



FLOWERS FALL

By Bethany Saltman

My New Year's Resolution: Putting My Kid First

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

— Dogen Zenji, *Genjokoan*

A couple months ago, I had the opportunity to be somebody else, someone we've all seen before. It was during the pre-holiday winter madness, in Kingston, at Adam's Fairacre Farms. At the time, I had no idea that I was entering the realm of the illusory Other. All I was aware of was this: Body aching from a long day of negotiations with my three-year-old, Azalea, in Target, in public bathrooms, her car seat, the produce aisle, etc. Standing in the checkout line, piling on the food for several upcoming festivities, I was vaguely aware of how this was all supposed to be fun, thus a mild disappointment was settling in my shoulders. I was also aware of said three-year-old, standing in the grocery cart, leaning over dangerously, trying to put the kale on the conveyer belt, while the wheels of the cart moved away in the opposite direction, and I was aware of my repetitive fear-fantasy that she would come toppling over onto the ground, head cracking, anticipatory tension squeezing me even tighter.

And then the mounting pressure of people behind us sighing heavily at how long we were taking. The tightness in my jaw and a slight buzzing around my temples, brewing anger at the people who were rushing me, and then my ill-fated attempt to hurry a toddler and remove her from her position of authority both in the cart and *in my life*, which just invigorated her need to be "helpful" by grabbing hold of the bag of delicate (*expensive!*) porcini mushrooms, squishing them in her haste, which just totally pissed me off, so I grabbed the bag from her, which made her cry really loudly, wailing, "THAT HURT MY FEEEEELINGS!!!!" which is when the (evil) checkout lady started sending me some serious vibes, as did other people around me, glaring at me as if I had actually hit the child instead of just grabbed some gourmet items out of her hand, then ignored her. I remembered a friend of mine (childless) describing a mom in a store and how she *just refused* to pick up her screaming kid. And how she was actually tempted to break the public sound barrier and say something to the effect of, "Look, just pick up your kid, okay? Is it really so hard?" But by this time, I was so totally disembodied I wouldn't have been able to pick up a thread of saffron had I so desired.

After a few uncommonly frank exchanges with strangers, Azalea and I made it out of there. Once outside, I stopped the cart and picked her up. I re-embodied and apologized for snapping and being short. We hugged, then put the canned soup in the boxes outside for other people's holiday dinners. And we drove home together, repairing.

It wasn't until later, in the middle of the night, accompanied by a full-body blush, that I realized I had become, in Adam's, *that woman*, that *fallen woman* who is fatefully understood as someone who can't control her child in public, or worse, who is so out of control herself that her capacity for natural,

maternal love is questionable. I was her; she was me. There was, as we say in Zen, no separation. The fact that I stopped being *that woman* soon after the incident makes it even clearer how *she*, and every other fixed thing we think we can point to, is a phantom, an idea. When we see *her* struggling with her kids and/or herself in the supermarket, even though it may not feel like it to any of us at the time, that particular incarnation of that specific nightmare is impermanent. And in fact, it may even be our noticing that is, at least in part, creating it.

Indeed. As I look back at this and other times I have lost my cool, it is so often because I am worried about the wrong person—someone other than my daughter—some adult who I feel is watching. Okay: Judging. A stranger, a friend, an in-law. Interior whispers sound like this: *Are we taking too long? Is she too loud? Too saucy? Too passive? Is she spoiled? Am I mean?* The crazy thing is that if there's anything that is certain to make me act like a total jerk, it's that anxiety.

Parenting in public is a big challenge for me. As much as I wish I could be a little less emotional, that's probably not going to happen any time soon. And a toddler demands response 24/7, limiting opportunities to hide. But for someone who vows to be still and brave in the face of such total exposure, to stop trying to be someone/somewhere else, this scenario is, as the Christians say, the good news. The gospel of being real.

So my new year's resolution is to put my kid first. What does that mean? It means that I vow to notice when I am more concerned about grown-ups and their thoughts about me/her/me than about my child. It means to appreciate that Azalea is not the center of the universe, but she *is* a person who needs a lot of help in the world and I am her guardian (thankfully not her only guardian, but an important one!). It means I am sorry to the folks who are in a hurry and have to slow down because a little girl is learning how to be helpful by pushing the kid-cart in front of them, and, whenever possible, we will move aside and let you pass. I am sorry to the people who work at the diner who aren't in the mood to feign interest as the kid can ask for her own apple juice. Believe me, I get it. But at the same time, nobody ever died from faking it. And most of all, I am sorry to all the adults who feel bitter about their own childhoods, and resent the fact that this kid gets to call any shots at all. Another feeling I can most certainly appreciate.

If I'm honest, I can see my own ambivalence about giving Azalea what she wants. This nonstop giving thing can seem unfair, or even impossible, since I don't feel like I have what she needs. But then I hear her calling softly in the middle of the night, *Ma-ma...* We're turning toward each other in our half-dreams, and I can feel, head to toe, how simple this love can be. ●