

Really Happy

by

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NY
Q Books™

The New York Quarterly Foundation, Inc.
New York, New York

NYQ Books™ is an imprint of The New York Quarterly Foundation, Inc.

The New York Quarterly Foundation, Inc.
P. O. Box 2015
Old Chelsea Station
New York, NY 10113

www.nyq.org

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First Edition

Layout and Design by Joseph Hamersly and Raymond Hammond

Cover Art: "Really Happy," oil on board, 13 x 15 in., 2013 by Bret Gottschall | www.gotty.com

Author Photo by Jamie Ridgway

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014945817

ISBN: 978-1-935520-81-8

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Ready—Action!

I'm standing in line
at the mega-pharmacy, waiting to buy drugs.
I know, I don't like this place,
but it's handy and cheap.
Standing in this slow line,
I can't keep my eyes off the prophylactic section. Two young guys
with bottles of 5-Hour Energy shrug shoulders, laugh,
turn to look at who might be staring at them, joke louder,
turn back to the KY and rows of Trojans and Lifestyles
while they fondle the Astroglide.
Don't be such a numb-nut,
one says to the other as they snicker
and turn their cart down the aisle.

Soon enough, they're back. Intent this time
on grabbing the right product.
Then off they go, burying their goods
in a large half-empty cart that in a couple of years
they will fill with formula, baby wipes, diapers, Aquaphor Healing Ointment,
disinfectant wipes, lead paint test kits, hand sanitizers, lots of sugar-free juice,
binkies, tearless shampoo, a Pack and Play, a bouncy seat, pregnancy tests,
colored condoms, acid reducers, Band-Aids, Ativan, peroxide, and tonic.
The cart will overflow.
That will only be the beginning.

Today, though, none of that stuff matters.
They race for the only male check-out clerk who, God willing,
will let them pass through with hard-earned cash
without asking for their IDs, or if they need to speak
with the pharmacist about practical application,
correct procedures, or any other instruction
they've never wanted or been given.

Black Words on White Paper

I am grading freshman essays.
Too many papers about exhaustive
road trips without hitchhikers. Anorexia.
The death penalty. Abortions. One about the
Future Farmers of America. You don't have to
grow up in the country to be a member.
I never knew that.

Most essays about families say they are dysfunctional.
They always are.
But sometimes it still scares me what students reveal.
Like when Carlos writes, *That night,*
when my father pointed his hunting rifle
at my head and said he was going to put a bullet between my eyes,
I knew I had to say something. That's the first time I used my voice
to make a difference.

The phone rings and it's Willow.
Dad, she says, her voice shaky and exhilarated.
Can I get my ears pierced?
At that moment, she could have asked for a pony
and I'd have probably given it to her.

How exciting it is to hear a child's anticipation.
The delight, instead of
darkness.

Wishing Well

*Each one of us makes a myth of the soul we imagine ours.
So mythic we'll never vanish.*

—Kevin Clark

This morning in the hallway
I find a note on the floor:
I hope my mom and DaD don't Diy forevre.

My daughter does this sometimes, leaves notes.
She tries to ignore me as I hold the letter
in my hand and ask, *What's this?*
She turns her back and acts disgusted.
I don't push the issue.
But, all day I approach the note in my head
from different angles.
Is she scared? Has she been watching too much TV?
How do I tell a six-year-old
that we will all die someday?

Later, after exhausting myself
with the right thing to say, I think
soon enough she'll want me dead—not seriously
gone for good, just out of the picture.
When she's a teenager, all that freedom she'll be aching for,
like the other day she screams at me,
Dad! I can get out of the car by myself. Thanks for the ride.
And she's out of the car running down the small hill into school,
her enormous pink backpack smacking the backs
of her calves.

A friend of mine told me,
You can't be friends with your kids.
And I know what he means; we can't just be friends.
That'll come down the road, when they are gone
to train orcas, and wrestle with the other
predators of the sea.

I also know I'll never stop
being their father. As I get older,
I'll still need them to ask me for advice.
Like, *What the hell is a basin wrench for? Or,
Why do you care about that so much?*
I realize our relationship will continue
to evolve, like mine with my father and mother,
how we occasionally butt heads.
Now parenthood is becoming a bit more clear.

Really Happy

And, like me, he misses the old days, when talking to yourself meant you were crazy, back when being crazy was a big deal, not just an acronym or something you could take a pill for. I liked it when people who were talking to themselves might actually have been talking to God or an angel. You respected people like that.

—George Bilgere

Take highway 81 north, just over the Missouri River bridge, and merge onto Broadway—this is river city—dirt’s grime and chime. There he is with the worn jacket, sun-faded red, white and blue hoodie.

Listen. He’s belting his guts out again, all the way up these four lanes. Broadway is humming with cattle trucks on their way to the world’s largest livestock auction, jake brakes and texters—all of these pilgrims haulin’ ass north to a colder Dakota or scoopin’ the loop out of boredom. You can hear him above the din. Some days he’s pedaling and now he’s be-boppin’ on foot, singing what sounds to be Dylan’s *Tambourine Man* or is that Sly’s *THANK YOU FALETTINME BE MICE ELF AGIN?*

The other day my daughter asks—*Is he wacko?*
He’s having a good time is what I tell her.

And today, because of our own cabin fever, we are packed in the car looking for him—windows down, a cold January wind filling the cab. There he is turning onto 25th, then Fox Run Parkway on his way to the global super-center for a new pair of socks; or maybe to some human behavior center where they’ll ask him to take off his headphones and talk with the others. We cheer him on; let him take his time at the crosswalk, his right hand waving and left hand clutching the radio. He doesn’t miss a beat, banging that imaginary snare and floor tom.

That’s the guy who saved rock and roll, my daughter says.
Yes, indeed, I respond.

And I feel happier than I have in days—my daughters in the back, all smiles, bobbing their heads up and down to their own music.

He keeps right on going past the South Dakota tradition, a 12,000 square foot machine shed where this weekend it’s all you can handle crab legs and mountain oysters. He’s not after food. He’s not stopping at any gas station casino for his cash crop. Doesn’t stop at the floral shop—nor does he need a tune-up. He pays no attention to the three whiz kids on the other side of the road playing swords—pissing into the wind. Doesn’t seem to give a rip about much of anything except the rhythm of the guitar, that thump thump thumping of the bass and his own irreducible voice.