

*IN THE BALANCE*

The road is a series of twists and turns past parched fields and pine and the occasional scrawl of building. Three more hours at most, and we'll arrive at our destination on the Italian Mediterranean.

“Are we ever going to get to this hotel? Does it have Internet? Why do we always have to go on these stupid trips with you? I need to talk to my friends, like now.”

“Yeah, Mom. Tyler’s right. Being in the back seat sucks.”

"Michael, keep your bloody feet to yourself."

"You know what, Mom? You suck."

Thirteen years ago, Peter and I cobbled together a home study aimed at appealing to Michael’s birth mom: Peter as Roy Rogers and me, Dale Evans—all spurs and sugar cubes. Shuck off that dreary business garb; we were blue jeans and sky diving and fly-fishing in Montana.

Rain fell horizontally that November day we pulled up in front of the social worker’s home, the only colour a streak of blur of turquoise blue at the window. I took the stairs two at a time. When I grabbed Michael close to me, he shoved his tiny elbow hard into my neck, a harbinger—though how could I know it at the time?—of things to come. Distracted on the drive home by his new Gund family: piles of soft furry lions and monkeys and buck-tooth beavers; gifts from happy friends, Michael grinned and I became a mother.

I had worked hard for years, my law practice broken only by annual trips to Hawaii where I read throw-away mysteries and calculated my billings for the year. My parenting skills were derived from a two-week crash course put on by well-meaning friends. The next several weeks and months passed in a blur of diapers and spit-ups and the clucking sounds of curious strangers.

I remember rushing Michael to the doctor after he did a back-flip from the change-table (the pediatrician brushed it off as "well within the norms of responsible parenting"), and I remember stuffing him with so much mashed carrot and squash he turned orange. The rest I mostly forgot.

Everything but the crying. For three hours every night, Michael woke up around midnight and screamed. Peter or I, and sometimes both of us, would strap him into his car seat and drive straight-eyed around Vancouver. If we were lucky, Kingsway, with its flashing strip of venous-blue neon lights, its drifters prying open beer bottles with chipped teeth and spitting caps into the gutter, distracted him from his tears. I remember that, once, we were well on our way to Hope, a hundred miles East of Vancouver, before we noticed, suddenly, that the howls had stopped.

When it occurred to me that the experts had no interest in settling their differences on chronic crying, I went with my gut, the sleep-deprived gut that said "let baby cry." Peter checked into a hotel and I spent the night in the kitchen, head under stove fan, ears stuffed with orange spongy earplugs, trying to block out Michael's terror. He was still screaming at dawn when I downed my last cup of acrid coffee and spit the grounds from my cup into the sink. He must have

stopped crying after that because, when Peter pushed me gently into bed at eight, the house was silent.

When Michael woke up in the early afternoon, his ropey-red face strained to push out raspy sounds like dry heaves. Two days passed before Michael's screams matched, once again, his rage.

Michael loves to travel, as do I. When he was eleven, he read a book written by a Brit who escaped to Spain's Alpujarra Mountain range in search of the simple life. That summer we traveled to Spain and Michael, a quick study when it came to the *Alhambra*, Granada's fourteenth century Moorish palace, insisted that the two of us seek out the author. When the steeply rising road finally gave way to a dust-caked, deeply rutted trail, we abandoned our car baking in 38-degree centigrade heat and walked knee-deep through scrag-grass and prickly thistles and branches. We ducked low under olive trees weighed down with grit and clomped through orchards choke-full of lemon trees. Though I cursed the greedy insects and the pebbles in my sandals; the brambles that scored my sun-burned limbs, I savoured the moment of peace between us.

We never did find the writer—only a long fence of barbed wire fending off interlopers. The guy was such a misanthrope that he had built a three-metre high scarecrow, complete with hollowed out eyes and a long rifle slung hip-height, poking out at us through the fence. After we mustered up the courage to approach it, Michael performed acrobatics on its head while I took pictures. Back in Canada, we sent the author a long newsy letter about our adventure, pictures courtesy of Michael's photo-shop program.

A year after Michael's arrival, his birth mom decided to give up her older son, three-year old Taylor, for adoption.

"I've been sober for two months. I think that long." Gloria's watery eyes barely left the table that night we met her at a coffee-shop on the outskirts of Vancouver. Her shaky fingers rubbed the top of the coffee mug as though it were a talisman. "I'm fucked up. I keep hooking up with losers. I want something better for my boys."

When we asked whether she had any contact with the boys' father, the social worker nodded for her to answer.

"Taylor? He's messed up on heroin. God knows what else. A real bastard that guy. Never paid me a fucking dime in child support. He's had three girls with three different women. Raped one of them OK. Named all his daughters Taylor. What kind of screwed up bastard does that? Good riddance."

Studying the pictures of Michael we'd brought her, Gloria cried at how beautiful he'd become.

She pushed old pictures of her own across the table: Tayler dressed in clown polka-dots sitting on Santa's lap; Tayler grinning astride a Harley-Davidson; baby Tayler sitting in a wash basin, propped up by a scar-faced man holding a hand-rolled cigarette in his teeth.

"You take them." Gloria's voice was dull and her face rubbed dry of tears as she eased her new pictures into the pocket of her thin jacket. "I gotta go." She jumped up, pushed out her cold hand for us to shake, and left.

The social worker told us that Tayler had been confined to a play-pen until he was two because his mother's boyfriends couldn't be bothered. "Shut the fuck up," they'd say and slam the door in his face. I told her Peter and I would be changing his name to Tyler.

I drove with Peter and Michael to Naramata, a small town in the interior of British Columbia, to pick up Tyler. Just as the lane emptied into the backyard of a beaten-down house, a sturdy-booted toddler flung himself down a make-shift teeter-totter and then, before hoisting himself up again, grinned merrily in our direction. Over and over that red-cheeked, red-haired boy flung himself down that teeter-totter.

We sat there and watched and, for the first time I could remember, Michael sat perfectly still.

Kids of all shapes and colours ran and chased in the muddy backyard, dodging broken tricycles and sagging inner tubes hung from frayed rope. I had eyes for one child only: the red-headed boy on that make-shift teeter-totter.

Clones of each other with their pumpkin hair: Michael's soft coiled, Tyler's cow-licked straight and thick; mischief in their eyes.

Tyler says he hates traveling and I'm starting to believe him. If he had to choose between a night ghost tour of Old London and watching *Much Music* on TV, no contest. He once said in Mexico City, "Come on, Mom. You know it's true. Seen one tin roof, seen 'em all".

"Tyler, shhh. Someone might be listening. Keep your rich-kid wisecracks to yourself."

Girls. Now, that's a different matter. I never would have guessed it, but Tyler—quick to pummel his brother black and blue or push him into hysteria—is becoming quite the ladies' man. Girls phone him for advice, and they say it's good. If he could just stop scaring Michael out of his wits, stop busting out of Michael's closet in the middle of the night, he just might have a career in empathy.

Tyler had only been with us a week when we noticed the first bite mark on Michael's back. "This is understandable", said the first of many psychiatrists. "He has abandonment issues. That explains the bites and the bruises." I destroyed most of the pictures we took of Michael during their first year together, and we gave ourselves over to so-called experts.

When Tyler was four, we took him to yet another play therapist, this one highly recommended by more well-meaning friends. After the session was over, I pushed away Katrina's Kleenex box and focused on her long worried brow.

She lowered her voice, funereal-like, and said, "Did you see how he went after that punching bag? Hostility, deep-seated. He hit that ball hard with his fists. That boy has huge anger and betrayal issues. He's in pain."

"He's just a kid, a strong athletic kid at that." Peter's voice was tight. Like when I drive too fast or a client fails to tell him the truth the whole truth nothing but the truth.

"What boy *doesn't* like smacking punching bags?"

Katrina's eyes narrowed. "I've been working with children for years and I can tell you that—when your son buried those action figures in the sand—he was acting out revenge fantasies."

She warned us of dire consequences should we not immediately commence a two-year program of therapy. We never went back.

In the years ahead, we kept both boys busy with sports, "a perfect outlet for boys like that", experts advised. "Get rid of that hyperactivity." As though we ever could.

There were those games where Tyler roared down the ice to score an impossible goal or kicked a soccer ball over his shoulder into the net while disbelieving coaches looked on. Or the day he ran so hard in a 400-metre race that he collapsed at my feet gasping "Never again, Mom. You can't make me." I grinned and loaded him up with 7-Eleven slurpies and X-Box games on the way home.

And there was the time, not so long ago, when Michael beat me ten squash games to zero. For one of those games, he lay on his back, sending the ball off to impossible places. I managed to get three or four points and, as we toweled off, Michael winked and said, "You're improving, Mom. You really are."

We are driving from the hill-top town of Orvieto to Punta Ala on Italy's west coast. As I steer our rented car past hills crammed with olive trees and the occasional spindly pine, Peter peers at the map and Michael swats at his brother's hairy leg and sweaty foot. Whenever Tyler's foot bumps against my elbow, I give his long toes a rub. It's not easy for him to wedge his six-foot frame into the back seat of a jam-packed Fiat.

"You might look at the road occasionally," Peter says.

"Keep reading the map," I say.

To placate Peter, I return my bare left foot to the floor, reconnect my right hand to the steering wheel and stare straight ahead as dried-up hills roll by. The minute he stops noticing, though, my hand finds its way back to those long large toes.

“I’m bored with experts. That Dr. Lancaster was weird,” Michael says, cackling from the back seat of the car. Weird? A bit rich, I think, coming from him.

“Remember when we met alone at home? He’d make me stop jumping on the bed and then tell me to imagine being on some Hawaiian Island. He’d close his eyes and get all dreamy looking. After a long time, he’d ask me how I felt. I’d make up stuff like once I told him I’d seen vampires hanging out in the sand sunbathing and sipping drinks in opaque glasses and he said ‘good, you’re acting calmer’, and left.

“And, yeah, Mom,” Michael says. His knee hits against my back like that pea under that multi-mattressed princess. It would be pointless to mention seat belts, so I don’t. “Who was that woman with the big smelly dog we drove across the bridge in the rain to see? She hooked us up to those electrodes and measured the speed of our brainwaves while we watched movies. She sucked. It took me days to wash off that jelly crap she smeared all over my head! She had eight kids hooked up at the same time. Cool. Even *you* said she was a waste of time. I heard you tell Dad that.”

“Yeah, right,” said Tyler. “What was that movie we watched? *Scary Movie*? That was cool. I wanted to go back. Mom, why couldn’t we? That graph was cool, too. Didn’t it say Michael was *way* more hyperactive than me?”

"Tyler, get your dam foot out of my face!"

"Boys, boys, hang in there. It won't be long," Peter mumbles, his eyes riveted on the "empty" sign flashing beside the fuel gauge. He suggested we gas-up long ago, but I assured him we could make it to the next town. I hate stopping for gas.

Dr. Turner, a psychiatrist purporting to specialize in ADHD and a myriad of related disorders, made short work of neuro/bio/feedback. "Bunk!" He patted his massive belly and gouged with his middle finger at some elusive object inside his left ear, while Peter and I hung on his every word.

"There's no evidence that having monitors taped to your head while you watch TV—or anything else for that matter--reduces hyperactivity," Dr. Turner said, breathing heavily as perspiration trickled in crooked lines down his cheeks. He stood up to stretch first one bulbous calve muscle, then the other. When he plopped down again on the sagging sofa beside his silver-haired chihuahua, *Missy*, dust rose and danced in the sunlight.

Michael crawled into Missy's cage and pulled the door shut behind him while Tyler hyper-focused on a fly trapped between the window and the yellowed Venetian blinds.

"*Pills*. That's what's needed. Eli Lilly is sponsoring a multi-national study into a new drug. It's a breakthrough drug. Just the thing. Substitute for Ritalin."

"What's in it for the drug company?" I'd researched pharmaceuticals—who as a mother hasn't?—and was wary.

“Nonsense. If you’re interested, I have two openings left. You visit me regularly and periodically have the boys’ teachers fill out questionnaires. The drug is supplied to you free of charge until it’s approved. After that, you pay.”

When we left that first meeting with Dr. Turner, I clutched my own prescription for Paxil and headed straight for the nearest pharmacy.

“If I weren’t so damned assertive,” I say (“That would be “pushy””, quips Michael from the back seat), “we never would have ended up with Dr. Turner. Remember all those earlier failed attempts? The toy soldiers and punching bags and all the *ignore-negative-behaviour* advice? Mind you, I’m not sure that this Eli Lilly drug works either. Four years now and nothing has changed. The craziness continues. But, whenever I raise the question with Dr. Turner, he glares and says 'don’t even think of taking them off it. The stories I could tell you....”

More hoots. We’re on a roll now. Like when we checked into a hotel that was so horrible it featured tiny squares of soap and towels so thin you squeezed them after drying one arm. We partied on Perrier well into the night, me fending off spiders while Peter sat in his underwear making phone calls.

The road turns north along the Mediterranean coast and Peter mutters something about his sore back and aching sciatica and how he can’t take it much longer.

Merry howls from the backseat, arched eyebrows from the front.

“Cheer up, Dad,” Michael laughs. “Besides, you hardly ever have to stay with me until I fall asleep anymore! Who knows? Maybe, by the time I graduate, I won’t even need a night-light.”

"Are we ever going to get there? I am never, I swear, traveling with you guys ever again. Mom, you said we were almost there and it's been four hours."

"Yeah, Mom," Michael said. "I'm starving and I'm thirsty."

After we picked up Tyler in Naramata, we drove to a park and pushed the boys on teeter-totters and swings, and played in a wet sandbox. Tyler parked his black Panda-bear against a tree so it wouldn’t miss any of the fun. That bear and a red plastic shovel were all that he brought with him from the foster home.

Michael's eyes never left Tyler, especially when Tyler climbed like a monkey to the top of the teeter-totter and threw himself down, head-first. He picked himself up and jumped Tigger-like in figure eights while Michael clapped his pudgy hands and squealed in delight.

It was in that park that Tyler called me Mom for the first time. For the entire first year he was with us, Mom was the only word he spoke.

“Who cares about *our* opinion? We’re just the parents,” says Peter, rolling his eyes in the rear view mirror. The boys high-five each other in a singular display of sibling solidarity. “The experts say the drug works. So what if all your teachers and coaches think otherwise?”

“Yeah, Dad, you wanna know something? The girls at my school say that drugs suck. Drugs make everyone goofy and change your personality, and why shouldn’t I get to be me? Even Tom Cruise says that drugs suck and it’s wrong to give them to kids. He’s against all drugs.”

“Well, you know what, Tyler? Tom Cruise is a dink.”

The boys slam back in their seats in mock horror. Never before has such language come from their father. I wink at Peter as they giggle helplessly in the back seat.

We drive along the coast, suspended in a rare moment of family harmony. Frames of cobalt blue and sunlight flash a strobe-light rhythm through the screen of roadside trees.

The boys slump over in a hot afternoon sleep, the kind that presses fold lines on cheeks and dampens hair, and Peter burrows deeper into the map, calculating and re-calculating the distance to our hotel at Punta Ala.

The older the boys get, the more strangers’ eyes pivot between them with their deep olive skin and towering height, and us: me short, Peter short and Jewish. They won’t live my life. Maybe it’s enough that Tyler puts songs on my I-Pod for me; that Michael writes quest stories that read true and strong.

A sign announces our turn west into the hotel and the strobe-light show gives way to the full-on reds and oranges of sunset. The boys wake up thirsty and hot and grumpy, the goodwill of the day behind them.

“We’re almost there,” I say. “Swimming pool and billiards and, yes I’m certain Tyler, Internet.”

"I'm not going swimming alone," Michael whines. "You know I'm afraid of what's at the bottom of the pool. Mom, can't you make Tyler come with me? You *never* make him swim with me."

"Michael, I have trouble making Tyler do anything he doesn't want to."

The words are out before I know it and, in the rear view mirror, I catch Tyler's look of triumph.

The minute we park the car, Tyler leaps out, computer bag slung over shoulder. If he could block out the sunset and the Mediterranean and the tree branches drooping with golden lemons, he would. As he slams the back door, he shouts over his shoulder, "Hey Mom, I wanna meet my birth-dad. Why *not* until I'm nineteen? The law sucks."

"Yeah," Michael says. "Our real mom too. She'll understand me way better than you do."

"You know what, Michael?" I say, my voice flat as always at such moments. "I'm sure she will." I turn my face away and busy myself with tearing labels off suitcases.

While I unpack, Peter keeps his distance by running errands and checking out the sports channel. He finally leaves to go for a walk and I sit in the bath, up to my neck in soap-suds. I begin my mantra. I've adapted it over the years but the guts of it remain the same. Teenagers and hormones. Before that, it was pre-teens and independence. I release them from responsibility for behaviours not always intended. They veer from loving to horrible and back again. Lows followed by highs. Take the long view. Live your own life.

By the time I retreat to the hotel lounge and find a plug-in for my computer, I am revived. The server delivers a glass of wine and a dish of assorted olives and I am keen to get started.

I look out over the pool and see the boys bobbing in and out of view, tossing a basketball in the midst of a clutch of adoring young women. As I reach for my camera, Michael sinks a perfect basket. Tyler looks up at the window, catches my eye, and gives me both thumbs up.