



FLOWERS FALL

By Bethany Saltman

The Truth: It's Dizzying

Yet, though it is like this, simply, flowers fall amid our longing,
and weeds spring up amid our antipathy.

— Dogen Zenji, *Genjokoan*

I just finished reading Andre Agassi's memoir, *Open*. I loved it because it is actually a fascinating memoir, and also because in the 80s I had a big crush on Agassi, so it was almost like reading about an ex-(fantasy) boyfriend. Growing up, though, I had no idea how tortured he was, or that he had dropped out of school in 9th grade, or that he, in his own words, "hated tennis." I had no idea he was suffering so terribly, doing drugs, destroying himself, but looking back, that certainly explains why I found him so attractive.

Another thing I had no idea about was the fact that Agassi was driven by a ruthless father who was determined to raise the world's number one tennis player. It's not like I had ever really considered Agassi's childhood before, or pondered how such a talented tennis player comes into being, but there was something about the absolute power his father had over him that was, in fact, surprising. Comforting? Maybe it's just me, but I feel like I am catching a parenting vibe these days that cautions us not to think that we are actually having an effect on our kids. Like, Sure, go ahead, knock yourself out, but just remember that in the blink of an eye our sweet little "Look, mommy, Buddhas are everywhere!" babes can turn into the neighborhood dealer, depressive, garden-variety A-hole, or much, much worse. And of course, ultimately, we have little or no control over what will happen to our children, or the kind of karma they come into this world carrying with them. And god help us all, it's the most heartbreaking work in the world—to cultivate sincere intentions, make mistakes galore, and then not attach to any result. But sometimes I feel like we forget just how much influence we really do have on our kids. Or, more to the point, I deny how much influence I have over Azalea. And fancy this: In a good way.

Here's an example. One of the things that we have been wrestling with lately is kindergarten. For now I would like to set aside the complex and fraught socio-economic/political details of public v. private school, and just say that the questions concerning Azalea's education, and whether or not we would even entertain the idea of sending her to a private school, brought up a wave of such deep confusion in me it was actually stunning.

As I have mentioned here before, I grew up in a pretty hands-off house. Grammar school...please...I just walked there, suffered alone at my little table, then walked home. Middle school? Were there books in that building? In high school, I won my one award for anything in my whole life, ever, in Mr. Martel's Biology class: Most Talking During Filmstrips. I wasn't even planning on attending college until my even-then professorial friend, Stephen Jost, who spent senior year slumming it with me in the back of Mr. Norris's English class, said, "B, you should go to Antioch." Lucky for me, Antioch was a truly "self-selecting" institution, meaning, if you want to come here, and you are not currently in rehab or jail, Welcome! After my first semester, which was a con-

tinuation of my hang out, smoke, read, and resist life, I plugged into something new and found myself wandering around the beautiful 1850s Ohio campus, holding my head, wondering, *Woaaaa, what's that strange sensation?* And then it hit me: *This must be what learning feels like. And what do you know? I kind of like it!*

Where were my parents during all this?

Who could say? Fighting their own demons, I suppose. But I know where they were not: sitting around wondering what the best thing would be for their already perfectly perfect, four-year-old.

So are T and I—in the words of the kind of silly world of writing about parenting, of which I am a shameless participant—"overparenting"? Are we "spoiling" our daughter by considering what would make her happy? Are we terrible people for "judging" public school at all? Like, who are we to have an opinion about our child's life? If we can't change the game for every kid in town, why should we cherry-pick just one to get some fancy-schmancy, wholesome school "experience"? Whatever happened to the Bodhisattva Vow, "Save 'em all?!"

And furthermore, how much does it really matter? Won't our kids just rebel against whatever we represent, anyway? Isn't the universe pure chaos? Even parents of artists from Mozart to Twyla Thwarp claim to have simply "discovered" their children's prodigious talent early in their lives, and felt like they were just following their kids' lead by devoting their entire lives to the schlepping of geniuses. Maybe so, but isn't it funny how such geniuses are always born of like-minded families? I am sure there is a genetic/karmic component to propensity and virtuosity, but come on (I plead with myself)...of course we are always shaping our kids. It's ok! Imprint away!

Does it follow that I want to take the lead of someone like Agassi Senior who fastened ping-pong paddles to his infant's hands, and balls to the mobile above his crib? I guess I could strap Azalea to a zafu and threaten to take away her Kai-Kai Bunny if she moves. Or I could have Anne Sexton piped into the house 24-7. Or I could just make one clear choice at a time about what I think is best for my child and will reflect the values we would like to pass on. Right?

The thing is, as much as I like the idea of someone thinking about me when I was a child, I am totally attached to the version of me that was given so little, and found my way anyhow. I like the story of salvation where I don't owe my parents anything because they didn't do squat for me (which is of course not true but integral to the narrative). And I guess it just feels crazy to let go of the past and let reality rip. The bounty of this life, my life, and Azalea's life, is dizzying. What I can offer her is plenty, rich, and in a sense, boundless. I am ashamed even to say that I am working on accepting that bounty as my life, so deeply askance from who I always imagined myself to be. But it is true, and so I say it. ●