

**BEFORE YOU GO
FIVE NOTES TO MY DAUGHTER**

1.

Advice Upon Waking

All day your head will be filled with someone else's jangle. Don't give away this precious hour, too.

Move through it with the soft-focus eyes of an infant who awakens and scans the room in search of one loving face. Let it be yours.

Listen to the music of last night's dream still thrumming against your chest. Before the ether reclaims it, be still and let it leave a rune upon your ribs that you might read in the quiet of some empty night, the blood of your heartbeat brushing it like Braille.

If you speak, use the hushed tones of someone witnessing a birth. You are. All around you the world is rising, breaking into a run, falling to its knees, and you must find your place in it. Greet the newborn day and all its stunning hunger. Answer its weak, insistent cry with open arms, your mouth inhaling O, your very breath a willingness, saying yes, I will take you in.

2.

When Someone Errs

Try to be generous. If someone forgets your soup, or can't find your favorite shirt in the swish of spinning garments at their back, or overcharges for the sheets on sale, try not to purse your lips. Assume it's not malice or sloth or anything at all to do with you but mere humanness mucking things up. He might be weary or worried or mired in hopeless love. She may be numb with boredom, waiting for the clock to set her free.

Look at the way a face changes when you say, "I make mistakes every day." Something loosens around the eyes, something like relief softens the line of the mouth. There's a taste of salvation in that small act of forgiveness. The two of you will carry it all day long, like a shared canteen of water sipped on a dusty road. You won't be a story at dinnertime, souring the taste of the bread. Instead, your generosity keeps flowing, filling the cup of a stranger who can sit across a table and ask about the day without dread.

3. Supper

There will be days when your kitchen is stocked with all the civilized ingredients: bright lemons and a bouquet of parsley, prized thin spears of young asparagus, clarified butter, baby spinach, mushrooms still fragrant of earth. You may have stopped by the fish market on your way home and picked up a precious sack of scallops, luminous as floating pearls.

You will feel exotic and adept those days, sharpening your knife and donning an apron, assembling the props of your culinary theater. Cooking can be sheer performance then, worthy of applause, even if it is just yours, as you lean over to sample something glorious from the tip of a wooden spoon, inhale the simmering, do a little jig of sheer pleasure, right there in front of the stove.

Other days you will be tired. The milk will smell off, there's no meat, the greens are lying around like limp socks in the crisper drawer. Even the long-suffering apples have lost their patience with you, shriveled up from neglect. The thought of trekking to the market makes you weep. You are sick of feeding people. Why is everyone so hungry all the time?

Not every day lends itself to jigs and pearls. You might stand in the rectangular glare of the bare refrigerator, its chilly stare an accusation of everything left undone. Even if you are lucky enough to love someone who

will plop next to you on the couch and eat cereal for supper, sometimes you're just not cocky enough to pull it off.

But wait. There are some eggs in their carton, and a small bunch of grapes. And there, a decent chunk of cheese. There are even a few crusts of bread left; the heels aren't bad when they're toasted. What you've got is an omelet, with a side of fruit, to boot. You might even get out the good plates, just because the yellow will look so pretty against the blue. You might pour water into wine glasses. Days like these, supper can feel like a small miracle.

4.

Slapdash

Remember how we made things out of scraps. I learned from my mother, who could quilt a perfect square with meticulous stitches but knew how to dress a window with nothing but an old cut-up dance gown and straight pins. Twice I've sewn and stapled you into costumes on the fly. The year you were a cowgirl we raced to the store for a short width of faux cowhide flannel and you stood patiently in the kitchen, both of us giggling, victorious, as I cut holes around your skinny arms to make a vest, the garment taking shape around your chest as if by haphazard magic. This year you came home from the fabric store with swaths of green satin and glittering purple, saying make me into a mermaid. I doubted you, I don't know why, but you knew exactly what you were doing, you had a vision in your head. I wrapped a remnant around the taut curve of your woman hips, crossed your heart with sequins and gasped—at your beauty, at the magic, at the years swallowed up in sweetness like this.

5.

The Pleasure of Things

I believe the small ceramic plaque hanging by our bathroom sink that says *The best things in life aren't things* but then there are those four little clear glass dishes with lids, and how I found them.

I roamed an estate sale with my eye on a crisp floral couch in such immaculate condition it seemed out of place amidst the evidence of lives worn comfortable and soiled. I pawed through afghans crocheted in terrible colors. There was some old paste jewelry that caught my fancy, the kind of thing I always want to own but never have places to wear.

I came upon those dishes in the kitchen then, stacked with the mismatched china and topless Tupperware, sturdy and incised with the pale scratches of hard use. Just right for cereal or a dish of fruit. Any hungry person standing in front of an open refrigerator could plainly see whatever spot of leftover supper they held. And the matching lids, snug but not intransigent, how they settled in with a quiet but satisfying clink.

Fifty cents each. The floral couch faded away. I shelled out my two dollars and walked away jubilant.

I could name other glorious things, not all of them humble as a fifty-cent dish. I admit to a persistent awe when my garage door rises and shuts with the push of a noiseless button. I love the way my car starts when I turn the key.

Also I confess attachment to my phone. I tap out silent messages, a Morse code of motherhood that you read with a swipe of your slender finger. *I love you. Don't worry so much. I'm in housewares where are you.* Our cellular connection consoles me when you drive alone at night.

Of course it's not the things themselves I love, but the qualities they stand in for. A sense of transparent clarity. Of order and ease and mobility. The illusion of perfect safety, knowing full well no thing on earth can offer that.

Still, I empty and fill these vessels with no small measure of contentment. The collapsible door lifts in welcome, and I am glad to be shielded from cruel weather another day. At night I type my tiny missives, knowing that

somewhere my words glow faintly in the palm of your open hand. I wait
for the light's return, pulsing against the dark.