

UNSCHOOL

When his four-year-old, Katie, rammed a piece of chicken wire into her finger one hot October afternoon as they finished their snail fences, David called Madeline and Emily over and let them take turns wrapping the wound.

“See how much pressure it takes to stop the bleeding,” he told his girls. “Try different amounts.”

Maybe the girls would grow up to be doctors, David thought as he watched the care they took wrapping the kitchen towel around their sister’s finger. Maybe they’d be Peace Corps volunteers or veterinarians or candy stripers. Did hospitals use candy stripers anymore, he wondered? How old did hospital volunteers have to be anyway? When he got online later, he’d have to look this up. Each day David was filled with a deep sense of possibility for his girls.

“I think the holes are too big,” Emily said. She stared critically at the circular enclosures the four of them had worked on all afternoon. “I bet the snails will climb right through and eat all the fall tomatoes.”

David began to suspect as much himself about ten minutes into the project, but he figured it would be a learning experience for his girls, and they could always reuse the chicken wire later for something else. Hadn’t he just read something somewhere about making lampshades out of recycled stuff?

“And what would we learn from that?” David asked. “If the snails

did get through?”

“We could try cheesecloth next time,” Madeline said, twisting the kitchen towel tight around Katie’s punctured finger.

“Good thinking. We could experiment to see if enough light gets in for photosynthesis,” David said.

“It’s my turn to stop Katie’s blood,” Emily said, elbowing Madeline out of the way.

“I want a band-aid now,” Katie said, pushing both her sisters and the kitchen towel away. “I want a real band-aid, a Star Wars one, and I want Daddy to put it on. Not either one of you.”

“Daddy to the rescue,” David said, picking up his youngest duckling, his baby, and carrying her inside to the bathroom, where Katie climbed up on the toilet seat and pulled a box of band-aids out of the medicine cabinet. David centered the padded section over the small dried-up puncture on his daughter’s fingertip.

He heard the television set blare on in the living room. They had decided to hold onto cable for the first year of homeschooling and had never really revisited the issue. David thought he and the girls might watch selected documentaries on the History Channel and have interesting discussions afterward, that they could all study Spanish together on the public station and maybe even have some fun with their new skills by following a telenovela. And what harm could there be if the four of them spent a half hour a day watching *Sesame Street* or some other educational programming?

But instead of doing any of those things, the girls ripped open bags of organic trail mix and sat down to watch the cartoon channel every time he left them to their own devices. And the truth was, David was relieved to have the down time. Sometimes he watched cartoons, too, the four of them sprawled across the couch in the middle of the afternoon, his index finger poised above the “off” button of the remote in case he heard his wife’s car pulling up in the driveway.

He wasn’t sure when Deborah had become the authority figure in their household, but no matter how much he tried, he couldn’t seem to help thinking of his wife as *the man*. Once in a while he even slipped and called her that to the kids. “The man is home,” he’d hear himself say as the front doorknob turned.



David had always assumed he'd end up in Oregon or perhaps in a foggy coastal area north of San Francisco, somewhere like Mendocino, where rocky cliffs juttied out over the ocean. His future children would grow up collecting rocks and building forts in the woods. He'd made it as far north as Santa Cruz for graduate school, where the coastal fog-loving banana slug was the university's official logo.

And he planned on heading farther north still as soon as he completed his master's. He imagined a life with rain and redwoods and plenty of community activism and liberal free-thinking neighbors and a surprising abundance of small companies eager to hire people with MAs in comparative literature. But, instead, after graduate school, he'd somehow wound up right back in Long Beach, living in a crappy tract home ten minutes from where he'd grown up.

The somehow part was not a complete mystery, of course. Deborah, the law student he'd begun dating while in graduate school, had passed the bar and, after sending out two rounds of resumes, had landed a job working at a law firm in nearby Cerritos. Although the job was corporate and dull and had nothing to do with the legal work she planned to pursue—environmental law—with their first baby already on the way, they'd snapped up the offer. They reasoned that it was a first job. It didn't have to be a dream job. And they reasoned that with Deborah's parents retired in Florida, having at least one set of grandparents nearby had to be a good thing for children. Then they sealed the whole suburban deal by getting married at the Lakewood Country Club, a glowing Deborah then eight months pregnant.

Their three daughters had been born two years apart nearly to the day. Deborah called them their lucky ducklings, using the phrase for the first time when she surprised them all by getting off work early one Friday afternoon to find the girls trailing after David on their way home from the corner playground.

He was the stay-at-home dad, and Deborah went to work and made enough money to pay for bicycles and vacations to San Diego and rectangles of sod to cover the dry dirt David unearthed by drilling

through the concrete of the backyard. He planned the playdates, made the doctors' appointments, and found the waxed paper cups stowed away in the garage for the lemonade stands. In this way, at least, they weren't their neighbors. But in every other way, he had relented. The tract house, the kind of vacations where the only surprise was how long the lines would be at SeaWorld, the cable television, none of it was anything he had ever imagined.

A year before it was time to enroll their oldest daughter, Madeline, in school, David decided he would finally take a stand. Even if his children had been born and raised in dry, paved-over Southern California the way he had been, he still imagined his idealized elementary school in the redwoods. The principal would have a Question Authority bumper sticker peeling off his back windshield, and the teachers would be young and enthusiastic and attractive, although, of course, he knew he couldn't quite justify this last wish.

And because their city offered school choice, he began searching for just this school. He visited a French immersion charter school, a K–8 arts magnet, and their own neighborhood elementary school, where the moms with whom he organized playdates planned to send their children. Some already had older children there, and they gossiped freely and, it seemed to him, a bit too happily about the tyrannical nature of the PTA board.

None of the schools David visited seemed right to him. Instead of meeting actual teachers, he was forced to interview assistant principals and other beleaguered administrators, city employees who sucked breath mints and had bad haircuts, and who glanced too often at their watches. When examined closely, the “magnets” themselves, he decided, were little more than sales ploys to attract parents from middle-class neighborhoods like his own to the grim neighborhoods they could otherwise safely avoid. No matter what they claimed to be, every school he visited had standardized testing, and virtually the same grading system, the same hoops at the end of the day that each kid had to jump through.

Having jumped diligently and unhappily through plenty of those hoops himself as a child, David decided to say no to all of it and homeschool his girls instead of sending them anywhere. They may not

be able to roam freely in nature the way he'd hoped, but he could make sure that their imaginations weren't killed the way his own had nearly been with rote memorization. They wouldn't sit for hours while he flipped flash cards in front of their faces so they could learn their times tables. In third grade he'd used his own subtraction flash cards to build an entire city across the floor of his classroom during after-school "math club," and, instead of being praised for his creativity, he was sent the next day to practice math facts with the second graders.

Who cared what the names of the fifty state capitals were if you never got to leave your own confining desk? His girls would be able to get up and sharpen pencils without raising their hands. They could walk down the hall and go to the bathroom without enduring the humiliating choice of requesting a bright yellow hall pass or risking an accident. They could pursue what they loved at their own pace. Everything they did would be about learning.

"We'll get rid of cable, of the television set entirely," he had told Deborah, formalizing his plan even as he talked to her.

"One year," she told him. "Try it with Madeline for one year and then get back to me with the full report, and we'll see."

Screw you, he thought. Deborah had never talked this way before they were married. They'd met during a beach clean-up and shared equal parts raw idealism and lust. Back then, he thought it was sexy, in a feminist sort of way, how she told people to pronounce her name, Deb-OR-ah, with the accent on the middle syllable. Now, it just seemed affected. Back then, they used to stay up all night having sex and plotting how to change the world. They didn't *try* anything.

"Okay, *Deb-OR-ah*," David said. "We'll try it for a year."



Three years later, David couldn't believe he had ever considered sending his daughters into classrooms. He shuddered when he imagined them forced to sit on hard wooden chairs for six hours a day. He was certain that one day humans would look back at schools the way society now looked at foot binding or public stoning. Human beings were the only animals who treated their own in such cruel ways.

Now four, six, and eight, his daughters spent their days any way the four of them saw fit. They took field trips to the nature center to look for garter snakes and egrets. They studied planets by driving up the mountains of the San Bernardino National Forest with their sleeping bags and a telescope, noting the changes in vegetation as their car climbed. They studied earth science by pulling out carefully laid sod and planting an organic vegetable garden. They found geometric shapes in the patterns of spider webs. They soaked old newspaper in warm water and broke the blender trying to make their own recycled paper.

They spent an hour each week eating free samples and tracking the life span of the humble doughnut in their local Krispy Kreme, following the same doughnut from its flat beginning to its full glazed glory. When they became bored with their own company, they participated in the occasional half-price homeschool restaurant dinner or a midweek homeschool day at the Lakewood Ice Palace skating rink.

And sometimes they stayed home and did very little.



“Why don’t you and your boo-boo watch TV with your sisters for a while,” David said, giving Katie’s band-aid one last kiss, “while Daddy does his computer work.”

Katie nodded and said, “That’s a good idea. I need to take it easy for a while.”

He watched his youngest daughter wander into the living room, feeling dizzy with love for her and the stoic temperament with which she was clearly born. While they physically resembled one other and their mother, with their sandy blond hair, small waists, and larger bottoms, it seemed to him that each of his daughters had a strikingly different personality. Madeline, easily overstimulated by the outside world, was the first one to pop on the television set. Alert Emily always counted the most pelicans at the bay. And Katie was the rule-follower, the one who probably would have done the best in an actual classroom.

David went into the bedroom and logged onto his computer. He thought having children would make him more of an activist. Didn’t

people want their families to inherit a better Earth, with healthy air, good daycare for single mothers, and political leaders whose names they wouldn't be embarrassed to utter?

But he found that becoming a father had actually made his world smaller. He cared so intensely about his own children that he had to remind himself to consider anyone else's. And even then, after the birth of his first daughter, his concerns felt abstract—the world's poor, the homeless, the disabled—and were usually in the context of teaching his girls something.

He knew he should care, so when his youngest daughter, Katie, was three and David deemed her old enough to participate, he made it a project to get the girls involved in a more direct way. When it turned out that they were too young to volunteer in person anywhere meaningful (the local homeless shelter insisted that children be fifteen), David decided to let his daughters pick charities online.

They made one of their first donations to teenage girls in foster care who wanted new prom dresses. "I like the one whose mother is a drug addict," Madeline said, pointing to a moon-faced girl on the computer screen.

"I want the one who got straight As," Emily said, touching the screen where a girl's hopeful smile revealed a need for braces more urgent than her desire for a prom dress.

He felt overwhelmed with the luck of his children's lives.

"Who do you want?" he'd asked Katie.

"I want them all," she said.

The girls counted up the coins they had amassed between sofa cushions and under the seats in the family minivan. They paid for prom dresses.

Then they found more causes.

They manned lemonade stands each Saturday until they could afford to buy a bicycle for a man in Ethiopia who had started a small business delivering coffee beans to a bed-and-breakfast that catered to a surprisingly regular tourism industry in Addis Ababa. They bought prescription glasses for women who sewed clothes in sweatshops in India. They bought winter coats for a family of eight in Appalachia.

David praised his daughters for their efforts, but he knew the truth:

He had become one of those *distant givers* he and Deborah used to deride as they speared plastic bags and the occasional used condom around the fire pits of Seacliff Beach with other environmentally conscious UCSC students. His point had been to get his children directly involved. He finally found a homeless shelter in Inglewood that didn't care how old the volunteers were as long as a parent supervised them. But after just one afternoon spent attempting to organize clothing donations—this had devolved quickly into a spontaneous and disorganized game of dress-up—he realized the truth: They really were too young to do much good in person.

They went back to their online charities. David vowed to teach his girls how to make a difference in the larger world without leaving their own small one. And in the process, he had become the kind of person he used to criticize. Home with daughters, he rarely left his own comfort zone to pull on rubber gloves and pick up syringes in a city park or mop a sticky, peeling linoleum floor at the kind of shelter that smelled like barley soup no matter what was on the menu.

He gave money instead of time. Of course, everyone's contribution was *needed*. And it could be argued that money was way more valuable than time. It could be argued particularly now that he was the one giving it.

While the girls were nearly as instantly thrilled and subsequently bored with their small donations as if they'd purchased something for themselves, none of it felt like quite enough to him. They were all out there pleading with him to give them more, to make a real difference in their lives, the children with cleft palates and big empty bellies, the Latin American men with their modest needs for an ox or a wheelbarrow.

Late at night, while Deborah and the girls slept on their thick mattresses in their suburban neighborhood, David logged onto glossy nonprofit websites the way some men logged onto porn. And he said yes. Like Katie, he wanted them all, too.

He'd held onto several of his own credit cards when he and Deborah married. Feeling righteous and sneaky in a way he knew was more adolescent than adult, he maxed out those cards one by one on his causes. Now he was chiseling away at the small retirement fund

he doubted Deborah even remembered he had, one he'd accrued at meaningless jobs before he quit pursuing outside work to become a full-time father.

But no matter how many goats he secretly bought for struggling villagers in central Mali, no matter how many bath towels and teddy bears he bought for a women's shelter in Oakland, he felt that his one real connection to his old activist self, the person who used to man the suicide hotline on New Year's Eve and dish out mounds of wet stuffing on Thanksgiving at shelters, his one real, nonmonetary contribution to the larger world that existed outside of his daughters, was to homeschoolers.

He posted his email address on every legitimate website and chat group he knew of, and every day he made himself available to answer questions. So he didn't feel overwhelmed, he made a schedule, checking for questions in the afternoon and once again later at night when the girls were asleep.

Each day he had at least several messages. There were leisurely comments about curriculum—along with occasional book recommendations—from a group he thought of as hobbyists or would-be homeschooling experts themselves. Then there was an entirely different set of messages from the desperate people whose emails felt nearly as urgent to him as the suicide-threateners had seemed. *Help me!* they wrote. *No one understands why I want to do this. I'm all alone.*

He answered the desperate ones first, of course, today's leading contender a triple threat of a woman named Beth who had a daughter with nearly constant asthma and potentially life-threatening allergies, a husband in the process of leaving her, and no connection at all with other homeschoolers.

I don't know where to start, she wrote. *Can you help me?*

Of course, David typed back, the screeches of revved-up cartoon voices in the background and images from his most recent charity, famine victims trekking across a desert in northern Kenya, calling out to him from a window on his computer that he would reopen as soon as he finished this email. *No matter how you feel now, you are not alone!*