November 2015

On Hearing My Son Was Socrates and my Husband Frank Sinatra

My son dresses in blue sailor suits. His choice, not mine. The red cowboy boots are his choice, too. Along with the quizzical look on his face.

"Mommy, why can't we see air?"

Not another question. Not now. You know how it is. You're hoping for an ordinary day. The kind of day you read about in all those *Parenting Done Right* magazines.

"Mommy, why can't we see air?"

Your husband Paul looks across the breakfast table at Sean, then you. *Inquisitiveness is a sign of genius.* Paul's smiling when he says this and your lips quiver involuntarily. You don't mention the other three-year-old boy with autism, the one on the TV last night. It's all too much, even for you. You wonder if the little boy will turn out okay, and if his father thinks he's a genius, too.

"Answer him," Paul says, and his smile widens.

You begin to hate his smile. You begin to hate yourself for not saying what you're thinking about saying. You tried once, only once. You still remember how your vowels overran your consonants, and you turned into a Valley Girl from one of those Molly Ringwald movies when Paul smiled and you wondered why you ever married a prick like him in the first place. Oh yeah, you remind yourself, you were nineteen and pregnant,

that's why.

"Mommy, why can't we see air?"

Please stop. But you adore Sean, so you refocus, as if hearing the question is just what your bone-tired brain needs to re-energize. Besides, didn't Socrates say we learn more from questions than answers? Maybe -- just maybe -- Sean's autism serves a *useful* purpose. This you could live with.

You wave a Pop Tart and glance at Paul for help. Nothing. Men are just different, you tell yourself, and you're surprised how much you sound like your mother when you say it. You could give up – a lot of wives do -- but you long to feel Paul's tongue once again slide across your cheek like he has to have you right there and now. You see the way he watches your neighbor with the tiny waist and big boobs. You wonder if he's sliding his tongue across her cheek, and if he is, if he's fucking her with that grunting sound that lets you know a part of him is becoming a part of you. Shush, you tell yourself. Paul is Sean's father and your love revolves around them like the earth revolves around the sun. This is why you won't mention how in Macy's yesterday you imagined his smile right before Sean disappeared. Or that a whole hour had passed before a security guard found Sean dissecting a telescope and eating fudge. No, you won't tell Paul any of this. You know there's no point.

"Mommy, why can't we see air?"

I'm still thinking, honey. Paul leaves the table as you speak. A few minutes later you and Sean are heading back to the mall. Somehow, in between the telescope and the fudge,

he pocketed Superman and you need to pay for him. As you slow for a red light, it suddenly occurs to you that everything is made of atoms and molecules, so air is made of atoms and molecules. Stay calm, you remind yourself. You can explain that atoms and molecules are microscopic, then explain microscopic with so many examples you'll be home before Sean can ask another question you can't answer.

"MOMMY, why can't we see air?

You carry Sean inside Macy's to pay for Superman. He is screaming. The cashier stares at you and you hold Sean closer. On the way home he repeats the question and you attempt to answer, but each time he demands a shorter, more concise answer and kicks the seat.

You are relieved when you finally get home. Paul is smiling, of course. You hand Sean over and watch Paul deposit him on the sofa and pat his head. You are about to speak, but through the window you catch a glimpse of the neighbor woman looking your way, and you choke on your words. "What's wrong now?" Paul snaps. "You aren't happy if you don't have something to worry about." It's a lie. But you don't say anything. Paul is too loud to listen. Just this morning, you awoke to Frank Sinatra - not the real one – rather your semi-nude wannabe belting out "My Way," as if your bedroom was Carnegie Hall, and a packed house was hanging onto every note. His eyes were telling you not to interrupt, so you didn't. Instead, you gathered up Sean, and as you expected, as the day progressed, things only got worse. Still, you kept moving. Not forward. Just moving.

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OVERAGES & SHORTAGES

For years it was an uneasy truce, more a matter of convenience if anyone was being honest**.** But honesty had come and gone in the Mills family and no one had the slightest inkling how to get it back. At home, the parents spoke in the shortest of sentences to squelch any sign of substance. Yet, **in** public they were seen as outgoing, even “blabbermouths” as their daughter, Naomi, liked to say. Still, if anyone had looked closer, the routine shifting of conversation from the personal to impersonal would have been obvious.

It should come as no surprise, then, that no one outside the family knew about the cross-dressing and no one inside the family talked about it. Naomi was eight when she came home early from school and saw her father, all six-foot-four-inches of him, in the kitchen sporting a red taffeta dress with matching heels. It was the wig, however, that caught most of her attention: blond, with curls that hung just short of his shoulders and a red-striped headband holding the whole thing in place.

“Daddy,” she screamed, “that’s Mommy’s dress.”

Naomi expected him to say something…anything…to help her make sense of the situation. Instead, he patted her head and took another swig of beer as if everything was hunky dory. Part of her wanted to tell her mother, but most of her didn’t know how. Besides, it was only days later, when her mother was flitting

around the house with her hair in a beehive and a dusting wand in her hand that her father grabbed the wand and they kissed right there and then.

“From this day forward,” he said, “You shall be known as Queen Mary of Mills Manor,” which made her mother laugh and made Naomi wonder if her father was done with dresses, and if she hadn’t seen what she thought she had, after all.

With eyes squeezed shut, Naomi, a prodigious child, reminded herself that the right question would deliver the right answer. To test her theory, she began to study her parents through the long lens of overages and shortages where a teacher once said people hide all sorts of things. And while this may sound peculiar--and why wouldn’t it—some say it was a yearning to balance the overages and shortages in life that set Naomi apart.

“Intelligence isn’t everything.” Her mother repeated this daily, always in a tone of unspeakable regret.

“Then, what is?”

“God,” her mother would roar, shutting down the conversation with a single word.

To reinforce this point, every Sunday, at 7 a.m. prompt, her parents shoved Naomi out the door for early arrival at The Most Holy Temple of God to meet with other church regulars. Naomi marveled, with barely controlled displeasure, at the efficiency her parents displayed as they moved from elder to deacon, chatting about the fine (or crazy) weather and how good it was to see Brother Cobb up and around after losing another leg to cancer, and how Sister Raymond looked.