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Big Night

THE US CONTAINS MORE SPECIES OF SALAMANDER THAN ANY OTHER country, but in an entire lifetime you may never encounter one. Salamanders—secretive, fossorial, nocturnal—exit underground harbors only in darkness. Even those that gather in great masses to breed do so without a sound, moving monk-like through the yammering of wood frogs and spring peepers to ephemeral ponds.

In the country's eastern half, many folks would be surprised to find they share their neighborhoods with *Ambystoma maculatum*, the spotted salamander, a creature that looks like it belongs in the Amazon. Two uneven rows of big, bright yellow dots extend from head to tail on its dark, glossy body, a body I have always thought looks purple, though most field guides describe it as steel gray or black. Spotteds are stout and medium-sized; at four to seven inches long, they look like they'd make a good meal for something. But they're not easy to find. Scientists tracking them with radio telemetry, through tiny transmitters surgically implanted into the salamanders' midsections, discovered one spotted salamander living four feet underground. To find one of these brightly colored animals beneath a rock or within a log feels like hitting the jackpot.

My interest in salamanders renewed with surprising force the same spring my husband and I began the process of adopting a child. I had recently moved away from an area of high salamander density (from New Jersey, which has sixteen species, to Wisconsin, which has only seven) and ceased teaching environmental education; instead I was teaching English and spending my workdays indoors. Nevertheless, I aimed to be present for the annual nocturnal mass breeding of the spotted. There was a chance I would see them and a chance I wouldn't, these creatures that seemed scarce but were relatively numerous, that lived singly all year long but on a single evening gathered in multitudes. It was just this odd combination of uncertainty and possibility that I would need to embrace in my journey to becoming a parent.

What's more, the adoption process seemed at times (excuse the pun) rather cold-blooded. Mechanical. Deliberate. Too conscious. Take, for example, the initial paperwork, a long list of characteristics we had to decide whether we would accept in a child. We had checked "yes" for premature birth and low birth weight, and "maybe" for developmental delays and failure to thrive; "yes" for heart murmur, but "no" for heart defect; "yes" for cleft lip and club foot but "maybe" for epilepsy and microcephalus; "yes" for diabetes but "no" for hemophilia. Under both hearing and vision we'd checked "yes" for partial loss

and “no” for total loss. Somewhat contradictorily, we’d checked only “maybe” for tobacco, alcohol, and drug use during pregnancy but “yes” for *no* prenatal care. We’d checked “yes” for criminal history in background, “yes” for mental illness, and “yes” for all the ethnic groups listed. We’d folded the paper into thirds, slid it into an envelope, and mailed it to the adoption agency we had selected, to enter it in the May lottery.

This was in March. As we waited to hear if we’d won, I needed something else to anticipate that, like a child, had as yet eluded me. I needed something to actively look for, something I couldn’t be sure I would find.



Many have attributed the “child wish,” as it is called rather poetically in the scientific literature, to biology—a yearning innate and necessary for survival. “This gazing at my child,” essayist Lia Purpura has written, “is a kind of eating, it is that elementally nourishing.” It seems reasonable to assume a species would die out if it did not have an inborn drive to create offspring. But natural selection would hardly hinge a species’ survival to a desire for such a delayed effect. And for most of our evolution we didn’t even know what act created children. If the biological child wish were true, we would be in peril—ingrained with a strong yearning for a particular end yet lacking any knowledge of how to achieve it; *this* would have caused extinction. By now the truth should be obvious: what we have an innate biological drive for is the *creating*, not the offspring. It’s sex we want, not children.

It appears, though, as if the human desire for children is innate simply because it is so common; most people want to and do have children. According to the US Census Bureau’s American Community Survey, in 2008, the number of women who had given birth ranged from 6 percent of teenagers aged fifteen to nineteen to 82 percent of women aged forty to forty-four. So by the end of their childbearing years, most women have borne children—more than three-fourths, a solid majority. Of the 6 percent of married women, per the Centers for Disease Control, who have complete infertility, many seek alternative methods of fulfilling the child wish. More than 1 percent of infants born in 2012 were the result of assisted reproductive technology (ART), a number that does not include the likely high and rarely publicized number of failed ART attempts. In addition, 1 percent of all women ages eighteen to forty-four, about half of whom already have a child through birth, have adopted.

These last two groups clearly want children. They’ve gone well beyond the mechanisms nature has provided to acquire them: the first may have induced ovulation with drugs and undergone multiple cycles of in vitro fertilization, accepted eggs into their bodies they did not create and sperm from men they’ve never met; the second has perhaps made uncomfortable decisions about the sort of child they want—its age, ability, race, and, for a little more dough, gender—and spent so much time preparing and signing paperwork that the process may begin to feel more akin to divorce than adoption. Both cases require significant

amounts of money and entertainment of the child wish for much, much longer than the year it takes most people to have a child naturally. So, when we go to such extremes to have a child is it really the child wish we're fulfilling, or has the wish taken on some other nature? In other words, what, exactly, is it we desire when we desire children?



I've always been fascinated by salamanders. Early on, I saw them retreating now and then beneath a ring of pioneer-laid stones around a favorite spring in the woods where I grew up. Later, walking off some adolescent woe, I leaned into a steep hill, brushed away leaves, and found the soil beneath so moist and rich with salamanders I could hardly believe it. (Long before, there would have been unbelievably more: the non-native earthworm, brought to America in European ship ballast, gobbles up the forest's leaf litter, leaving less to support our native invertebrates and, thus, fewer invertebrates to feed our woodland salamanders, then, finally, fewer salamanders.) In my job as an environmental educator in New Jersey I taught elementary and middle school students. Salamanders, if you knew where and when to look, were often the easiest thing to conjure up for a hundred city kids who had just two and a half days to spend in the woods. Salamanders are more numerous than turtles. They are easier to catch than frogs. You kneel at a forest seep, fingers numb, lifting and replacing rocks wrapped in moss, one after another. Most reveal nothing. But then something happens in the mud beneath an upturned stone: what looks like just the current of the stream escaping becomes a salamander.

In general, salamanders don't bite, though, surprisingly, most do have tiny, flexible, cone-shaped teeth used for grasping prey. They don't pee on you like toads, or musk you like stinkpots or mink frogs. They don't scare the hell out of you at first like snakes do. As long as you don't grab them by the tail (which would be cruel—many detach their tails in self-defense and leave them behind wriggling wildly for the confused predator while they escape, then burn precious calories in tail regeneration) they are easy to handle. They seem relatively untroubled by capture, staring at you with dare-to-amuse-me eyes. If you want to commune with some animal, salamanders can be an exquisite choice.

Many species, despite overall general population declines, are still shockingly numerous. "If you took all the salamanders in the forest and put them in a sack," I would say to my herpetology students at the environmental education center, "and then put all the small mammals in that same forest in a second sack, the sack of salamanders would be larger." Another comparison: salamanders make up more than 2.6 times the biomass of birds during the peak breeding season. Once or twice a year, my students didn't need these thought experiments; on a warm day after rain, there would be mass migrations of red efts, the toxic-looking—and, to a blue jay, toxic-tasting—juvenile, terrestrial stage of the eastern spotted newt. You couldn't walk without fear of crushing one. Those days were a great unplanned lesson on fulfillment and desire. With kids transporting efts by hand

across roads and paths, adopting particularly cute ones as temporary pets, we never got where we were going. Where we were going became where we were. What we unearthed became what we had set out for.



Salamander courtship and breeding offer quite a few zoological surprises. Up to a third of red-backed salamanders are monogamous, a rarity for amphibians—though their monogamy, it turns out, is more social than reproductive. Many terrestrial salamanders guard their eggs, curling body or tail around their clutch in the kind of circumferential hug one might more reasonably expect of a canine or rodent. But perhaps nothing tops the reproductive behavior of the spotted, which, once a year, holds a bacchanalian nuptial dance that lasts into the wee hours of the morning.

No one is sure what drives the various species of ambystoma, the mole salamanders, out of the networks of small mammal burrows they occupy singly for up to fifty-one weeks of the year, to mate in spring. Because they all appear at the same time, migrating to safe, fishless waters, herpetologists have come to call this event “Big Night.” To ambystoma, the essential factors for Big Night must be quite precise. But to us, with our calendars and thermometers and sling psychrometers, it’s just another numbers game.

They emerge in the first warm rain after winter. But how warm and how rainy is anybody’s guess; different studies conclude different temperatures and sometimes just fog or sudden snowmelt is enough. The most accurate predictor may have been right under our noses—or our feet—all along: in a ten-year study of mole salamanders in St. Louis County, Missouri, mass migrations started when soil temperatures a foot deep reached at least 40.1 degrees Fahrenheit *and* the thermal profile reversed—meaning it was finally warmer at the surface than underneath.

On that aforementioned first warm, rainy night after winter, spotted return to the place of their birth, likely aided by the smell of the water and plants of each particular pool. In experiments, blindfolded—yes, blindfolded—salamanders have easily been able to find their pools; intercepted adults preferred home pond odors to those of foreign ponds.

Then, under the water, the dance begins. According to James W. Petranka, in *Salamanders of the United States and Canada* (2010), the male contacts the female with his snout, once, twice, again, and again; she prods him in return each time. He circles her ceaselessly, rocking his head back and forth over her back and beneath her chin. Then, shuffling aside, he deposits several packets of sperm on substrate in the water, or on top of other males’ deposits. Called spermatophores, these are six- to eight-millimeter tapering gelatinous stalks with little calderas at the top holding the seminal fluid. The female searches for them, a side step with the back feet, a walk with the front. She chassés across the pond bottom, squatting over spermatophore after spermatophore, taking in seminal fluid with her cloacal lips. The mating occurs in groups of three to fifty or more,

and with all that twisting and turning of spots I imagine it must look like a sort of subaquatic Jackson Pollock painting.

Although it is referred to as Big Night, the mating period can actually last from three days to over two months; but even when prolonged, breeding usually occurs in just a few major bouts. The point is not to miss it. Because I couldn't know when it was going to happen, by my logic, I needed to be at the water before it possibly could. So all through March I hiked to frozen pools. I wasn't wearing snowshoes anymore—but only because the trail was so packed I didn't need them; if I stepped off the path, winter was still knee-deep.



Five years ago, after four years of trying unsuccessfully to conceive, my husband and I gathered with several other couples at a local agency for an informational meeting on adoption. It was exactly the opposite of Big Night. There we were: the city's infertile, un-fecund, no matter our achievements, unable to create in the most basic, most ancient of ways, in a way some people did by accident. There was no need to meet and greet. We knew all about each other—the baby-name books resignedly shelved amidst rows of travel guides, all the insane things we'd considered, like post-coital headstands and egg-white lubricant. But in spite of the air of defeat, the faces of the women looked paradoxically triumphant; their determination to be mothers would not be trounced by this refusal of their unborn children to come into existence, to continuously pass out of them like tears, not solid, but liquid. After receiving a fat folder of handouts, my husband and I paraded to our seats, navigating the circuitous route afforded by round tables butted up against walls in a small room. We sat down and took off our coats. I heard something but didn't move. Then, a voice:

“Your wallet,” it said.

I turned and saw the source of the sound I had ignored. My wallet had fallen out of my pocket. It was now lying on the floor in the center of the room. The finger of the man who had seen it fall extended toward it, as if accusing us all of what it seemed we were about to do: buy something. Not a baby, of course. What was it we really wanted?

Although the child wish itself may not be innate, it may still have natural underpinnings. Our biological clock is perhaps not set at “baby” but at more abstract things: security, love, esteem, meaningfulness. Such needs can be met in many ways, including having children. And the child wish, of course, like all human behavior, is heavily influenced by learning and environment. Perhaps no other period in history than the 1950s and 1960s, with its focus on the perfect family—think *Father Knows Best* and *Leave It to Beaver*—has made it seem as if not having children is abnormal, that if you choose to remain childless, you don't know what you are missing.

The child wish can be so strong, sometimes good people who want to be parents do desperate things. A week earlier, I had read a blurb in the US news section of my local paper about a man and woman who traded an exotic bird

for two children. The guardian of the children wanted two thousand dollars, originally, for the boy and girl, four and five years old, respectively. But the couple, who had been trying unsuccessfully to get pregnant for years, did not have two grand, so they gave her \$175 in cash and their \$1500 pet cockatoo.

The “adoptive” parents, according to the case detective, “had good intentions from what we see.” But I had trouble believing this, that to buy a child, even to raise it as one’s own, was not tainted with the same unlawfulness as to sell one. An economic transaction seemed no way to start a family. Weren’t the buyers as much at fault as the sellers? After all, if there were no demand in the first place, there would be no supply. Isn’t that the law of economics?

Dutch philosopher Paul van Tongeren has written that a paradox arises when “the manner in which we want something is in conflict with the nature of the thing we want.” Although he seems to be writing primarily about the use of assisted reproductive technology, I can see how adoption also applies. According to van Tongeren, the child wish hinges on elements of surprise combined with unmatched love; we don’t choose our children and we love them unconditionally. What we desire when we desire children is actually a wild unbridling from choice and control—the most intense astonishment and rapture the universe can provide. Yvonne Denier, of Belgium’s Center for Biomedical Ethics and Law, agrees: when we wish for a child, she notes, we want something that by its very nature escapes us, something we are unable to control attaining. We cannot decide to have a child, she writes, in the same way we might decide on a holiday destination, by weighing pros and cons and choosing the characteristics we do and do not want.

Compared to the heat of passion in which one normally produces children, assisted reproductive technology and adoption can, at times, feel rather calculated. Beyond sex, fulfilling the child wish naturally is passive, a nine-month unraveling from womb to world governed only by imagination. It takes just two people. ART and adoption, in contrast, usually take much longer and involve crowds of stakeholders. Both feel deliberate, premeditated, a long road of things changing hands. ART can feel like playing God, disrupting natural selection, messing with the rhythm of the universe. We measure adoption’s progress not by sonograms and tiny knit caps, but in fits and starts of legalese and paperwork. At times, one worries that adopting means participating in a system that exploits the poor. One unhinges at the phrases *child laundering* and *human trafficking*.

My husband and I left that day without filling out any paperwork, unable to pinpoint exactly what it was we wanted or to reconcile that with how we were going to get it. We also never set foot in a fertility clinic. Five years passed. We met a couple who did not want to become parents, a friendship that did not require bracing ourselves for the inevitable phone call or dinner announcement that would change every second spent with them to a reminder of our inadequacies. We took up wine and mojitos and went to Paris. We got advanced degrees. Every month we buried the possibility of a child, until we had no more room for grief.

Once, teaching that herpetology session at the environmental education center, surrounded by fifth-graders, I held a northern red salamander we'd just found. As I relayed some fact or another the salamander began to writhe, opened its mouth, and out popped another, smaller salamander.

"It just had a baby!" one of the children shouted.

"No," I said after a moment, gently correcting him, "I think that was dinner."

Many salamanders, including the northern red, engage in cannibalism. The tiger salamander—the country's most widespread species—actually produces larva that can develop to be either cannibalistic or not. When populations are dense, the cannibalistic morph appears. Through smell, it can tell whom it's related to and how closely they're related, preferring to prey on non-kin.

The fifth-graders and I knew that amphibians don't have live births, and births don't originate from the same place as words. But what had happened seemed perfectly natural, expected even: something smaller had come from something larger. So I have to admit, looking down on what had occurred, feeling topsy-turvy from the moment, birth was also my first thought.

The tendency to see death as birth, or link the two in some way, is not all that unreasonable a leap. For an organism programmed for survival, recognition of mortality results in all kinds of tricks of the mind to reduce our anxiety, including, according to one study, increasing our desire for children. It makes sense: children offer both literal and symbolic immortality. They can carry on one's genes, one's beliefs, one's business, one's memory. Part of our wish for having a child is really about reducing our fear of no longer existing.

Is this why, at age thirty-eight, sitting in an airport waiting for our plane after visiting my family at Christmas, watching worn-out parents trying to corral their spirited children, I turned to my husband, who had over the past five years often brought up adoption, and said, "Let's do it"?

Fear of death is hardly the only motivator for having children, and certainly not a totally conscious one. There are a multiplicity of factors, measured by many tools: the "Reasons for Parenthood Scale," the "Parenthood Motivation Index," and, my favorite mostly because of its title which sounds like something a six-year-old might create to interview Santa Claus, "The Child Wish Questionnaire." I muddle through the research: a whole host of causes for desiring children exists, ranging from happy early childhood memories to the influence of organized religion and traditional female sex-roles to the belief that having a child around is "nice," makes one happy, and provides a unique relationship. Nothing is that surprising. What actually surprises is the reality of parenthood, which, most research suggests, decreases happiness. Much has been written about it. Roy F. Baumeister, in *Meanings of Life* (1992), called this the "parenthood paradox." Perhaps the most cited indicator of the lowered sense of well-being felt by parents is the fact that on one survey, women rated taking care of their children only slightly more positive than commuting and doing housework. This makes

the great lengths folks using ART or adopting go to even more curious.



By April, the snow began to melt. I knew the time was approaching for Big Night. At work, vernal pools strung through my mind like the trail of shiny white pebbles laid by Hansel and Gretel. One night, I took the dog to the woods. In the past, she had stumbled upon a spotted salamander or two when we weren't even looking. But that night, when the beam from my headlamp, aimed at curious holes in the mud—probably openings where squirrels had buried and dug up nuts, or rained-out tracks from deer hooves—crossed before her in the dark, in the rain, she just looked confused.

If even the dog was flummoxed, I thought, *what would a baby do?* We had received a return letter from the adoption agency confirming our entry in the May lottery, but with no information regarding when or where it would happen, or how they would deliver the results. I worried a little bit. *Could a baby do this?* I wondered.

Could you bring a baby to the woods in the rain on a cold night? Sit it on your hat or gloves laid side by side—like you sometimes do yourself—on top of the wet grass, while you moseyed around looking for amphibians? A fear overtook me. How would I change as a parent? Would I leave my baby at home with my husband while I went on amphibian hunts? Would I stop hunting altogether? I didn't find any salamanders that night, but when I got home and took off my clothes to shower, I did find the first tick of the season. Ticks don't faze me. But how would I feel if I found this tick crawling over the pudgy little kneecap of my amphibian-hunt-spectating baby?

A certain level of ambivalence toward parenthood is common. A 1997 study in the *Journal of Marriage and the Family* found ambivalence toward childbearing in 20 percent of young couples. A 2010 *Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology* article concludes some ambivalence toward childbearing is “widespread.” And the 2012 National Center for Health Statistics reports that 37 percent of US births are unintended, meaning mistimed or unwanted—more than a third. Particularly for women, to whom most child-bearing and -rearing responsibilities still fall, and who more accurately anticipate all these responsibilities, whether or not to have a child is a complex issue.

And statistics show the social pressure to have children may be changing. One study followed 12,700 UK women born between 1950 and 1960 to their mid-forties. Seventeen percent are childless. That number was 10 percent for those born in 1946 and rose to 19 percent for those born in 1960. Delaying parenthood has birthrates down in multiple countries: Greece, Switzerland, Britain, Japan, Canada. While delaying parenthood doesn't necessarily mean couples will remain childless, it does alter the idea that childlessness is selfish, shameful, or to be pitied.

A married friend of mine who decidedly does not want children—never has, never will—once asked her mother, who also had two boys and another girl (all

healthy, all successful), what she thought about having children. The reply: “If I could do it again, I wouldn’t.” My friend was pleased with the answer, which vindicated her own feelings. And yet, of course, she would not exist if this very woman had not conceived her.

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Chances of becoming pregnant through ART, one cycle of which costs, on average in the US, \$12,400, an amount rarely covered by health insurance, are 40 percent for women aged thirty-five and under, 32 percent for women aged thirty-five to thirty-seven, 22 percent for women aged thirty-eight to forty, 12 percent for women forty-one to forty-two, 5 percent for women forty-three to forty-four, and 1 percent for women forty-four and older. Despite less than promising odds for even the youngest age bracket, each year more than eighty-five thousand women choose ART, on average requiring three cycles (over \$36,000) to have a “live birth,” a clinical-sounding term which also includes babies born alive, pre-term, who won’t survive.

Adoption may seem like less of a gamble: if you have unlimited funds, inconceivable patience, and openness to a child with any type of needs, you will end up a parent. But most people do have boundaries. When I looked at the numbers, I was comfortable with the \$3,000 required for a homestudy and initial fees even though I knew we might never be chosen by an expectant couple considering adoption; but I worried about the unpredictable amount we might pay for prenatal care, legal fees, and counseling to an expectant mother who could understandably change her mind at some point during the pregnancy or (in Wisconsin) the thirty-day period after birth (called a “false start”—for the majority, 72 percent, false starts costs less than \$5,000); the possibility of this happening multiple times (38 percent of adoptive parents have at least one false start); or, in the unlikely chance a birthmother with whom we were matched gave birth to a baby with serious defects (chances: less than 4 percent), that we would make the decision to walk away. If we did this, our losses would be big: the entire cost of the adoption (usually around \$25,000), any hope of ever becoming parents, and our own integrity.

I wondered how we would fund an adoption should we win the lottery (pardon that irony). I did some research; one article listed hard-to-get grants, loans, and ideas for saving up this large chunk of money, ending, rather ridiculously, with the idea of garage sales and bake sales. *Leave no stone unturned*, the last line said.

ART and adoption both involve uncertainty, though hardly the type von Tongeren and Denier describe that characterizes the child wish. Any uncertainty involved in ART and adoption clashes with a cavalcade of consciously and carefully considered decisions, procedures, phone calls, and appointments. Often, you must move forward deliberately in the face of crushing defeat. The child wish can become a child obsession. Why do people go through with it?

I found more insight into the answer to this question not from studies of the

motivations of couples considering IVF or adoption (such studies tend to give results not much different from studies of those trying to conceive naturally), but in studies of problem gambling. Research on gambling addiction gleans insight on how we make decisions, how we respond to personal gains and losses, and why we take risks. Humans seem to be drawn to the astounding occurrence, regardless of its likelihood of happening. We are traditionally bad odds-makers. We believe that a win is likely after a series of losses, just as we expect sun after a week of rain, or, if you are looking for salamanders, vice versa—though here our assumptions may be correct, as weather does follow patterns. We abhor cognitive regret—stopping something too early and missing out on the next big reward—and are driven to recoup our losses. There is always the possibility that, although we never know where or when we'll hit it, a big win is just around the corner. *One more rock overturned*, one of my sources said, *and you'll find dinner*.

The closer it got to the adoption lottery, however, I found myself no more distressed about losing than I was about winning. I began, salamander-style, to get cold feet.



The adoption lottery seemed a bit unconventional, despite its being hosted by a licensed Christian social service organization of Wisconsin and upper Michigan. When my husband and I first heard of it, I imagined that if they drew your application, somewhere, instantaneously, a stork that would soon appear above the thatched roof of your own house was plucking a baby from the pond where all little children lie, according to the Hans Christian Andersen tale, “dreaming more sweetly than they will ever dream in the time to come.” It seemed almost too good to be true.

The prize, though, if they drew your application, wouldn't be a baby but acceptance into the agency's domestic infant program, just the start of the sometimes multiple-year process of becoming an adoptive parent. It's a popular agency, probably because of its long, successful history of providing good counsel to birthparents and adoptive families, as well as its reasonable fees. So, instead of dealing with a never-ending wait list, they hold a biannual lottery.

At the meeting required to enter the lottery, we were told that on two unspecified dates—one in early May and one in early November—social workers from the organization's various offices throughout the state would gather together, number the applications, put the numbers in a hat, and blindly draw a particular quantity determined by their leader. After we mailed in our application, I wondered often about this event. I imagined tiny slips of paper—the one with my number on it for instance—blowing off a table when someone exited or entered the room before it made its way into the hat, leaving me with no chance at all of being picked. Was there a lottery witness? Did a senior citizen stand against the wall, hands joined together solemnly as on so many states' televised daily lotto picks, to ensure everything went fairly and squarely? And if, as the social worker informed us, we would be allowed to reconsider the items

we marked on the application again at a later date—whether we could parent a child with microcephalus or one born from a schizophrenic, for instance—why was it even on the lottery application in the first place? Was this really some kind of weeding-out process? I imagined the social workers—all women, most likely mothers themselves—laughing wildly at those whose applications indicated a desire for the perfect child, ripping them up, and trashing them immediately. If this truly was a lottery, why not just have us write our name and number on the back of a raffle ticket and, if our ticket were drawn, consider the hard questions later?

Some psychologists believe gambling mirrors sexual excitement, with its repeated buildup, climax, and release of tension. Maybe this is why the idea of the adoption lottery excited my husband and me so much, why we chose this agency over others where we could have signed a contract and jumped right into the adoption process. It felt natural to begin parenthood this way: to cast our lot, and then wait a month or two to see what happened.



Mid-April rolled around. I still had not seen a single salamander. One weekend, the forecast was warm and rainy, but I was busy entertaining a friend who had flown in to visit. On Saturday she slept in, and I grabbed an umbrella to walk the dog and check out an overflow area near our lake, finding two deep open holes: turtle hatchlings must have overwintered in the nest and emerged in the last few days. It was a sign of something—but as of yet, I saw no amphibians.

We stayed indoors all weekend. On Sunday morning, we missed a call from my husband's little brother. On Sunday night, it was still raining. He called again, and my husband disappeared to talk to him. He returned to announce that his brother's wife was pregnant—twelve weeks pregnant, with identical twins.

I left my husband and guest to hunt for salamanders. Many factors were at work in my decision to go out that night, and I don't deny any of them. The major mistake in psychology may be the belief that awareness changes behavior. It doesn't: we like our social pressure, our sorrow, our envy. I knew I should be overjoyed by the prospect of two new nieces or nephews—and I was—but I admit I was also irritated, as if there were some kind of cosmological math occurring that didn't add up: two babies for them, and zero for us.

I drove the streets past every pond I knew, looking for slick salamander bodies in my headlights, wondering how many I was running over in my desperate quest. But it began to snow. In the morning five inches would cover the ground. I became dizzy from the windy country roads, staring into the oncoming flakes with my brights on. The seasons ran through my mind, lapping one another. They tangled in my brain and I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd missed something, even though I knew it was still early. It felt too late.



A week or so later, I bought a pair of boots—no matter that I should be saving

money—at the local Fleet Farm, the kind kids wear to jump in puddles (or obstetricians, I recently found out from a friend, whose son’s birth proved messy and more difficult than the norm). I couldn’t believe I’d been traipsing around the shores of ponds all these years without them. I also couldn’t believe I was still traipsing around the shores of ponds at my age, a kitchen strainer in hand. I knew I should be shuttling kids to soccer practice, piano lessons, laundering the clothes of *kids* who do this. Was there something wrong with me? Because I didn’t have children I couldn’t stop being one? I felt like a ten-year-old boy, not a thirty-eight-year-old woman. In an old army ammunition plant near Madison, Wisconsin, a reservoir contains a population of tiger salamanders that, in adapting to their enclosed environment, have become neotenic, retaining for life their juvenile characteristics—feathery gills, keeled tails. They still reproduce, but along with their young, never leave the water to live on land as do most adult tiger salamanders. Officials want to drain the reservoir, seen as a safety hazard, but locals are working hard to preserve it and its salamander population.

The day before Easter I hiked to a pond a couple miles into the forest. It was dry and warm, so I still didn’t find any salamanders. For this reason, I was reluctant to put on my boots, which I had been carrying in a backpack. Finally, since I didn’t want to have carried them in vain, I slipped them on and waded into the water. That is when I saw them.

All over the substrate, on submerged sticks and grasses, like a thousand tiny glass slippers, lay the spermatophores of now-vanished male spotted salamanders. I picked up a stick where a salamander had laid three in a row to examine them more closely. They were translucent, the size of half your pinky fingertip. You might think they were some kind of tree mold, or something a snail left behind. They littered the bottom of the pond like confetti, evidence of the start of the salamander new year. Upon further inspection, I found floating beneath last year’s submerged cattail leaves loose constellations of eggs coalescing into infant galaxies.

I wanted to pick them up, but two feet was as far as I could go. I began to sink a little and water threatened to deluge my boots. I was in the muck.



Despite knowing that the day-to-day tasks of raising an infant (changing diapers, doing laundry, cleaning up vomit) and raising a teenager (worrying, feeling hated) are unlikely to increase my happiness, and that social pressures to have children and labels of selfishness for the childfree are diminishing, I have not lost my child wish. Perhaps my (and others’) child wish is so strong because the paradox of parenthood was nonexistent in the ancestral evolutionary environment. When we lived in small clans and tribes, children weren’t such a drain on just two people. The “village” helped to care for the howling, nocturnal infant and adolescence wasn’t so trying on parents because children began their own families at puberty.

So say Sonja Lyubomirsky and Julia K. Boehm of the University of

California, Riverside, in their 2010 article “Human Motives, Happiness, and the Puzzle of Parenthood” (*Perspectives on Psychological Science*). Furthermore, they point out that studies indicating a correlation between parenthood and decreased well-being have a severe limitation: it may not be possible to measure the kind of joy we receive from hanging out with our kids.

Consider this: When my nephew was a baby (he is eighteen now) I carried him along on a hike with my mother and his two sisters. We jumped over puddles in ATV trails where, annually, American toads laid their jellied egg-strings, and descended to the creek where my father had often taken my sisters and me as children. A soft wind blew aspen leaves from the trees. I took in the whole scene. But then my attention was caught by something I will never forget: my nephew’s long moment of focus on a single leaf falling to the creek, from sky to water’s surface. It was the first time he had seen the likes of this. He had no room in his head for the big picture, for cycles and seasons and laws of physics. His life thus far was a patchwork of private astonishments. Maybe this is what children give us.



The night of Easter was warm and humid. When I walked the dog, the spring peepers were deafening, like some kind of uncoiled mechanism inside my ears. Despite my previous day’s discovery of the eggs and spermatophores, I reasoned that maybe a bout of latecomer-breeding would happen again that night.

Back home, sweating, I sat in a chair facing my husband, who was on the couch typing up his doctoral thesis.

“I feel like tonight is the night.” I said. “It’s foggy. It’s still sixty degrees. And it’s very humid.”

I was surprised when he put his laptop to the side and grabbed his camera to accompany me. We made the brief drive to the pool. Right away, when we exited the car, I saw something dark and glossy in the middle of the road. A salamander. Not the spotted but the blue spotted: slightly smaller and more slender, deep indigo on top, cloud-colored on the bottom, with sky-blue speckles. Blue spotted also migrate to vernal pools in great masses, though their mating dance is more private as they pair off in the water, spread out, and lay their eggs mostly singly, attached to underwater vegetation.

When we entered the woods, we were in new territory. My husband and I have spent plenty of time outside in daylight hours, and certainly done our share of camping, but this was the first time we’d been out and about together in a dark wood. And it was unexpectedly pleasant. Something rustled, a sound we were surprised to find when we shined our lights at the ground came from leaves lifting over worms pushing out of the soil. For a while we saw nothing, but when we got closer to the water they started appearing, every five feet or so a blue-spotted salamander, same as the one we saw on the road.

“This is a good pool,” my husband declared, and I felt a small surge of affirmation. “I wonder if there are any in the frog pond by my work.”

“The frog pond?” I asked, curious.

“The overflow area by the lake,” he replied.

We went to check out this pond, along with another one, nearby. The night was perfect. We labored for hours, covering ground we’d never walked in daylight. Even though we saw no nuptial dancing, it was clearly a Big Night for blue-spotted salamanders. I’d never seen so many. We didn’t get home till after midnight, and fell into bed, exhausted.



We did not win the lottery. The news was delivered in the mail along with another child characteristics checklist—blank, to be pondered all over again—and an invitation to enter the next lottery, which would occur in November. Earlier that week, we had also received a large manila envelope enclosing a poster-sized drawing of “Quinn County.” My niece, for a school assignment on mapping, had named a district after us. I wondered what part of that child’s mind, who lives eight hundred miles distant and whom I hadn’t seen for a few months, I occupy. What word ignited her memory of me, brought me into existence in a place I no longer inhabit, to be gifted with a whole province?

We must never balk at unfamiliar territory. The worlds we discover, like those unanticipated red eft migrations that so engrossed my students or the midnight parade of blue-spotted salamanders my husband and I encountered, are often more astounding than what we set out for. For the truth is this: no one is desperate for a child until they can’t have one. The child wish is an art. We may entertain it any way we want as long as we know it is not about fulfillment. We must recognize that the laws mothers everywhere lay across the land—the grass is always greener; life is a gamble—were writ by the universe long ago and to live fully we must embrace them.

Finished with lotteries, I picked up the phone and called another adoption agency that had openings. I would, I decided, burrow beneath the bills and contracts, let them occupy a level I was not fully conscious of, as do those fossorial creatures I so admire, surfacing and resurfacing for the false starts. I would invite the ambivalence, the uncertainty that accompanied my original wish for a child, which is what, finally, defines it. Right then all I felt was calm. It was a calm that allowed me to imagine what it would look like, if I ever found those spotted salamanders on Big Night, in the beam of my flashlight: the yellow spots on their backs a hundred gold coins tossed into a fountain—the child wish, in whatever way it would, unraveling.