

WHAT WE TELL THEM

Jeremy Grace

WE. WE SAY things, fix things.

We're mythologizers. We make hamsters immortal. No deaths, no worries. No faces found pressed into recycled newspaper, breathing small, last hamster breaths, no none of that. They don't twitch, keel over, die on the exercise wheel; they go to visit cousins. Not gone, just moving on. On the road, like Whiskers who eloped with the Peterson's tabby. Like Goldie who wanted to see the ocean and knew the toilet was the quickest way there. Goldie, remember Goldie? we ask them.

Goldie told me to tell you he's keeping an eye out for Becca.

Their eyes perk up from LOST DOG flyers. We say Becca's got a good sniffer. Their faces lift from LOST DOG flyers. We say Becca knows her way back home. They're smiling, content, back in the minivan. We say Becca knows her way back home when we know—absolutely, positively—she doesn't.

We're hospitable. We acknowledge all friends, real and imaginary. When the study window breaks, we forgive Mr. Reggie. When the horse figurine goes missing, Princess Debbie is still welcome to dinner. When the question is chocolate or Neapolitan, we serve two scoops—one for them, one for their buddy.

We're problem solvers.

Your friend broke it, your allowance fixes it. Your highness doesn't know how delicate that horse is. Your guests want dessert—we want to see asparagus disappear.

We're magicians. We make food mystical. We've heard of men that drink so much milk, their bones are bulletproof. We saw Mr. Davis lift an elm tree after a bowl of spinach. We know carrots let you see in the dark. Yes, like night vision.

We're disturbed by poverty.

There are people starving in Russia. There are people starving in India. Hell, there are people starving everywhere. Any other child would be happy to eat that.

Any volcanoes need to turn back into mashed potatoes. Intestines need to become spaghetti. We applaud cauliflower—though we won't touch it ourselves.

We're translators. Dropped meals are "uh-ohs." Spilt juices are roughly "whoopsie-daisies." We say that's what napkins are for. There's plenty of paper towel. We spill ourselves. We spill secrets:

Let's just say Mr. Levinson's been known to test out one or two of Mrs. Levinson's undergarments. Let's just say the Wrights might be seeing a judge sometime soon. And, let's, while we're at it, let's just say Patty Ericson's a real ghastly lady.

There's input, hands raised high like school. Queries on brassieres, queries on court dates, now, what exactly does "ghastly" mean? We pause. We say we didn't think you were listening.

They look back, look at each other. They look mischievous.

We're damage controllers, deflectors, PR for the cul-de-sac.

Dinner conversations are private conversations. Mrs. Olsen wasn't breaking dishes. Mr. Olsen only spends so much time in Barry Thompson's garage because they're close friends—sometimes Daddy says funny stuff when he's had wine. Sometimes we just joke. Someone should be getting ready for bed soon, shouldn't he? Shouldn't she?

We're groomers.

Dirty ears grow potatoes. Brush your teeth before they fall out (before the dentist yells at us again). Get in bed before the bogeyman gets here.

We're monster hunters. There are clothes in the closet; there are hangers in the closet; there are no werewolves. We fought off all the witches. We searched the dresser for stowaway vampires.

We're consolers.

We were kidding about the bogeyman. He's not under the desk; he's not behind the lamp; he's like you; he wants to hear *Go Dog Go* and go to sleep. That's just a chair. That's just a shadow. That was only in a movie. That was only

a dream. That was only a nightmare. That was no ghost, there was no moaning. Daddy and I were only wrestling. That was only an accident; we can wash your sheets. That must've been the tooth fairy's doing; a dollar's not bad for a molar.

We're currency traders. Two bucks for incisors, three for bicuspid. We take them all. We take teeth from bedding that doubles as a fort. From pillows that make the outer wall.

We're creative. The sofa moonlights as a pirate ship. Below the cabinets is a cavern. Stuffed, bean-filled animals nest on the bookshelf. We stick our hands into Lego villages. We build the dreamhouse. We help Barbie move in. We see Barbie move out, kidnapped, held for ransom. We see Barbie at the bottom of the pool (Mob Hit Barbie). Barbie lit by sparklers (Third Degree Burn Barbie). Barbie in the mouth of the Hues' terrier (Virgin Sacrifice to Neighbor's Dog Barbie). We scold him. We say the garden isn't a jungle (scold him again). We say the cardboard under the dining table is a spaceship (as long as you invite your sister in).

We're impartial; judge and jury; the law. Indian burns are a capital offense. Wet Willies are subject to grounding. The ponytail doesn't get pulled; pinches never happen; nipples shall remain untwisted.

One curse, two curse—three strikes mister, want to keep it up? (Curse self, look skyward, pretend to have conversation with deceased parents: yeah, yeah, yeah, we said it.) This is for your own good. This is for your safety. And this, for this you'll thank us later (but we're not entirely sure when).

We outlaw whining. We stop complaining; we say get ready for school.

We're lunch packers. Sandwich crusts must be severed from their respective bread. Snacks must be tradable (of the pudding variety or better).

We're lunch packers, note leavers. Sweet messages, secret messages. All folded between apple and thermos.

Couplets: I left a Milky Way / Hope you have a good day!

Stanzas: The cow's on the farm / The monkey's in the zoo / Wherever they are / They know I love you!

Prose: I know things will get better. Hang in there, cowboy. Don't listen to them.

Poetry, parental consent, permission, we send field trip forms for the good (or bad) of museums and pumpkin patches everywhere.

They return, exhausted, fun-filled, day seized, grinning like their jack-o'-lantern. They return—one pilgrim, one Indian—clasping finger-traced, construction paper turkeys. They return, ornament-holding, valentine-waving, producing stick figure masterpieces. They return knowing every watercolor painting has a place on the fridge (even the shittier ones).

They return, asking to explain artistic visions: That right there, that's Daddy, Russell and I are in the middle, and that one over there, that's you Papa.

They return asking questions. She wants to know if we liked the picture. He wants to know why Jenny Martin doesn't like him. Sam who lives two houses down told him Jenny's just crazy.

Sam who lives two houses down asked what we do on Mother's Day.

And then Megan, you know, Megan from music class, she asked if we call our mom. Then Megan S.—not Megan from music class, that's Megan Y.—asked if I even have one. Well, I knowed some of those things but I wasn't so sure how to answer.

We're correctors.

We say we didn't like the picture; we *loved* it.

We say Jenny Martin throws dirt not because she dislikes you, but because she *like likes* you.

We say knew not *knowed*, sweetie.

We tell the truth.

You know you have a mom. You know she's in Phoenix.

We give conditions, provisions: If the friends ask, say Mom's beautiful. Say Mom's considerate.

That Mom made sure her daughter grew up with people that could support her.

And now, now that you're a big girl, maybe we can arrange a meeting with Mom.

We tell the truth, slanted. We leave Mom's age out. We don't mention teenage pregnancy. We don't.

We don't mention his mother.

We know better.

We know he still weeps some nights. We still know the sound.

We're assurers.

We still think the counselor's helpful, don't you, Russ? Mr. Harris isn't nosy; he just wants to get to know you. He doesn't think you're weird; he just wants to be sure you're making friends. Yes, Mr. Reggie is great, a real pal—but what do you say to soccer practice?

We're cheerleaders. When he scores a goal on his own team, we still clap. When he stops running after the ball because he sees a grasshopper, we remember that's a reasonable excuse. We give a thumbs-up either way. We say they wouldn't have given you a trophy if they thought you were a bad player.

Look how polished it is. What does it say? Soccer Participant?—that's pretty special.

We're debaters of popular belief. Advocates of the contrary.

Those parents were snickering at a joke, not when you tripped. Their boys wish they could kick like you. You don't suck. You never have. You're not a spaz. You're not a fag. If Bill told you that, he's an idiot. Riley doesn't know what he's saying. Not finishing this season is only letting them win. Violence won't take back what they said. Did punching Riley solve anything?

We're healers. Boo-boos get Band-Aids. Paper cuts get kisses. Black eyes get frozen peas.

I'm sorry, he tells us, vegetables unthawing on his cheek bone.

We forgive, as long it doesn't happen again.

It *better* not happen again.

We're threat makers. Soft threats, harsh threats, many threats.

We'll put you in the corner, the most boring one. (Too soft.)

We'll leave you in the car, with the windows up. (Too harsh.)

He'll say hello to the soap bar if he doesn't stop saying hell. We say an eye will be lost if she doesn't drop the stick.

If a certain boy and girl want a certain bunny to leave eggs in their rooms, there must be *some* space for him to leave them.

We're bribers. When garbage is taken out, we get take-out. (What a coincidence.) We'll pay a visit to the North Pole (the mall). We'll see Santa (some guy). We will—after the lawn's mowed.

There're cookies for whoever helps paint. One more bite and you can be done. One more problem, we'll go get dessert.

We're chauffeurs. The pet store for a rabbit. The pet store to replace the rabbit. We're the cab to school, limousine to Toys R Us.

We sit in Toys R Us, waiting for daughter to choose which boa to buy. (They're all so pretty; I can't!)

We sit outside Toys R Us, waiting for the mother of our daughter.

I'm sure she just got caught in traffic, sweetie.

Yeah, I guess so.

We watch the emptiness of the parking lot, the endless gravel.

You know what? Barbie told me she was kind of lonely. Let's get her a Kelly or a Ken doll?

Or a Stacey?

Sure, anybody, everybody.

We're consumers. We buy little green army men to protect the bedroom. We buy games to buy Park Place, accuse Miss Scarlet, rule the world. Etch-a-Sketches, so they can draw once, shake, throw away. Play-doh, because our carpet's too clean. Bikes with training wheels. Bikes sans training wheels. Sneakers for her basketball games. Tennis balls, tennis shorts, tennis racket—latter of which is instantly swung. (Oh yeah, I think this is my calling, he swipes at us.) We look at guitar strings, guitar picks, guitar itself. (Dad, I know, I promise, this *really* is my calling.)

We say, that's kind of pricy, isn't it? We say it in too high-pitched a manner. (Dad, come on, *don't*.) We say we don't know.

Maybe when you're older. Maybe for your birthday. We don't believe in video-games, you know better.

We're contradictors.

Five more minutes all right? Pause the game, save it, whatever, just start your homework.

This is a preliminary run; before we fully commit to keeping this, we want to know you're actually committed as well, got it?

Got it! strumming all strings at once. His amp must be at ten.

We immediately regret decisions.

We're worriers. We lose sleep. We stay up pondering certain theories, small fears. We're pushovers, frauds, fakes. We slink into the easy chair. When did he stop calling us Papa? When did "Dad" start. Mantras are repeated: At least we've held our ground on ear piercings. We've stayed strong on makeup. R-rated movies are still restricted (though he spends a lot of time at Cam's house). TV is still limited to one hour (which is why he probably spends so much time at Cam's house).

We're interrogators. Questioners of friends.

Is Cam really the best influence on you? Doesn't Bobby seem kind of...odd? You sure have been spending a lot of time with Jenny Martin, haven't you? What ever happened to Mr. Reggie? we ask. Dad and I miss him.

Call if you're going to a friend's house. Call if you're going to be late. Call if you're ever in trouble.

We're guilt trippers. We say you were supposed to be home an hour ago. We say, *really?* Really? Of all the nights. You had to do this didn't you? We say, we're having company, remember? Your sister's mom, remember? (We give good guilt.)

We get, *whatever*.

We get, least her mom can visit. (He gives it right back.)

Come on. She'll be here shortly.

Yeah, if she actually shows this time.

JEREMY GRACE

What was that?

Nothing, he says, thin smile.

We're parole officers. We say watch the attitude.

You're on thin ice. You're on no ice at all. We stop the yelling. We say you don't hate us, you're just trying to hurt us. You're just going through a phase. Your body's just changing.

We're doctors. There might be hair in some strange places. That alto might become more of a baritone. Girls (or boys) might seem different. Just different, you'll see. We tell her when two people love each other, a bird's been known to deliver a baby. We tell him when two people love each other, there's a good chance they do something about it.

We're confidants.

Don't be embarrassed, we're happy to talk about that. Don't be embarrassed, we can keep this between you and me.

We say sometimes that happens at night. That's perfectly normal for boys in the morning. Sometimes that happens and it's perfectly normal. We find magazines in weird locations, under the mattress, between books, behind dusty action figures. Magazines we know we didn't buy, *Playboy*, *Esquire*, *Forbes* (?). Magazines we find but don't bring up until he does—one large, masturbating elephant in the room.

We're understanding.

It's fine, but if you're going to do that please close your door. It's fine if Jenny Martin comes over, but please keep the door open. Yeah sure, he says.

Of course, he assures, proceeding to close door.

We're supportive. Enablers. We watch him and the sweetheart hold hands in the yard. We extend invitations, put another plate at the table.

Jenny seems really great.

She is, he says.

It was nice to finally talk to her after all this time.

Mmmhmm.

We're photographers. Winter formal, spring fling, Sadie Hawkins. She-and-he profile shot, garden for background, we capture it. Her thumb on the front of silk tie, twisting silk gingerly, suggestively, got it. Head buried in his chest—snap. Light peck on cheek—snap.

We're trajectory charters. Relationship predictors. We track common patterns. Pecks turn into smooches, smooches into kisses, kisses into things we rather not see.

What's Russell doing? his sister asks.

Nothing sweetie. We decide her room's a safer play spot.

We're like cold showers. Jenny and him out on the patio? So are we. Sweetheart and him in the living room, sweetheart positioned on top whispering sweet nothings? What are the chances, we just remembered a movie we'd like to watch.

What? he asks.

Just checking to see if you two wanted some soda?

Jenny gets up, fixes hair, saunters to door. He follows, immediately.

I know what you're doing, he says, not funny.

We watch him leave.

We watch him enter, or some cartoon of him. Lilt, bouncing—as if inanimate objects jumped up and started singing, he might chime in. We see day-dream heavy, branded with hickies. We see late, no explanation (Hey, we were having fun. We lost track of time.) We see him enter, money in hand, less money than before departure. (I just felt Jenny deserved something nice.)

We're cautioners.

Does Jenny thank you for all these nice restaurants you've been taking her to?

What? Of course.

What does she say?

I don't know, thanks and stuff, I guess.

Thanks and stuff?

Dad.

JEREMY GRACE

We're listeners.

It's like, he muses, swallowing electricity, you know?

Easy, cowboy.

I tell her everything, he says.

Nice to hear.

I told her everything, his voice slows, about Mom.

We stare.

The OD, everything.

Please just be careful, Russ.

We're listeners. (Even when he doesn't want to talk about it.) We hear him walk in alone—though he's always walked in alone—this time he exemplifies it, promotes it, he embodies *alone*. He walks in, man of few words, limited progress, man mumbling *bitch*, *slut*, and nothing further. He sneaks in, dead of night. He sneaks in, dead of night, and with him beer, low quality, putrid-smelling, purchased by Cam—bad influence, bad friend—'s older brother. He sneaks in, or rather tries to, upchucking profusely, left foot through sister's dreamhouse. Barbie, Kelly, Ken, Stacey wiped out when he sneaks in, middle of the night, taken from their beds.

Is he okay?

Yes honey, go back to sleep.

He's fine, we tell her—though it's too early to call.

We're concerned.

All right, let's get the clothes off. Let's play a game, champ; It's called up and over.

We have him spread like airport security. Shirt off, shoes off. The jeans are first in the wash. His sheets (we predict) are the next load. A pail is left next to the bed. Water on the nightstand. We don't speak. We hold our son's hair back. We pat his naked back. We don't speak. We lay him down gently. (He still moans.) We say we get it. We say we loved. He laughs, a possessed laugh.

When have you ever loved a wom—he pauses. He stops himself.

Dad, please, not right now.

We. We say things, fix things—when we can.

Okay, we tell him. We'll talk later.

We close the door. We start down the hall. We're empathetic tonight. Tomorrow, next week, next month, we'll be discipliners, punishers, anything he needs. We can be anything.

We're limitless, we've told them, we tell them. We're his, we're hers, we're theirs.

You're Bianca's father, correct? Mrs. Schafer asks after school.

Well, one of them.

Nice to meet you, she says, her eyes staying on roll book. (Unappreciative of joke.)

Actually we've met. You had my son some years back. Russell?

Oh yes. How is he?

Never better. (Fibs know no limits.) He's a sophomore now.

Glad to hear it, her focus falling onto papier-mâché, botched solar systems waiting clean-up, leaving this world.

So Bianca? Everything okay?

Right, your girl (coming out of trance)—I just thought you'd like to know she, um, well, she had her monthly visitor come today.

Really?

Her first visitor, I'm sure you know.

Of course, yeah, no. Wow, feels like we just went through that with Russ. Not menstruation, but, you know.

Yes, well, she starts. Time flies, right?

A silence falls. Her voice wanting to say more. The throat growing syllables. The mouth not letting them blossom.

Anyways... thanks for letting me know. I'm sure we'll see you soon?

Yeah, of course, it's just (just before door can be opened—they bloom) Bianca seemed, well, *seems*, awfully distraught about the whole matter and I was wondering if anyone's had the talk with her yet?

No, I mean, we haven't yet.

See that's what I figured, given, you know, house full of boys, your different

living situation, and I just wanted to make sure Bianca's getting the attention she needs.

All right.

Not to say you're not giving her attention, oh no, not that, not that, she starts squawking with laughter. It's only, well, I had three sisters, and I had my mom, of course, and I just can't imagine growing up in a household without any other women. It must be disorienting.

Uh-huh.

So—leaning forward—that's all. I just want to make sure you understand how big of a deal this is to a girl.

She leans back. Are we good?

We're students. We give the correct answer. We let the roll book slap close to our face. We leave the classroom when we're allowed to. We wait to be dismissed.

We help our daughter into the minivan. We make sure the door is shut, vacuum-sealed. Buckles buckled, belts fastened.

The engine hums. The van backs out. The blinker signals a left on Ortega. We don't make many other sounds. The radio off. The *Kidz Pop* CD not spinning. Only small noise coming from the back seat. Whimpers replacing the silence.

Meh, meh, she groans, brow scrunching. We know how it begins, we know where it's about to go.

I'm sorry, she bawls.

What? What?

I'm sick. That, that's what you and Mrs. S talked about, wasn't it? I'm bleeding, she roars. I can't stop. I can't.

Oh honey no, honey.

No wonder Mom won't see me.

Honey. Baby. Listen. We pull over.

Mrs. Schafer and I only talked about boring boring things. Nothing about you. Believe me.

I heard, she hyperventilates, I heard my name.

No, no. Maybe we said it, maybe it could've sounded like it was about you, but it was actually stupid grownup business. That's all.

But—

Bianca. You're not sick.

We're lion tamers.

We hold her by the jaw, our palms under her chin. If we could fit our whole head into her mouth we'd yell down the esophagus *bleeding's natural*, what she's doing's *natural*, and what your mom's doing, or not doing, that's her problem, sweetie. And when we get home we'll talk more okay honey, we'll talk, I promise we will.

She calms to a snuffle, surveying the perimeter, her muscles anxious, the child uncertainty in what's supposed to come right after a cry.

All right, she whimpers. (At least it's back to a whimper.) We turn around.

You're not sick, we repeat. We adjust the mirror.

Rough outing? Our other half greets us at the door.

Hands are thrown up.

Our baby girl, no longer a baby, runs and hugs her father who, in return, scoops her, swings her.

We swing her between the two of us. We carry her over the threshold, giggling. Right now we play. (Later we'll talk). We set plates, three on table, one by bedroom door for son refusing to come out, refusing to speak to us, a protest of grounding, a hunger strike—though food will vanish before we return from laundry room. Right now we wait. (Later we'll talk.)

We rerun his pillows through the wash. The same pillows that once built a fort, a castle, still soiled from vomit. The entire house, two weeks, three weeks after, stains left to be found. Here is the sofa, the once great pirate ship, covered in bile. There are the caverns, saliva-sprayed, spotted, reverted to cabinets. The stomach acid staining the wood and gnawing at it. The rooms once again, merely rooms. Us, unsure what it'll alter to next. Us, unworried. We're adapters. We're resilient. We take some fiberboard from the workbench, our hammer from the toolbox. We place Barbie back inside.

We rebuild the dreamhouse.