

Baby Joseph

Monday, October 7, 1974

I remember a time while we were living in Huntington. What was I, eleven, maybe twelve years old? My bedroom upstairs (used to be "the attic") with its small high sliding glass window and slanted ceilings. Painted pink, originally supposed to become the girls' room when my father was to have finished building my room. (I remember him putting the floor down, showing me how the wooden slats dovetailed. I remember him crawling into the wall behind the insulation he was putting up. I remember being so curious and at the same time so timid - afraid to ask too much - or to touch anything.)

Anyway, the baby cried late one night. I heard him from my room upstairs, perhaps thinking, "Why doesn't anyone downstairs go to him?" Then, "Ma can't hear, and they're all asleep." And I remembered what she told me about love: "It's not just playing; it's also changing diapers."

I got up. Three in the morning. Climbed down the long staircase (wooden banister two-thirds of the way down, then wrought iron), crossed the living room with the big "picture window", went up the hall (past the doors to the "cellar", the bathroom, my mother's room), and into Joseph's room (used to be my room, with Irene - long ago). He was crying in the wooden crib which must have been mine also, once.

When the baby cries, there are four things that might be wrong usually:

He might be wet. I checked. I don't think that was the case, but if it was, I automatically changed him. He still cried.

He might want a bottle. I seem to remember heating some milk (or formula) though the memory might be of any of countless times (testing it on my wrist). Anyway, he still cried.

He might want to be turned over on his stomach - maybe with a pacifier-(I remember Joseph on all fours rocking back and forth, shaking the creaking crib and crying. This may not have been the same night either, but it is something he did more than one time.

He might want to be "burped". I picked Joseph up. Up to this time I still might have been grumbling about "Three in the morning and I've got school tomorrow," but when I put that baby to my chest, bracing his neck with my right hand, his chin on my shoulder, it was O.K. No-one awake but me and my baby brother, soft and little and warm.

He belched loudly and threw up all over my pajama shirt.

That got to the bottom of what he was crying about, but, for a moment, I think I felt betrayed.

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