

Putzel, Putzel, I Love You So Much
An essay by Walter Wangerin, Jr.

While I was courting Ruthanne Bohlmann, visiting as often as possible her farmhouse in Illinois, I was vouchsafed a gentle, indelible scene. Though the scene was brief and as common as mother-love everywhere in the world, I've never forgotten it (though my mother-in-law likely had forgotten it by the end of the week). And perhaps *because* it betokens this most common miracle—that mothers can love immediately, with the fullness of their beings, seeking nothing in return to sustain the love that will not cease—I have found in the event and my memory of it a sustenance of my own. I have cherished the vision for more than three decades; and in the end it triggered a genial children's book of love.

In the middle of an autumn afternoon I glanced into the parlor of the farmhouse. Martin was in the fields, harvesting soybeans. Gertrude had just finished canning tomatoes in the kitchen; had set the hot jars in rows on the table, waiting for the lids to click; was drying her hands on her apron. I had been sitting in the back porch swing, reading a book and watching Martin's combine crawl across the distant fields. I sneezed. Dust in the air. Or Panda, the dog. I went into a small fit of sneezing, after which I got up and went into the house to blow my nose. As I entered the kitchen, Gertrude was just passing through the doorway into the parlor.

The sweetness and the durability of this memory is that it isn't mine alone. It belongs to Thanne as well, and to her more deeply than to me. What I saw, she saw. Indeed, even today I see it most

clearly through her eyes—because the gesture was her mother's, after all. And central to the scene was her sister, Dorothy—whose bed Thanne shared until she left for college, whose round, warm body would curl into Thanne's stomach, comforting her on cold winter's nights.

Gertrude entered the parlor still wiping her hands in her apron, then noticed Dorothy sitting by herself on the floor.

Dorothy has Down's syndrome. In those days she was by the count of her years a teenager. But by intellect and behavior—even by her physical appearance—she was a child. As round and soft as a doughnut hole, frosting-sweet, the slant of her eye seeming ever to smile, short fingers, short stature: if her mother insisted that she eat what she didn't want to eat, Dorothy would break into the sobs of the truly forlorn. But paper delighted her to a giggling glee: paper dolls, paper cuttings from the pictures in *Life* magazine, paper bulletins from church, green paper money—these she hid in wickedly cunning crannies in her bedroom, refusing ever to produce her treasures, however her parents pleaded.

It was, of course, that green paper which caused the greatest fuss. Gertrude supplemented the meager Bohlmann income by baking wedding cakes—this on top of the labor of farming and the administration of a family of fourteen children. Paper money was more precious than coin. And the louder and the fussier she went in search of Dorothy's hiding places, the more worthy became the child's green treasures.

Mother and daughter, willful each, could come to thrilling confrontations. And sometimes the mother won. Sometimes she drew the green paper, all rolled into the thinnest tubes, from the legs of dolls, from chinks in the wall. And then, of course, Dorothy would deliver herself to the sobs of the abandoned.

And so it was that, on an autumn afternoon, I happened to see the bedrock thing upon which the relationship was founded, the thing that never changed, whatever the weather between this mother and her daughter, allowing storms to come and go without a lasting damage.

I saw it fresh. Thanne saw it as another sign of something she'd known all along. This thing: an enduring mother love.

Gertrude, smoothing the apron down her thighs, walked over to Dorothy. The child glanced up, wrinkled her forehead, then put her head down between her knees as if to rain on all the rugs: green paper money, apparently, had vanished again.

But Gertrude knelt and then bent down low, low enough to peer upward into the cloud of the Dorothy-face. Then, suddenly, as if overcome by the sight, Gertrude reached and squeezed her daughter's cheek between the thumb and the fore-knuckle of her right hand. Gently she tugged the little face left and right, left and right, and "*Putzel, Putzel,*" she whispered in a small voice rising toward tears: "Oh, *Putzel,* I love you so much I could eat you up."

As if her daughter were the highest, most royal doll on the crown of the loveliest wedding cake ever baked in Iroquois County, Illinois.

And the Dorothy-face, still staring downward, began to giggle. Silly, silly giggling: like a baby, a tearful giggling. Like a daughter restored. Like a sinner forgiven.

And that's it. That's the memory we share, Thanne and I. Completely common and as forgettable as bread. Except that people don't forget the staff of life in a world more hungry than whole.

And from such goodness, good stories come, for the artist's job is to notice, to preserve. and to make public these blessings for the sake of the many.

For the children's story is meant as much to embrace the child with health and wholeness as it is to companion the kid through difficulty.

Therefore, my mother-in-law's words became the spirit and the tone of my own tale, written to give voice to any parent's abiding love for the child, *The Bedtime Rhyme*.

With the beginning of that story, I end this story:

Are you my strongest?

Are you my smartest?

Are you my baby true?

Are you my laughigest,

Loudest and lastingest

Friend? Oh, I love you.

*I love your eyes
Like fireflies;
I love your ears
Like boutonnieres;
I love your back
Your bones in a sack;
I love your cheeks
And all your teeth,
Your nose and toes and tongue and such—
But you say, "Stop! How much? How much?"
How much, my honeydew?
How much do I love you?
Lay down your head,
Sweet gingerbread,
And listen: I'll tell you....*

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