

Watching Andrew

My grandson, Andrew, now ten, has reached that age when kisses are no longer distributed freely. He has grown beyond all that. When I protest and tell him I need a hug badly, he checks to see who is looking, making sure the coast is clear. He quickly throws his arms around me and acquiesces before collecting himself again as if this embarrassing display of affection never happened. He is all boy now, having moved on to Yankee games, basketball hoops, and filling his days with nobler pursuits than satisfying his grandma's wishes. There was a time long past when Andrew was all mine - before he slipped through my hands en route to his formative years. Today, a Saturday afternoon, I am sitting on a bench, my daughter and nine year old granddaughter, Caroline, beside me. We are watching Andrew kick a soccer ball and cheering him on. The clouds are high in the sky and the cacophonous roar of game-time frivolity fills the air. As I watch Andrew, I am transported back in time to when my grandson was a baby.

I am taking care of Andrew for the weekend. The house is quiet as he has just settled in for a nap. Looking around, the room is filled with signs of babyhood. Stuffed animals peek their heads out of toy box and the aroma of Johnson's Baby Powder scents the room. I am on intimate terms with Big Bird. Winnie the Pooh and his friends are my friends, too. Last night Andrew and I had dinner with Jamima Puddleduck. At bedtime, we said goodnight to eight stuffed animals, each of which holds a significant place in Andrew's heart. Because my grandson doesn't like bathing alone, I climbed into the tub with him, his three rubber ducks, a couple of plastic balls and a windup turtle that swims

Life with Andrew is never dull. From when I arrived yesterday, my world has moved in and out from real to make-believe. Life has taken on a magical quality. Such moments encourage one to shed the confines of conventionality and cross over to that sacred place where story book bunnies really talk and Sesame Street is still populated with the same gang from my daughter's childhood: Bert and Ernie, Grover, Cookie Monster and Oscar the Grouch are our pals.

While Andrew naps, exhausted from a morning of new discoveries, a stroller ride into town and lunch at our favorite haunt, he sleeps off an apple juice hangover while I stretch out on his parents' bed. Grandchildren are the jewels of life. Andrew is my link to a world I long ago abandoned when my daughter's baby carriage was disassembled and stored under a large quilt in the basement. When tricycles made way for two-wheelers, toy cars evolved into real automobiles and a eventually, a beginner's driver's license. At sixteen, Elizabeth was out on the road, tooling about town all piss and vinegar as though she owned the world despite the fact she still hadn't mastered the art of making her bed.

Now, years later, her car houses a baby seat. She drives to and from appointments, no longer “burning rubber” as she did as a teen, but keeping a watchful eye on the rear view window, on the precious cargo she carried in the back: her son...my grandchild.

She admits that life is different now. The rooms of her home are decorated in a new motif: Toddler Eclectic. The doorways are adorned with safety gates, the walls are accented with peanut butter taupe and scrambled egg yellow with just a hint of apple sauce crust on the door knobs. She thinks it gives the house that cozy, lived-in look.

As Andrew grows, we who spend time and know him best, have grown too in ways that only happen when we allow ourselves to slip back to that enchanted place known as childhood – that place where the unexpected occurs daily and we, the adults, must trespass carefully so as not to interrupt the rhythm of miracles in the making. Just this morning, on our way to town, Andrew picked up a rock, studied it and handed it to me. Upon inspection, I saw nooks and crannies revealing hidden stone landscapes. Throughout the morning, other commonplace objects took on new creations, born from the mind’s eye of a child and passed on to me for further scrutiny.

I think now of children whose imaginations are never stirred, who live with hunger, illness and daily struggles – children, worn-out emotionally before they even had the chance to explore the wonders of being a child. My heart aches for the cruelties and hardships of those little people. While Andrew sleeps, surrounded by Elmo and Barney, the inequity of human existence becomes disturbingly apparent and profound.

Soon my grandson, refreshed from his nap, alerts me to the fact he is up, and ready to resume his afternoon agenda. First, a diaper change is in order. Then, off we go in search of new delights: a puddle of water from last night’s rain becomes a mirror of Andrew’s reflection. An ant wending its way toward a crack in the sidewalk can hold his interest for at least five minutes. And oh that face he makes when he tastes a new flavor of ice cream, making his lips pucker as he savors each frosty bite. “Andrew,” I tell him, “ice cream always tastes better when eaten with you.” The afternoon looms ahead as we, two explorers on a mission, navigate the streets and gardens of his town, occasionally pausing to meet a neighborhood dog or cat out on a stroll. Surprises await us at every turn: mud pies become deliciously real, a lone bird on a telephone wire elicits squeals of delight. A fire truck racing down the road alerts him to stop and take notice. As evening approaches, we wend our way back home, to supper, bath and bedtime stories. Another day in the life of Andrew draws to a close and he is ready for sleep. His world has expanded. Mine is that much the richer for having Andrew in it.

But, wait...I hear a crash: a city of wooden blocks is suddenly demolished. Andrew and Piglet are sitting among the rubble having an important conversation. I've got to hurry. I don't want to miss a single word.

The soccer game is finished. A group of ten year old boys high-five each other and saunter off the field, Andrew among them. He is red-cheeked and perspired, feeling full of himself for having played well. "Nice game, Andrew," his sister tells him. "Yeah," he counters, half ignoring her. My daughter, his mom, hands him a snack. He grabs it eagerly and keeps walking.

Suddenly he stops, and turning to me, says: "don't kiss me, grandma, everyone is watching."