

Lullaby

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A lullaby is sung to a baby. As the child grows he begins to appreciate its meaning and power.

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The click of the light switch focussed his attention and he bobbed back to the surface of consciousness. Soft, retreating footfalls. A whispered kiss. The baby opened his eyes. A gentle glow illuminated the room to his left and his gaze, seeking comfort, was naturally drawn there. He was warm, full, content, sleepy, and yet still expected something more. The familiar beaming face appeared, garlanded by blonde curls, lighting the cot and eliciting happy gurgles from the baby's soft lips. A gentle, soothing voice sang a familiar lullaby that immediately drew the child into the depths of sleep. 'Twenty-seven thou-sand, four hundred and sixty-eight. Twenty-seven thou-sand, four...' * * * * *
* He grew to love that face almost as much as he loved his mother's. In some ways he loved it more. As he grew, and its significance became clear, it brought him serenity, nights of peaceful sleep. The dawning realisation of one's mortality usually engenders fear of the night, but never once had he stared into the unending blackness, heart racing and mouth dry, wondering: 'What if I die when I close my eyes?' Not Ernest and tonight was no exception. 'Twenty-three thou-sand, eight hundred and seventy-five. Twenty-three thou...' * * * * * One autumn day, exploring on his own, he found a small frog. Despite sensing Ernest's stomping boots, it had unwisely hopped from its cover of skeletal leaves onto a patch of green. With a wide-eyed gasp, Ernest stooped quickly, caged his hands around it and ran home. He raced through the park, wrongly imagining it would die if he kept it from water for too long. As he dashed down the passageway between his house and next-door's, he slipped and fell, dashed the tiny creature to slime with his palm. He felt overwhelming remorse. It would be living now if he hadn't intervened, would be hopping happily around, maybe chewing on a tasty slug. Ernest looked at the remains with disgusted awe. There was nothing he could do to put it right. Never in his life had he felt so helpless. Sobbing while scrubbing his hands in the kitchen sink, he vowed never to be so stupid, so selfish. The rest of the day was darkened by the tiny frog's huge shadow, but as night fell and he pulled on his pyjamas, a semblance of his usual calm clothed him once again. However, for the first time, he felt the need to speak to the cherubic face. 'Twenty-three thou-sand, six hundred and twenty-two. Twenty...' 'How many can I give him?' 'It is up to you,

Ernest.' 'Can I please give him...' and he counted to himself, one two three four, 'five?' The ensuing melody was just as beautiful, but the lyrics had changed. 'Twenty-three thousand, six hundred and seventeen.' As soon as he woke he put on his slippers and ran outside into the backyard. The weeds that sprouted through the cracked tarmac were dusted with dew. In the corner, by the red brick wall, sitting on a pile of brown, soggy leaves was a tiny frog. Ernest didn't chase him, handle him or try to catch him. Instead, remembering his vow, he simply named him: Fred. After breakfast, Ernest took him bits of bacon and breadcrumbs. Mum donated an old washing-up bowl that he sank into the corner of the garden. Some stones and small sods of grass were soon installed in it and there was even a bed made of decaying sycamore leaves. He had almost finished when Mum called him in for dinner, but he didn't stop till he'd added some water from Mrs Wadsworth's rain barrel. Barely able to keep in his chair, he peeked out through the window as he quickly ate his midday meal. For the next five days of the half-term holiday he crowned Fred 'The King of the Frogs'. He wanted for nothing. On the sixth morning Ernest looked in the miniature pond, fearing the worst, but his friend was still going strong. His speckled head dipped slightly with every throat-bulging breath, then he leaped from his palace and into the dark soil of the garden. Day seven and he was still living it up. That night, Ernest spoke again. 'Twenty-three thousand, six hundred and ten. Twenty...' 'Why is he still there? I asked for five. I don't want to cheat.' 'You can't cheat.' The angel laughed, kindly. 'There is a finite amount of life, only so much to go around... but I have my own. For every day you give, I match it with one of mine. So, Fred has three days left...' Ernest smiled his thanks. The serene face nodded and again began to croon, 'Twenty-three thousand six hundred and ten.' Three luxurious frog days later, Fred was simply not there. * * * The illness struck quickly. At eight pm, Mum was fine. By ten, she had a bad headache. Ernest was woken in the night by her terrifying cries of pain. He ran across the back yard, vaulted the brick wall and hammered on the door and windows. He kept banging and shouting till old Mrs Wadsworth, pale and bleary eyed in her flannel nightdress, pulled back the curtain. Half an hour later, the ambulance scanned the street with its blue eye then took Mum away. Ernest was eventually tucked back into his bed, yet slept only fitfully. Mrs Wadsworth, the neighbour who was more like a grandma to him, curled up on the settee. The next day was a blur of drizzle, steamed-up buses and timeless hospital waiting rooms. Ernest was given sweets, sausage rolls, pop and a comic to occupy his hands and mind. He eventually saw his Mum for a few minutes towards the end of the day. A doctor shook his head and looked pityingly at him, then spoke to Mrs Wadsworth in a hushed rumble. Ernest wanted to brush Mum's hair like he did most evenings, kiss her forehead, but the nurses told him to keep off the bed and away from the bleeping, humming instruments. That night, as soon as Mrs Wadsworth had left his bedside and closed the door, he prayed. He prayed Mum would soon be well and his life would be back to normal. When he opened his eyes, the familiar ageless face peered down at him. This time Ernest spoke before he began to sing. 'How many can I give her?' 'How many would you?' 'All of them. All twenty-two thousand, two hundred and sixty... five.' 'And she would give them straight back. She has accepted her number of grains, always knew that by tomorrow her egg timer would be empty. Go to her tomorrow. Say goodbye. Use every day as though it is a day that she gave back to you. Spend them wisely... Twenty-two thousand, two hundred and

sixty five.' Ernest was gently coated in the sweet, syrupy song and tumbled noiselessly into a deep slumber. * * 'Can we go to the park, play football tomorrow, Dad? It's been ages.' 'Sorry, son. You know I'd love to, but I have to work. It's very important. Lots and lots of people depend on me... Right, which page were we on?' Ernest read till his son's heavy eyes began to close. He kissed him on the forehead and tiptoed to the door. 'Goodnight Sweetheart.' The click of the light switch pulled him back from the brink of sleep. Soft, retreating footfalls. A whispered kiss. The boy opened his eyes. He was comfortable, happy, sleepy, yet knew his day was not quite over. The familiar smiling face, adorned by blonde curls, appeared by the bed, casting its warm light. A gentle, soothing voice sang a familiar lullaby that immediately dispatched the child into a deep well of sleep. Breathing deeply and easily, Ernest paused on the landing and smiled. His life was full, complete. At this time every night, he recalled Mum's contented, porcelain face on the hospital pillow, then he carefully panned through the contents of his day, searching for grains of sand. Today, as usual, they were few in number. The rest were tiny nuggets of pure gold. He smiled again. The ball of his foot found the first step, but a faint, haunting song pierced his reverie. Ernest quietly turned and pressed his ear to his son's bedroom door. 'For-ty se-ven. For-ty se-ven.' He recalled the angel's words: 'There is a finite amount of life, only so much to go around... but I have my own. For every day you give, I match it with one of mine.' For the first time in his life the night brought him fear. Death shaped a hard lump in his throat, shrank his skin onto his bones and pursued his pounding heart around the cage of his ribs. 'Twelve thousand, eight hundred and seventy-six.' 'How many can I give him?' 'How many would you?' 'All of them.' 'Give all but one. Keep tomorrow.' 'Thank you' 'One. One. One. One...' * Ernest didn't go to work. The day was long, bright and sunny, a Christmas stocking stuffed to the brim with excitement and wonder. A playful breeze chased crisp leaves across the improvised pitch and he had picked up his boy, swung him round and round till they both fell laughing to the grass. Colours were brighter, sounds were sharper, smells were keener. Every touch was loaded with simultaneous joy and despair. Now the day was over. Sheila had retired early, was already sound asleep. Ernest kissed her gently so as not to wake her, breathed deeply and settled his head into the welcoming softness of the pillow. There was no lullaby to help him sleep. Staring up into the unending blackness, he smiled, nodded and then simply closed his eyes.