

Cymbals

by Steven Miller

--for James Aloysius

Passion is a big word, a word that has meant conversely both great desire and great suffering, both long periods of endurance and an impetuosity that causes us to burst forth into spontaneous and unbridled action.

My nephew's passion is "ba."

"Ba" can refer to a volleyball, ping pong ball, or miniature football. Additionally, it can refer to the action of throwing said ball at somebody's face or any other object that can be thrown at a face—from his sister's toy car in the middle of mass to his dad's iPhone to the eyeglasses of whomever happens to be holding him.

"He also uses it for anything round," my brother-in-law Matthew informs me. Matthew then enumerates the many "bas" Jimmy has recently pointed out: a water tower, the cap of a Coke bottle, pumpkins, yo-yos, lollipops, the sun, the moon, the crown of a bowler hat, and the circularity of a conversation held between two very old and dear friends. (Okay, so I may have added that last one.)

To me, the ear on the other end of Jimmy's near-talk, "ba" has become an exclamation of joy for everything he finds both round and wonderful.

I'm thinking of Jimmy's "ba" later that day as French soldiers put on their red, arm bands--each one a broad, flat circle. We are, of course, attending a local showing of *Les Misérables* to hear Matthew play percussion.

On stage, students from the junior college join children from the community to speak and sing in American-French accents. They are timid, heart-broken, in love, rebellious, faithful, resigned to their fates—and all in the matter of a few short hours. Though this is amateur theater, if I squint my eyes I can almost feel like I'm there in the dirty streets of not-so-gay Paris. What helps bring these emotions to life are the roll of the timpani, the ringing of the bells

and, of course, the beating of the drums, which shake us in our seats at all the appropriate moments.

At intermission Joan makes her way down to our row. Joan is Matthew's mother and Jimmy's grandmother and, as far as I can tell, no relation to me whatsoever. And though she comes from the generation before the generation that invented the internet, she's one of the last people whose statuses I still actually follow on Facebook.

"Did you see my baby boy?" she asks.

It takes me too long to realize that she's referring to Matthew down in the orchestra pit. If Matthew is a "baby," then I am certainly some sort of pre-pre-fetus known only to God and a handful of his closest angels.

"We were just about to go say Hello," I tell her, and we all wade down through the sea of other theatergoers toward the orchestra pit.

On the program, his name appears: Matthew Lobmeyer—Percussion. But this is a cruel understatement, for there in the pit sits a grown man looking like no more than a child in comparison to the army of drums that surrounds him. The program should read: Matthew Lobmeyer—Every Piece of Percussion...Ever. In that moment, looking down at him as he looks up at us from his playpen of percussion, encircled by bas of every shape and size, he has never looked more like his own baby boy, Jimmy.

"Talk about surround sound!" Joan says, and I kick myself for not coming up with the pun first.

An English teacher of mine once said that it's impossible to end a story two different ways. At a certain point you have to choose. He also said that finding your passion is the most important thing—and by passion he meant the passion to write stories that end only one way.

"And once you've found it, you've got to hold onto it for dear life like a dog holds onto its favorite chew toy. Because there's nothing the world wants more than to take away what you love. If you love

something, you must suffer for it.” He was profoundly unhappy then and I can only imagine how much more unhappy he must be now.

Nevertheless, I do hope that Jimmy finds his “ba,” the one that will keep him striving through this life. But, to disagree for a moment with what I was taught—as I am so often apt to do—I hope he never latches on so tightly to this or that “ba” that he forgets just how many water towers and lassos and glass marbles are out there in this big round world.

And something else I've learned is this: When the Master takes away a toy—if it indeed came from Him in the first place—He never takes it away for very long.

