

Maxwell Yumm

During breakfast, unsupervised, Maxwell Yumm found a misplaced bottle of Ibuprofen in the breadbox, beneath rice cakes. The seal had been broken, Maxwell gathered, by impatient hands, and he pictured his father or mother dropping the bottle to draw a glass of water. After that, who could say what had happened? The headache's pain fogged his father's memory bank? His mother was hiding the pills from his father? In a similar way, it seemed to Maxwell, babies were born: an initial action followed by the thick, sometimes two or twenty years long, stupor of ecstatic discharge. The theory was clean, and desultory. Maxwell lost it among battle plans for pinball as he moped to the bathroom.

Once there, squatting, he took a sudden liking for his socks, which combined a peanut butter orange and Welch's grape jelly stripe around the squashed lump of calf. Maxwell rolled the sock evenly to his ankle to look at his pressed skin. He remembered a dream about lightning bolts freezing in the sky for him to climb. At the top, above the cloud-line, he found all sixteen of the baseball cards that had dodged him in his four years of collecting. They were alive, and throwing a ball around, made of fire. "You'll burn!" Maxwell shouted, and woke up. He emptied the bottle of ibuprofen into his palm, pushed the tablets into his exposed calf, and rolled up his sock. When his business was over, he opened the medicine cabinet, removed a bottle of Anacin, and transferred half the tablets to the empty bottle from the kitchen. He put both battles back, closed the medicine cabinet, stuck his tongue out at his reflection, and headed to his parent's bedroom.

Maxwell's parents worked demanding jobs in the television industry. In the Yumm house, the remote control substituted for all manner of child-rearing paraphernalia, from

pacifier to playpen. A steady supply of batteries could be found in an ornamental box on every TV, and two more in the refrigerator. The rooms were set up to facilitate the particle flow of each remote control. Obstructions such as tables and plants were stored behind couches and beanbags. Maxwell's younger sister's crib sat near the window. Its mobile of storks hung six feet above the girl for a clear link to the tube. At intervals, Maxwell marveled at his sister's belly button, having warmed to the thought that her umbilical cord had also been remote. He tickled her in the space of it and she stretched her hands upward like a pair of antennae.

Wedge Yumm came into the world during the historical equivalent of a break for commercials. In the lull between the Gulf War and its negligible effects upon the 1992 presidential election, she thrust forward her head and screamed something akin to static. In the next days, Maxwell watched her through thick hospital glass, from a distance of several feet. He wished he could turn up the sound. At times, the picture seemed too green or lacked contrast. "My sister is a cipher," he complained. "She never even moves." Then the family took her home and Maxwell stationed himself by her crib. He took great satisfaction in watching her work at her bottle, which squeaked between her lips. At first, her senseless attachment to a household remote control bugged him. He quickly got over the feeling. In obedience to their oldest morning ritual, Maxwell removed it from her fingers before lifting her.

In the elevator, Wedge drooled on Maxwell's shoulder. He carried her through the building's revolving door and out to the bus stop. When the M-30 came, he climbed aboard and flatly denied the driver's joke to accept the baby as a fare. An old woman cast expressive eyes at him, as if delighted by any reminder of human origins. Maxwell sat in a

seat reserved for the handicapped and coughed twice. "You should take something for that," said the old woman. "I have," Maxwell said, and squeezed his sister.

The bus stopped at 72nd and Central Park South and Maxwell stepped off holding Wedge in pretend-flight. Reversed, her bib rested on her back like a cape made of tablecloth. Maxwell explained to her as they traveled the street that she was flying, and should enjoy it. He raised and lowered her in response to urban turbulence and a mild tingling in his arms, which he wanted to keep moving.