



I CAN ONLY GIVE YOU  
EVERYTHING

BRADFORD TATUM

# I Can Only Give You Everything

**By Bradford Tatum**

<http://icanonlygiveyoueverything.com>

## Chapter 1: She Sleeps With the Polyethylene

She has left.

I move my fingers forward and feel a ring of dampness beneath her. Like the condensation under a long sitting stone. No reek. No horror. Just the moisture given up after the last days of spare glasses of coral calcium water.

Above and behind her the doll is still tied. It hangs by its solid throat, suspended from the bed post with purple sparkled birthday ribbon. Hard knots.

A ravaged Barbie.

Blond polyester strands cropped close to the hollow head. The hard flesh colored breasts sheared clean with a heated steak knife. I helped her with that.

It is a twin. A reflection. The map our daughter has made of the changes.

I don't have much time. The day will be here soon and with it the rustling in the next room and then the rest of our lives together without her.

I think of her body, the ripe full body, hipless and lush-chested with knees like a renaissance Christ, taut from the constant movement that never left her. Heart-snag and shyness and that cup of a green wool sweater that barely held her, tipful and spilling all of our soon to be future. Five hours of raw mouthed kissing, sucking in wine stale fumes like the most volatile of gasses, half-dates, waiting, a proposal that was only half mine, then marriage at home and the phone call about how predictable life had become. Surely our bay had swelled passed its beams, surely we could float another. Me, poised above her, her nose still congested from the dregs of a winter cold, mid stroke, ponderous, hearts pounding like rival marching bands. Are you sure? I'm sure. And our daughter caught. Nine months. No hospitals. Bliss. Born here. Born at home. In this bed where I lay now.

Chloe pads into the room on her square little feet, in nightmare-proof pajamas, enters right on cue as my last thought of her pressing through her mother's hips leaves my mind. Her little bed addled head, smelling of biscuits and sleep, bobs past the footboard.

My time is over.

It is now all us.

"She looks just like the doll," she says looking down.

I can only feel the sloppiness of my own nakedness under the sheets. We had been a very open family or a very lazy one depending on how you look at it. We moved around the interior of our house in our natural states when it suited us, answering the requisite questions about sexual plumbing and pubic hair with enlightened chirps. But this nakedness is new, freshly peeled, somehow unpleasantly exposed. I squirm under the covers, trying to twist the sheets around me. Chloe doesn't seem to notice. She is untying the doll from the headboard. Her

small intent fingers picking at the knots of the ribbon are the only sound in the room. When the doll is loose she looks up. I don't expect tears. We are as empty as wineskins, the two of us.

“Do I have to go to school today?”

I fluff up a little nest for her out of her brown micro-fiber blanket and the soft bodies of a few stale stuffed animals, put a bowl of dry cereal in her lap and put on the DVD of “her movie.” Dana Andrews and Theresa Wright are staring at one another in chaste confusion when I think of the body again.

I adopted a dog once, a grave misstep in judgment, a mutt I found on a job site licking brake fluid out of the gutters. The vet had given it six months. It hung on for four years. Then one evening while my wife was on location with Chloe I walked into a dark kitchen to find it stiff on the saltillo.

I called my sister.

“Oh, my God,” she answered the phone. She had always been intermittently psychic. “When?”

“This morning, some time. Early.”

“Where is she now?”

“In the bed.”

“Still? Jesus.”

“What's Jesus about that? It's pretty much how we planned it.”

“I am so sorry.”

My instinct is to want this tidy, tucked in cupboards and folded in closed drawers. I want my sister's famous pragmatism not the other.

“You remember Otto?”

“Your dog?”

“Right now this is like that.”

I left the kitchen and went right to the phone. She had told me to call the vet. Vet's handle this kind of thing. She understood.

"You call the funeral home," her voice cracks, then clears.

"Don't have one."

"Okay." I can hear her producer gears whir. "The hospital, coroner's office. You want me to handle this?"

She would. Beautifully. Every concession allotted for. Every snag massaged. It's what she does. But I say no.

I call my wife's oncologist. We haven't spoken for two years.

"Dr Marfi, please," I say.

"May I ask who is calling?" An officious voice, rehearsed.

"I'm calling for \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_." I use my wife's stage name.

"Is this her husband? I remember you." Warning barbs in her resonance. Old wounds. "How is your wife?"

"She passed. This morning."

Silence, again rehearsed. Then: "I'm sorry."

"Could you maybe...?"

"We don't handle that part of the process but I can give you the number of a funeral home."

"Process" lingers but I fumble for a pencil and take down the number.

When I return to the front room, the air cracks with the cheap carnival bite of bubble gum. Chloe's jaws work absently as she studies Myrna Loy's pert profile.

"Auntie's here," she offers, dazed by the creamy black and white. I hear the bathroom door buck and fret. I turn the door knob to free her Auntie.

"Jesus, you scared me," my sister says on a quick intake of breath, her wide features splayed even wider by the home made fright.

I scared her once with cookies, baked them for a Memorial Day thing before my wife's illness. She bit into one and jolted.

"Oh, my God," my sister had said. "What was that?"

"Where?" I asked.

"In my mouth. I bit something weird. What was that?"

"Pecans, I think. Or walnuts." You had to be careful around her, tap the walls, announce an entrance. You could frighten her with nuts.

"When did you get here?" I ask. She catches her breath and moves past me, her hands still wet from the sink.

"You were on the phone. I thought you might need some help." It was the type of help she was rehearsed at offering, the left handed loopy kind that whether by design or omission inferred your own incompetence as it attempted to soothe.

"Did you give her the bubble gum?" I fired back quietly.

"She wanted it."

"I'm trying to watch her sugar."

"Really? With what she's going through you think bubble gum's going to hurt her?"

"I don't know what she's going through and I just wish you'd have asked."

"So now I'm supposed to be sorry about giving my niece some gum?" She could drop this reductionist napalm in any kind of weather. She watches my palm trees implode and then demurs.

"She not going to school today?" A classic opening. She knows I'll riposte with her own formula:

"You really think she should go to school the morning her mom died?" Which is precisely what she wants me to say. Now we're even and the ground is set for her final foray.

"Listen, you've been through a lot. I really just came here to help." Match point.

The gurney from the funeral home arrives on the porch while I am silent. My sister opens the door like she is welcoming dinner guests. I retreat to the kitchen with Chloe's empty bowl. I wash it out even though it is filled with only a few cereal crumbs. I can hear the rubber coated casters of the gurney resound off the subflooring, hear the metallic tick and shift of its tube legs as it is guided past our bedroom door. I join Chloe in the door jamb to watch two Hispanic men in short officious sleeves push the gurney to my wife's side of the bed. My sister is cool, a cop calmly directing traffic in a mass evacuation. They dip into her like workmen loading wheat sacks, four dark arms sunk in the hollows of her arm pits and knees.

"Hold on," I say, the words slipping out of me like eels. The workmen stop and turn their slick heads. My sister's face screws into judgment. I find I cannot speak.

"We want to do it," Chloe says evenly, looking at the body. "Come on, Dad." She extends a little hand. This is not what I meant. This is not what I wanted. But my daughter has taken the moment and found a way out of it. The workmen retract their arms. The body falls back to the soft sheet like a tide. I figure the legs will be lighter so I settle next to the upper body. But nothing prepares us for the weight. During her last days I could have sworn she was made of paper. As light as parchment. But something has filled her now, a ponderous accumulation, the anchor of her leaving. We manage to make her hover finally, shakily. My daughter's strength surprises me. I look over to her to assess her struggle. Her large eyes are flooded. I break.

"Brian, enough," my sister shouts. "Put her down." But I can't. I won't. Tears stream down my daughter's pale cheeks. She blinks to clear her eyes, her face clenched like kissed fingers. The legs swing onto the bleached sheet covering the gurney. I heft my side and my wife is no longer in her bed. She is with them now. The workers give me a tentative look as if to say, are you done now, gringo? We got jobs, man. Mind if we get to it? I step aside and reach for Chloe.

“I’m okay,” she says, pulling her palms down her cheeks. The workers adjust the body and start the wheels squeaking out the door.

That night our hunger falls on us like a cartoon piano, comes out of the blue and leaves us bleary and irritable. Chloe sits in the breakfast nook while I rummage through the refrigerator. It is sparse with cold organic produce: a few hard dirty orange digits of carrot and a frilly head of black-green kale. A plastic carton filled with a thatch of alfalfa sprouts. On the counter the wheat grass screw still winks with its alloy sheen next to a pallet of cowless pasture. She lasted almost two years ingesting nothing but foliage. There is no sugar here, no white flour, no meat, no milk. Only cud fit for something with two stomachs.

“Pellet!” Chloe suddenly shouts. “You will feed me now.” She uses her false imperious voice, her Bette Davis as Queen Bess. I don’t know it but she will never call me dad again. The new mantle of this name falls on me like day, as lightly as a chain of knotted daisies. I turn and bow deeply. She grins with delight.

“Forgive me your grace, but poorly sits the condition of our cupboard.”

“You will call me Crumb, knave,” she commands looking down the soft jump of her tiny nose.

“Yes, Crumb,” I answer and swear the air is lighter.

“We have but one option left to us,” she says, rising from her seat. “Dupars. Pancakes. Immediately!”

Public was not the best place for me. The sheer heft of the day was beginning to descend and I knew the night would be no better. But it was good to see her eat. Even if it was a gummy stack of processed flour and corn syrup. We found a booth at the back, near a couple twin stained with age spots by some penny colored rain. The woman held a spoonful of reconstituted mashed potatoes out to her man, her mouth open like an encouraging mother feeding an infant. At least we were spared

that, my mind flashed. Then the loss bucked and I raised my water glass for a swallow.

“What did they do with mom’s boobs?” Chloe asked. The question hydroplaned on bad brakes before it slid queasily into me. I looked at her, hoping for my voice.

“What do you mean?” I finally got out.

“After they cut them off. What happened to them?”

“I don’t know, honey. They probably...why?” Her lips are red from licking, lipstick looking, unsettlingly mature.

“Will they be in the can with the rest of her?”

“What can?”

“The coffee can.” She must have heard us, laughing, near the end. We teased about her ashes being interred in some stuffy urn and she said don’t bother just sweep ‘em into an Illy espresso can, but remember which one. It was the sense of humor we thought we were supposed to have.

“Mom and I were just kidding, sweetie. She won’t go into a can.”

But of course she would.

“What will we do with her?”

“What do you want to do with her.”

“I want to keep her.” Stray cat conversation. Lost puppy. I sipped.

“In what?”

“My Mega Girl thermos,” said outright, triumphantly. A hard midget fist settled in my throat. She had found the perfect place of repose. The Mega Girl thermos. Of course. It even almost looked like her. It had held soup, juice, mud concoctions, soy chocolate milk, even pee once on a trip to Ojai. Why not her? To a few thousand die hard fans my wife was still Mega Girl, although no longer syndicated. She had an action figure, signed 8×10’s. Bed sheets. Vintage lunch boxes. Ebay

could sell what Comicon couldn't. Even though the run had been brief, three years when she was freshly eighteen, it had had enough steam to deliver a respectable stream of guest spots and bit parts, a level two SAG co-pay that shouldered the lion's share of what it cost to nearly unsex her. She would have smiled at the irony and then asked for a glass of Malbec.

"I think that's an absolutely brilliant idea, Crumb." I said smiling.

"Pay the bill, Pellet," she said smirking and waving dismissively. "Our work here is done."

The funeral home sent her back in brown paper, like porn. We tore at the package with Christmas fervor and slammed the simple tin can down hard on the breakfast table. A frail cloud of mother/wife dust bloomed out of the creases. We beheld it in awe. Was all of her really in there? Was it really mostly water we had so loved? Chloe booked out of the kitchen and ran back, breathless, with her Mega Girl thermos. I pressed a grip over the lid that held the ashes.

"I want to do it," she said, pulling the can towards her with two hands.

"Careful."

"I know." Her little face screwed up like a spring and then the lid gave, and she massaged open the can. We knew what to expect. We had a dog reduced the same way. I opened the thermos top and held it out to her. Chloe tipped the can into the thermos, a bad housewife too liberal with the coffee, and let the powder flake into it in shuddering slides.

"There you are Mommy," she said, her large eyes dancing. "Home now."

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