



'I'm Sorry, No More Ducks'

A few weeks before she turned 2 last month, my daughter decided she would not be going to bed on her own anymore.

It started without warning one Sunday night, after I laid her down the way I always do. She's been a calm and confident sleeper for most of her brief life: Three or four books, a song and a kiss usually does the trick. This time, instead of rolling over, she climbed to her feet and began to wail.

"Come out, come out!" she spluttered through hot tears. My wife and I waited outside her room for it to end, but a toddler's cries can be even harder to resist than an infant's. We went back in and asked her what was wrong. Was she sick? Was she hurt? She looked fine.

"Hold you," she whimpered, grasping over the crib's bar. "Hug."

And every night for weeks, that was what we did.

Sometimes it took 30 minutes; sometimes it took an hour or more. Each time, I wedged myself into the chair in the corner of her room, angled for her comfort and not mine. Once she was curled up on me, I'd sit very still in the darkening room. The ground rules were clear: No talking, no coughing, no checking my phone. My legs would go numb. If I made even a small move before she was completely unconscious, she would jolt awake and grab my shirt like a baby monkey. "Hug!" And then, more quietly, like an echo of herself, "Hug, hug, hug."

That first week, I literally counted the seconds. I was desperate for dinner

and had work to finish. I'd become used to a routine that gave my wife and me an hour or two to ourselves in the evening — a luxury for parents of young children. Now I spent most of that time motionless in the dark with a toddler draped over me.

Was she finally asleep? It was hard to tell. Twenty minutes of silence would pass — 1,200 seconds — then I'd move too soon and we'd have to start all over again. The fatherhood manual didn't include instructions for this step.

Of course, there was a solution; I was just avoiding it. We had trained her to sleep before, and surely we could do it

The long bedtime routine started to feel like a gift.

again. But I realized I didn't want to. I had begun to look forward to these compulsory moments of stillness and silence. The enforced separation from phone calls and emails and texts and tweets and news — all of it urgent and almost none of it necessary — started to feel like a gift. In place of it all was a little girl with clear and simple needs — the warmth of a large body, the calming pulse of a heartbeat in the dark — to end her day. It had become the purest, most human transaction of my own day.

One night a few weeks later, no end in sight, my daughter and I were cramped

in our usual style across the chair, probably half an hour along, when, without lifting her head or opening her eyes, she whispered, "I'm sorry, no more ducks."

Pardon?

"I'm sorry, no more ducks."

It was the first full sentence I'd ever heard her speak. "What do you mean?" I asked. She couldn't explain it.

It turned out she'd been to the park that day with my wife, who had promised her there would be ducks in the pond. She has a thing for ducks and was excited to see them, but it had been a chilly spring, and the ducks weren't there. My wife apologized, and for whatever reason, it stuck.

Maybe that was when I knew she was ready to move on, even if I wasn't. She was putting things together, turning words into sentences, figuring out how to be separate from us. After a couple nights of retraining, bedtime returned to normal. And I felt as though I'd lost something I couldn't get back.

New parents rejoice at the milestones and miracles of their child's earliest years. We compare notes: who's talking, who's walking, who's dancing, who's saying "please" and "thank you." We cheer the first wobbly step, but we tend to stash away the sadness that it will never happen again.

The ducks are back in the pond now. My daughter readily goes to sleep by herself — for the time being, at least. And I find myself missing that dark, silent room, frozen, with a little girl snoring softly on my chest.