

READING AND LOVING

Leila Berg

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LEILA BERG

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Leila Berg



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Kit, Martha and Emily

Kit is – at the time of writing – my youngest grandchild.

For the first few months of his life, he and his parents, and I, were living in different parts of the same house.

He came here from the maternity home when he was three weeks old. For perhaps two weeks after that he would wake with a roaring scream, a vibrating machine-note that crashed its demand through the building. Then his cry changed – because his relationship with his environment had changed. His voice was noticeably lower; it was melodious and sad. No longer a violent demand, but a trusting and reproachful plea. No longer a savage assault on an unknown terrifying hunger-hurting world, but a communication to someone who could be trusted to give nourishment and comfort. Grief had entered his life, because of this growing relationship. It was almost a *looking at* dependency, an awareness of it, rather than the first rigid raging terror of it.

This difference in a cry was a result of a whole month's experience of dependable response, a result of Jenny coming in to him and talking gently and laughing softly, and picking him up, stroking him, touching him, still talking, and giving him what he had said he felt he needed, in close physical intimacy. (I called Jenny 'Nina' in *Look at Kids*, Penguin, 1972.)

A little later and he had started to croon back to her, gazing at her gravely while holding his first conversations, laughing soundlessly at her voice when something was said to him with laughter in it, very different from the wildness and inaccessibility of his original cries when he hadn't yet learnt trust. He had moved from a cry, to a cry and response, and then moved still further to a conversation.

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A little later, when he was perhaps two and a half months, feeding at the breast, his hands would explore her body, her hair, her clothes – the territory within reach – while his bright eyes searched the room, drinking it in as his mouth drank in the milk, eagerly getting further information, while his mouth securely held on to the breast. (If you had pulled his face away from this security and confidence and trust, in which all his senses were pleasurably at work, surely he would have been thrown into great anxiety, and all his lively eagerness to explore what was farther afield would have exploded into chaos?)

At four months he recognised with delight tunes that had regularly, at definite times, been sung to him, and at the first familiar musical phrase his mouth would open upward and downward in that extraordinary rose-petal laugh of babyhood, then spread across in a happy grin; then he would join in, very seriously, leaving no doubt whatever that the tune he so solemnly improvised was participation. At this age, too, when he made one of his intriguing noises and Jenny imitated it back, he would gaze at her entranced at this mutuality, then laugh with delight.

Jenny used to carry him around for a few minutes at a time and show him different objects in the room – flowers, pictures, books – and talk to him about them. Very soon he too began to talk and comment on them. A light hangs over his parents' bed, shaded in a large sphere, purple, blue and green; this light is one of his first loves, almost on a par with Jenny, though it gives him nothing except visual pleasure. From his first days he was often laid, awake, on this bed, and gazing upwards always saw this light – sometimes on and sometimes off – and began to talk to it, and later to laugh to it. Always he reminded me of T. E. Brown's poem about the blackbird and the star, and I found myself thinking 'Good Lord! she is so bright tonight!' At five months old, when he was sitting on Jenny's lap with his back to 'his light', he would bend his body over and backwards, in order to stare, upside down and absorbedly and for a long time, at this very dear friend, often also conversing with it. (Jenny didn't jerk him round or pull him upright, but would say 'Oh, you want to talk to your light, do you?' and wait till he had finished this 'meeting'.) It was by then falling to bits, and Jenny, respecting its importance, was worried a little how they would take it with them when they moved without reducing it to dust.

She took care from the beginning that as he lay in his cot in his own room, whatever was at his eye-level on the wall or by his bed – posters, pictures, a mobile, a frieze – was colourful and interesting to him. If it is something he gazes at, talks to, laughs to, she leaves it there; if it isn't she takes it away and puts something else there and watches to see if it pleases or absorbs him, since he cannot yet initiate his own choices. Because she had always drawn his attention to such things, he was, while still very tiny, interested in the colour of people's clothes; he gazed at them, talked about them, fingered them, gathered them up, tried to screw them into his mouth; if the clothes were worn by Jenny, instead of moving away or loosening his fingers she would move nearer.

From the time he was four months old, and going out in his pram lying still mainly flat so that his vision was skyward, he so gazed at, and conversed with, the trees, that you felt that his next toy should be a shady tree that could stand near his cot with a piece of blue sky and a cloud tied to the top. And a tree in blossom – for this has been a freak winter, and all the spring blossom was out in January – so affected him that he panted with excitement, fists clenching and unclenching, and could not speak for ecstasy.

At four to five months he had already framed the idea of expectancy and association. When you took his vest over his head, he reasonably shut his eyes tight and screwed up his face; so when you took his vest over his arms, he did the same – shut his eyes and screwed up his face. We always thought this was funny – but how his intelligence was working, to remember and apply!

If you make a noise now, with your fingers curled up in the air ready for a tickly pounce, he will gasp the next time you make the noise, waiting, eyes sparkling, for the pounce, and will laugh with joy as this expectation is confirmed.

I remember I talked to him when he was about four months, just tossed him a sentence, and he shouted with laughter, which made *me* laugh, and that made *him* laugh again, and so we went on, just catching each other's eye and collapsing with laughter. This is something that generally happens with a friend of one's own age: it was odd to notice suddenly that this sharer of completely relaxed laughter was a four-month-old baby.

By five months, you could already play 'Round and round the garden' with him, tickling his palm very solemnly and quietly, walking up his arm with your fingers and tickling under his chin,

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watching his gleeful anticipation, his delighted apprehension – sure in his anxiety and suspense that pleasure would crown the sequence. This is a mini-plot that he was following. At five months, this baby was dipping a toe into stories.

An interesting thing has happened recently, his sixth to seventh month. From birth Kit has had a lullaby-bell – one of those musical boxes whose string you pull to play a lullaby – to go to sleep with. The string is pulled, then he is left alone, and goes to sleep. When he was taken on a visit, his great-grandfather took out a wooden Swiss bowl, which was actually a musical box though it played a different tune from his lullaby-bell. Instead of being delighted at the familiar sound (for he recognises the sounds of known musical instruments, as well as being delighted by music anyway) he seemed to be thrown off balance, worried and agitated. And the same thing happens if Jenny puts a second lullaby-bell, which his great-grandfather gave him and which plays the same tune as his night-time one, in his pram, and plays it while they are out, when he seems bored or tired; he gets agitated instead of being soothed. Perhaps – for his hearing, so pleasantly nurtured, is very sensitive – he is disturbed that that kind of sound which he knows so well should come out of an unexpected object. Or perhaps he can't yet accept a musical box, whatever the tune, outside the bedtime situation where it has always belonged. It will be interesting to see when he can accept that this sound, which he has already grown old enough to identify and is so tranquilly satisfied to recognise in its 'right place', has a relaxed right to turn up anywhere and anytime. I find it fascinating to see in this baby how each step in growth alters the current situation which has only recently been understood and accepted by the baby and docketed in his memory – how grief enters one step ahead of joy.

I worry because neither of his lullaby-bells which both play the Brahms lullaby, play it correctly. I bought one, his great-grandfather the other. Each plays a truncated version, commercial practicality being more important than musical beauty or integrity. Will he, perhaps never knowing why, be disturbed when as an adult he hears it played correctly? And did he cry in his pram because the wrong one he heard was different from the wrong one he knew? And the bowl, which pretended to be making the same kind of sound, was playing a tune that wasn't even

remotely like the tune he knew; it was even wronger! Perhaps his anxiety had nothing to do with the dishonoured association of time, or of object, but with the dishonoured association of sound? Certainly, he has become old enough and experienced enough to make associations and remember and have expectations; and this again brings disappointment and shock and grief before it brings extended delight. Soon he will be old enough perhaps to accept, with the help he has, that one needn't hold so *tight* to one's expectations, that it is pleasurable to move beyond, or without, expectations. . . .

At eight months, after Frank, his father, had played 'Knock at the door, ring the bell' with him, for the first time he did it again *himself*, knocking on his forehead, pulling his ear, touching his nose, opening his mouth and putting his finger in. He did it very tentatively, obviously both remembering and exploring (both drawing from the past and moving into the future), in very much the same way as, at the same time, he suddenly began poking with one extended finger at a crust of bread which before he would simply have clutched with his hand – as if familiar things had suddenly revealed an unexpectedness or a variety that said they should no longer be taken for granted but carefully investigated. On the same day he initiated and created two separate varieties of 'Peep-bo' entirely on his own, insisting on having a partner and getting a serious delight from this self-chosen collaboration. In these three instances on this one day, he deliberately and on his own initiative shared the delight that his body provided with another person – gave a present to someone who had given him presents.

And now he is also beginning to put food into your mouth. This for me is the essence of human growth, this delight in *mutuality*, this wanting to give that is sparked off by being given to (and that is killed by our school system).

For a little while now he has been blowing raspberries – he is teething, and when he is given a spoonful of dinner he sometimes blows it out with a spattering noise. Jenny was not enthusiastic about it. After considering the situation, she raised her eyebrows, waved a finger at him, and said 'No'. He fell about with laughter. Now he has instituted another game: he puts his mouth ready to blow a raspberry, Jenny raises her eyebrows, lifts her finger, and puts her mouth ready to say 'No' – and he collapses in helpless

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laughter. And so does Jenny. (Weeks before, he would laugh whenever anyone pulled a funny face – even if it was only raising an eyebrow or screwing up their mouth. How is a baby so definite that this is not the usual face, and how does he know it is meant to be funny? Already this baby is busy classifying, and having classified successfully – for the time being – knows when something has broken the rule, and is – sometimes – able to laugh, not to worry, about it.)

There is an empty house up the road, with masses of lilac in the garden. A month or so ago, Jenny went up in the evening and brought an armful back. She set these luscious trusses in a bowl on the left of the living-room window. In the morning Kit was ecstatically excited about this – not only the sight of the lilac, but also, we thought, the scent. Every time he was carried into the room he gazed at the lilac, and talked to it. One evening Jenny went up to the empty house again, brought back more, and set it on the television set on the right of the window. Next morning Kit was brought into the living-room, and as usual gazed immediately at his flowers on the left. At last, with a half-sigh he turned his face away – and suddenly caught sight of the others. He was visibly amazed. He stared, as if he just could not credit it. Then he turned his head to the left. The lilac was still there. Then to the right. Still there. On and on he went, turning his head from side to side like someone watching a tennis match. He seemed to be wondering if it was the *same* bowl of flowers changing its place, whether perhaps he could competently catch it in the very act of moving from one place to another. Or was it remotely possible – and this would be a new step forward in experience – that there could be *two* bowls of lilac? Again, it was memory, and classification (flowers belonging on *that* table), with something sensuously important to him involved.

At eight and a half months, an absolutely new thing happened with him. He would turn and look at the lilac, if you said 'Where are your flowers?' He would turn and locate his fish too if you said 'Where are your fishes?' (These are a mobile, which he and Jenny always gaze at and talk about when he goes to bed. If he woke in the evening distressed from teething, she would lift him up and show him his fishes, and talk about them, and he would be comforted.) He looked at his tea-time banana too, if you said 'Where's your banana?' These three things – on which