

## **Exile in Teletubbyland**

It is 6:30 AM and I am awakened by the sound of Julian calling me.

"Mommy, Mommy."

He sounds like he may not be fully awake and I hope that if I just don't do anything, he'll go back to sleep.

"Mommy, mommy." It's too early, how can he be awake?

"ALISON, ALISON." Yes, my son has already figured out that we have multiple names. It kind of feels like he is playing along with this "mommy and daddy" thing only as long as we do as we are told. But if we step out of line, the gloves come off; my husband and I become Fred and Alison.

Damn.

I walk into his bedroom. Julian is standing in his crib with a huge smile on his face and he is holding on to the railing, jumping up and down.

"Mommy, I want to go downstairs and watch Teletubbies."

"Oh honey, it's still dark outside. Please go back to sleep."

"I want to watch Teletubbies."

"Teletubbies isn't on right now," I am still clinging to hope that Julian will lie down.

"I want to watch Teletubbies!"

He hitches his leg up to the crib railing and I lift him out before he makes too much progress. Julian is only two, but he can do pull ups on monkey bars, he can unlock and open doors, and he has no fear with regard to falling. What little sleep I do get at night comes from the knowledge that he has not yet realized how easy escape from a baby cage would be for him. The last thing I need is him having the run of the house during the night as well.

We go downstairs and I turn the television set on. As I flip through the options, Julian gets settled on the sofa.

"Mommy, I want to watch Caillou."

"I thought you wanted to watch the Teletubbies," I say.

"No, Caillou. Curious George. Arthur. Clifford The Big Red Dog."

What the...? How does he even know about these shows? Luckily, the Teletubbies music starts and Julian becomes mesmerized by the images on the screen.

This is exactly what I was afraid of. At first, we only watched one half-hour episode of the Teletubbies a week. Then it became two a week, then an episode a day, and pretty soon we were watching up to an hour and a half of the Teletubbies every day and Julian was asking for these complex shows designed for much older children. The Teletubbies have served as his gateway show to hardcore television abuse. So far from the Teletubbies being a developmentally appropriate, educational tool (as PBS would have you believe) it's the

children's television equivalent of pot.

This is not how things were supposed to turn out.

When I was pregnant, I read every single book I could find on pregnancy and child rearing, and I made a lot of plans. I was going to exercise every day of my pregnancy. I was only going to gain 25 pounds and I was going to lose all the weight (and then some) within the first six months of giving birth. We would only use cloth diapers. I would breastfeed and make all his baby food from organic fruit I bought from local farmers. My child would love to read and hit all his milestones early. And, most importantly, our child would not watch television.

Motherhood has taught me that plans go awry.

Motherhood has taught me that absolutely every deep, morally centered belief will be trumped by sleep deprivation. Motherhood has taught me to be careful what you wish for because nothing turns out the way you think it will. Motherhood has taught me that you can exercise every day and eat right and still not lose those last five pounds of baby weight. Motherhood has taught me that having a child who loves books means someone has to read them to him when he asks. Motherhood has taught me that having a verbally gifted child means that your child is able to make all his demands using complete sentences and you don't have the luxury of pretending you can't understand the requests. Motherhood has taught me that no matter how long you hold out you will eventually turn on the television set.

For the first 19 months of Julian's life, we successfully avoided watching television. I sometimes spent Julian's naptime staring at a blank wall; Reading was out of the question, it took too much mental energy and I didn't have the attention span to follow a plot. Talking on the phone wasn't possible because I didn't have much to say to most of the people I knew—most of my friends don't have children and they couldn't understand why I was not up for discussing whatever they heard on NPR that morning, and I felt like they probably had no interest in hearing me talk about the health benefits of extended breastfeeding. So I stared at a wall. But at least I was setting a good example by not watching TV, right?

And then, one afternoon last June, I snapped. I was exhausted after hours of reading and rereading *The Poky Little Puppy*. Julian was still desperate for stimulation, and Fred wouldn't be home for at least another hour.

"Alison...you guys spend all this money for cable, you know about On Demand don't you?"

Before I go any further, I should probably say that under most circumstances, I would have been a bit freaked out that the television set was trying engage me in conversation, but, in that moment, I was just grateful to be talking to something capable of grasping abstract concepts. So I said, "On Demand?"

"It's a feature that allows you to watch a children's television show any time you want. With no commercials."

"No, I can't."

"Just for a few minutes. To give yourself a rest."

"I can make it until Fred gets home, really."

"But you make it so hard on yourself. Everyone knows these hours between 3 and 5:30 are

the longest and dreariest, at least in the non-siesta taking world. Why do you think the English invented afternoon tea?"

"But you're the enemy. If I let Julian watch one show now, before I know it, he'll be an obese, autistic, couch potato. With ADHD."

"Oh, come on. You know the studies linking television and autism were flawed in their methodology. And, besides, Julian's really underweight, isn't he?"

I had to admit, the television made some good points.

"Besides, you can watch the Teletubbies."

I just want you all to know that the TV set did not fight fair. It knew that I used to watch the Teletubbies now and then before I had children, so how could I possibly resist?

For those of you who have never watched, the Teletubbies follows the adventures of four colorful bipeds in a land of rolling hills which bears a striking resemblance to a gigantic miniature gold course. There is a voice over which serves as both narrator and dictator of the actions of the Teletubbies. The Teletubbies have a pet, the NooNoo, which is a vacuum cleaner with eyes and many a problem has either been created or solved when the NooNoo tidies up. At least once in every episode, the Tubbies go in for a Big Hug and we are all reminded by the voice over that the Teletubbies love each other very much.

I'm not sure where Teletubbyland is located, if it is somewhere on Earth (like The Village in The Prisoner) or if it is on another planet entirely, but wherever it is, the laws of physics are not the same ones I learned in high school. For example, objects, such as a mirror or an animated carousel with a tap dancing bear inside, often just appear out of nowhere, without explanation, and the Tubbies get to interact with it or observe it for a while and then, also without explanation, the object vanishes, and they are left to deal with the consequences. Of course I began watching this show when PBS began showing it nine years ago and, frankly, I was always a bit surprised it never caught on in the more self-consciously artsy, hipster circles. My friend, Maria, used to say that if you put people in colored unitards in a black box and had them recite Teletubbies transcripts, it would be German Expressionist Theatre.

(Two girls on an empty stage, PO and LALA. PO, wears a red unitard, LALA wears a yellow one. LALA is holding a gigantic pink ball, a ball so large she is almost having difficulty maneuvering it.)

VOICEOVER

Lala throws the ball to Po.

LALA and PO

Lala throws the ball to Po.

(LALA throws the ball to PO. It hits PO and knocks her over. Rolls offstage. After about three seconds, the ball rolls back onstage. PO collects the ball. Suddenly, a gigantic guitar falls out of the sky and lands at Lala's feet and, at the same time, Tinky Winky appears wearing a tutu and does a pirouette.)

You know, I think she probably meant Bauhaus theatre, but you get the idea, don't you?

As children's television goes, Teletubbies is almost perfect. It's slow, it's simple, it's brightly

colored, and the characters are usually pretty nice to one another. It's almost like reading a book except that someone else is doing the work for me and the pictures move.

But, unfortunately, nothing is perfect. Every so often, I have noticed dissonant elements in Teletubbyland which concern me. For example, when they eat Tubby Custard, the Tubbies put on colored bibs. The bibs which Lala and Po wear are the same color as their bodies. Not so the bibs worn by Tinky Winky and Dipsy; Tinky Winky, who is purple, wears a magenta bib while Dipsy, who is lime green, wears a bib that is teal colored. At first, it just struck me as mildly irritating, but the more I saw it (and they eat Tubby Custard a lot), the more it pissed me off. What, the costume designer didn't think it was important to find matching bibs for these two? It's the BBC, they could afford to make matching bibs, couldn't they? I used to do costume design for no budget storefront theatres and I would never have been that sloppy. Unless, of course, it's intended as some sort of statement like, "These are the Tubbies referred to by the masculine pronoun he and men are colorblind and fail to notice when something clashes with their entire bodies." It just looks so bad. I mean, did anyone who thought Tinky Winky was some gay icon because he was purple and carried a purse even watch the show? One day, I couldn't stand it anymore and I turned to Julian and said, "Honey, just in case you do grow up to be a drag queen, you need to know that no self-respecting gay man would ever pair that color purple with that shade of magenta."

"Okay, mommy." I don't know if he was just humoring me or if he really understood what I was saying and as I tried to delve further, the voice over announced that it was "Time for Tubby Bye-Bye, time for Tubby Bye-Bye" and Julian said to me, "Mommy, it is time for Tubby Bye-Bye. Be Quiet."

Over the months of watching I have begun to identify with the Teletubbies. I, like the Teletubbies, believe I am free and that I am in charge of my reality, but the truth is, I have this two and a half year old who makes the decisions and dictates my actions. Just like me, any autonomy the Tubbies think they have is entirely fictional because as soon as that voice over makes a command, they have to comply. And while we all could spend our days making and adhering to plans, trying to fight the directions we're given in an attempt to assert control, I'm not so sure that would work or if it would even make us happy. Sometimes, it makes more sense to go with the flow. Sure, some people may say that the Tubbies are wasting away in self-imposed isolation, not living up to their full potential, and causing irrevocable damage by sometimes taking the easy way out, but the reality is that you never know when a guitar is going to fall out of the sky and appear at your feet. You can either choose to play it or not. But, once the guitar is there, you can't make it go away.

So we watch another half hour of Teletubbies and after it is over, Julian wraps his arms around me and says, "I love you very much, Mommy."

"I love you too, Julian."

"Can I have some Tubby Custard?"

"Sure," and then I give him plain yoghurt with organic blueberries. Yeah, I gave in on the television thing, but that just means I am more prepared for when he asks for Fruit Loops. Right?