



# FLOWERS FALL

By Bethany Saltman

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

— Dogen Zenji, *Genjokoan*

## A Strange Kind of Hope at the Dawn of Father's Day

*“Among the primates, parenting behavior by males is rare. This isn’t necessarily because males have less interest in infants, but because primate mothers generally will not allow males to get very close to their newborn. The males of many primate species have been known to harm infants.”*—James Kimmel, The Natural Child Project

*“Somewhere at the dawn of human history, some social invention was made under which males started nurturing females and their young.”*—Margaret Mead

T and I recently took A to see the movie *Chimpanzee*, a Disney nature film about a small band of chimps in Ivory Coast. What a treat it was for the three of us to sit in the theater together with our contraband Skittles and popcorn. Even though I had to cover A’s eyes during a bunch of the insanely aggressive and LOUD trailers (even princess movies are in 3-D now...truly...a fate worse than death), I still felt deeply comforted by the Homo Sapien ritual of the whole theater-going experience.

The story of *Chimpanzee* is simple: Isha is the chimp-mom and Oscar is her toddler. We get to know them through beautiful footage of Isha teaching Oscar to, say, suck the juice out of a fruit, open nuts, ride on her back, climb trees, and play. We get lots of close-ups of their crazy chimp fingers—so long and flexible, reaching into a log for ants, and their strong, black, wide feet, roaming the electric-green earth. It was pretty eerie/awesome to watch Oscar nurse while Isha’s flat-affect, yet clearly sentient and deeply familiar face stared into the distance as if she was distracted. But of course that’s me, not her. Isha always does what she does while she’s doing it, not because she is enlightened, but because she is utterly bound by instinct, a beautiful creature of the animal realm.

The story then turns when a “rival gang” (the narration is a bit much, but oh well...) attacks our protagonists’ group and Isha disappears. Oscar, just like our very own little primates, is totally unable to fend for himself, and won’t in fact, reach maturity until around 20 years old. So he moves around the group, searching for his mother, and in the meantime, tries to find some other lady to take care of him, but as the narrator says, “unfortunately, the other females already have babies of their own.” Oscar is alone. And nobody cares. This next part is brutal, watching Oscar’s rejection lead to weight loss, listlessness, bug-infested skin, his little amber eyes, blinking, blinking, blinking... then the narrator tells us that Oscar had to give up looking for his mother. I looked over at A, feeling guilty for bringing her to such a sad and disturbing movie (and wondering about the ethics of the filmmakers), but saw her resting on T’s big shoulder, her face concerned, but wow, so at ease, and just then she popped up and said, in full-volume of course, *why doesn’t Oscar look for his daddy?* At which point, right on cue, in an ending even Disney couldn’t have dreamed up, we see how Freddie, the alpha male of the group, adopts Oscar. He lets him ride on his back, feeds him, grooms him. He allows Oscar to attach to him, which saves Oscar’s little life. Darn cute, yes, and true! But highly improbable.

These days, among the chimps’ bipedal cousins, many of us “females” are fortunate enough to have sniffed out mates who are willing to at least give this new-fangled family-man thing a go, but let’s be frank: it’s a stretch. Modern humans have been scratching around on earth, and making babies for 200,000 years, and men have not been devoted, direct caregivers until, like, pretty much, now. While there are some species of male monkeys who actually carry their babes around in their mouths, most male mammals, including ours truly, historically, only care for their offspring in the uncommon instance of having their paternity assured and even then, mostly indirectly, meaning they attend to their little ones by offering some security and nourishment to the mother, and not by dealing with the kids themselves. And so, to all of you diaper-changing, homework-helping, ahead-of-the-evolutionary-curve-dads, Happy Father’s Day!

And then there’s my dad, who died several years ago, affording me the opportunity to be totally honest. So here goes: Whenever Father’s Day comes around, instead of inspiring any personal lament or sadness or grief, I feel relieved, as in *finally...I don’t have to freak out about sending a dumb card to a guy I don’t care about*. There. I said it. For a long time, I took my cold-heartedness to be a character flaw. And I guess you could say it is, in the sense that we earn our character flaws through a life of what we call conditioning. And then we can spend what feels like another life learning how to see that conditioning, acknowledge it, and let it go, making the effort to open our hearts to the perfect, luminous emptiness of the whole thing.

And then there’s this: When I look at the big picture, scanning back with Paleolithic perspective, I can appreciate that my dad was just doing his not-exactly-alpha-male thing, and the fact that I don’t have any sacred feelings for him is not a big deal. And enough with all that whining anyway; what a miracle, this life, and the unlikely, incredible, resilience of all things. All these bajillions of beings working so hard to make life happen in the face of famine, floods, making tools, traveling across the earth on foot, developing *language*, creating creation stories, and females suffering at the hands of male aggression and unaccounted-for sexuality much more vicious than anything I have experienced. Right? Any way you slice it, this existence thing is a challenge! How humbling.

At the same, time, even Oscar had needs.

My dad thought he loved me. I know he did. But I didn’t buy it, and I was pissed. From as long ago as I can remember, I have had my sights so set on real love, a connection I could actually feel, that nothing else would do. God, how hopeful of me. The truth is, my whole life has been a hankering for some primordial, utterly satisfying internal state that may well be a fantasy. But hey, you never know, maybe the dream is actually a strange, deep knowing, an instinct carried over from my ancient, knuckle-dragging past—a simple hunger made complicated by the freedom of being human. And maybe it’s a preview of something coming soon. ●