

A Grandparent's Joy

By Dyan Pike

When Marian Robinson moved into the White House with her family, grandparent reactions ranged from groans (*This is my time; I'm not the baby's caretaker*) to aahs (*What a win-win situation for all!*). I'm definitely in the latter category. Babysitting two days a week for my grandson Finn is a joy.

If a baby's job is to make you fall in love with him, and your job as a caretaker is to make a baby fall in love with you, my grandson and I have wildly succeeded. His name means "fair" in Gaelic and acknowledges his Scandinavian background. His blue eyes and blonde hair fit both categorizations. The language of connectedness between us is pure feeling. With no other agenda than to be with two-year-old Finn, it's easy to give my full attention to the moment. How different than when I raised my own daughters, worked part-time, cooked, laundered, and was weighed down by the infinite concerns of parenthood.

Time expands with Finn. Now I have the leisure to observe and reflect how he learns, greets the world, and deals with frustration. I have the sensation of "seeing" what's going on in his brain at each stage in his development, a front row seat into a child's mind. Like most proud grandparents, I assume Finn is brilliant, the connections he makes at an early age surprise me. For example, when we read *Goodnight, Moon*, Finn pointed out the stars ("tar") and did the same when we recited from the "Hey, Diddle Diddle" nursery rhyme card, where the cow jumps over the moon amid the stars. The same day, he picked up a Mardi Gras necklace with a star pattern, pointing to and saying again, "tar."

Listening to Finn's language sometimes renders me speechless. Eating breakfast one morning, he identified the "o" in Trader Joe's O's cereal. "O for Oly" (the name of his favorite cousin), Finn said. Then he asked, "What dat, Mimi?" about the mark between the o and s. "An apostrophe," I replied. "Ah-pos-tro-feet!" That night, when Cait came home from work, I pointed to the box and asked him what it was. "Ah-pos-tro-feet!" he happily exclaimed. Who knows what this means to him, but I now have an image of a dancing foot for a punctuation mark.

Finn's first multi-syllable word was triggered just before the Presidential election. I arrived at the house with an Obama button on my jacket. "Oh-bah-mah!" he called out. The weekend earlier, Finn had joined his parents to campaign in Nevada and was familiar with Obama's face and logo from the signs he'd seen. Sitting outside together that afternoon to enjoy a Popsicle in the sunshine, Finn jumped up every now and then, shouting, "Oh-bah-mah!" or "Go, Erdcake!" (his word for the San Jose Earthquakes' soccer team, whom he had cheered a few nights before with Daddy). Is this evidence that he's a budding cosmopolitan citizen or simply one of the guys, ready to celebrate politics and sports for no apparent reason?

Finn also loves eating, so when he had a serious stomach virus and couldn't keep anything down, we spent a scary week. He wanted hot dogs, macaroni and cheese, cereal and cheddar bunny crackers—the hearty comfort foods he loved. Saying no to these forbidden foods was distressing to me, but not as awful as when he completely stopped asking for them. After five days, his bright blue eyes dulled and rosy cheeks paled. Obviously hungry, Finn began to stumble as he walked, dizzy from lack of food. His slender body grew so thin I could feel his bones through his jammies. My mind wandered to the extreme—what if he became dehydrated or slipped into a coma? When he could finally digest small spoonfuls, he spent several days in his kitchen chair, enjoying food as much as I loved serving him. His restored appetite signaled a full recovery.

When her teaching contract ends in three months, my daughter, Caitlin, and Finn will travel 3,000 miles to join Daddy in Washington, DC, so our remaining time together has become more poignant. Making memories

means I'm not above taking advantage of Finn's willingness to imitate. I recently taught him the thumbs-up sign, accompanied by "Good job!" which I regularly encourage him to repeat. We also share high fives, touch baby cup to water glass with vocal "Cheers," and break out in song for no apparent reason.

Who knew what other improbable acts I would commit as a grandparent? I've learned to identify trucks and emergency vehicles I've never had any interest in, as well as names of dinosaurs that are completely foreign to me. The first time I picked up *Sports Illustrated* and began narrating what the players were doing in response to Finn's question, "What dat, Mimi?" has resulted in a weekly ritual. Years from now, I imagine I'll be reading the sports section daily to continue pursuing the interests of our ball-playing boy.

Before Finn was born, Cait and Greg (in their estimation, both tone-deaf) made one request: "Would you please teach our child to sing?" So when Finn was five months old, Cait enrolled us in a music class, where babies enjoyed listening and swaying to songs with a group leader. Finn especially loved the scarf dance, a post-hippie version of tie-dyed scarves swirled over and around babies to 60's rock tunes. I gagged; Finn giggled. We still sing and dance, but have thankfully abandoned the scarf and prefer children's songs.

Not everything is fun with Finn. "Don't like dat" emphatically means he wants to avoid whatever makes him unhappy. At naptime, he tries to close his eyes as I sing when he'd rather be awake. His favorite ploy is to ask me to sing one more song, then another, then another, to keep him company for the full two hours of rest.

Since November, Daddy's full schedule has permitted him to be home for less than a month. Finn cries easily when favorite people walk out the door, whether it's Daddy on a return flight to Washington, Mommy on her way to work, or Mimi at the end of my babysitting day. Recently, the family dog, Leo, got into the other grandparent's car to spend several months with them while Cait prepares the house to be sold. For five minutes, Finn was inconsolable. Thankfully, he can be distracted, so the promise of playing basketball lured him to his indoor net and ball bin.

My interaction with Finn has offered unexpected bonuses to other important relationships. When I talk to my ninety-two year old mother, our conversation often focuses on her great-grandchildren and mothering in general. Her unconditional love and family-first priority has shaped who I am. One activity that has seamlessly passed from my mother to me to my daughter to Finn is an appreciation of reading. Finn loves to look at books and have them read aloud to him. He's heard some of them many times, so fills in words and phrases when I pause, just like my daughters did when they were small and I probably did for my mother.

My relationship with my daughter has deepened and expanded. Time collapses as I interact with Finn and recall his mother at this age. When I cared for Cait, I wish I had her maternal calm and self-assuredness. Establishing routines for her son, such as taking a bath or brushing his teeth, has required patience and firmness. At bath time, Cait invites him to push the soap dispenser to wash his hair, arms, trunk and legs, helping him as backup. She lets him take the lead, putting him in charge of the less pleasurable parts. Tooth brushing can be a struggle. To soothe him, Mommy asks him what song he'd like to hear, then sings as she brushes his clenched teeth. Recalling my own ups and downs at the end of each babysitting day, my daughter and I laugh in pleasure at our mutual experiences with Finn.

Treasuring my daughter's trust as well as the relationship with my grandson, I think about how to spend our remaining time together. What activity has the potential to become special between us? What interests of Finn's could I more fully develop? Although he'll soon be 3,000 miles away, I intend to keep our bond vibrant and strong. I'll regularly contact Finn through Skype and video cam to continue being a visible presence in his life. Enjoying each other's company will mean short visits online but long trips in person. "Thumbs up to that," Mimi says.