

From Tim O'Brien's book

Dad's Maybe Book

2019.

I

## A Letter to My Son

Dear Timmy,

A little more than a year ago, on June 20, 2003, you dropped into the world, my son, my first and only child—a surprise, a gift, an eater of electrical cords, a fertilizer factory, a pain in the ass, and a thrill in the heart.

Here's the truth, Timmy. Boy, oh, boy, do I love you. And, boy, do I wish I could spend the next fifty or sixty years with my lips to your cheek, my eyes warming in yours.

But as you wobble into your sixteenth month, it occurs to me that you may never really know your dad. The actuarial stuff looks grim. Even now, I'm what they call an "older father," and in ten years, should I have the good luck to turn sixty-eight, I'll almost certainly have trouble keeping up with you. Basketball will be a problem. And twenty years from now . . . well, it's sad, isn't it?

When you begin to know me, you will know an old man.

Sadder yet, that's the very best scenario. Life is fragile. Hearts

go still. So now, just in case, I want to tell you about your father, the man I think I am. And by that I mean not just the graying old coot you may vaguely remember, but the guy who shares your name and your blood and half your DNA, the Tim who himself was once a Timmy.

Above all, I am this: I am in love with you. Pinwheeling, be-dazzled, aching love. If you know nothing else, know that you were adored by your dad.

In many ways, a man is what he yearns for, and while it may never happen, I yearn to walk a golf course at your side. I yearn for a golden afternoon in late August when you will sink a tough twelve-footer to beat me by a stroke or two. I yearn to shake your hand and say, "Nine more holes?"

I yearn to tell you, man to man, about my time as a soldier in a faraway war. I want to tell you what I saw and what I did. I yearn to hear you say, "It's okay, Dad. All that's over."

So many other things, too. Right now, as I watch you sleep, I imagine scattering good books around the house—in the bathrooms, on the kitchen counter, on the floor beside your bed—and I imagine being there to see you pick one up and turn that first precious page. I long to see the rapture on your face. (Right now, you eat books.)

I yearn to learn from you. I want to be your teacher, yes, but I also want to be your student. I want to be taught, again and again, what I've already started to know: that a grown man can find pleasure in the sound of a happy squeal, in the miraculous sound of approaching feet.

I yearn to watch you perform simple acts of kindness and gen-

erosity. I yearn to witness your first act of moral courage. I yearn to hear you mutter, however awkwardly, "Yeah, yeah, I love you, too," and I yearn to believe you will mean it.

It's hard to accept as I watch you now, so lighthearted and purely good, so ignorant of gravestones, but, Timmy, you are in for a world of hurt and heartache and sin and doubt and frustration and despair. Which is to say you are in for being alive. You will do fine things, I know, but you will also do bad things, because you are wholly human, and I wish I could be there, always, to offer forgiveness.

More than that, I long for the day when you might also forgive me. I waited too long, Timmy. Until the late afternoon of June 20, 2003, I had defined myself, for better and for worse, by the novels and stories I had written. I had sought myself in sentences. I had loved myself only insofar as I loved a chapter or a scene or a scrap of dialogue. This is not to demean my life or my writing. I do hope you will someday read the books and stories; I hope you will find my ghost in those pages, my best self, the man I would wish to be for you. Call it pride, call it love, but I dare to hope that you will commit a line or two to memory, for in the dream-space between those vowels and consonants is the sound of your father's voice, the kid I once was, the man I now am, the old man I will soon become.

That said, I would trade every syllable of my life's work for an extra five or ten years with you, whatever the going rate might be. A father's chief duty is not to instruct or to discipline. A father's chief duty is to be present. And I yearn to be with you forever, always present, even knowing it cannot and will not happen.

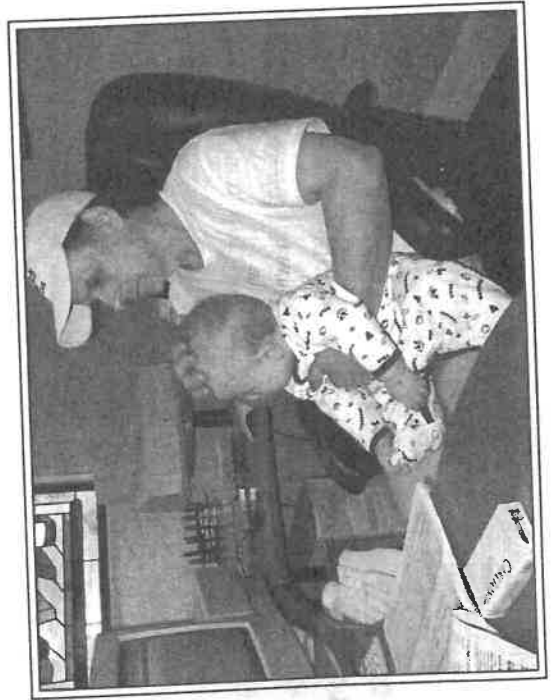
There have been advantages, of course, to becoming a father at

my age. I doubt that at twenty-eight or even at thirty-eight I would have fully appreciated, as I do now, the way you toddled over to me this morning and gave me a first unsolicited hug. (You knew I was waiting, didn't you?) I doubt I would have so easily tolerated the din at bedtime, or your stubborn recklessness, or your determination to electrocute yourself, or the mouthfuls of dirt you take from the potted plants in the foyer, or how, just a half hour ago, you hit the delete key as I approached the end of this letter.

You had awakened from your Shakespearian slumber. You were on my lap, squirming, and then you whacked the keyboard and let out a delighted squeal when I muttered a nasty word or two.

I've rewritten what I can remember. And now you are on my lap again, my spectacular Timmy. I'm using your fingers to type these words.

I love you,  
Dad



## A Maybe Book (I)

And then it becomes November 22, 2018.

My son Timmy has grown into a tall, basketball-loving fifteen-year-old. He has a brother, Tad, who is thirteen, and both have a father who, at age seventy-two, is at last approaching the end of this book of love letters to his children, along with a few anecdotes and some tentative words of advice.

I began writing back in 2003, stopped for a while, then resumed near the end of 2004. My intent was to leave behind little word-gifts for Timmy and his yet-to-be-born brother Tad, who had been conceived but was still waiting in the wings. The idea was to dash off a few short messages in a bottle that my kids might find tucked away in a dusty file cabinet long after my death. I was fifty-eight back then, not yet an old man, but the mathematics of mortality were already forbidding. It struck me that by the time the boys reached middle school, their father would almost certainly be mistaken for a grandfather, or maybe a grandfather's

Were you present at the creation? Does sunlight come equipped with earbuds through which it whispers to you, "I am truth, I am truth"? Do wars whisper, "I am righteous, I am righteous"? Or is it mankind who whispers those comforting words about sunlight and the wars we make?

There is no Easter Bunny, Timmy. Although your mother and I will do all we can to make you believe in generous rabbits, please don't forget that you once accepted as perfectly true something that was perfectly false.

As you grow older and wiser, I want you to remind yourself that this true-false thing cuts both ways. What is accepted as false may later be accepted as true. And what is accepted as true may later be denounced as false. Planet Earth is not flat. Planet Earth is not located at the center of the universe.

I want you to remember that your country once went to war to get rid of weapons of mass destruction that did not exist.

I want you to consider that the witches executed in Salem, Massachusetts, were probably not true witches, except in the heads of the people who executed them.

I want you to remember that the word "truth" can kill.

I want you to remember that what is true in one place may not be true in another. Right now, for example, it's Christmas Eve, 11:52 p.m., on Friday, December 24, 2004. That's true, I suppose. But it's not true in Tokyo, is it? Or in Baghdad? Or on Neptune?

Right now you are sound asleep in your crib, dreaming your true dreams, but at 5 a.m. tomorrow, when you awaken, what is true at this instant will no longer be true.

I want you to remember that truths can be contradictory. I

7

## Home School

Timmy, I want you to consider something: George Washington was once declared a terrorist in the halls of Parliament. America's beloved patriot had become King George's detested criminal. It is not just beauty that resides in the eye of the beholder.

Also, Timmy, whenever you glance at a five-dollar bill, I want you to remember that Abraham Lincoln engaged in the sexual act. He had four children, after all, and this required ejaculation, and during those exclamatory moments, Lincoln almost certainly was not contemplating the Gettysburg Address. The man on the five-dollar bill is not the whole man.

I want you to bear in mind that truth has no patience for what is tasteful and what is not.

And I want you to ask: Is one-kabillionth of the truth the truth? Is three-quarters of the truth the truth? In fact, is the whole truth, to which we are pledged in courtrooms, ever truly the whole truth, and if so, how do you know? Can you read minds?

could tell you, Timmy, that you live in a great and good country, and I would be telling the truth. But I could also tell you that ours is a country that once permitted the enslavement of human beings, and that too would be true.

Truth can be fluid, Timmy. People fall out of love. What is true on Thursday may not be true on Friday, or may not be true in exactly the same way.

I want you to remember that Newton was succeeded by Einstein.

I want you to remember that what we call the Vietnam War is called by others the American War.

I want you to remember that God did not receive creation instructions from the authors of Genesis or from the trustees of Oral Roberts University. Presumably the instructional flow went the other way.

I want you to remember that sometimes—in fact, many times—literal truth does not matter in the least, and should not matter. As you sit in a movie theater or lie in bed with a good novel, Timmy, I hope you will not mutter to yourself every few seconds: “That’s not true, that’s not true, that’s not true, that’s not true, that’s not true.” If anything of the sort occurs—if literal truth matters to you that much—please seek counseling.

Along the same lines, I want you to keep in mind that any work of history, though it may contain a great deal of truth, will never contain *the* truth. The daydreams of Alexander the Great will not appear in a work of history, and yet daydreams influence aspiration, and aspiration influences behavior, and human behavior influences history. Did Tojo wake up with a bad headache on a

December morning in 1941? Did Ho Chi Minh dream about riding naked aboard an elephant through the streets of Saigon? At the Little Bighorn, in his final seconds, did Custer appreciate the irony that he was about to receive exactly what he had come prepared to deliver? History doesn't know.

Also, Timmy, I want you to remember that Osama bin Laden is at this instant convinced of certain truths, truths he considers worth killing for, just as Dick Cheney is convinced of his own precious truths, truths he too believes are worth killing for. Truth does not come dressed in flags or priestly vestments or classy business suits.

I want you to remember that the word “truth,” especially when it's capitalized, can be used as a tyrant's bludgeon or as a saint's exhortation or as a con man's invitation to invest your life savings in a Ukrainian time-share.

Also, Timmy, I want you to know that your first utterance had nothing to do with Shakespeare. It had nothing to do with murdering people in suspenders and straw boaters. Your first words, in fact, were these: “This so' is *mine!*” (The word “so,” which is not quite a word, was your parents' shorthand for “soda pop.”) While few will believe it, your grammar was excellent and your youthful utterance arrived in the form of a flawlessly constructed sentence. Who cares if skeptics don't believe this? As Galileo discovered, people often prefer comfortable falsehoods to uncomfortable truths.

As I sit at your crib, Timmy, and as I jot down these things under the glow of a night-light, I'm caught up in some pretty serious Christmas Eve sentimentality. I'm here beside you, that seems true, but it's also true that I'm gliding through the silent,

snow-softened Christmas Eves of my Minnesota childhood, then to a sad and fearsome Christmas Eve in Quang Ngai Province, then to a Christmas Eve in 1994 when I'd come to the conclusion that for me there would be no more Christmas Eves ever again. How untrue that was. But how true it then seemed.

Humility is not a bad idea, Timmy.

There's nothing immoral about the word "maybe." This entire maybe book, like our lives, is full of maybes—all those undisclosed truths, all those forgotten truths, all those unknowable truths—and it's okay to say "maybe" even when you believe you have access to some self-evident, ironclad, miraculous, and eternal Truth.

It's also okay to say "I don't know," even when you're cocksure that you do know.

It's okay to say "It seems" instead of "It is."

And so, please, watch out for absolutism, Timmy. Chipmunks are absolutists.

An apple a day may not always, or ever, keep the doctor away.

An eye for an eye may end up becoming a million eyes for a million other eyes, and some of those eyes may belong to children like you.

Be suspicious of slogans and platitudes and generalizations of any sort, including what I just had to say about chipmunks and apples and eyes. Seek the exceptions. Memorize the fallacy of composition. Remember that even mathematicians demand proofs. Raise your eyebrows when you hear the phrase "courage of conviction." Remember that Adolf Hitler and the executioners at Salem had the courage of lunatic conviction.

You were born, Timmy, in a time of epidemic terror—airliners crashing into skyscrapers, anthrax arriving in the morning mail—and among the casualties of terror is our fragile tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty and all that is unknown. The word "perhaps" becomes "for sure." The word "probably" becomes "slam dunk." Truth, or what we call truth, becomes as wildly cartoonish as the big bad wolf. I realize, Timmy, that in the coming years you, too, like our country at the moment, will find yourself terrified—of love, of commitment, of madmen, of monsters in your closet, of me—and tonight I'm asking only that you remain human in your terror, that you preserve the gifts of decency and modesty, and that you do not permit arrogance to overwhelm the possibility that you may be wrong as often as you are right.

Listen, I'm afraid, too, Timmy.

I'm afraid to leave you alone in your crib on Christmas Eve. And I'm afraid of leaving you alone forever. There will come a Christmas Eve, maybe in five years, maybe in twenty-five, when I won't be here to look after you, and I guess that's why I'm writing these things down. Not just to offer advice, but to give you the voice of your father.

It's late.

I'm going to bed now, Timmy.

But before I switch off your night-light and close the door, I need to let you know that you will have a brother arriving sometime next June. Set a good example for him. Stop eating cockroaches. Learn to change your own diapers. Do all you can to look after your new brother, Timmy, even if it's true that at the moment you do not have a brother.