



HOW WE WRESTLE IS WHO WE ARE

MY SON LIAM was born ten years ago. He was as fat and bald and round as a cucumber on steroids. He looked healthy as a horse. He wasn't. He was missing a chamber in his heart. You need four rooms in your heart for smooth conduct through this vale of fears and tears, and he only had three, so pretty soon doctors cut him open and packed his heart in ice and shut it down for an hour while they made repairs, and then when he was about eighteen months old he had another surgery, during which they did more tinkering, and all this slicing and dicing worked, and now he's ten, and the other day as he and I were having a burping contest he suddenly said, "Explain to me my heart stuff," which I tried to do, in my usual Boring Dad way, and soon enough he wandered off, I think to beat up his brother, but I sat there remembering.

I remember pacing hospital and house and hills, and thinking that his operations would either work or not and he would either live or die. There was a certain clarity there; I tried to crawl into that clarity at night to sleep. But many nights I could not sleep because nothing else was clear. I used to think, in those sleepless days and

nights, what if they don't fix him all the way and he's a cripple all his life, a pale thin kid in a wheelchair who has Crises? What if his brain gets bent? What if he ends up alive but without his mind at all? What then? Who would he be? Would he always be what he might have been? Would I love him still? What if I couldn't love him? What if he was so damaged that I prayed for him to die? Would those prayers be good or evil?

I don't have anything sweet or wise to say about those thoughts. I can't report that God gave me strength to face my fears, or that my wife's love saved me, or anything cool and poetic like that. I just tell you that I had those thoughts, and they haunt me still. I can't even push them across the page here and have them sit between you and me unattached to either of us, for they are bound to me always, like the dark fibers of my heart. For our hearts are not pure; our hearts are filled with need and greed as much as with love and grace; and we wrestle with our hearts all the time. The wrestling is who we are. How we wrestle is who we are. What we want to be is never what we are. Not yet. Maybe that's why we have these relentless

engines in our chests, driving us forward toward what we might be.

Eventually my son will need a new heart, a transplant when he's thirty or forty or so, though Liam said airily the other day that he's decided to grow a new one from the old one, which I wouldn't bet against him doing eventually, him being a really remarkable kid. But that made me think: What if we could grow new hearts out of old ones? What might we be then? What might we be if we rise and evolve, if we come further down from the brooding trees and out onto the smiling plain, if we unclench the fist and drop the dagger, if we emerge blinking from the fort and the stockade and the prison, if we wrench the steel from around our hearts, if we haul the beams and motes from our eyes, if we do what we say we will do, if we act as if our words really matter, if our words become muscled mercy, if we grow a fifth chamber in our hearts and a seventh and a ninth, and become as new creatures arisen from our shucked skins, the creatures we are so patently and brilliantly and utterly and wholly and holy capable of becoming...

What then? 