

JOHANNA BERKMAN

Admission

VOTED OFF THE ISLAND, that's how Ben described them. They were his cousins' cousins, a self-satisfied obstetrician who'd gone to Yale, her self-satisfied corporate lawyer husband, also from Yale, and their precocious, surely slated for Yale but somehow unable to get into a single Manhattan nursery school two-year-old daughter. We knew them from having attended a number of the same family gatherings over the years, weddings, bar mitzvahs, the occasional Friday night dinner, but now, well, now we wouldn't be seeing them quite as frequently. Now that they had been voted off Manhattan, they were decamping to Scarsdale.

Ben told me the story in the fall, the fall when Jonah was just two years old and I was, believe it or not, already applying him to preschool, and I think he told it to me as a kind of cautionary tale, since I am notoriously bad when it comes to deadlines and had begun dragging my feet, a fact which had already resulted in our missing the open house at Park and Village, our inability to even get an application for Bright Beginnings in Gramercy Park, and god knows how many other irreparable fuck-ups and indignities. Blithe procrastinator that I am, though, I naturally missed his point and took the story to mean something else.

For me it was proof that the world does, on rare occasions, work exactly as it should. I had always disliked the Yales and though I would often try to engage them and ask after their work, they would never reciprocate and ask after mine. I think they thought of me as a writer in quotes, a hausfrau too ashamed to admit the truth, and so their forced march from Manhattan provided me no small amount of schadenfreude. *Take your smugness to the Westchester mall. Carry it with you when you go to pick up your no-delivery shitty Chinese food.*

We would be having no such nursery school problems, thank you, and that in spite of my writerly inability to meet deadlines. Sure, like the Yales, we were Ivy League educated, a touch neurotic, Jewish, etc., etc., but we were not, I repeat not, the sort to do things like prep-and-quizz our kid on who is President and who is Secretary of State, where's the U.N. and what's a thirty-year Treasury, or better still, hire a toddler coach to temporarily strip our toddler of all toddler qualities so that our toddler would be utterly untoddlerlike when it came time for the nursery school playgroup evaluation. No, we were not that crazy and besides, our kid wasn't even talking. No, when we started the nursery school process, and when I say "process" I mean that quite literally, emphasis on its secondary definition as something that is continuous, ongoing, *the process of decay, the process of human development*, we were quite certain that, crazy tales of cutthroat competition aside, we would waltz right into any nursery school in the city. Call us naive, call us stupid, arrogant or what you will, but that is what we believed back then, what we *knew* we knew, and we had our reasons.

First off, unlike the Yales, we were kind, thoughtful people, the sort of people who like to build people up, not take them down, the sort who can find common ground with anyone, and if we can't, well, it's not for lack of trying, or at least not usually anyway. Added to that we were smart, and not just book-smart like the Yales who were still hung up on things like who graduated magna (me) and who graduated sum-

ma (them), but we were intelligent, humanists in the broadest sense, people who had passions and had turned those passions into careers. (I am assuming here, for Ben's sake, that investing can count as a passion). We knew a lot about a little, a little about a lot, and, in short, were the sort of people who read not just the *Times* and the *Journal* but also the *Economist*, *Harper's* and the *New York Review*, though it's true that, on occasion, whenever we were awfully busy, for example, we would throw out the whole lot of them without even so much as flipping through.

So there you have us. It's no coincidence, of course, that I have run through our entire laundry list of nursery school attributes without even once mentioning Jonah. *Jonah*, l'étudiant. The boy was two years old when we started the process and was, in our minds anyway, an unmitigated positive if he, unformed and malleable as he no doubt was, counted as anything at all. He was very, very tall, blond, and handsome, the sort of kid whose beauty people consistently remarked upon when he was a newborn but then kept on remarking about even as he grew. Sure he didn't talk, but he was kind and sweet and clearly of extraordinary intelligence. The boy loved Vivaldi ("Spring" in particular), "Acis and Galatea," and "The Goldberg Variations," which he liked to listen to while flipping through his *Complete Collection of Curious George*. He had the best visual memory of all of us, take him anywhere once and he could, if let out of his stroller, find his way right back, and, while he often grunted when he couldn't verbalize what he was thinking, we were convinced this was utterly normal and that as soon as he could talk he would be dazzling us with his thoughts.

All of which is to say that at this point we were still simply just parents, parents with fervent hopes and desperate, projecting dreams, clichéd as all parents inevitably are, in spite of whatever best intentions, in spite of whatever top-notch psychotherapy, and for us, back then, the projecting dreams coalesced around a single entity, one single brick-and-mortar institution. Park and Village. That was our place, I tell you,

that was our destiny. We had known it way back when, back before we'd had Jonah, back before we'd even known each other. We knew it when we each, with our respective lovers, had watched that Woody Allen movie about the rich and fascinating but slightly dysfunctional family that sends its kids there for school. The school's name is never quite spelled out in the movie (what New York-specific details in a pre-Soon Yi movie are?), but to people like me and Ben, people who know the city's topography as well, if not better, than we know anything else, that one panning-shot glimpse of West 13th between Sixth and Seventh said it all. Park and Village. Village and Park. The unassuming facade cobbled together out of equal parts townhouse and tenement. The thick but not-too-clumpy dull maroon Communist paint job. The plain wooden blocks of every shape and size stacked like sentries against the street-front windows. And then, the *pièce de résistance*: the intentionally left unlocked tool cabinet. Even from the street you could see the little box cutters and semi-circular saws dangling on pegs inside. Who wouldn't want a child responsible enough to roam safely in such an environment? Who doesn't dream of making their child useful to society by the age of four? By the time Jonah was through with that place, that Park, that Village, he would be building us all new tables and chairs, scolding us for being so useless, so bourgeois. And that, at bottom I suppose, was the thing we desired, a way out of all of the excess, the crazy, moneyed culture of which we were both a part and apart, a way out of what was undesirable about New York without ever having to leave.

Aside from the fact that we miss the open house, our introduction to Park and Village begins auspiciously enough. Our introduction begins with Linda, an attractive but slightly overweight Hispanic woman with a husky voice, a clear complexion, and cool, turquoise, plastic-frame glasses. We meet on a frantic Tuesday morning, frantic for me and not for her, frantic because I have just come from Bleeker Park where I've

spent nearly an hour listening to all the neighborhood mothers go on and on about the amazing open house that I missed. I rush over to the school not because I think that there might be another open house to sign up for, no, I am much too much of a realist to wish for that, but because I figure that, as with every time I've ever missed a deadline or procrastinated my way into a tight spot, there must be some way around it. Silence, that is the first thing that I notice. Not a single child's cry, not a single child's voice, not a single buzzing hum of a single child's work tool. Nothing but a cool, aquarium-like, bathy, dark silence and Linda, pristine, powerful, proud Linda sitting there at her desk, poised at the edge of our dreams. You can tell from the way that she speaks, the incredibly clear enunciation, the way her voice ironically drops at the end of her sentences, the over-the-top, intense-as-a-cat eye contact: this is no mere receptionist, no, this is a woman with power. Before I left investigative reporting to write fiction and have babies, it was people like Linda who could make or break my stories. Get one of those Lindas to talk and you could find out everything you wanted to know, get access to everyone that you needed. Rub a few Lindas the wrong way and well, you might have no story at all. I say this not because I want to drone on about my previous career and how good I was and how I gave it all up in a risky gambit to work on creating art and life, two of the most unforgiving mediums that there are, but because I want you to understand what I thought was incredibly clear: win over Linda and we, ideal candidates that we were, were a shoe-in.

I tell Linda I've missed the open house and she smiles, her smile as big as a Cheshire's, and then my cell phone rings, Fuck!, "Mom" popping up on my screen.

"Excuse me," I tell Linda. "It's— It's an emergency." I sound like I'm lying, even I think so; Linda rolls her eyes.

I step to the side. "What?" I whisper. I hear intense, child-like whimpering. Jonah! It sounds like Jonah, and for a moment I am convinced

that it *is* Jonah, that he, brilliant boy that he is, has somehow figured out how to reach me and is trying to communicate his displeasure with his new nanny, a Sherpa from Nepal whom I have hired so I can try to get back to my work.

But then the voice. “I can’t take it anymore,” my mother sobs. Not once in my life have I ever heard her like this. No, I have never heard her like this.

“I want to talk,” I whisper, “really, I do, but I’m at a school and—”

“I am not cruel,” she shouts back, still crying. “You’re cruel. Why are you whispering?”

“I can’t talk,” I say. “I’m sorry. I want to, really, but I’ll call you ba—” Click and she’s gone. I want to run out of here, come back another day, but I know I can’t; with these Lindas, things don’t work that way. I walk back over to her desk. “I’m sorry. I, ah—”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” I nod, “yeah, sure.” But she can hear it in my voice, I can hear it in my voice. I am starting to crack. “We missed the open house,” I repeat, “really, we wanted to come but—”

“But you’ve got bigger issues, haven’t you? I can see that,” she says. I can’t tell if this is sarcasm or honesty. It’s like my normally hyper-attuned emotional antennae have gotten knocked out in a storm and all stations are coming through unintelligibly scrambled, audio and video both.

“Family, huh?”

I nod. I guess Linda is just doing what I myself like to do, what I used to get paid to do, drawing people out, going with my gut, going with guesswork.

“That’ll do it,” she says matter-of-factly, world-weary. And then nothing. It’s my turn to speak, but I don’t know what to say. Do I reveal something more or do I return to talking about what I have come to talk about, why, in spite of our absence at last night’s open house, we

are so gung-ho about Park and Village? In the face of total uncertainty I pull a Ben, run a quick risk/reward analysis and go for Option A. “It’s my mother,” I say, and from the way Linda’s face lights up, complexion flushing, eyes a-twinkle, I know my gamble was a wise one. I flush too.

“Cancer,” I volunteer.

Linda closes her eyes, an appropriately remorseful reaction, then boom! they’re open. “Hospice?” she asks, her voice rising expectantly with the “sss” at the end of the word.

God, no, that’s what I want to say. My mother, she was just here the other day, in Bleecker Park, me chasing her chase Jonah chasing pigeons away. “Still in treatment,” I say. But I am losing her now, I can see it, Linda’s eyes dimming with the news, the implied hope that treatment conveys. “But terminal,” I add.

“My mother,” says Linda, “two years,” holding up two fingers in a staunch Richard Nixon-like V.

“Two years?” I raise my voice to sound surprised, impressed.

“Uh-huh. Two *years* on hospice. Can you believe that?” says Linda. “That woman was incredible. Oh that woman.”

“Wow,” I offer. “That’s amazing,” unsure of whether she means two years spent in hospice to be a good thing or a bad, perhaps grounds for medical malpractice?

“Mothers,” she says, throwing open her hands.

“Mothers,” I repeat, mimicking her gesture. She laughs, I do too, and then that’s it, the gates are open. I learn Linda has a daughter at the school; I learn Linda pays no tuition. I learn the founder of the school has a book; I learn Linda can sell me that book but is willing to loan it for free. I learn there are too many applicants for preschool; I learn they’ve decided to limit the number by lottery; I learn the lottery is totally random but that Linda can make sure I win. We shake hands at the end of our chat, we air-kiss each other good-bye. And then I’m done. I open the Lilliputian hand-hewn Park and Village door, look up at the

impossibly bright sliver of Lilliputian Park and Village sky and thank dear god for making me one of the blessed, the beneficiary of totally random, completely aberrant, and absolutely wonderful, great, good fortune.

A few months later and I'm back, this time with Jonah. Just as Linda promised, we've made the cut, won the right to strut our stuff in a toddler playgroup. In an attempt at further ingratiation, I've dressed us both as Commies for the occasion, albeit Commies by way of Madison Avenue, Jonah in Petit Bateau denim overalls and a flannel Ralph Lauren work shirt, me in overpriced jeans and a black made-in-China cashmere hoodie. Up till now we've had a fabulous morning, croissants and hot chocolate at our favorite café, the one where Jonah likes to high-five all the counter help and run his fingers through the tip jar, followed by some neat creative play at home. "Dis." I could have sworn I heard Jonah say that several times, whenever he reached for a little Lego window as we built a little Lego house, replete with little Lego people, on the floor of his room. Dis. Dis, Dis, Dis. If that's not enough to boost my confidence for the playgroup there's the fact that just before we left the apartment Jonah ran back to his room, pulled *If You Take a Mouse to School* down from his shelf and held it out for me to read. I indulged him of course, how could I not, how could anyone not indulge reading? And when I got to the page where the mouse is sitting in a classroom facing a giant blackboard and rows and rows of desks, Jonah looked me in the eye and shook his head, as if to say, Yes, Mommy, don't you worry, I'll do my best in school.

So there you have it. Between that incident and the aforementioned Dises I am so knee-deep in fantasy, so busy imagining a scenario where in Jonah erupts spontaneously, opera-style, into full sentence English in the midst of our play session, that by the time we make it inside the Lilliputian Park and Village lobby, a lobby now teeming with parents and

toddlers, I notice nothing, nothing but the all-consuming, resplendent splendor of the beautiful blond boy standing in front of me—a me-not-me—taking, I know, absorbing, I’m sure, anything and everything and nothing in.

So this is how it ends, that is what I’m thinking, it’s the end of the beginning, the beginning that started with just an idea, a wish, a hazy concept of family, nearly infinite specks of unknown, floating and floating, unkineticized for years, decades, and then splash! the breakthrough, a way out to realization, ethereal, unconnected genetic matter no more. A link, a match-up, a pairing, as random and not random as any pairing that has ever taken place in any synagogue or church or city hall, the instantaneous creation of frantic heart-thumping life-not-yet-life, cramming forty weeks’ preparation for the big coming out, the coming out that is the greatest, most liberating, most decadent debutante ball of them all. And then there you are, absolutely perfect in all your perfect imperfections. I am staring down now at the back of Jonah’s head, this head that once tucked so neatly inside me, so neatly that I couldn’t even really believe it was there until it wasn’t and all I can think is, No need to bother with the mails, thank you. We’ll take our acceptance right here, right now, just verbally, no problem.

“He’s adorable!” Linda shouts from her desk on the other side of the lobby. In all the confusion I hadn’t even noticed she was here. “Absolutely adorable!”

I pick Jonah up, walk over to thank her for the compliment, and as I do can’t help but take in the angry tableau assembled behind her, the stony-faced collage of parents sick with the realization that, yes, even the Park and Village receptionist was once up for grabs.

Inside the classroom the admissions director has taken up a post beside the water table, has got comrades-in-arms stationed in each of the play areas, dolls, blocks, even dress-up and kitchen, meanwhile

Jonah, up till now ebullient, arms-pumping Jonah, freezes just inside the doorway, takes one long semi-circular scan of the room and makes a beeline for the only unattended station there is. He makes a beeline for the books. He grabs hold of *The Runaway Bunny*, motions for me to sit down on the floor and as he scoots into my lap all I can think is, I could not have planned it any better myself. I wrote it down on his application, how much he loved to look at books, how much he loved to hear me read, and now, voilà, all the proof they needed, if they needed any at all.

It is not until we've finished, the bunny having given up and gone home, concluding that escape from mother is well nigh impossible, that I look up and see that every child, absolutely every child—that is, every child but mine—is standing at the water table, holding a naked baby in their arms and joyously, rapturously giving it a bath. All the teachers and the lower school director have converged there now, too, and are weaving in and out, asking questions, patting heads and taking notes, scribbling them down on skinny spiral flip-top pads, the same sort of pads I used to buy in bulk when I was working on a story. And just then, for an instant, I metamorphose back into who I used to be, a dogged, truth-obsessed reporter, only this domestic, scholastic story and not some tale of corporate greed and corruption, this is my assignment, and I am able to see, to really see, to evaluate the scene through non-mother, third-party eyes, and what do I see? I see a roomful of normal, happy children and then this, this outlier, this enigma, this oddity, this boy who is clearly lacking or different in some fundamental way. So what do I do? I brush-shoo this boy who is my boy, my love-doo, my life, my immortality, I brush him from my lap and give him a push, a not-too-gentle push, in the direction of the water, the place where I am one-hundred-percent, not-up-for-any-negotiation certain he belongs, and what does he do? He pushes me back. I push again, this time harder, and as I hold him there, out front, pinned to the fringe of the world, he

turns around and looks at me, his face squished up in a mix of fear and plaintiveness and anger. Don't make me! Please don't do it!

Eventually he goes, slowly, tentatively at first, but go he does and it is then, temporarily relieved from the burden of making him do what he needs to do, what *I* need him to do, that I notice the pairings, how every parent is paired off with their spouse, sitting side by side in teeny wooden chairs watching deliciously, ravenously as their little sperm-and-egg incarnations interact around that table. I am taking this in now, taking everything in and cursing myself for being so confident, so carefree that I let Ben—Ben who takes everything on faith and numbers, Ben who's so mired in earnings season, Ben who felt it didn't matter anyway, Ben who handicapped us at a 75 percent chance-of-acceptance rate—go to some completely-irrelevant-to-the-rest-of-our-lives corporate presentation in midtown and send me here to fend on my own.

Jonah, my poor, perfect Jonah, is zigzagging all over the room now, holding his baby the way a hunter holds a dead rabbit, upside down by one foot. To make matters worse he is also grunting like a madman, exhibiting a level of frustration that he never has before, or perhaps he has and the fault lies with me, that is, I have never seen it for what it was. And then a couple of boys get inspired, ditch the table as well, and begin knocking about the room like, well, like little boys. This is what little boys do, isn't it? It is, isn't it? I start glancing around at the other parents for support, surely someone knows the answer, but no one is meeting my gaze. Perhaps Jonah isn't frustrated, perhaps I'm just imagining it, but I am so desperate for simpatico now that I lean over to the mother sitting closest to me, a mother I have known since Jonah was born but never really liked, never really trusted, a mother whose son is now, like mine, bouncing around the room, and I laugh and say, "Jonah's quite the inspiration, huh?"

Her son is following Jonah toward the tool cabinet now, the tool cabinet that was intentionally left open even for this, this toddler

playgroup, this toddler test, the boys running with their hands held out in front of them, their little, grimy, can't-wait-to-touch-the-vises-and-saws-and-hammers hands, when the director of admissions looks up, sees the future and pounces, it was only just a pop quiz anyway, shutting the cabinet so loudly, so preemptively, so jarringly that nearly everyone in the room, not just adults but children, too, look up in one collective painful twitch. And then the mother of this similarly but not quite as awfully renegade boy, what does she do? "Roman's just saying 'Hi,'" she says, her voice loud and syrupy and sickening. "He's just being friendly. He just wants to talk."

It's time to put the toys away, the director is singing. It's time to put the toys away. It's snack time now, she is ringing a teeny, meant-to-be-soothing, but completely irritating bell, and as I go over to help a struggling Jonah into his seat I notice both that he is the only child who cannot complete this task alone, and, just as worrisome, that I am the only parent not huddled deep in conference with a comrade. Jean is bilingual, well I guess you could say tri- if you count English because then there's French and Russian too. Do you have music? Oh good, because Dora's been playing scales for, well, forever. I have no prepared remarks, no idea what I should say, what is good and great about Jonah disappearing right here, right now, from memory in less than one hour. And yet still I go over and stand beside the director, this keeper of the keys to the park, the village, my park, my village, the one that belongs to me. It's a decision that still comes naturally to me even now, the indelible mark of years spent shmoozing with CEOs, always going up to them whenever I could for even the shortest of chats. So here I am, standing right beside the director now, and what is it she's doing? The wolf in Eileen Fisher clothing is ignoring me to talk to who? To talk to Roman's mother.

"Oh, yes," his mother is saying. "We are very into the block thing. And did I introduce you to my husband? Did I tell you he runs his own firm?"

“Your own firm!” says the wolf. “Well congratulations. And what is it you make?”

I am straining to hear the answer, probably leaning in too close, but no matter. The director is laughing now.

“I always love when it’s something that’s auctionable,” she says. “That’s what I love to hear.”

And then I tap her. I do it reflexively, instinctively, before I even realize that I’m going to do it and can assert some self-control. She turns, looks straight into my eyes in a way that Jonah never has, maybe not even Ben, maybe not even anyone, straight on, not searching, not curious, not questioning, not interested, not even maybe a little. It’s an animal look, the kind of look a dog might give you if you looked up close in his face when he is hungry and you are not food and therefore completely, wholly beside the point.

“Uh-huh,” she says.

Uh-huh? I am speechless, trying to gather my thoughts, to think of what I can say to drag her up out of this hateful, disinterested pose, this pose that has never been posed to me before, people always caring what I think, wanting to make a good impression, I am calling from the *Times*, I am calling you from *Fortune*. I can hear Jonah’s grunting now, refracted across the room and straight into my perfectly attuned, prickly mother ears, and then I hear a comrade, some adult with some degree of power, “You’ve had enough, I think,” she’s saying. “That’s absolutely more than enough!” I look beyond the director, just a quick little glance, and I see Jonah, cheeks bulging like a fish, chocolate smeared all over. He sees me, a flicker of recognition, what I like to think of as a smile, and he picks up his cup, a wax paper cup, a soft, crushable cup, the sort of cup I have never given him before, the sort of cup I never would, and he picks it up, holding it as though he’s about to make a toast or do an experiment, yes, a science experiment! And then he just tosses it up like a ball. He’s got juice all over the table, he’s got juice all over the floor.

“I, I, I need to explain,” I tell the director. “I think you’ve gotten us all wrong. At home, at home Jonah does—Well he does—amazing, truly amazing things! He builds walls out of blocks and not just walls but representative staircases. I don’t even show him how, he just does it on his own. And he loves Bach and books and...” And then, and then I hear myself telling her the one thing I never thought I would. I pull a Yale. That is, I tell her I went to Harvard.

She smiles, the smile of someone who went to Tufts.

“How nice for you,” she says, and then she turns, turns and walks away.

Tears are welling in my eyes now. I am ashamed in a way I haven’t felt since I was a child. I hope you have a child who’s as nasty to you as you are to me. It’s what my mother used to say back when she was mad or disappointed, and she was well and I was little. But my son is not nasty, I want to say, this is nobody’s fault, not mine and not his either. What’s happening here, maybe it’s like cancer, a biological glitch, something random, undeserved.

I go get Jonah and it’s crazy because he suddenly seems so happy. He is smiling, his smile loose and broad, as loose and broad as I’ve ever seen it. He is staring into my eyes the way I’m always hoping that he will, the way I believe a child should, and I cannot help it, but now it’s me, now I’m the one who looks away.

We file back out into the lobby and see Linda, sweet, all-powerful Linda, sitting on the edge of her desk, swinging her legs back and forth like a little girl. “Jonah!” she calls and he runs right to her and they give each other five.

“So,” she says matter-of-factly, “will I be seeing you every morning for coffee or what?”

I briefly tell her what’s just happened.

“Oh,” she says ominously, sliding down off her desk. “Good luck. And I’ll need that book back.”

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We bundle up. Jonah is exhausted now, demanding, via his grunts, that I carry him home. He is heavy and my arms ache and there is a lightly dusting snow, little white Slurpee flakes drifting down one by one from a blank bleak sky the way they do in children's drawings. We are just a few storefronts from the corner when my back gives way and I put him down. He is clutching my neck, flailing his legs, the grunts getting louder and louder and then he gets it, he understands, I am not going to pick him up no matter what. And what does he do? This tired, lifeless boy lets me go and starts to run, heading straight for Seventh Avenue. "Red light!" I scream, a game I never successfully managed to teach. Nothing. "Stop, Jonah, stop!" Nothing still. Stop or say anything, that is what I'm thinking, give me some sign you're really there. Say taxi say cab say car say run just say.

He is just a few steps from the curb now, cars whizzing fast. I have just enough time to break into a miracle mother run and save him from the worst fate that there is, a fate that will surely befall me before it ever comes to him, but before I can do it he makes a perpetual motion U-turn, not stopping, heading right straight for me.