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You Would Do Anything

Kevin Coates

You are driving on the interstate, and your daughter says, “Look, Mommy! A polar bear!”

You are not so far gone that you think it really can be a polar bear, but you can not in that split second think of much else that it could be.

“A polar bear?” you say, stalling.

“Polar bear, polar bear, what do you hear?” she says.

You remember vaguely that those are the lines of a book you read to her at night. You don’t know what the polar bear hears. What do polar bears hear? You imagine white noise, winds filled with tiny particles, the breath of fish.

“Go to sleep,” you say, more like a wish than a directive.

You are doing your best to navigate the tunnel vision of the road and the place where the yellow lines – or are they white? – merge and become impassable. You can only see so far.

You do your best. You would die for this child. You would take a bullet to the chest – or the heart – or anywhere, actually. You don’t want her to be in some anonymous assembly line day care, and you won’t let her ever visit the father that broke your ribs and abandoned her. You picture yourself as a mama bear, claws un-retracted.

You have had six gin and tonics at your sister’s house, and you are navigating the spaceship that carries this child home. Your sister told you it was time to go; her husband was on the way home, and you could not be there for that. He got upset if anyone parked in the driveway. She was on her fourth drink and trying fast to catch up. You kissed her and said you’d be back next week. You are doing your best.

You listen for the sounds of sleep: the slow, melodic breathing, the hair brushing softly against the fabric of the car seat, the absence of interrogation.

You concentrate on the road in front of you. Just a foot at a time, you tell yourself, but the foot goes faster than your responses can travel. You think you are lost, so you turn off the radio, first thing. It doesn’t help. Your light blue Ford Pinto – seemingly independent – pushes trustingly onto the off ramp, and you know you are blessed to get this far.

“Mommy?”

You were wrong about the sounds of sleep, as you are wrong about so many things.

“Yes, love?”

“What is the polar bear going to do?”

You know it wasn’t a polar bear, that it can’t be, but you are unsure whether you should answer what that polar bear will do or what the proverbial polar bear would do or what the polar bear really was.

“He’s going to go to sleep,” you say, selfishly.

“He’s not sleepy,” she says, kicking the seat in front of her, breaking the delicate clear glass semblance of peace.

“He is!” you say, and your voice sounds loud in your head. You want it to be true. You need sleep; she needs sleep. All good polar bears need sleep.

“He wants to go see things,” she says, and she starts to sing her own song. “If you knew polar bears – oh, oh, oh – if you knew polar bears, then what would you say? What would they say? What would Daddy say?” Finally she is silent.

“What would Daddy say?” you wonder out loud.

That makes her stay quiet a minute longer. But just a minute.

“Where is Daddy?” she asks you – again – and, as always, you change the subject in the clumsy way of a person who has missed the last step on a staircase.

“You want to get ice cream tomorrow?” You know as soon as you say it that it is a mistake. Tomorrow is too far away for a four year old.

“Ice cream now!” she says with more kicks.

“The ice cream stores are all closed,” you say, and you think you might be right. You are right for all intents and purposes; her father used to say “for all intensive purposes,” and you only made the mistake of laughing at that one time.

“Polar bear wants ice cream,” she says. “Vanilla ice cream. Like snow.”

Your driveway appears blessedly in front of you, and you pull into it slowly enough to catch yourself before you hit the garage door. Excruciatingly slowly, the zealous caution of a drunk.

“Polar bear can have whatever he wants tomorrow,” you promise.

It takes time to take her out of the car seat. She knows how to unbuckle it herself and is obviously capable of walking up the stairs, but she simply refuses to do that. She pretends to sleep; she loves to be carried into the house. You are too tired to reason with her but worry that you might be too tired to manage to carry her and your purse and the car keys and her stuffed ladybug and the bag of extra clothes and the snacks and the thermos you are too afraid to ever leave at home.

She starts talking the minute you drop her down on her bed.

“What time tomorrow?” she asks. “For the ice cream?”

“Whenever you want – if you go to sleep right now.” You are not sure that sleep is that enticing but you can hope.

She closes her eyes and keeps talking. “I never saw a real polar bear before.”

“Yes, you did – at the zoo. Remember?” You are trying to take off her shoes but the laces are tangled. All at once you become impatient – that is the essence of impatience, of course, that it comes on all at once, as a surprise, even to you – and you pull them off, still tied, far too violently.

“I did not! And you hurt me!” She turns her face to the wall. You are going to let her sleep in her clothes.

“I did not hurt you.” But you know you did.

“I hate you,” she says to the wall. You begin to rub her back through the pink Hello Kitty sweatshirt. You remember that she has to go to the bathroom before bed because you will not be awake enough to change the sheets in the middle of the night.

“I think there’s a polar bear in the bathroom,” you tell her, and you start to walk to the door. “Come on, let’s go look.”

She turns and looks at you with eyes that both challenge and accept you.

You do your best. You would die for this child. You would take a bullet to the chest or the heart. Buy her ice cream before breakfast. Lie about polar bears. Lie about ice cream.

You do your best. There is only a little gin left in the bottle in the freezer. It may not be enough, but you can check. You can hope.

“It wasn’t a real polar bear,” you say, going over to the bed and pulling at her arm to get her into the bathroom. “It was just a bag of sheets.” You don’t know if this is true, but it has to be as true as a polar bear on the interstate.

“It wasn’t! It wasn’t!” she is crying, pulling back to resist you. “I won’t go to the bathroom, I won’t!”

But she does, because she has to, and you wait in the hallway while she cries more softly than she talks.

You would do anything for this child. You would take a bullet to the ribs. You would pull her from a burning building and buy her ice cream and comb her hair gently when it’s tangled. You would do anything. But maybe not right at this instant.

You would do anything for this child. You head to the kitchen.