

Starting from Scratch

by Kurt Opprecht

The last time our whole family visited my grandparents was the summer of 1991. We were all in the front room and grandpa was holding my sister's six-month-old son, Jarek. Neither of the two had seen the other before. Jarek lay still in grandpa's huge arms and stared up into his face.

"You can tell he's a bright kid," grandpa said. "Look at how he looks right back at you. You can just see it in his eyes."

As we talked about the things that families talk about when they live too far apart to see each other very often, the afternoon sun warmed the room and I watched my nephew's little eyelids grow heavy. Each time they closed, he shook off the sleep, whimpered, and opened his eyes wide again. I'd never watched a baby fall asleep before, but I realized at that time that falling asleep could be a scary thing.

The world gets fuzzy and starts slipping away. Where is it going? This has happened before, but you don't remember what happens next. How do you know that this world and all the people in it are going to come back? You hang on for dear life to consciousness. For all you know, it really is dear life you're holding on to.

Everything is new to a baby, and I don't mean just grandpa's face or the vacuum cleaner or strained carrots. Even the most basic act of all, breathing, isn't always automatic. Many physicians attribute a portion of sudden infant deaths to the baby's simply forgetting to breathe.

Babies start from scratch every day, and so do grownups, to a lesser extent. How would life be if we couldn't lie down at the end of the day, close our eyes and let everything slide away for a while? Things

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are almost always feel better the next day.

Grandpa closed his eyes for the last time the summer following our visit, at the age of 88. Now when I think back to the last time I saw Grandpa, I picture him with Jarek in his arms; great-grandfather and great-grandson looking into each others' eyes across two generations.

The battle for survival is part of what makes life worth living, I suppose. But I can't help but think that most of us are babies when it comes to death; hanging on desperately, like an infant at naptime.

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