

Babies. So helpless. They look at you with their big, absent eyes, full of innocence and purity, expecting you to feed them and protect them and love them-- with nothing to offer in exchange but their presence. How self-centered is that? It's remarkable. Feed me, Bathe me, pay for my speech therapy classes, change my diapers, drive me to daycare, and in return-- I humbly and graciously offer you: my existence. What the actual fuck? That's not how we make transactions in this country.

When Chloe was born, I was very straight with her. She was resting peacefully in her mother's arms and--while various nurses rushed in and out of the delivery room, performing blood tests and checking vitals-- I gave her an ultimatum: if she wanted a ride home from the hospital, she needed to chip in for gas; if she expected to live in my house, with my wife, with my dog, and all my favorite possessions, she also needed to pay rent. I offered her one free month of rent. I'm a reasonable guy and the job market is scarce, so one free month seemed like more than enough time to get herself on her feet and get a job. She burped, giggled, then rolled her squishy face towards me and smiled. I could see the agreement in her enormous brown eyes. Legally speaking, her giggle was a binding verbal contract.

I'm not sure what went wrong, but Chloe made little effort to find a job after that. I told her, "This is America. Nothing is given to you. You have to go out there and take it, Chloe."

She didn't seem to understand that though, because all she did was sleep. And if she wasn't sleeping, she was crying. And if she wasn't crying, she was pooping. And if she wasn't pooping, then according to the doctors she had some sort of medical problem that cost fifteen hundred dollars in surgery to fix. I own a successful law practice and money isn't necessarily an issue, but that's because I take care of my money and I don't spend it on superfluous things. I told this to Chloe and I said, "I'm happy to pay for your surgery, but I need you to understand: once you're fully recovered from this procedure I expect you to pay me back-- with interest." I took out my briefcase and repurposed one of my contracts. I wasn't going to make the same mistake twice. I crossed out a few words here and there to make it relevant to this particular negotiation and I handed her the pen.

I kid you not-- she didn't even reach for the pen. I had to force it into her hand. She scribbled her signature, which was pathetically crafted, and that was that.

The nurse took her towards the operating room and within hours the surgery was over.

The next few months were infuriating. I watched Chloe piss her life away. My wife insisted that we start to teach her the alphabet, but I was vehemently opposed. If Chloe wants to learn the alphabet-- that's her prerogative-- but she needs to do it on her own time. Chloe made a commitment and it's been three months since her surgery and I haven't seen a nickel. I told my wife, "honey, I love you, but this baby is entitled. If we don't start instilling a sense of consequence into her life, how will she ever be successful?" My wife smiled, kissed my forehead and said, "John, she's a baby. Just give her some time."

I love my wife and I trust my wife, but at a certain point I'd really had it. Chloe was starting to piss me off. I spent most of that next year at my law firm, trying to distract myself with ongoing cases.

I was working on a specific claim that involved the double suicide of a middle aged Manhattan couple. The husband was a taxi-driver and fell into considerable debt after the financial crash. He lost his job, his house, and his wife's affection. He shot himself. His considerable debt was then passed on to his wife-- and as the divorce papers were never finalized-- she was burdened with the six-figure load. After three months, and two failed attempts at filing for bankruptcy, his wife jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge.

The case was brought forth by his wife's sister, Kathy Blumenfeld, and I was in charge of representing The Bank she was suing. In essence, Kathy's lawyer argued The Bank gave the husband a predatory loan-- and therefore were directly responsible for his suicide. If Kathy's lawyer could prove the loan was intentionally malicious--then legally, The Bank would be liable for his death. If The Bank was liable for his death, then they'd also be liable for his wife's-- and suddenly The Bank, my client, needed to pay millions in reparations, rebranding, and PR.

It was a well structured argument, but flimsy in the court of law. All evidence suggested The Bank followed FCC regulations and nothing on the books suggested otherwise. Proving malicious intent was nearly impossible and while both the husband and wife had their own forms of life insurance, neither of their plans covered suicide. Kathy Blumenfeld showed heart, but financial compensation looked unlikely. It felt so wrong and unfair to see such intense and gut-wrenching tragedy ignored-- as if it were all somehow meaningless.

It haunted me and every time I'd come home for dinner, I'd sit across from Chloe and think about that case. My wife would repeatedly say, "John you're crazy! Chloe is just a baby" but every time I saw her plump little face, I could see the distress in Chloe's eyes. Her debt was weighing on her. She'd laugh and she'd giggle; she'd drool all over the leather briefcase I bought her for Easter, but behind those deep brown eyes, I saw sadness. Pure, unadulterated sadness. My baby-- my tiny, precious baby-- wanted to stick her head in an oven. How could I have let this happen?

I erased Chloe's debt and spent the next few months traveling with her. I took Chloe to Disneyland, to the Taj Mahal, to the Australian Outback-- hoping she'd be inspired to start anew. I tried to convince her how lucky she was, there were people out there who had it far worse-- but all to no avail. Chloe was ungrateful. She was hopeless. She was hellbent on being miserable.

Her sadness exacerbated my own sadness and I quickly found myself getting angry. It wasn't that I hated Chloe-- in fact, I'd grown to love her quite dearly-- but her melancholy was all encompassing and the pain she felt--so seemingly acute-- was contagious. It was real and blood-sucking and crazy-making.

I couldn't bear to watch it any longer. I needed to *do* something. I needed action. Chloe was plummeting into existential darkness and I was her last hope-- her flashlight. I needed to shine purpose into her meaningless life.

I sent my wife on a two-week spa get-away in this quaint little Australian town called Maragret River. While she was there, Chloe and I went up to my cabin in Alaska.

Aside from her complete inability to carry a conversation, Chloe seemed intent on wallowing in her nihilistic self-pity. We flew private. I bought her two movies, her own seat, a

chilled glass of premium-grade whiskey. Not only did she cry all the way through the showing of *Inglourious Basterds*, but she didn't even touch her whiskey. It was a 1926 Johnny Walker Blue. What was wrong with this baby?

I had a driver pick us up on the runway and as we drove out of Anchorage I had to remind Chole to put her seatbelt on. I don't know if she didn't hear me or just chose to ignore me, but she looked at me like I was insulting her. There she sat-- all but two feet tall--dressed in a cute little floral sundress caked in snot. After repeatedly asking, "will you please put on your seatbelt?," she remained unresponsive. It was the most blatant illustration of unbridled self-hatred. I couldn't believe my own daughter regarded her safety with such extraordinary ambivalence. It was embarrassing and scary and I was at a complete loss for words. I started sweating. Eventually, I gave up and buckled her seatbelt for her. I said, "I love you Chloe, but it's really hard for me to see you like this. Please just tell me how I can help?"

She looked at me and scrunched up her nose. I thought she might say something, but instead she just sneezed. I took a quiet breath and prayed to God, "please fix my precious little girl."

My plan was to send Chloe on an expedition. I gave her a backpack filled with everything she needed: compass, map, first aid kit, machete, water-proof blanket, etc. I even gave her a pump action shotgun. I told her I'd be back in a week and that all she had to do was follow the river to Fairbanks. I handed her a Life Alert necklace and assured her, "everything I'm doing is for your own good."

I told her, "The shot-gun should take down any of the big wild animals you might encounter. If you stumble on a pack of wolves just hit that Life Alert button on your necklace and it'll take about fifteen minutes for me to come get you" She giggled and did her little baby thing. "Chloe, look at me. There's no food in your bag, ok? That means you need to hunt. Look for rabbits or squirrels, but remember to set traps, because that shotgun will destroy any hope of you salvaging the meat. You understand?" She grabbed my index finger and stuck it in her mouth. It was the first time I realized she had no teeth.

"I'll be honest Chloe, this isn't going to be easy. But I'm hoping it'll teach you a valuable lesson, Ok? Remind you how precious life is... give you a sense of purpose... you understand?" She nodded.

I picked up her chubby little body and carried her in my arms. I walked her out of my cabin and into the forest, along the river bank of the Alaskan Sustina. The wake was turbulent and the air was brisk, but I knew this was what Chloe needed. I was her father for God's sake. She needed meaning. A clear-cut, existential objective. It was going to be difficult, but it was also going to be enlightening.

As I placed her gently in the grass, I walked towards my cabin without looking back; any sign of remorse would just solidify the legitimacy of her sadness. It was impossible to hear over the whitenoise of the glacial winds, but a part of me knew I left her crying.

Thirty five minutes. It took thirty five minutes for her to press the Life Alert button. At first, I was disappointed she didn't have the resilience to finish the trip, but that disappointment lent itself to an overwhelming sense of gratitude: Chloe valued her life. She pressed the button. Maybe fighting for her life, showed her the value in it. Maybe there was still hope?

Hope quickly vanished as I began to understand what happened. Chloe hadn't moved. She didn't even attempt the expedition. She sat there for half an hour, fell asleep, and rolled onto the button. She was mocking me. It was maddening. I wanted so desperately to save my little girl, but I was powerless. She didn't want saving. There was no amount of parenting that could teach her to love herself or value herself or give her life meaning. I was completely helpless.

And yet, her misery was engulfing. It brought me down with her. I started taking pills.

The pills were originally for a herniated disk, but as my back pain subsided, my headaches inflamed and the pills became a nonnegotiable part of my day. My wife started to lose her patience. She'd yell, "you're being crazy, John! She's a baby! Just give her some time!" But I was starting to worry Chloe was running out of time. What if she hung herself from her crib? What if we give her too much time and she makes a rash decision?

I couldn't sleep. I'd have nightmares. One night, I found myself in a heated argument with a garden gnome. The gnome kept asking, "why are you in my garden!?" and I didn't know what to say. I never thought I was in his garden. I just thought I was in a patch of unclaimed grass.

"You're in my fucking garden, John!" the gnome kept yelling. I was beginning to lose it.

"Well what do you want me to do about it?" I asked.

The gnome calmed down.

"Oh. Well, nothing. I just needed you to know that this is *my* garden. That's not to say you can't live in it, but it's mine. I'm the only one who will ever understand it."

What an odd thing to make a big deal about.

I awoke that night sweating.

Chloe progressively got worse. She didn't eat unless I fed her. Her hygiene was practically nonexistent. She didn't write, she didn't read, she didn't exercise or watch TV. She was just there-- in the most basic sense of the word. She was alive, but she wasn't living.

Any traditional sense of pride or dignity seemed to vanish as Chloe completely lost the drive and motivation to take care of herself. At a certain point, it became unbearably disgusting. My wife kept putting diapers on her as if to condone this behavior, but every time I noticed, I'd take them off. She wasn't 95 years old, she didn't need a Goddamn diaper.

One day I made her a bubble bath in hopes the comfort and tranquility of the vanilla Epsom salt would ease her stress. The Alaskan expedition, while unsuccessful, was indisputably exhausting. I wanted to inspire and guide her, but I also wanted to show her my love. I made Chloe the bubble bath to try and make amends.

I undressed her and placed her naked body gently in the warm water.

As soon as I let go, she started to drown herself. She sank into the water like a bowling ball. Right before my very eyes, Chloe was committing suicide. She was actively trying to end her life in front of her own fucking father! It was horrifying and panic-inducing and I jumped into the water to save my little girl. I couldn't believe what I'd just witnessed--my precious, adorable little Chloe--was plagued with the most intense self-loathing I'd ever seen. She wasn't just empty inside, she was angry. A pure and limitless wrath.

My wife didn't see what I did. She didn't see Chloe for the ticking-time-bomb she was. She didn't notice how our gorgeous-little-creation was constantly eyeing the kitchen knives. Chloe was lost, and lost was bad, and bad was destructive.

"I need you to get help, John"

"What are you talking about!?"

"You're going insane! You've got this weird, perverted notion that Chloe wants to fucking kill herself! She's a fucking baby, John! She can't even tie her shoes. For fuck's sake, she doesn't even wear shoes!" My wife started pacing along the granite island in our mahogany kitchen.

"Lily... I... I just... I just can't watch her be like this." I started to cry.

"Be like what!?"

"I don't even know," I was sobbing. "I tried to make her honest. I tried to instill a sense of duty and responsibility into her life. I wanted her to value money, to be successful. But I broke her, Lily. I look into her eyes and I can see the wreckage. I can see the pain. Lily, she's dying inside. And it's all my fault.... it's all my fucking fault."

My wife, Lily, looked like she was about to have a fit.

"John, she's a fucking baby! How many times do I have to say that? She's practically a fucking plant! All you have to do is feed and protect her, John. That's all you have to do. The rest she'll figure out on her own."

"But what if she doesn't...?"

My wife couldn't take it anymore.

"John, I need you to get help. You need to talk to someone. I can't... I can't keep doing this."

I knelt at my wife's feet and bawled. I was in my own house, with my own family, in my own neighborhood and I'd never been overwhelmed with such a crippling and total confusion.

My wife had a friend named Karen and Karen was married to a young man named Chris. Chris had a sister who studied psychiatry and while she, herself, wasn't actually a psychiatrist, she knew who to recommend me to.

I walked into Dr. Katz's office and hesitantly lowered myself into the leathery cushions of her frayed ottoman. I've never liked shrinks. She seemed to sense this and casually remarked,

"I don't bite, feel free to sit anywhere." I was already seated by the time she finished her sentence, so I decided to stay put.

"Well John, why are you here today?"

"Because of my wife."

"Yes, I know that. She called. But why? Why did she want you to come here?"

"Because she thinks I'm crazy."

"And why does she think you're crazy?"

"Because I think my daughter, Chloe, wants to kill herself."

Dr. Katz paused. She didn't appear alarmed, so much as simply curious.

"And what makes you think that?"

"She's purposeless."

"Well how old is she?"

"Eight months."

"Is it not expected that an eight month-old baby would have no purpose? Isn't growing up purpose enough?"

"No, you don't understand. She doesn't feed herself. She doesn't workout. She doesn't have a job. She doesn't have friends. She cries almost every day. She doesn't listen to music. She hates the sound of television. Her life is meaningless. She doesn't have reason to wake up in the morning."

Dr. Katz smiled. It felt patronizing.

"But she does wake up in the morning, yes?"

"Yes."

"So isn't that your answer, right there?"

It wasn't my answer and I couldn't make sense of it. It was all I could think about on my ride home. I couldn't fathom the inescapability of my predicament. I couldn't move forward. I was stuck--mentally, emotionally, spiritually-- in a sinking sand pit of pain and guilt. I walked through my front door and I hugged my wife. I kissed her forehead and apologized, deeply and wholly. I went into Chloe's nursery and did the same.

I walked sheepishly into my bedroom's bathroom and I reached above the sink into the worn medicine cabinet. I pulled out my bottle of pills. Before I could second guess myself, I stuck the orange prescription bottle between my lips and ate the pills like candy. Each and every one of them.

It was late. My wife was in her home office planning what I could only imagine would be the most marvelous wedding for her clients. Our own wedding was spectacular and I remember vividly the beauty and grace that effortlessly wafted off of Lily that day-- and come to think of it-- every day thereafter. I remembered what my father said that day; he said I was being reborn, that I was no longer just Plain Old John, but John The Husband of Lily. I teased him and said nothing could turn Plain Old John into anything other than what he already was. As much as I loved Lily, I was too stubborn. He laughed. Maybe he laughed because he knew something I

didn't or maybe he laughed because he believed I really was that stubborn. It didn't quite matter though because the pills were eating my insides.

I was sprawled face-up on the floor, fiddling with a nail in the hardwood floor beneath me. I could hear my wife calling the ambulance and I could feel my mouth starting to foam. Everything was blurry, until suddenly it wasn't.

I was at the base of a great Sierra, pushing a gigantic boulder up the steep and endless mountainside. Then I was thousands of leagues under the Atlantic flattened by the limitless might of the water. I was flying in the heavens with wings made of wax until the sun melted them and I fell. I fell deep and fast, down and dark, time didn't stop-- but if it did, I wouldn't have known. Then without warning the pills took me to a garden.

I was in a grassy garden built mostly of shrubs and greenery. I could roam freely and willfully in a manner that felt especially unusual. I had the uncanny sense that I was lost, but not lost accompanied with anxiety or fear -- as it typically is-- but a pure lost; a lost full of absolutely nothing. It was opportunity. It was liberation. It was everything that wasn't human, but should be.

"Why are you in my garden?"

I turned around and saw the garden gnome.

"Why are you in my fucking garden, John?"

"What?"

"John! Why are you in my garden!? John! John! Why are you in my garden?"

"Because...."

"Because, what?"

"Because I am."

"That's right and what does that mean?"

I looked around at the empty patch of grass that wasn't mine. It was empty in matter, but full in possibility. "Well, I suppose it means whatever I want it to."

The gnome smiled, "So isn't that your answer, right there?"