

Farewell, Crest!

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I went to the Portland airport yesterday morning without having heard the news of the terrorist plot against the airlines. So it took me by surprise to find, in that small airport, huge slow-shuffling security lines, and people discarding toothpaste, sunscreen, toddler's juiceboxes, etc. Dutifully I jettisoned my stuff and boarded a plane that left Portland an hour late, still giving me enough time to make my connection in Atlanta. But the Atlanta airport was also something of a zoo, and a zoo with thunderstorms as well, and my 5:20 flight from there to Panama City didn't take off till 10:30 PM. Finally, though, I am here, with my granddaughter...she and I are sharing bunk beds (I get the bottom!) in a condo on the beach...and my daughter-in-law...just for a couple of days, and then I fight my way through the travel situation to go back home, pick up my puppy, and go back to work.

My granddaughter was born here when her dad, a USAF pilot, was stationed here at Tyndall USAF base. I flew down then to meet her when she was two days old, in 1993. They returned to Germany when she was five months old and now her mom has brought her to see where she lived as a tiny baby. She doesn't remember the house, of course; but amazingly she does have some memories of the house we rented in Seaside, FL, when she was two and a half. Her dad had been killed the previous spring, and we came then to have some quiet time together, and for Margret to see some of their many friends who were still in the area.

My memory of that rented house is also a memory of a children's book and my first very profound awareness of the role that literature can have in the lives of children. Nadine was two and a half, just learning to talk, and learning in two languages simultaneously. Her mother is German and her father had been American, so they had always spoken to her in both languages; and after he died, her mom spoke English to her - her mom's family speaking German - so that she would continue to have both.

During that visit, her mother went out to dinner with old friends while I babysat. It was the first time she had left Nadine since her papa had died, and when it grew dark outside, the little girl began to cry and cry. I had taken a lot of picture books with me to that rented house, and that night she chose the one we read again and again....she, shuddering with sobs, whispering "read it" to me each time we came to the end, and so I would begin once again at the beginning. The book is called "Owl Babies" and it is by Martin Waddell. Such a simple story, of three baby

owls who wake in the night to find their mother gone. Two are filled with ration and logic, explaining to the terrified littlest one that she is out hunting for their food. But the frightened little one wails again and again, "I want my mommy"...the same thing my granddaughter was feeling that night. Each time the book moved toward its wonderful ending, with the mother owl swooping in and enfolding the babies in her huge wings, I could feel my frightened and grieving granddaughter relax in my lap with the knowledge that her own mama, too, would return.

It has been such a long time since then, and the same child who sobbed then is now a tall, beautiful, and self-assured almost-13-year-old. She says she has vague memories of that house, the house where we read "Owl babies" again and again. She doesn't remember her own fear, or the reassurance of that book; but she remembers the porch swing.

I remember a porch swing—it was on my grandparents' porch—from my own early childhood. I wonder if there is something about that repetitive motion, that soothing rhythm, that embeds such a memory.



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