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The Grandfather Diary

By Mike Tully

Recently, “The Late Show with Stephen Colbert” featured an opening animation that depicted Peppa Pig’s father dying of a heart attack while using a Peloton. I wouldn’t have gotten the reference a year ago; I didn’t know Peppa Pig from Pinocchio.

But Peppa Pig – possibly the worst drawn animated cartoon in the history of the artform – is now a part of my weekday experience. As is, of course, “Sesame Street.” The latter is compulsory viewing for American toddlers and my grandson loves it. I’m not so crazy about the show, mainly because Elmo is the show’s principal character and I can’t understand a word he says. Ryan Dillon voices Elmo in an annoying falsetto that is not friendly to a grandparent’s hearing. I try to make out what he’s saying but it’s like having a conversation with a squeaky toy. Of course, I’m decades outside the target audience and my grandson seems fine with Elmo’s high-pitched songs and soliloquies.

I used to spend my weekdays with Andrea Mitchell, Katy Tur, Nicole Wallace, Craig Melvin and other cable news hosts. They have been largely replaced by Sesame Street, Peppa Pig, Masha and the Bear, Team Umizoomi and Blaze and the Giant Machines. Bubble Guppies is probably the best produced, although it’s theme song easily degenerates into an earworm that lingers in my head for most of the afternoon. (Bub-bub-bubble, gup-gup-guppies! Bub-bub-bubble, gup-gup-guppies! – gaahhh!)

I draw the line at Blue’s Clues. I have my limits and the kid can live without it.

Joey – we still call him “Roo,” but I think that will change as he gets deeper into toddlerhood – just turned 14 months and celebrated his birthday by starting to walk. Kris and I have taken care of him weekdays since last March, when his mother returned to work. All of a sudden, a comfortable, if docile, retirement was upended by a tiny creature with healthy lungs whose existence was framed by bottles and diapers. Having a couple of septuagenarians provide child care for an infant seemed like a long-shot, an experiment unlikely to succeed. But it all came back: preparing formula, bottle feeding, changing, holding, rocking. It helped that Joey was and is an amazing baby. He’s engaging, happy, rarely cries, and exudes charisma.

About that. We took a family vacation to Hawaii over the holidays – the first time all five of us traveled together – and two people looked at Joey and asked, “Is he always this happy?” One was a waitress and one was a fellow diner. The answer: yes. He has a remarkably good disposition. He likes to flirt with waitresses and other diners. A hostess at Duke’s in Waikiki looked at him, stopped mid-sentence, and said, “Oh my God, I got lost in the eyes!” It was like traveling with a celebrity. Imagine that: hanging with a one-year-old gave us status.

He was still a rug-rat in Hawaii, but we bought him a walking toy, a Fisher-Price product known as a “Puppy Walker.” It’s designed to introduce budding toddlers to walking by giving them something to hold onto while learning to walk. It’s colorful, lights up and is easily maneuverable. The infernal device also talks, encouraging the toddler with phrases like “You’re Walking!” and “Keep Going!” in a – what else? -- high squeaky voice.

Joey likes to push the Puppy Walker up and down the hall. After his first day of robust walking, we left it at the end of the hall. That night, in the early morning hours, I got up to use the bathroom (yeah, I’m old). I carefully walked out of the bedroom into the hallway on the way to the restroom. Then, in the blackness, the Puppy Walker blurted out, “DOO DOO DOO-DOOOO! LET’S GET WALKING!”

I almost didn’t make it to the bathroom. Lesson learned, the next day I stashed the perky little sleep assassin in the nursery.

We have a toy bin in the bedroom – for the dog. Zoey is hard on toys. She dismantles rope-and-ball toys and plays with the parts separately. We bought plush toys for Roo, but Zoey kept finding and disemboweling them. We replaced a couple, then gave up. I still have the remnants stored on top of my armoire. The island of dismembered toys. Heartwarming.

But don’t feel sorry for the kid because the dog shares her toys with him. When he comes over in the morning, the first place he goes is to Zoey’s toy bin. He especially loves the balls. He and Zoey are forming a bond and his father refers to Zoey as “his first best friend.” He will grow up around dogs and I suspect dogs will always be an important part of his life, as they have been for his parents and grandparents.

Certainly, taking care of a little one is challenging, tiring, sometimes frustrating. Occasionally, I’m a bit intimidated by the responsibility. But the wind is calm and there is a bright blue sky outside. Let’s get walking!