

Leaping

On taking chances

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My grandfather's toast to us at our wedding was, simply, that if we waited for the right time to have children, we never would. At thirty-two, I was conscious that my eggs would leap into a higher risk category in three years, so, despite the remaining two years of intensive training in your fellowship, we leaped into parenthood. By our first wedding anniversary, I was pregnant with Maya. Elina followed a little more than two years later. Through the long hours of your fellowship, a move to North Carolina where we knew no one, and my not knowing what I wanted to be when I grew up, we took my grandfather's advice and made babies.

And then, with Elina only two months old, you died in a car crash.

When I remembered how to breathe again, I questioned much of the life we had been living. First, I questioned our leap into parenthood. What if we had gone slower? What might we had learned? What change might have saved your life?

But our babies were not interested in slowing down. They crawled and walked and ran and leaped. They murmured and mumbled and spoke and questioned. They asked and pleaded and demanded and wanted so many things. Some things—like books and toys and trips to grandparents—I could give them. Some things—like you—I could not. And some things—like a dog—I wondered if I could.

We moved to New Haven, closer to my parents and yours. I got a great job, the girls finished preschool and started at our neighborhood school. We sat on our front stoop and waited for neighbors to walk by with their dogs so we could ask to pet them. We dog-sat when friends and siblings traveled. The girls continued to ask for a dog and I continued to believe we were not ready. Maya and Elina barely took care of their own bodies—how could they walk a dog?

Perhaps more importantly, could *I* really add a dog to all the balls I had in the air?

I wondered what you would have said, and I just didn't know. I remembered that the day before I proposed to you, we had talked about buying a house and filling it with children and dogs. I remembered that I had understood that conversation to be the pre-proposal conversation—I thought we were telling each other that we were ready for marriage. But you were surprised at my proposal the next day. You thought my saying “Do you want to get married?” was me bringing the topic up for conversation. And though, after a fifteen-second eternity, you said yes, and though we bought a house and started filling it with children, what if filling the house and adding a dog were just parts of what you and I had understood differently?

Then one day last winter, seven-year-old Elina came into the kitchen crying. “They put dogs down,” she told me, “I never want a dog.” As only an older sister could, ten-year-old Maya had told Elina these facts. I explained to both girls that only sick, old dogs get put down. And only after their family has done everything they can. Elina didn't believe me. I told our girls that having a dog die at the end of a long, loving life was OK. It would fill us with joy as well as sorrow. Elina burst into tears. She told me that if they would put down a dog we loved, she never wanted a dog.

Then it was my turn to burst into tears. Not right then in front of the girls but later, after they were asleep. What if I were creating a family where my daughters might not be willing to love because love ultimately ends? I may have had a good excuse for not leaping into love for a few years myself, but parenthood isn't about modeling love when *I* was ready.

Perhaps that is why when, one cold Sunday last March, I felt the confluence of the girls' “Do you think we'll ever get a dog?” and a neighbor texting photos of a puppy in need of a home, I leaped.

The next day we brought home four month old Wallie, a part black Lab-part terrier mutt.

In general, Wallie is mischief in a black fur coat. He drools.

He chews. He ruins shoes and books and toys. He has changed our morning routine and our ability to travel. He barks at neighbors and thinks that a brightly-colored mitten on a hand must be moving around in an attempt to get him to jump and chew. Wallie has made it clear that three humans cuddling together in bed around a book is a short-lived peace. He wants in. With apologies to Barbara Woodhouse, Wallie is a bad dog.

On the other hand, we love him fiercely. He runs and plays and snuggles with abandon. He brings us tennis balls to toss on the hard wood floor—each time, he chases the ball as hard as he can—running, sliding and just barely avoiding the cabinets. On days when he leaps the fence and I worry he will go into the street and be hit by a car, I wonder at the foolishness of bringing another fragile life into the girls' orbit.

Although I had been sure it would be you reading fantasy books to the girls, after your death I read all 4,100 pages of Harry Potter out loud. And I was rewarded. J.K. Rowling gave the three of us the ability to talk about bigotry, children trying to figure out where they belong, and parental death. Rowling taught us how concentrating on the most wonderful feeling in the world could conjure up a patronus, an animal that would be protective against Dementors and other scary aspects of life. The girls chose an animal to serve as a patronus for each of us—owl, koala, doe—and for your patronus, they chose a black lab.

Maya called it right away.

Wallie looked like your patronus.

The girls think my presence makes Wallie bark more. They think he is protecting me. And every time that unkempt, poorly behaved dog does something loving, I wonder if he is somehow being conjured up by you.

On our first vacation away from Wallie, my parents graciously offered to care for him. We unpacked his food and bed at my parents'

house, repacked our car, and buckled ourselves in. When I put the car in reverse and turned around to back out of my parents' driveway, I saw tears streaming down Elina's face. We were about to go to Mexico for a week, a trip Elina had been looking forward to since long before we knew Wallie, and she was crying over leaving our puppy. I stopped the car and found myself trying to explain the concept of bittersweet to the girls—we loved Wallie and that meant we would be sad being away from him—but weren't we lucky that we had him to love? I heard myself say that the feeling was painful but it was a small part of a really good feeling. In the backseat, Elina's tears turned to sobbing.

I still don't know if you would have brought Wallie into our lives.

But here's what I do know. Even on days when the extra work that Wallie requires frustrates me and makes me short with the girls, I try to remind myself to pause and simply to watch what Wallie does, day after day: he leaps. He leaps for sticks and balls. He leaps for squirrels he has no chance of catching, and yet he continues to leap. Then I know that every day, at least one of us is modeling hope.

