

In The Thirties

My grandchildren,
I feel very close to them,
really akin.
Closer by far than I do
to the inchworm, say,
or whichever worm it is
that has almost as many genes
as we humans do.
Not only do we share
the same number—exactly!—of genes:
we even have some similar
physical traits and mannerisms.
But Oh! I was raised in the thirties—
my first decade of existence—
and the planet was different.
By today's standards, I was suppressed,
repressed, constrained.
No chance that I could grow up
to have my own thoughts,
follow—even know—my own desires.
I was impoverished, I'd be deficient.
There may be some truth to all that,
but it wasn't all black and white.
I remember when I was four,
I hated tooth powder
(my mother bought it in huge supplies).
And I was always chided
for protesting that I wanted toothPASTE.
What did little kids know of taste?
I knew toothpaste was runny
and toothpowder dry—Gobi dry.

There was no TV in the thirties,
no manuals to help us solve
problems of this kind.
But there was LOGIC:
If toothpaste is wet and toothpowder dry
—add water! Which I did! And it worked
—for a while—until the water dried
and the mixture congealed. . .
I knew this couldn't be concealed
too long from my mother.

I heard her bellow—knew what that meant—
and ran to hide
under the dining room table,
where my father sat.
I shushed my finger to my mouth
scrambled beneath the table,
held my breath, heard steps approach,
dared hope that my secret roost was safe—
then saw the brown eyes
almost at floor level
seeking—seeing me in my canopied terror.

“What did you think you were doing?” she asked
as she heaved and pulled me out from under.
“Toothpowder's not good enough for you?
You had to ruin the whole box?
You think money grows on trees?”
A colloquy then with my father,
a growl: “David, get to your room—NOW!”
Which I did.
And two days later,
there was toothpaste with my toothbrush.

It's true my solution (colloid perhaps?)
was not too informed or effective
from the chemical point of view.
But it was uncopied, elective.
As was the mode of the thirties,
the experience bulged with lessons:
money didn't grow on trees,
some persons do prefer
toothpowder to toothpaste
—four-year-olds did exist.

I fear for my grandkids:
toothpastes to taste and squeeze;
parents all ears;
money seemingly grows on trees.
Afternoons scheduled so tight
for fear of a social lull,
computers so handy for fact and play,
TV or videos if the day turns dull.
Where are all the old values
that helped us thrive?
Well, I tell myself,
we've the same number of genes—
they too can survive.

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