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Michael Bogan

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1. How to Sleep (*middle of the night*)

You wake with her crying. Wait for a moment—maybe she’s having a nightmare, maybe just a cough, she’ll fall back asleep. You’re tired, you don’t want to get up. You have a meeting in just a few hours. But then she cries again, louder.

Stumble out of bed, down the darkened hallway and into her room. Immediately smell it, the vomit. Lift her up and tell her, It’s okay, It’s okay. See the relief on her face now that you’re here. The cries already soften. She rests her head on your shoulder, and her hair settles into your open mouth. Taste it. The vomit in her hair. She’s been rolling in it.

Spit it out with loud bursts. Drop her back into bed and let her scream. Drink two cups of water and wash your mouth with Listerine. Let her scream still, louder now, while you clean up the mess, her pajamas, her sheets, her pillow, her blanket, her hair, then rinse your mouth out again before you finally go back to stop her screaming.

But no. Do none of that. Because her crying has stopped and she’s already asleep again on your shoulder. Instead, let the wet hair drip into your mouth. Slowly move a hand upwards and push the hair out of your mouth and try to clean your tongue with your sleeve. Shuffle backwards into the rocking chair and hold her through the rest of night. Fall asleep with her.

2. How to Be You (*waking up/morning*)

When she's bored, she spins under the blades of the ceiling fan until she's so dizzy she collapses. When she's upset that you're done reading *One Fish Two Fish*, she cries. She laughs when you raspberry her stomach then eat her nose. She doesn't care if her face is smeared with peanut butter. Or if she's peed her pants. Or if she smells funny. If a man with a beard scares her, she cries. If her diaper itches, she takes it off and just lets loose on her bedroom floor. If she's hungry, she'd rather have a cookie. She swims in bathwater, gulping it. If you've pissed her off, she screams at you, doesn't care if the neighbors hear. Wants *everyone* to hear. When she's done screaming, all is forgiven. If she's awake, then she's running. Always running. Ten seconds after she's out of bed, when you're still stumbling around tripping over dinosaurs like a drunk, she's already running. When there's danger, she hides. If she can climb the slide herself, she does. If her feet stink, it's funny. If you stink, it's funny. If she doesn't feel like wearing underpants, she turns naked somersaults on the living room floor.

When she scrapes her knee it's surgery. When she sings it's Puccini. When she colors it's Monet. When she jumps and runs it's Superman. When she hides she's invisible. When she talks it's gospel. When she throws books while you eat your breakfast it's because she's *mad*.

3. How to Live with Guilt (*breakfast time*)

When you order her to pick up that library book she just threw, snap the words, hard, so she understands by the tone of your voice—No—and she looks up at you and her face scrunches and she hides her eyes and cries. Don't spank her as you would have her brothers. Don't whap her through her pants a few times until she picks up the book. Just see her—hair falling over her eyes, face hidden behind fingers short as crayons, as if *she's* the one disappointed in *you*.

See her as a teenager, heels too tall and skirt too short, her back to you as she walks out the door on a date with some guy with a pretend moustache and oversized antelope belt buckle, his pick-up with the camper top parked out front, a wad of chew in his glove compartment, probably a three-pack of condoms, too. Be waiting in the dark on the porch when she finally comes home at two in the morning, three hours past curfew, and be ready to yell at her, really let loose this time. You've been fighting the images all night—this first boy that doesn't make fun of her braces, that buys her a plastic rose from the drugstore, and that calls her just to say Goodnight. She trusts him.

And she's no longer yours. And now she's half-naked in the bed of his truck, somewhere in the middle of nowhere, and she's realizing it's too late to tell him no, or even worse, she doesn't *want* to tell him no, doesn't *want* you to save her—but if you just knew where they were, you'd be there in an instant and split that fucker's skull open with a tire iron.

But, when she finally comes home, you don't yell at her. Because she's crying, her face red even in the dark night. And she won't tell you what's wrong. Instead she yells at *you*, almost bites you. She says, Quit spying on me, Just leave me alone, You don't know anything about me. And she's right. Instead she huddles in a corner and confides over the phone to someone you've never even met.

See her ten years later, calling late on a Friday night, from her house on the far south side, her husband's out playing poker, her kids are asleep, she's been watching a black-and-white movie but she's bored. It's the first time she's called in two months. You haven't seen her in four. She says she's taking that new job, moving across the country to L.A.

Or worse, see her gone before you even got to know her.

Now see her three feet tall on your carpet, next to a worthless library book that means nothing to you, a fucking nothing in your life, and breathe. And breathe again. Tell her, It's okay. Hold her until she stops crying. Hold her even longer, long past the time she stops crying, long after she grabs your collar and clings, and buries her face in your chest, as if you are all that exists in the world. And for a moment, it's all easy.

4. How to Try Hard (*at work, then coming home*)

But struggle through the long years with your wife. It's *hard*.

Who cares about the big issues. It's the little ones, like being \$5.52 over budget because you ate Chinese for lunch, or she washes all the towels while you're in the shower, or you walked out this morning without kissing her goodbye, or can't she keep the kitchen clean for one goddamn day, or you're an asshole just like her father, or she hasn't worn makeup in two weeks, or you were late on purpose just so you wouldn't have to drive the kids to piano, or she dresses like a potato, or you won't give straight answers when she wants to talk about Relationship Enhancement, or she actually paid money—*money!*, that you slumped all day at a desk to earn—for a trunk-load of rocks, or you're so goddamn negative about everything when she calls you on your lunch hour—those are the ones that make you try to throw couches across the living room and punch holes in drywall after dinner and wish you had

slept with that recruiter at work.

So you imagine a different life.

You flirt with the Mexican cleaning lady and it goes somewhere. You travel to Ireland and sleep *wherever the hell you want*. You drive aimlessly down the California coast. You read all day long. You stay out late dancing. You quit your shitty desk job. You don't care if you bounce checks. You tell your boss to Fuck Off. You sleep in a one-room apartment downtown where you can walk to the ballpark and a dozen restaurants, and the bookstores, and the canal. You buy a *kayak*, for god's sake. A *kayak*. Not because you've always wanted to—you've never even thought about it—but Jesus, you do it because you *can*.

But then, see her—your daughter—face pressed to the glass of the back door, about to explode with happiness, because you're home from work a little early. Fifteen minutes, that's all. But it's forever to her. She scoots right up against you as you relax on the couch. You imagine her life if you split up. Imagine life without her.

So you try *harder*.

5. How Much is Enough (*relaxing before dinner*)

Tell her, on the couch just before dinner, holding your fingers an inch apart, I love you this much. She shakes her head no, trying not to smile. Hold up both hands, a foot apart. This much? She loses control and laughs, but still says no. Hold your hands open a little further to the sides, as if shrugging. *This* much? She says, Daddy!, and she pushes your hands apart, stretches your arms wide to the side, to where your shoulders would pop from their sockets if they were stretched any further. *This much?* Yes, that much.

6. How to Lie (*her bedtime*)

Later, after a long night of playing in the backyard, she's tired, and you sing her a lullaby from decades ago. She falls asleep in your arms, the purple stuffed bear squeezed between her arms and her chest, her hair still damp from the bath, wet and fruity in your nose, her cold toes tucked under your hands. Stop singing now that she's finally asleep. Her breath in and out, small wisps barely audible. Stroke her pink-footed PJs, push her hair behind her ear with your finger. Gently, now, don't wake her.

Carry her to bed, legs dangling, head heavy, stirless. Walk the dark stairs and hallway, into her room, lay her down carefully and cover her and kiss her goodnight. Try to whisper to her that she is safe, that you are here, that you

will always be here, that nothing will ever happen to her. You don't have the right to say these things. But still, you have to try.

7. How to Fail (*by her bed, watching her sleep*)

Because you realize, as you watch her sleep, that one day you'll find yourself cleaning out her room after she's moved away. You'll find yourself sitting on the floor, surrounded by the cardboard boxes, and for the first time *in a long time* you'll just get it over with and cry. You'll remember the day she camped out on your shoulders while you spent five hours at the children's museum. You'll remember thinking at the time, I'd better enjoy this, because some day I'll look back and miss it.

Because that day will come. And you can't stop it. It's here *now*. And you didn't stop it. And you know you're not alone in this. But still, you're alone in this.

8. How to Ignore Failures (*lying in bed, falling asleep*)

And in that future she'll be grown, and your failures will manifest. You lie in bed. The clock ticks then chimes. Wind gently rattles the window by your head. You see her as a woman.

She's cold and repressed. Her kids call her stupid, her husband calls her a bitch. Her friends borrow money and don't even pretend they'll pay it back. She grows so vacant inside that one night, when the kids are at camp and her husband is working late, she lies down in bed and swallows three bottles of aspirin.

All because once, long ago, she threw herself onto the carpet, screaming because she couldn't watch *Looney Tunes* again, and instead of helping her to understand her emotions, you marched her to her room, told her to just deal with it, and slammed the door shut.

Or it's the opposite: she can't contain her emotions. They come barreling at her every time someone criticizes her. Because once, when she was young, her brother knocked over her tower of Legos, and she cried, and instead of forcing her to just deal with it, you held her. For too long you let her sit there and cry and you *comforted* her.

Or, her therapist will explain, it's your fault that she can't stop sleeping with the boyfriend that every now and then pops her in the eye. Because you had no *consistency*. Sometimes it was okay if she cried when she spilled her cereal, sometimes it meant she was acting like a baby. Sometimes she was *sup-*

posed to listen when you said it was bedtime, sometimes it meant, well, okay, five more minutes. You were too strict, you weren't strict enough. You were too overbearing, you were too elusive. You are the reason she drinks entire bottles of wine in the afternoons, the reason she woke up at a frat party once with no pants on, the reason she dreadlocks her hair and stops shaving her legs and moves to a commune in Iowa.

But, no, forget all that. She'll be okay. You'll help her to get her juice even though she can reach it herself, and she'll still be independent. You'll scratch her back as she falls asleep, but she won't need a man to make her happy. You'll be strict with her, but she'll still question authority. You won't let her wear eye shadow and slutty halter-tops when she's ten, but she'll still be beautiful. You'll let her climb that tree. You'll let her find out the radiator is hot. And still, she'll be a litany of words you would choose for her: independent, witty, intelligent, tough. She'll coach soccer, or teach children in Mumbai, or stay at home and raise your grandkids, or backpack alone through the Andes. You fall asleep now, believing in that future.

9. Where to End a Story (*outside after dinner*)

Because in the end she's grown, or not grown. Dead or alive. And you're dead, or still alive. And your wife—that doesn't matter either. And no one remembers you. No one cares. Or if this story never existed, or is yellowing in the stacks of some minor college library in Canada, and will never be read again, it's not important.

It's okay. It's all right. Because those things don't matter.

What does matter is that at one time—even if no one is left to remember—at one time there was sliding down the stairs in pillowcases. There was a bloody nose wiped on a white work shirt. There were pigtails and ponytails. There was puke in your mouth.

What does matter is that there is a night, an endless night, *tonight*, when *everything* matters—when she plays in the backyard with her brothers, up and down the slide, short legs kicking up dust, her smudged face poking out of the treehouse window, rolling down grassy hills, pouncing, laughing, until the sun sets and the street lights kick on, and the lightning bugs chase her hands, and it's hours past her bedtime, past your bedtime, but still you sit quietly on the bench, in the dark, and let them be. Your wife is by your side, silent, almost not there. Your bare calves touch now and then and, at

times, one of you stretches, or laughs at the game they play with sticks and bare spots on the grass. A train in the distance. Dogs barking. The waning moon sets. Clouds move in from the west and extinguish the stars. Autumn approaches, summer is almost over. But this night continues on. This night with clouds like pale horses; this night that never ends, with kicked-up dust that never settles.