

A Five Year Old's Reflections on Life & Death

by Steve Lewis

Five-year-old Eleanor and I are on the upper deck of a small beach cottage on Hatteras Island, North Carolina, cradled in the hammock. We have just finished reading a book about a turtle, and are now quietly swaying in the warm breeze.

From this perch I can spot the rest of our large and unwieldy family in miniature mime across the hurricane-flattened dunes. With seven kids and 16 grandchildren crowding into a life lived at the loud edge of chaos, these quietly intimate moments with any child are rare.

After a while I wonder whether she's fallen asleep, but I'm wrong. "Chiefie," she says, using my nickname and sitting up. "How old are you?"

"Sixty-six."

Her eyes widen. "That's old!"

"Yep," I say, smiling, instantly feeling all of—and perhaps more than—66. Out of the mouths of babes and all that.

Moments later I'm tempted to add something a little wistful about how in my heart I'm really 19, how I sometimes look into the mirror in the morning and wonder who that old man is staring back at me, but I press my lips together, lean down, and kiss the top of her beach-blond head.

After 43 years of stumbling headlong through a life informed—and daily reformed—by my children and then theirs, I know my quip about age won't mean a thing to a child who has not yet learned addition or subtraction. So in the breezy lull, with three brown pelicans soaring high out over the swells, I reach over and push on the rail, the two of us rocking, first fast, back and forth, then ever more slowly, back and forth, through the warm humid wind.

When the hammock slows to an August stillness, Eleanor snuggles back into my shoulder, slipping her thumb into her mouth. So I ask her about starting kindergarten in the fall ("I get to ride the bus") and her best friends (Marina, Ada, Sophie, Sage) back in Northampton, Massachusetts. But she doesn't answer when I ask the old grandparent fallback about what she wants to be when she grows up.

Moments later, though, Eleanor breathes in deeply, withdraws her thumb, and mutters, "A gymnast and a ballet dancer," and then slides the thumb dismissively back into her

mouth.

A minute—five minutes?—10 minutes?—go by, the two of us suspended on crisscrossed ropes between eight-by-eight posts, a sultry north wind blowing wisps of her hair across my face, when she says, “I want to be 30, Chiefie.”

“Thirty?” I say, smiling, unable to hide my surprise.

She nods and the thumb returns to her mouth.

“How come?”

She doesn’t answer. Thirty it is.

So I ask how old she thinks her tattooed Aunt Elizabeth is. Eleanor shrugs, but then tells me that she knows for sure Elizabeth is not 30. (Elizabeth is 24.) Nor is Uncle Bay, she adds. (He’s 27.) OK, not them. Neither one is married. Neither one has kids. Maybe that’s the key. She says she knows that her parents are 35.

Then with nowhere to go but back and forth in the hammock, we meander through the rest of her 11 aunts and uncles, and she offers wildly wrong guesses at their ages. Anyway, none of them are 30, the magic age.

“So tell me why do you want to be 30, sweetheart.”

She turns on her side then and nestles in under my wing. “I don’t want to be little when you die.”

Oh.

Oh my.

She says it so matter-of-factly—“I don’t want to be little when you die”—that, with waves crashing far off in the distance, I am mute. Moments later I wonder if maybe I laughed a little. (Or did I just clear my throat?) Then, looking out over the vast ocean, at the arc of heaven and earth, unheard children’s cries of joy drowned out by the crashing swells, I can feel my mouth turning up into a smile so sad I think I might cry.

And in that smiling lull, gulls circling overhead, ruddy turnstones skittering at the edge of the surf, I scramble around to understand the quantum psychomathematics of our intimate exchange. Did someone tell her something about how people don’t die until they’re really, really old? Is it possible that she actually understands how young she is—or how sad it would make her if I were no longer around? And how did she do the math to come up with an age where she would no longer feel so small and vulnerable anymore?

But in that humid, sunny moment, all that deciphering doesn’t matter. She has made her pronouncement and the thumb is back in her mouth, an index finger twirling and twirling her hair just like her mother used to do.

I don’t cry, although I still feel like I could. So I reach across to the rail and rock the hammock once more, holding this baby close to my chest as long she will allow. Which is not too long, it turns out. She squirms out of my grasp after a few seconds, and when she sits up, instead of asking her to try to explain what she meant, I ask if she’s hungry.

Eleanor nods and the two of us clamber down from the hammock and walk hand in hand down the creaky wooden steps to the cottage below, where she stands on a chair and together we make two tomato and cheese sandwiches on soft white bread with big slathers of artery-clogging mayonnaise. And since her parents are not around to say no, I pour us two glasses of root beer.

We eat in silence, the two of us all alone in the little cottage.