

Sitting in It

by Gary Fincke

“You left him sitting in it,” my wife said, angry because she’d returned from running errands to discover I hadn’t changed our six-month-old son’s reeking diaper. I didn’t argue. The baby was crying. The evidence of my selfishness entered through smell, touch, sight, and sound. No one could have ignored it but the self-absorbed.

I didn’t lie and say he must have just filled that diaper as she walked up the stairs, but I didn’t apologize either as I handed our first-born to my wife and told her I had to leave. I rushed out as if I’d somehow not had a few minutes to spare before keeping a set of afternoon appointments with commuter students at the branch campus of a large state university where I was an English instructor.

My wife would never say things this way, but I knew there was an adult corollary to her expression, one that fit me perfectly—I had shit the bed. Just like my infant son, I was sitting in it, an embarrassment to reflect upon, for sure.

Our son grew out of diapers. He became old enough to sit in his own secure car seat, belted and harnessed in a way that would prevent harm or at least mitigate it. My wife was pregnant again, but still working. I was the one with the flexible schedule, the one who dropped him off at the babysitter and picked him up. I’d grown into some semblance of reliability. I never missed arriving on time. But finding an acceptable baby sitter was elusive.

One took our son to the grocery store without strapping him into a car seat. Her apology was unaccepted. One watched two other toddlers at the same time, and our son came

home twice with bite marks on his arm. She didn't even offer an apology. The next one lived in a large house with a yard that bordered a creek that emptied into the Ohio River a couple of miles away. That proximity was worrisome, but our son was the only child the woman, recently separated from her husband, watched for extra income. Her house was large and clean, everything in its place in a way that suggested responsibility.

The arrangement worked well. For nearly two weeks, no matter my erratic schedule, she was waiting with our smiling son in her living room. Our son even seemed happy when I dropped him off, no longer crying like he had at the apartment where the bite marks occurred.

Friday afternoon of the second week I parked, as always, where the driveway ended at a patch of worn grass near the back door. I knocked. Then I knocked again. While I waited, I noticed how full and deep the late-spring creek was running less than fifty feet from where I was standing.

I turned the knob and the door, unlocked, swung open. My son stood there smiling. I picked him up and hugged him. I called "Hello?" twice before I began to search the house, finding the babysitter asleep in an upstairs bedroom, sprawled in a way that made me think she'd been drinking.

The woman didn't seem to recognize what the problem was. "He's two years old. He can't open the door."

"He's three in July. He's opened doors before."

The woman followed us downstairs to the kitchen where I put my son down at last. "Maybe at your house, but not here," she said. "He knows not to touch so there's no problem." I started to list disasters encouraged by a sleeping babysitter, all of them preceded by opening a door—falling down the cellar stairs, pulling cleaning products from under the sink, but mostly, drowning in the creek.

“That’s extreme,” she said. “He would never go near that creek.”

While I counted out what I owed her, my son turned the knob and opened the door for us to leave. For sure, I thought, she’d just seen that she’d shit the bed.

Before I’d finished explaining how I wasn’t bringing him back on Monday, my son ran straight to the car. “See?” the woman crowed, as if that proved something.

On Monday, I spent more than a few minutes at the newest babysitter explaining my concerns and settling my son down in yet another living room. I taught my classes, picked him up, and saw him cheery in a way that made me turn up the music on the radio as we sped along the four-lane highway with the thin, raised, median strip that took us to the bridge back across the Ohio River to the campus where I’d forgotten a set of student essays I needed to grade. I passed two cars, still accelerating as I closed up the distance on the trailer truck ahead of me, the radio playing the Rolling Stones’ “Brown Sugar.”

As I began to pass the truck, a moment too long in its blind spot or else the driver careless, that semi pulled left, and I punched the brakes hard, locking my fastback in a four-wheel drift up and over the median into the oncoming lanes of the late morning freeway. I didn’t shout or swear or do anything but grip the wheel and slap the brakes again until I stuck, the fastback rocking, but staying upright and facing the oncoming traffic on the opposite shoulder.

I stabbed the radio off and looked back at my son. He seemed dazed, but not terrified. I gave thanks for how young he was, took three deep breaths to settle myself, and thought about the odds for the perfect spacing of the heavy, high-speed traffic that allowed us to skid through two lanes untouched. There seemed to be nothing to do but wait for a clear stretch before I angled back across the oncoming lanes and humped

over the median to finish the trip, getting off at my exit where, I discovered, the truck I'd begun to pass was waiting at a stoplight with only two cars between us.

The truck door opened. The driver, a burly man who looked to be about fifty, maybe twice my age, walked back and leaned close to my open window. For a long moment, he stared over my shoulder at my son. Still looking into the back seat, he murmured, "I'll bet you're sitting in it."

"No," I lied, so calmly and so softly, that it sounded something like gratitude for his appreciation of our peril.

The light turned green, starting a horn chorus from in front and behind us, but the trucker held his ground. "I didn't see you there," he said. For another few moments, the driver's eyes stayed fixed on my son in his car seat. At last, his eyes met mine as he held out his hand to me. I reached through the window to receive it. For a few seconds, the horns still sounding, he held my hand in his grip, the two of us silent, breathing together.



Gary Fincke's latest collection of personal essays, *The Darkness Call*, won the Robert C. Jones Prize (Pleiades Press, 2018). A new collection, *The Mayan Syndrome*, will be published early in 2023 by Madhat Press. The lead essay, "After the Three-Moon Era," was selected to appear in *Best American Essays 2020*.