

Extract from *This Is How It Always Is* by Laurie Frankel

Claude's first word, when he was only nine months, one week, and three days old, was bologna. There was no mistaking that one. Maybe the cooing *mas* and *das* and *bas* were words, and maybe they weren't, and maybe when he sat in the bath slapping the water and saying *wa wa wa* he was talking, or maybe it was just a coincidence, but he said bologna clear as a PA announcer. When had Claude started talking was one of the many questions on the many forms, one of the random facts medical professionals counted as clues. The doctors always looked at Rosie with condescending amusement when she got to the speaking-at-nine-months part. Then she was forced to have this conversation again:

“Babies do start babbling around six months or even earlier, Mom,” the doctors would say. Only a few of them called Penn Dad, but she was always Mom. This must have been covered in the fellowship year if you did peds because no one in all her years of training had ever suggested to her that she call a patient's parent Mom. If anyone had, she would have explained that its subtext — you know less about your child than I do for I am a trained professional and also because, as a woman, you are slightly hysterical — was offensive, untrue, and frankly embarrassing for the physician.

The doctors would always continue, “The babbling is an important first step of course, but it's not what we mean when we say ‘speech.’ Ma and da don't count.”

“Bologna,” said Rosie.

“No, I'm afraid it's true,” said the doctors.

In Claude's linguistically formative weeks, meat had been a source of great discord in their household. Rigel was refusing to eat anything but deli. He demanded bologna for breakfast and lunch, roast beef for dinner and dessert, salami for snack. He came home from kindergarten with pictures of corned beef rainbows. His dump trucks and spaceships all delivered ham. To balance this out, Orion ate

nothing but carrots and carrot-shaped foods, and though his parents were grateful for the nutritional options thus available in the form of veggie dogs and granola bars with the ends chewed to a taper, this arrangement was not sustainable. The upshot, Penn explained to the doctors, was that a nine-month-old saying bologna was remarkable, yes, but sometimes even the remarkable got lost in the fray. Rosie's point was more this: the normal state of children is nothing remotely resembling normal. Which makes it hard to identify the aberrations when they come.

Claude said bologna at nine months, was talking in full sentences before his first birthday.

“Does he have an older sibling?” said the doctors.

“Oh yeah,” said Penn.

And they seemed satisfied.

But Claude was precocious in other ways too. He crawled at six months. Walked at nine. During the year he was three, Claude wrote and illustrated a series of mysteries in which a puppy and a panda teamed up to solve crimes. He made a birthday cake — three tiered — for Rigel and Orion with no help from anyone except with the oven. He said he wanted to be a chef when he grew up. He also said he wanted to be cat when he grew up. When he grew up, he said, he wanted to be a chef, a cat, a vet, a dinosaur, a train, a farmer, a recorder player, a scientist, an ice cream cone, a first baseman, or maybe the inventor of a new kind of food that tasted like chocolate ice cream but nourished like something his mother would say yes to for breakfast. When he grew up, he said, he wanted to be a girl.

“Okay,” Penn said the first time as he had to everything else, including the ice cream cone. “Sounds great.”

And Rosie said, “You can be anything you want when you grow up, baby. Anything at all.”

She meant this to be encouraging, of course. She meant it as an assertion of faith in her baby boy, that his future was limitless because he was smart, talented, thoughtful, and a hard worker, that he would,

in short, be able to do anything he came to want to do. She figured by the time he got there, he'd no longer want to be a cat or a train or an ice cream cone, so his inability to achieve these goals wouldn't be upsetting. That's what she meant.

Remarkable though he was, however, Claude was still only three. "Mama?"

"Yeah, sweetie?"

"When I grow up and become a girl, will I start over?"

"Start over from where?"

"Start over from being a baby."

"What do you mean, sweetie?"

"Will I have to start being a girl from the beginning and grow up all over again? Or will I be a girl who's the age that I am when I'm grown up and can become one?"

"You lost me," said Rosie.

"I want to be a little girl when I grow up, but when I'm grown up, I won't be little anymore."

"Ahh, I see." She didn't. "I don't think you'll probably want to be a little girl anymore when you grow up. I don't think you'll want to be a train or a cat or an ice cream cone either."

"Because that's silly," said Claude.

"Instead, you'll probably want a job. Maybe it will be farmer or scientist. Or maybe it will be something you haven't even thought of yet. It's okay. You have a long time to decide."

"Are there girl farmers and girl scientists?" said Claude.

"Of course," said Rosie. "I'm a girl scientist."

"That's what I want to be then," said Claude decisively. "A girl scientist. Can I have a popsicle?"

"Sure," said Rosie.

Later — was it later that day or that week or that month? Neither Penn nor Rosie could remember when asked, again and again over the many years, how persistent, how consistent, he'd been, how sure —

Rosie opened her eyes in the middle of the night to find Claude standing next to her bed.

“Hi Mama.”

“Sweetie. You scared me.”

“When I’m a girl scientist, can I wear a dress to work?”

She willed her eyes to focus on the clock then wished she hadn’t.

“It’s 3:04 Claude.”

“Yes.”

“A.M.”

“Obviously.”

“I guess you’ll wear a lab coat.”

“Like my raincoat?”

“Yeah but white usually. And not waterproof. And no hood.”

“Okay. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

Rosie slept in. When she came down for breakfast, Penn reported, “Claude wants to know if he can wear a dress under his lab coat when he’s a girl scientist.”

“It’s okay with me.” Rosie was pre-coffee, still bleary eyed, catching up with being awake.

“I asked why he wanted to be a girl scientist instead of just a scientist.”

“What did he say?”

“So he could wear a dress under his lab coat.”

In November, it was Ben’s birthday. Later, when it turned out Penn and Rosie were going to have to catalog for doctors in a focused, specifics-filled way a life they were living by more of a skin of their teeth/seat of their pants/bundle of their nerves approach, they were glad for the formative moments which coincided with birthdays or holidays so they could remember when they happened. Claude wanted to make another cake for Ben’s birthday, but Ben wanted the pecan and pumpkin pies he saw all over the Thanksgiving displays at the grocery stores, and Claude’s culinary skills did not yet extend to pies.

Instead, Claude wrote him a musical with a cast of brothers. If the specifics of the plot were a bit muddled — it involved a princess, a farmer, and, for some reason Penn and Rosie could never fathom, two clouds carrying toilet plungers — the sentiment was sweet and the recorder music quite moving.

“Claude made the princess’s dress himself,” said Rosie. “It was one of my old dresses — we have a bag of dress-up clothes the kids like to play with — but he added ribbons, sequins, a cape off the shoulders.”

“We only have boys,” Penn always added. “Someone has to play the girl in the skits and the games. It was no big deal.”

“Until the next morning,” said Rosie. “He wore the dress all weekend getting ready for the play. He said he was in dress rehearsals. After the play, he didn’t take it off, but Orion wouldn’t relinquish his cloud costume either. Dress up is fun. Claude even wore the dress to bed. The next morning I made him take it off to go to preschool, and he really didn’t want to.”

Rosie was underplaying this. He more than didn’t want to. That was the one thing that was predictable about that morning: it had to fit exactly within the time allotted in order to work, and therefore it did not even come close. When Rosie woke at six, Claude was already up, had made himself cereal, was watching *Sesame Street* in his very rumpled princess dress. “Change into school clothes,” she said, kissing him on the head. Penn made breakfasts. She made lunches. “Claude,” she called over to the sofa as she sealed her fifth bag of mini pretzels, “get changed for school please.” Penn made coffee, thank god, and Rosie unloaded the dishwasher. “Claude sweetie,” she called, unfolding the stool she needed to reach the shelf where the jelly jars lived, “school clothes.” She went upstairs to wake everyone else. Roo showered. Ben showered. Rigel and Orion threw fits about not wanting to take showers until Rosie decided she preferred hot water to clean children and let the twins go to school dirty. “Claude. Now,” she said. Penn took school clothes out of the dryer. Rosie assembled after-

school appurtenances then went upstairs again to get showered and dressed herself. “Claude,” she called down, “we’re walking out the door the minute I get back.” At 7:59, she was downstairs, dressed, packed up, and quite pleased with herself, ready to drop Roo through Orion at the bus stop and Claude at preschool and be on time for work by not a moment later than 8:29AM.

Claude was still sitting on the sofa in his dress.

“Claude!” she shrieked. “Why are you not dressed for school?”

“I am dressed for school.”

“You’re still wearing your dress!”

“I’m wearing it to school.”

“Claude, honey, we don’t have time for this this morning. The boys are going to miss their bus. Go change.”

“No.”

“I said go change.”

“No.”

“Claude,” said Penn, “Mommy told you to go get ready for school.”

“Several times,” said Rosie.

“You can’t tell her no.”

“No,” said Claude.

“Claude. I am not going to ask you again. Go take off that dress and. Get. Ready. For. School.”

Claude stood up on the couch, clenched his fists straight out behind him like booster rockets, and yelled at the top of his tiny voice, “I am ready for school.” Then he threw himself onto the carpet and cried.

Rosie and Penn had a brief conversation with their eyeballs. Penn went up to change out of his robe and drive the boys to the bus stop. Rosie sat on the floor next to weeping Claude and rubbed his back.

“Claude. Honey. It’s time for school. Do you feel okay? Don’t you want to go see Ms. Danielle and Ms. Terese? Don’t you want to see Josie and Taya and Pia and Annlee?”

“I have to wear my dress.”

“Sweetheart, you cannot wear that dress to preschool.”

“Why not? Josie wears a dress to preschool. Taya and Pia and Annlee wear dresses to preschool.”

“Is that why you want to wear a dress? Because all your friends wear dresses?”

“I guess,” Claude guessed. “And tights.”

“Well. Usually boys don’t wear dresses to preschool,” Rosie admitted carefully. “Or tights.”

“I’m not usually,” said Claude. This, Rosie reflected, even at the time, was true.

“I think this dress is a little long for preschool,” Rosie tried. “Tea length is a bit formal for the occasion.”

“What’s tea length?”

“It means the dress comes down to your ankles. That would make it hard to run around on the playground. Aren’t your friends’ dresses pretty short so they can play?”

“But it’s my only one,” Claude whispered. “I didn’t know it was too formal.”

“And you’ve been wearing this dress all weekend. It’s dirty.”

“No it’s not.” Claude was still sniffing, still looking at the floor.

“Ladies don’t wear rumped, dirty dresses.”

“They don’t?”

“No, they wear clean, pressed ones.”

“All ladies?”

“Well, real ladies,” said Rosie. She’d been tongue and cheeky — and exhausted already with a long day ahead — but this one came back to haunt her.

“Oh,” said Claude. “Okay.” And he toddled off to his room to change into a sweatshirt and jeans.

But in the car, his little voice piped up from the backseat.

“Mama?”

“Yeah baby.”

“I need another dress. A short informal one for school.”

“Okay love. We can talk about it when you get home.”

“Thank you, Mama.”

“Sure honey.”

“And Mama?”

“Yeah baby?”

“Will you to teach me how to do the washer and dryer and iron?”

“That’s Daddy’s job,” said Rosie.

“No, it’s mine,” said Claude. “For my new dress. Real ladies wear clean, pressed dresses.”

Didn’t you know then, the doctors said later? Weren’t you listening?