

and, she said, "He's a handsome child, and he seems quite smart." And she said, "I have a daughter, she's grown up now. She was a baby, lots of dark hair and big brown eyes. She always asking questions. She used to love to throw bread to the pigeons in the park. I'm not at all afraid of them. They come closer and closer and I would stand still, her little hands stretched with the bread in her hands. They would take it from her fingers and that delighted her. Once she looked on her face and she smiled; there was such wonder in her eyes."

But the little boy was not happy. He had climbed from his seat and was banging against the wall with a toy car. His mother held his arm to stop him from crying. The young woman was not listening to Mercedes. She hardly noticed. She leaned back in her seat, closed her eyes, and thought about Stacey in the park with the pigeons.

Swallowtails

SHIINA MAKOTO

With sometimes painful honesty, a father reveals the mistakes he makes—and the joys he experiences—trying to help his young son grow up.

Hey, Dad, am I bald?" Takashi suddenly asked me one day when we were in the bath, with a serious look on his face.

"No, Takashi, you're not bald," I said. I wanted to laugh, but the expression on his face was so serious that I felt a bit unnerved.

"Oh. But Yuji and those guys keep calling me a bald-headed monk."

"Well, it's true your head is shaved, but you're not bald. Bald means you don't have any hair on your head."

"Oh, really?" Takashi thought about this. "Then I guess it was OK," he said, evidently satisfied about something.

My son had always had his head shaved. At first I used to take him with me to a barbershop whenever his hair grew long, but it got to be a pain and I thought it was silly to spend ¥1,600 to cut a head of hair as small as that. So I bought an electric hair-clipper and did the job myself. I'd take him into the bath, strip him, and shave his head. In the beginning I didn't know how hard to press or how fast to move, and Takashi would scream a lot. After three years, though, it got to the point where just shaving Takashi's head wasn't quite enough for me. So I'd shave two or three other kids' heads as well.

"What was OK?" I asked, feeling a little nervous about Takashi's sudden calmness.

"Well, Yuji kept calling me a bald-headed monk, so today I hit him." Takashi looked straight at me without a smile and then began cleaning the back of his neck with a soapy towel. I'd already heard that, apparently, my son was the only one in his class with a shaved head.

"You hit him?"

"Yep."

"What happened then?"

"Yuji started crying."

"Are you and Yuji in the same class?"

"No."

"What class, then?"

"He's a third-grader. Yuji Yoshino, third grade, first class."

"I see."

I looked at Takashi's round, clean-shaven head, which was still about another two weeks from its next shave, and said nothing. Then I suddenly recalled the report card he brought home at the end of first grade. His grades were as bad as I thought they would be, but I wasn't prepared for what the teacher said about his behavior. Under the "Getting Along with Others" section was written this:

"For some reason, Takashi seems aggressive. When I asked his classmates if they had ever been hit by him, two thirds of them raised their hands."

My wife turned slightly pale and fell silent when she saw this. We'd never dreamed something like this was happening; it was hard to believe.

"Maybe we just didn't raise him right," she said later, whispering in the dark of a spring night so cold that it was spring in name only.

"No, I don't think it's that," I said, as cheerfully as I could. "I think what we did was fine."

The worried way in which she spoke sounded like the way people talk about how badly poor parents raise their children.

About a year before Takashi was to enter school, my wife and I talked it over and decided that we weren't going to send him to preschool.

Kodaira, an out-of-the-way town on the Musashino Plain where I live, is a classic Tokyo bedroom community. There seem to be a lot of households here with very pointed ideas on education, about which they are excessively clamorous. It is, in fact, the perfect nesting place for mothers with an obsessive concern about the education of their children. These are the mothers who in all seriousness ask kindergarten teachers such sickening questions as what they should have their children learn, absorb, understand, and otherwise master before entering school, imploring the teachers to advise them on the matter.

For better or worse, my son went to a noisy city-run nursery school locked in a battle over wages that left the staff with little time to attend to the children. From an odd sense of destiny engendered by this environment, we never gave Takashi the kind of bizarre schooling most of his peers got.

Takashi, for his part, thoroughly enjoyed himself at this nursery. He was happy to spend the entire day running wild with his friends, returning home at night to wrestle and box with his boring father.

Shortly after Takashi entered school, however, it became clear to us that children these days are thoroughly schooled in a variety of subjects at home, even before they enter school. Everyone in Takashi's class could easily read, and many could also write. Of the thirty-four pupils in my son's class, he alone could neither read or write.

One day, two or three months after he started school, I asked Takashi if he liked it. He did; his eyes sparkled with excitement. He thought the nursery school on the whole had been more fun because he didn't have to study, but characteristically he allowed that school was better because he could play soccer.

The second semester started while my wife and I were still trying to figure out what we could or should do about the first-semester reports of our son's lawless behaviour. For Takashi, as always, the best part about going to school was being able to play with his friends. But with the start of the second semester many of his friends started practising the piano or taking English conversation classes, and there were fewer and fewer opportunities for him to play every day with a dozen or more friends until dusk and exhaustion set in.

Sadly, too, the parks and open spaces in which children could play seemed to have suddenly disappeared.

The first school prohibited use of the playground after 3:40 in the afternoon, when the gates were closed and the children sent straight home. Students couldn't use the grounds on Sundays because they were taken over by city baseball teams and soccer clubs. The reason for this was that, supposedly, the school didn't want to be held responsible for injuries incurred by students using the playground.

Croquet became the craze with old people at about this time, and what little open space existed inside the city was, by city decree, quickly turned into croquet grounds. The grounds were surrounded by barbed-wire fences—to keep the children from ruining the grounds when they weren't in use.

That day Takashi, who was lying on his bed, called me. Ever since he could talk, he's addressed his parents without using the *-san* suffix—*otou* instead of *otousan*, for example. I asked him why he never did so. He said we weren't important enough for the *-san*. That time, too, he wore an unexpectedly serious expression on his face.

"*Otou*," he said again, "today I went to that park over there—Atchan-Yama Koen—and it'd been turned into another croquet ground."

The only place left where we can play baseball is Central Park, but the adults there get angry at us right away, and nobody wants to play there anymore."

"That park has gotten to be really terrible," I said.

Central Park used to be a large testing site full of big ginkgo trees and mulberry fields. At first the city got rid of the mulberry trees and turned the area into a large grass field, which was very nice. On Sundays I would take Takashi, who was still in nursery school, to that park. It was big enough to have four grass baseball fields, and even on Sundays teams would be engaged in fierce struggles from early in the morning. Children would play baseball and soccer in the small spaces around the fields. To the people in the neighborhood, the park was a good place to bring their dogs to play, and quite a few adults would gather to watch the baseball games.

But the park was suddenly closed just before the beginning of summer vacation, when schoolchildren would be out playing in this park in earnest. Legions of bulldozers and dumptrucks came in their place, constructing a city park. Construction went on for a year and a half after that. The grass fields were dug up, the sides of the fields were surrounded with concrete walls and the bleachers replaced, so that the place looked like a magnificent racetrack replete with grandstands. The small spaces off to the sides were replaced with brick-enclosed flower beds ("no admittance"), tennis courts, croquet grounds, and exercise grounds.

The city had spent some four billion yen on the park up to that point. It was planning to spend an additional six billion to turn the site into a major city park.

I went with Takashi one day to see a part of the new park that had been opened. At the entrance was a huge sign, almost as if the city fathers had erected it as a warning to the residents. NO CATS OR DOGS ALLOWED, it read, in big red and black letters.

"What does it say?" Takashi asked me.

"It says that dogs and cats are not allowed in this park."

"Oh," he said. He seemed to be thinking about something.

"But that's strange," he said, after a while.

"Why?"

"Because dogs and cats can't read!"

But of course! I thought. Most of the time dogs are taken for walks on a leash, so the owners, at least, will see this sign. Cats, however, usually come and go as they please. "You're right," I said with a laugh. "Cats can't read."

"What a stupid sign," said Takashi. He had recently learned how to write and not just print, and he laughed pleasantly, pleased with himself for being at least a little smarter than a cat.

Still, the city's usual display of abrupt discourtesy and a penchant for prohibiting admittance to anything and everything—as evidenced by this No Pets sign—struck me as ridiculous; at the same time, it made me boil with anger.

The bleachers had been turned into something like an all-purpose playing field. On the other side of the grass was a 300-meter track, at one end of which was something extraordinary—a shot-put circle like the ones usually found on practice fields at schools built long ago.

"Hey, Takashi, this is where they have the shot-put competitions."

He didn't seem very interested in it. On the other side of the park, a helicopter hovered over the forest of ginkgo trees where a gymnasium was going to be built. As I was walking past the shot-put circle, it dawned on me that, although this was supposed to be a city park, a park for all the people of the city, its planners appeared to have done their level best to ignore the wishes and needs of those people—of us. I felt disgusted. After all, how many shot-putters could there be in this city, anyway? Instead of taking all that space to accommodate at most one or maybe two competitions a year between a very limited number of people, wouldn't it have been better to make some space for children and pets to play and run around in at will? As I thought about these things while we walked, the thought of living in this town began to depress me.

Spring vacation ended, and Takashi started the second grade. I realized then that, in the end, I had never actually asked Takashi himself why he hit his classmates all during the time he was in first grade. I excused myself by saying that he'd done well enough in a year, considering that he was the only one in a class of thirty-four children who had been illiterate to begin with, that boys have their own problems to deal with when growing up, and so on.

Even in the second grade, for Takashi the best thing about going to school continued to be the chance to play with his friends. Every day, he and his friends seemed to find some new place to play and to do something different. At night, when I gave him his bath, he'd talk about what he'd done that day. It was at about this time that the name Takayama, a classmate of Takashi's of whom I'd not heard previously, began to crop up frequently. From what Takashi told me, I learned that Takayama had transferred into the second grade from another

school; he and Takashi were in the same class. Takashi had mentioned Takayama when he told me about having hit Yuji.

"Takayama-kun knows a lot about fishing," Takashi said, as happy as if he had been talking about himself and with a funny kind of pride. "He has a brother in the fifth grade, and he says that his father takes them fishing a lot. There are a lot of really big fishing poles at his home." That's when he started going over to Takayama's house to play.

Takayama seemed to be a very generous boy. Every time Takashi came home from the 'Takayamas', he'd have some barbless fishhooks, or fishing line, or some outrageously big floats, or plastic models.

"You're always receiving a lot of different things from Takayama, but are you giving him anything in return?" I asked Takashi one day as we were walking through the woods near Central Park.

"Yeah, I gave him a metal erector set once," Takashi said. "But Takayama-kun seems to like giving me things more."

The park itself was closed off with ugly steel fencing of the kind used for construction sites, and the woods had been reduced to about half its former size. But the citron tree that Takashi and I were looking for that day was still there, covered with a thin layer of dust but otherwise standing aloof somewhat comically, as if at a loss for something to do.

"It's here! It's still here!" Takashi shouted as he swiftly circled its trunk. Bunches of caterpillars crawled about all but unseen on the undersides of the dark green leaves and between the stems, clustering there like lumps of salt and pepper scattered about.

We put about two dozen caterpillars in a paper bag, together with a bunch of citron leaves for food. Raising larvae and watching them change into butterflies was a big thing with kids just then.

"Is Takayama raising any butterflies?" I asked.

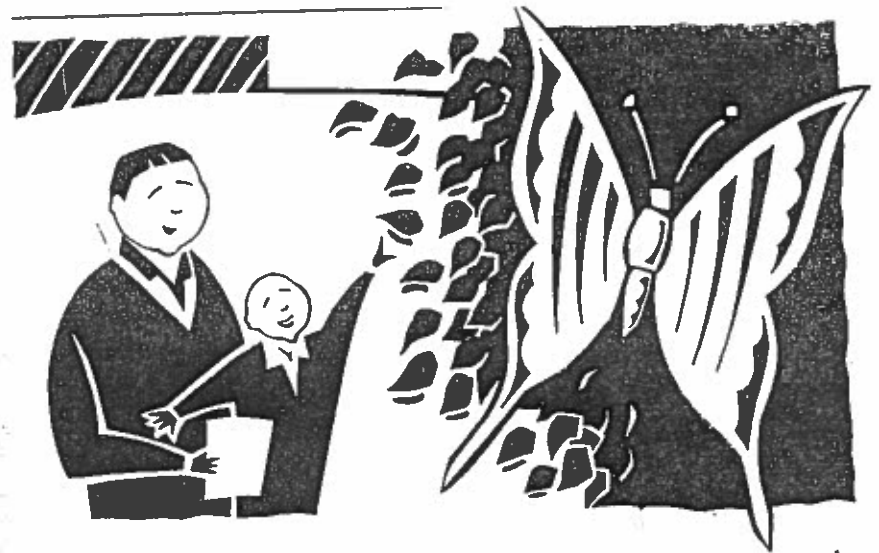
"No. He and his brother keep tropical fish. He's got a big aquarium full of them. He says his father buys them in foreign countries."

As we walked, I placed the bag close to Takashi's ear.

"I can hear them!" he cried. "I can hear them eating the leaves!"

I met Takayama for the first time the following Saturday. He had a sort of toy pistol in his right hand and a fishing rod—with reel and lure—in his left. He was only about half as big as Takashi and wore shorts with an apple design on them, which I thought was a little too young for a boy in the second grade. In complete contrast to Takashi, he wore his hair straight down in a bowl cut, which made him look like a little girl. The two of them standing together made an odd sight.

"You must be Takayama-kun," I said, sticking my head out from the living room. "Come inside."



"Excuse me," he said politely, in a high, slightly reedy voice. He took off his shoes.

"Did you make that pistol yourself?" I asked.

"Yes, I did," he answered.

I wanted to ask him to show me the gun so I could see how it was made, but he acted so adult for a second-grader that I decided against it. I found it hard to talk with him freely. If he had said "Yeah" or "Yeah, ya wanna see it?" things would have gone differently.

"Takashi's always getting some present from you, so I'll make you some *yakisoba* to eat later, OK?" I said. The boy had such an adult manner of answering me that I couldn't help talking to him in the same way.

"Thank you," he said, in his high-pitched voice. He followed Takashi upstairs. I couldn't help wondering if all second-graders said "Excuse me" when they went inside somebody else's home. Then I thought about my own son, my irreverent little Takashi, and I became very worried. I made a mental note to ask him about this after Takayama left, but that day I was distracted by other things and forgot about it.

"The incident" occurred about a month after the start of school, with a phone call from the school.

"I'm sorry to inconvenience you, but could you come over right away?" It was Yamagishi, the teacher. His voice was low and muffled, as if he had been talking through his hand into the receiver.

I relayed the message to my wife, who had gone to work early that day and had only just come home, also early. She became tense. "I wonder what it could be?"

"If it were an injury, the teacher would have spoken with more urgency, so I don't think it's something like that," I said.

About an hour later my wife came back with Takashi. She looked thoroughly exhausted, and the base of her nose was red. She waited for Takashi to go to his room upstairs.

"They said Takashi stole his friend's money." She spoke rapidly, in a whisper.

"What?" I said, incredulous. Though I'd been worried, I'd expected something no worse than Takashi's fighting with someone or having a trick he'd played exposed.

"Takayama's mother came in with this desperate look," my wife went on. "She said that, lately, the boy's brother's allowance had been disappearing quite often, and when she questioned Takayama about it yesterday, he said that Takashi had been stealing it."

"They said Takashi's been going into Takayama's house and stealing it?" I asked, still amazed. As I listened, for some reason I felt like laughing.

"That's what they said. His mother said her kids had no reason to steal, and she gave me a really threatening look!"

"I can't believe this."

"Neither can I, just suddenly being accused like that." I also thought we'd really have to ask Takashi himself.

"What did the teacher say?" I asked.

"He said we should all investigate the matter."

I even felt exasperated at how quickly I began to feel deeply unhappy inside.

"I wonder how Mrs. Takayama can be so sure Takashi stole the money," I said, realizing that it was this point that made me feel so uncomfortable.

"She says that's what Takayama-kun told her when she questioned him about it."

Takayama's bowl-cut head appeared briefly in my mind and then disappeared. The sum stolen was ¥500, a fresh new note that the boy's brother had been planning to put in the bank. Money wasn't the only thing to have disappeared, according to Mrs. Takayama. Artificial bait and floats that the elder Takayama prized had been missing frequently, and it looked as if Takashi had stolen these items, too. She wouldn't have felt so bad, she said, in a shrill voice heightened with agitation, if only these things had been involved. But stealing money at such an early age was a serious matter.

As I listened to my wife tell me all this, I felt a pain in the left

side of my chest. I'd always heard that extraordinary apprehension or anger can cause chest pains, and the thought that this was apparently true remained vaguely in my mind like a monotonous soliloquy.

That night, in the bath, I suddenly asked: "Listen, Takashi, have you ever taken anything like fishhooks or money from the Takayamas' without asking anybody's permission?"

I tried to ask this question in as normal an intonation as possible, in a slightly clumsy, intentionally joking manner.

"Yep," he said with alacrity, making a big bubble out of his washcloth.

I felt my stomach sink.

"Without asking permission?" I said quickly.

"But I wasn't the one who took it. Takayama-kun just brings the stuff to me. He says it's all right. Then he gives it all to me."

"Money too?"

"Yep. Last time he brought five hundred and thirty yen."

"What did you do with it?"

"Four of us—Kei-chan, Imai's older brother, me and Takayama—hit the *gacha-gacha* at Medakaya."

"You spent the whole five hundred and thirty on that?"

"Yep. We had about three turns apiece. Imai's brother got mad when he got the same thing three times in a row, and he shook the machine, and a guy from the store came over and hollered at him. I'm pretty good at it, so I got what I wanted all three times."

Takashi was completely casual about it. This *gacha-gacha* is a kind of vending machine filled with toys in plastic containers that you can get by depositing twenty or thirty yen. The catch is that you don't always get the toy you want.

"That money and fishing tackle don't belong to Takayama, Takashi. They belong to his brother. So from now on don't take them, even if he gives them to you." This time I spoke a little severely.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because it's wrong. Especially money—you shouldn't take money from friends."

"O.K. I won't," he said right away.

"Have you ever had a fight with Takayama?"

"No, never."

"Did you ever hit him?"

"Nope. Why should I? He is my friend."

"I guess so. Are you the strongest in your class, Takashi?"

"Yep."

"Strongest in your grade?"

"Yeah, either me or Kyoichi in the second class. Kyoichi's pretty strong, too." He answered in an almost matter-of-fact tone. I hadn't taught him anything in the way of studies, I thought. Instead, I'd wrestled with him and boxed and played at karate with him, and nothing else. Now, he's training himself in these areas all by himself. This realization gave me a strange feeling.

My wife told me to meet with Takashi's teacher, so three days later I went to see him at his home. I thought I'd get the details of the various troubles my son's behavior was probably causing on a daily basis, and make some sort of general apology.

"Well, he's still just a child. Almost everybody does something like this once or twice in his life, as a kind of test," Yamagishi said, with all the calm confidence of a veteran teacher of fifty years or more.

I didn't clearly understand what exactly was supposed to be a test of what. As we talked, however, I realized that this Yamagishi had concluded that, as far as "the incident" was concerned, Takashi was thoroughly guilty of theft. What is going on here? I wondered, frankly amazed, as I listened to Yamagishi speak like a Sunday pastor delivering a sermon to a wayward disciple. I thought that this guy was really something else.

I felt as if my talk with Takashi in the bath three days earlier had confirmed my suspicions. As Takashi's father I couldn't say so, but I had thought all along that Takayama, that delicate-looking transfer-student with the bowl cut, had been currying favor with his new classmates by getting the strongest kid in the class into trouble.

The more I thought about what Takayama's mother had said—that my lackadaisical son had sneaked into her elder son's room like a professional thief and stolen a brand-new ¥500 note out of a desk drawer—the more absurd, even unreal, I found the scenario she'd described. Why would a boy who doesn't even use his monthly allowance of ¥150 but just leaves the coins scattered around on his desk go into someone else's home to steal money? The thought made me quake with anger inside.

"Well, as long as all the parents involved see to it that this sort of thing doesn't happen again, I see no need to pursue the matter any further," Yamagishi said, with an air of importance. His eyes gleamed behind his glasses. He finally lit the cigarette he'd been toying with for so long.

Later that night, I didn't even wait for my wife to change clothes after coming from work before telling her about my conversation with Yamagishi.

"It's terrible, making Takashi out to be a thief like that," I said to her. I felt indescribably empty inside.

As always, Takashi and I went into the bath before dinner, talking about nothing in particular.

"When I checked the box today, I found eighteen pupae," he said, pouring hot water over his shoulders and slowly shaking his head from side to side. "Three more are still larvae, so I guess they died."

"Oh? That was quick!"

"Yeah. That's because I gave them a lot of food every day. The ones that ate a lot turned into pupae first. Komatsu-kun and Maa-chan say theirs have turned into pupae, too, but I think mine'll turn into butterflies before anyone else's."

"I see."

"Then Takayama-kun wanted to give me some hairstreak pupae, but I told them I didn't want them. They're not worth it." At this he wrinkled his nose in a gesture so adult I just had to laugh.

"So they're not worth it?" I asked.

"Yeah, they're so small."

Exactly one week later all the pupae in Takashi's box metamorphosed into swallowtails.

"I did it, Dad!" Takashi came tumbling down the stairs waving his right hand in a circle. He seemed truly happy.

"Right now there are thirteen of them," he said. "At this rate they might all turn into butterflies."

I went upstairs to my son's room to find a commotion of black and yellow blurs that filled the interior of a small box on the desk. The tiny little box trembled and shook from side to side, and looked as if it might itself take flight at any moment.

"It's amazing how fast they turned into swallowtails," Takashi said, taking the box in his hands. He stood there, clearly but happily perplexed about what to do next.

All eighteen swallowtail pupae changed into butterflies overnight. The little box soon proved too small for them; they barely had room to spread their wings and move around. The next day at about noon, Takashi stood on the veranda of his room on the second floor and released them. At first, the newly metamorphosed swallowtails simply continued to flit about in vain inside the box, unable to find the entrance. Suddenly,

two or three of the butterflies perched on the edge of the tiny square opening, stayed there a moment, then finally flew off into the hot, humid sunlight of an early summer day.

"Fly! Fly away!" Takashi shouted, pulling the swallowtails out into the air as he held the box on the far side of the railing.

Several more swallowtails appeared on the other side of the boy with the shaved head, beating their wings ceaselessly as they flew off into the midday summer sun.

Translated by Joseph Farrar

Girl

JAMAICA KINCAID

A Caribbean girl recites all the advice her mother has taught her—but she must wonder whether or not to follow it.

Wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the line to dry; don't walk bareheaded in the hot sun; cook pumpkin with very hot sweet oil; soak your cloths right after you take them; when buying cotton thread buy yourself a nice blouse, be sure that you have gum on it so that way it won't hold up well after a wash; salt fish before you cook it; is it true that you sing benna and always eat your food in such a way that it won't hurt your stomach; on Sundays try to walk like a lady and not like a man; you are so bent on becoming; don't sing benna in Sunday school; don't speak to wharf-rat boys, not even to give directions; don't go to the street—flies will follow you; *but I don't sing benna in Sunday school and never in Sunday school*; this is how to make a button; this is how to make a buttonhole for the button you have sewed on; this is how to iron a dress when you see the hem coming down and so to prevent it from looking like the shirt; you are so bent on becoming; this is how you iron your father's shirt so that it doesn't have a crease; how you iron your father's khaki pants so that they don't have a crease; this is how you grow okra—far from the house, because okra turns red when you are growing dasheen, make sure it gets plenty of water or else it makes your throat itch when you are eating it; this is how you sweep a corner; this is how you sweep a whole house; this is how you sweep a yard; this is how you smile to someone you don't like very much; this is how you smile to someone you don't like at all; this is how you smile to someone you like completely; this is how you

- chan: a suffix added to a girl's name to show affection
- kun: a suffix added to a boy's name to show affection
- san: a suffix added to someone's name to show respect
- yakisoba: a Chinese-style noodle dish