for a moment after he tramples away listening to the small thunder of him on the vinyl wood floors, there is no speed between whispering and stampeding when you are nine years old, and I think, not for the first time and certainly not for the last, that I have never loved anything in this life the way I love this child.

He is almost entirely motion, a boy assembled out of muscle and velocity and appetite and noise, more energy than I remember ever possessing as a child, and he loves to wrestle and be tickled and tackle me into the couch and invent ridiculous voices and make me laugh and be made to laugh, and he has this gorgeous laugh, this helpless full-bodied laugh that seems to originate somewhere below his ribs and throws his whole head backward as though joy itself has struck him physically, and out in the world he can be shy, cautious, watchful, a boy who likes to stand for a while at the border of a new thing and study its customs before crossing over, but with me he is not shy at all, with me the gates open and he comes pouring through, fully and loudly and gloriously himself, and he will try almost anything if I am the one standing beside him, which I have slowly come to understand may be the whole secret work of fatherhood, not making your child fearless, not clearing the frightening things from his path, but becoming the safe and solid place from which he can practice being brave.

And he is an athlete, an astonishing one, astonishing to me anyway and astonishing for nine, quick and fierce and instinctive on a basketball court and a football field, and he loves Pokémon with complete devotion, and basketball cards and Legos and Minecraft and the worlds he builds on his iPad and his dog Maisey and his friends and Steph Curry and Kendrick Lamar and anything involving a ball or competition or the possibility of movement, and he is almost never still until suddenly he is, until the enormous expenditure of being Benjamin catches up with him and he crashes sideways on the couch with YouTube still playing and one sock half off and his body surrendered completely to exhaustion, and being his father has taught me something I had forgotten somewhere in the long migration into adulthood, which is that joy is mostly a physical thing before we intellectualize it, before we begin asking whether we deserve it or how long it will last, that joy lives first in the body, in running because you can run and laughing because something is funny, in a boy who cannot wait to get to the next moment of his own life.

And I have been keeping his words.

I have been keeping them because I know now that childhood has its own language and few tell you that you are hearing a language while it is disappearing, fewer tell you to write it down because one morning the child who has been speaking it will simply stop, you won't know the day, he will learn the correct word and the old word will vanish from his mouth forever, and so when Benjamin was small a thing that could survive getting wet was never *waterproof* but *waterable*, and when he wants me beside him he does not always say *sit next to me,* but *sit to next to me*, and when he agrees with something absolutely, when agreement has occupied every square inch of his body, he does not say *a hundred percent* but *hundred percently*, and I have hoarded these words the way other people press flowers between the pages of books, because I can feel them leaving him already, little specimens of a season already ending, I can hear the slang of his friends arriving now, can hear the language of the year two thousand twenty-six creeping into his mouth, the borrowed phrases and basketball talk and schoolyard expressions, can hear him becoming fluent in the larger world, which is exactly what he is supposed to do, exactly what I want him to do, and still there is something almost unbearably tender about watching the private dialect of his childhood that once belonged to us dissolve into the language of everyone.

Perhaps this is what raising a child is, an endless series of translations in which the original manuscript is slowly lost.

He is the nearly perfect combination of his mother and me, although sometimes I look at him and cannot understand how either of us had anything to do with making him, because he seems so specifically himself, so Benjamin, but I see her in him constantly, in his kindness and compassion and sensitivity, in his shyness and his beautiful dark-brown eyes and the particular way he throws his head backward when something is truly funny, and I am grateful for this beyond any language

I possess, grateful that half of this gorgeous boy comes from her, grateful that whatever became of the two people who once loved each other enough to make him, whatever distances accumulated or promises changed shape or roads divided afterward, the love did not disappear, it changed its address, perhaps, changed its body, and sometimes, sometimes the hardest of days, I get to look across a room and see the very best of someone I once loved looking back at me through our son's face.

And his kindness is not something he performs, it is a thing he simply is, which may be what moves me most about it, because there is no audience for it and no reward he's seeking, it is simply there, built into him, and I have watched it this past year with my mother, his Granny, who has been badly hurt and is healing slowly and whose house is not an especially exciting place for a nine-year-old boy to spend an afternoon right now, and yet Benjamin seems to understand, seems to lower his own frequency when he enters her house, staying close, helping her, carrying something she cannot carry, fetching something before she finishes asking, giving a little more of himself than the circumstances require, and when I watch him being gentle with her I sometimes have the strange sensation that I am watching kindness travel through time, my mother into me, his mother into him, all of us borrowing and passing forward whatever tenderness we managed to learn, and I think about all the things families imagine they are leaving their children, the houses and money and land and names and watches tucked into drawers, and I have come to believe that kindness may be the only inheritance that truly matters.

And somewhere this past year, probably in a cold gymnasium while sitting beside him on a folding chair, or driving home after a tournament with his basketball bag thrown in the back, Kendrick Lamar playing low in the background, and the two of us talking about some play that had happened hours before, I understood that he is not only my son anymore, or perhaps he never was only my son, but has become the easiest person in the entire world for me to be with, the person I would rather spend an ordinary afternoon with than anyone else alive, because everything is more fun with Benjamin inside it, everything, the grocery store and the drive to Salem and some terrible YouTube video and a basketball game and breakfast and an afternoon with nowhere to be, and we love the same music and the same teams and so many of the same ridiculous things and laugh at the same jokes, and every now and then I catch one of my own small mannerisms coming back toward me out of his body, a movement of his hands or a tilt of his head or some expression I have apparently been making my entire life without knowing it, and there is something profoundly disorienting about meeting pieces of yourself in another human being, especially when you love that human being infinitely more than you have ever managed to love yourself.

And here is the part I do not say out loud very often.

I am a single father, and I do not get all of him.

Our weeks are divided and counted and handed carefully back and forth, and there are mornings when he wakes beneath another roof and evenings when someone else hears the stories from his day and nights when I do not get to lie beside him while his voice becomes softer and sleepier, so I miss half of his breakfasts and half of his dinners and half of his bedtimes, ordinary unremarkable holy debris from which a childhood is actually assembled, half of his only nine-year-old life, and it is heartbreaking, genuinely and specifically heartbreaking, every single week that I am present for only part of it, and so I take the days off work and drive to the practices and games and tournaments and sit in the gyms and say yes when I might otherwise say later and linger beside him when he wants to talk and try, imperfectly and sometimes desperately, to pour myself completely into the portion I have been given, because I have learned to pay these days a fierce and trembling attention, to look directly at them while they are happening, to memorize a childhood that is disappearing at precisely the same speed it is being lived.

And at night, on the nights he is here, I lie down beside him in the dark because he still asks me to, and I know with perfect clarity that this invitation has an expiration date, that somewhere ahead of us is a final night when he will ask and then another night when he won't, and neither of us will know which one was the last, and so I go when he asks, always, I treasure it, and sometimes after the lights are out and the house has gone quiet he whispers, "Papa, can I tell you something?", and I say what I hope I will say for the rest of my life, when he is nine and nineteen and thirty-nine and I am an old man if I am lucky enough to become one, *anything, everything, you can tell me anything, Gorgeous Boy*, and we talk there in the dark until the sentences grow farther apart and our voices go soft and slow and eventually he says his prayers, always with the grave sincerity of a child naming the boundaries of his known universe: I pray for Mama, and I pray for Papa, Granny and Poppy, Grandma and Grandpa and all my friends and family, pray for Maisey and Winnie in Heaven, amen.

And I say, amen, my Gorgeous Boy, amen.

And then he is asleep, all at once and completely, the surrender of a child to sleep, one arm sometimes flung across my chest and his breath going slow and even in the darkness, and I lie there beside my sleeping son unwilling to move because moving means leaving and leaving means the day is over and another day with him has entered the enormous country of things that have already happened, and I listen to him breathe and think about *waterable* and *hundred percently* and *sit to next to me*, about *Papa, can I get up?* and *Papa, can I tell you something?*, this small language we have been speaking to one another for nearly a decade, a language with only two native speakers, and I know that most of it will disappear, and I think, with the whole of my cracked open heart, that this is the best thing I have ever done and the best thing I will ever do, that being Benjamin's father is the truest accomplishment of my one strange life and my single clear purpose on this turning earth,

and that there is nowhere in the entire universe I would rather be than right here in the dark beside him, and nothing I was ever made for except this, except him, except this gorgeous boy.

And still I would give almost anything to preserve one small dictionary of us exactly as we are now, before the words go extinct, before the little boy disappears completely into the man he is becoming, so that somewhere, somehow, for as long as I am alive, there will remain a language in which *waterable* is a word, in which *sit to next to me* means I want you near me, in which a whisper through a cracked bedroom door means may the day begin, and in which *Gorgeous Boy* means everything I have ever tried and failed to say about being his father.