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Idolatry

I was feverish, the first time—in bed under two down comforters and still shivering. It was midsummer; I had the flu. Too glassy-eyed and dizzy, too flat-out miserable for once in my life to read (although I'd piled a hopeful foot-high stack of books on my night table, right next to the bottle of Smart Water the doctor had recommended to combat the dehydration that left me feeling drunk every time I stood up, sat up, or closed my eyes) and sick to death of sleeping, I was flipping channels on the little bedside TV my husband watches sports on. I started with HBO—the several channels' worth our cable company provides “as a courtesy” to the customers it overcharges anyway for just the one channel of HBO—and moved through Showtime (ditto), grumbling all the while about how it can be, *how is it possible*, that they broadcast movies twenty-four hours a day and yet never show anything I want to watch, before grimly beginning the round of the single digits: 4, 6, 8 . . . and stopped, stopped dead, at Channel 8, where a nervous-looking, bizarrely overdressed young woman was belting the hell out of a song from the forties—a fragment of a song, cut off after just a few bars and replaced by a clip of a young man, equally self-conscious, his tie untied in the style of Rat Pack-era Sinatra, stumbling through *his* song fragment. A talent show?

A talent show! I nearly clapped my hands in pleasure (no doubt I would have, if I'd had the energy—if I hadn't been afraid that clapping, that *pleasure*, would have sent me over the edge, into the freefall of another dizzy spell) as I settled back on my pillows to watch. I *love* a talent show.

That first night, I was so transfixed I didn't even think to call downstairs to my daughter, then nine years old—though if I'd stopped to think, as I did the next day, I would have realized that she'd be at least as interested as I. She's a sucker for talent, too, and for pop songs of all kinds—not

to mention the sort of human interest story I'd already sniffed out here. That first night, I just lay back on my pillows (a stack taller even than the stack of brand-new books I'd told myself I'd "use this time" to read after I'd been ordered to my bed), the two down comforters pulled up to my neck, and watched—with deep and growing pleasure—as the parade of awkward, unpolished, variously handsome young people, all of them groomed in an approximation of TV stardom (too much makeup, complicatedly styled and colored hair, wacky "glamorous" outfits that were clearly supposed to represent the look of the thirties and forties but didn't quite), sang and fidgeted and then stood tense and panting as they listened to the judgments passed on them by a panel of music industry professionals who seemed only slightly less self-conscious than they did.

All the singers looked frightened. Even the ones who looked cocky also looked frightened. I understood why, too, after only a few minutes. This was the "results show," broadcasting the highlights of the actual competition that had been on TV the night before—I groaned, as this became clear to me (how I wished I hadn't missed it!)—but already I saw how it worked. The judges could say anything they wanted—they could be downright vicious if they felt like it ("That was just awful. Honestly, that was possibly the worst singing I have ever heard") or utterly opaque (one judge, it seemed, did little more than sigh and shake his head and mutter the contestant's name again and again)—and there was entertainment value in their pronouncements. A viewer could (and inevitably did) judge the judgments just as she judged the singing. The judges competed—with one another, with the singers—for attention; they were showing off.

But in fact what the show-off judges said didn't matter, the show's hosts reminded us. "It was up to you, America." It was? It was! One could weigh in on the singing, via phone call. How I wished I'd had the chance! "Last night, America voted"—oh, how I wished *I* had!—and we'll find out what America had to say . . . "after the break."

I didn't change channels. What if I missed the news of how America had voted?

I already knew how *I* would have voted. Based on nothing but a fragment of a song I'd never heard before—"Stuff Like That There"—I'd picked out a favorite, falling in love the way I'll start to fall in love with a book thanks to a single gorgeous sentence. I'd picked a second favorite, too. I'd even dismissed a couple of the singers—and why not? A few

bad notes, a delivery unhooked from emotion, an obvious misreading of a song I knew too well—it didn't take much more than that.

I've slammed books shut, after all, after just one ungainly phrase or a show-off, impenetrable opening. Or a sprinkling of clichés. Hell, a handful of misplaced commas will do it if I'm in a black mood.

I actually held my breath during the show's final moments, and then I watched open-mouthed as sweet-faced Christina, who had gamely sung "The Glory of Love"—not very well, I'd noted as I watched her clip, but not *badly*, either; certainly not as badly as others had sung *their* songs—was eliminated from the competition. Her cohorts wept in sympathy and relief. And poor Christina wasn't even present except in videotaped footage (a chunk of sentimental back story about how her parents had insisted she go to college even though she wasn't sure she wanted to, and how she worked part-time in a bank to put herself through school—with a voice-over by Christina herself about how she was sure fame wouldn't change her, and how her family still treated her as if she were "just a regular person" despite her being on the show) and a somber report of her removal to a hospital "only hours ago" to be treated for "exhaustion and stress." Our thoughts were with her, said the show's hosts. We sent our love.

This show has everything, I thought. I was enraptured.

"What can you possibly be enraptured by?" my husband asked the next day. He is a serious person, an artist, whose only idle activities are watching the Dallas Cowboys or Ohio State play football and just about anyone play basketball. But even then, watching the game, he isn't really idle. He draws while he watches, exactly the way other people eat pretzels and drink beer. Half-filled sketchbooks and drawing pads and black, fine-line markers are scattered all over the house.

Before I could answer him, he asked another question, sounding hopeful: "Is this a hobby?" *His* hobbies are practicing playing the bass guitar for an hour a day and painstakingly designing houses on graph paper, one of which (the best one, the perfect one he has yet to draw) he hopes to build for us eventually. I always tell him I have no time for hobbies; *I'm* too busy running the household. When I'm not writing or teaching, I'm cooking or shopping for groceries or balancing the checkbook or digging through our daughter's dresser drawers to weed out the clothes that don't fit her anymore or shopping for *new* clothes for her. Unlike him, I say pointedly—and meanly, I realize (but I get tired, and when I'm tired,

I tend to slide toward meanness; I turn bitterly jealous of the sixteen-hour days he spends painting—even though I could never put in those kinds of hours at my own work; I *like* to have lots of different things to do, and I like running the household)—unlike him, I say, I *have* no leisure time.

Well, you can't call it a hobby exactly, but I've made time for the talent show. For three seasons of it now I've managed to make time for it—for every episode after that first one I caught, that first summer, and for the two, four-month long seasons in the two years since. Twice a week, I have dropped everything—student stories, my own new book in progress, laundry, dishes, stacking books and papers on chairs and around the edges of the dining room table to keep the chaos at bay—and sat myself down in front of the TV set. And my daughter, Grace, is right there with me—sitting beside me on the couch we bought her father for his fortieth birthday, along with cable we installed so he could watch ESPN. Grace has been watching the show with me ever since the episode after the first one I caught by accident. On “results night,” Wednesdays, we hold hands.

And the answer to her father's question is that I am enraptured by practically *everything* about the show. I love the striving and the hope of it, I love the singing (I am *crazy* about singing, always; I'm crazy about it whether I'm doing it myself or listening to someone else do it), and of course I love the songs themselves. I don't even care *what* songs. I don't care if they're dopey songs—songs by Barry Manilow, disco songs, unbelievably stupid songs made famous by Whitney Houston. Because the truth is, there's hardly anything I like better than songs—any and all kinds of songs. I like standards and show tunes and rock and roll and R&B and folk songs (real ones, “roots music,” as well as the early Dylan/Joan Baez variety) and seventies singer-songwriters' songs and rap songs and lullabies and protest songs and witty, newish (as in merely forty years old) jazz songs like “Peel Me A Grape” and songs by Willie Nelson and Dolly Parton and corny turn-of-the-century songs like “By the Light of the Silvery Moon.” There are days when it seems to me that I love songs even more than I love books.

But you can hear songs anywhere. And better singing, too. So I admit it: there's lots more to the talent show than singer and song. I could see that from my first encounter with it. That first night, I was already hooked on the *story*—hooked without any idea what I was watching, without the least notion that what I'd happened upon, mid-song clip, mid-summer-

replacement-season, was a certified television phenomenon. How would I have known? I don't know anything. Sometimes—or so I've been told—it seems I hardly live in the world at all.

It's true. Most of the time, the world is too much for me. I read the *New York Times* cover to cover every Sunday, but *between* Sundays—unless there's an ongoing emergency that makes it impossible for me to think about anything else—I do my best to ignore everything in the world except my own work and the immediate or potential needs of my family, my students, and the ever-growing collection of pets living under my roof. I read novels; I listen to music. I even read magazines. But the newspaper is just too distracting, especially first thing in the morning. If I read it, I can't write afterwards—I'm too jittery and upset—and it's too hard to ignore it if I see it sitting there. Thus, six days a week, I don't even bring the paper into the house.

Sundays, however, I take a deep breath and let it in. I let it *all* in—even Sports and Business, and I have no interest in sports or business (I actually actively dislike sports and business, but on Sunday it doesn't matter, because I like *reading* about almost anything). I read the Travel section even though I never go anywhere, and the Style section even though I can't afford to buy anything and almost never have any idea who they're talking about in the columns. I read Arts & Leisure despite the fact that I can't remember the last time I went to a movie, or that when I go home to New York, I never go to the theater (all I ever do is visit with family and friends, eat lox and whitefish and sable and *much* better Chinese food than I can get in Columbus, Ohio, and take long walks feeling sorry for myself because I don't live there anymore. If Glen's with me, I go to art museums, but we always skip the mega-shows covered by the *Times*).

And I know next to nothing about television. Until the talent show came into my life three TV seasons ago, the only show I watched was *Sex and the City* (which was why we *got* HBO, a couple of years into our contract with the cable company). For years—for years and years—I didn't even own a TV set: a neighbor had to bang on the door of my apartment in Greenwich Village in December of 1980 to tell me about John Lennon, and when the *Challenger* exploded, six years later, while I was in graduate school in Iowa, I didn't hear about it until the next day, from someone in workshop.

This is all by way of saying that I came to the talent show an almost complete innocent.

My daughter did, too. Chip off the old block, until she was three, Grace had no idea there was anything *on* TV except sports. Dutifully, when she was three, I introduced her to *Sesame Street*, but she found it irritating. “It’s so *jumpy*,” she said (putting her finger on one of the reasons I so dislike the news on TV, and have never been able to get myself to watch it). Then, when someone told me that Shari Lewis—the woman I had loved most, after my grandmother, in my early childhood—was still (or again?) on TV, I sat Grace down in front of the set for the pleasures of Lamb Chop and Charley Horse, and she was delighted—for a week or two, before she lost interest. I concluded then that it was genetic, that she must have inherited from me the inability to sit still and watch anything. Because it’s not—or not *just*—snobbery that keeps me away from TV. I’ve never even cared for *public* television, which my daughter’s godfather, our beloved friend Michael, insists has taught him much of what he knows about the world. I don’t have the patience for it. Reading keeps me still; writing keeps me still. Otherwise I need to be active, although not necessarily (well, never) vigorously so. I don’t jog or play tennis. I cook, I walk the dog, I sort laundry, I *talk*. I don’t sleep (I’d like to, but I can’t—because, I suspect, it requires too much stillness, and I’ve used up my stillness allotment during the day).

The weekly half-hour I devoted to *Sex and the City* several months a year for six years, I’ve always thought, was the exception that proved the rule. People who knew about my affection for that show would always urge me to try *The Sopranos*, too, and I did try, but I couldn’t tolerate the subject matter. The *surface* subject matter, friends pointed out (condescendingly, I thought). But what else is subject matter *but* surface? One has to be able to tolerate the surface to appreciate what lies below, and I couldn’t stand being asked to empathize with the worries of a murderous protagonist.

This was the problem, I decided, in a little flash of TV insight, with most of television for me: it wasn’t just that I hated sitting still and watching (almost) anything; it was also that TV lacked subject matter in which I had any interest. I can *read* my way through subject-matter apathy or even outright antipathy if the writing’s good enough. But I can’t *watch* my way through it. It feels like a waste of time.

This goes a long way toward explaining my affection for the talent show, since *its* subject matter—all of its subject matter—is right up my alley.

The songs, the singers, the stories. There's the business of character—the almost insane focus on character at the expense of story, as if “story” were about nothing *but* character. But that's the way I like it, always. I *loved* the “stories,” that first night: the story of wan, pretty, exhausted Christina (who, we were assured, was “watching the show from her hospital bed”); of plucky, multipierced, kooky, single-mother Nikki and her sweet, young son; of Justin with his showbiz relatives and his job as “party starter,” getting the kids up and dancing at bar mitzvahs. My two favorites had stories, too: adorable, innocent-yet-sassy, sturdy, *happy* Kelly the “cocktail waitress”; savvy, serious, no-nonsense Tamyra, who'd pulled off the “hi-de-hi-de-ho”s of “Minnie the Moocher” with admirable, if amused, poise. They both had good voices, better than the rest. They could be singers; why not? What was to stop them?

Oh, even without the next episode—and the next, and the next—I knew the answer to that. Even without any understanding of television itself, or any knowledge of what the prize was or how it would be awarded, I knew. That was part of what hooked me: the judgments to come, the potential for *mis*judgment, the missteps, the arbitrariness, the importance of a single moment, the way one good performance would matter more than it should, or one bad one. The sudden shifting of the tides. Luck, mood, happenstance. The subjectivity, the vagaries, the up-and-down, the why-now, why-me, why-*her* of it. The *mysteries*. It would be like watching the start of a writing career—or a romance. That was what I thought, shivering under my comforters, propped up on my pillows. It would be like *life*.

There would be triumphs, justice, miscarriages of justice, beauty, pity, shame, despair, pride, self-delusion, tawdry misbegotten glamour (which I love, even more than non-misbegotten glamour), innocence, and experience.

And I was right—I was right about all of it.

But really the true subject of the talent show, which in the finale of the season that just ended drew *sixty-five million votes*—considerably more than half as many votes, I feel obliged to point out, than the presidential election of 2000 (though cast, in the case of the show, by just under twenty-nine million voters, for unlike presidential elections, the talent show “elections” allow more than one vote per person; allow, in fact, as many votes as any one voter has the patience to cast—and patience is required: the phone

lines, even when the network allots three lines per contestant, as they did for this final showdown of the 2004 season, are relentlessly busy)—seems to me to be the blurring of the line between “professional” and “amateur”: the implicit recognition of how porous these categories are.

This may be what I like best about the show. It’s as interesting to me (and more interesting, I’m sure, to almost everyone else watching) that the line that’s being blurred is the line between “pop star” and “non- [or not yet] pop star” as it would be if there were a way to dramatize the blurring of the line between “artist” and “non-artist.” For years I have told the students in my introductory creative writing classes that one of the most pressing reasons for them to try to make stories themselves is to gain understanding in a visceral way (the only way that will mean anything to them) that literature doesn’t fall from the sky, that it isn’t made by gods, that it’s the product, always, of a single person’s heart and mind, of someone’s imagination and painstaking, exhausting work. That even the mysteries of talent—even the mysteries of *genius*—cannot be properly appreciated until one has wriggled inside the process of making art itself, has had a go at what it feels and looks like. That patience, hard work, seriousness of purpose, effort, time, energy, and mastery of craft can be managed by anyone willing to give it a shot. That with a lot of “talent” and a little hard work—or a little talent and a lot of hard work—miraculous things can happen.

What pleases me most about the show, then, is seeing the veil that separates “legitimate” pop singers—those with recording contracts and concert stages to perform on and devoted fans and a publicity machine to fan the flames of those fans—from “ordinary people” who like to sing, and who *can* sing, begin to fall away.

The display of “raw” talent—pure talent, talent without *finish*—reminds me of the one or two undergraduates I see every year in my writing classes who don’t know what they’re doing yet but manage to write a single perfect sentence, even a whole paragraph, that will be as good in its own way as anything I have *ever* read. This past quarter alone, as Fantasia and La Toya and Jennifer and Diana sang—from time to time—so beautifully it made my heart constrict with joy, I read perfect sentences by Lindsay, Joe, Mike, Marcy, Alex, Keith, Melissa.

If my first encounter with the talent show had also been my last—if that had been the end of it and I had blamed the flu, as Glen tried to do when

I first spoke of it to him—then I could stop right here, and we could all have a laugh (a gentle, indulgent laugh, yes?) about my absorption in, my *rapture* over, the show. But for the rest of that summer and all last spring and all *this* spring, on Wednesday nights, as Glen passes through the family room and sees Grace and me on the couch, clutching each other's hands, waiting to see who's been eliminated on the "results show," he shakes his head. "Great example you're setting there," he tells me before he ducks out the back door again to hole up in his studio until the coast is clear.

"*Hush*," I hiss. "They're about to announce the top two."

You call yourself an intellectual. You call yourself a feminist.

He hasn't said it. It's what he's thinking, though—I know it.

I don't, in point of fact, call myself either of those things. The only names I ever call myself are *writer*, *mother*, *teacher*, and *New Yorker*—not necessarily in that order. But I know what he means (or I know what *I* mean). I write books. I'm a tenured college professor. An *English* professor. I own the complete New York edition of Henry James. I've had dinner—vegan (Columbus, oddly enough, which can't manage decent Chinese, has a fine gourmet vegan restaurant)—with J. M. Coetzee, who is one of my heroes. Coetzee, Bellow—Tolstoy! George Eliot!—*those* are my heroes. Not pop stars.

And yet . . . here I am, biting my nails over Clay-versus-Ruben (and still mourning Kimberly, who I preferred). Booing the TV set when Jennifer is eliminated in favor of breathy, chronically off-key Jasmine. Calling, again and again, and cursing the busy signal, to cast my vote for Fantasia, week after week. I'm the *mother*. It's one thing for Grace to pump her fist and cry *yes!* when John Stevens is eliminated; it's another altogether if it's me. But there I am, cackling and muttering, "For godsakes, it's about time. Send that boy *home*."

I'm the mother, all right: a devoted, overbearing, lavishly affectionate, occasionally intrusive, *Jewish* mother—and above all a Mother Who Thinks (*à la* Salon.com). What the hell am I thinking?

I'll tell you what I'm thinking. I'm thinking about whether Fantasia might be able to take it to the top this year. I'm thinking that I *love* Fantasia. I love her powerhouse, raucous, dirty-sounding voice. I'm thinking that I sort of love Camille too—but only, I have to confess, because she's so heartbreakingly beautiful, and so young, and because her hoarse,

whispery voice makes me want to stroke her hair and tell her everything is going to be all right.

I'm thinking about how awful it is that Lisa didn't make it, that "America voted" and Matt the football player made it to the next round instead of Lisa, who has a terrific voice. Matt is likable—a likable lug—but Lisa can really sing. That's what I'm thinking.

But I'm also thinking about how, *last* spring, when she was in the fourth grade, Grace went to school with something she could talk to the other kids about for the first time in her life. *All* the girls in the fourth grade—the ones who used to ignore or avoid her because she's such an oddball (bookworm, leftist, dreamer, Child Who Thinks)—it turned out, were watching the show, too.

"And this is good?" That's my husband speaking, asking the question he's always asking.

I think about a number of possible answers, but all I say is, "She's stopped dreading recess."

When I mentioned to a friend—a smart friend, an excellent poet, and at least as much of a snob as I (she doesn't even *have* cable, so her TV set, in a small Ohio town, shows nothing but snow), not to mention another Mother Who Thinks—that I was trying to write an essay about the pleasures of watching the TV show *American Idol*, she suggested that I title it "American Idle." Then she added, sweetly, "Oh, but I suppose if you're trying to *justify* the time you spend watching it, and that you let Grace watch it with you, I guess not."

Maybe I have no business celebrating my daughter's (partial, and no doubt grudging) acceptance by the hoi polloi thanks to a TV show. Maybe it means I ought to be drummed out of the Mothers Who Think Club. But we're having such a good time! During the commercials we talk about the performances and *tsk tsk* about the judges' harshness. "It wasn't that bad, was it?" we ask each other. And even when it *was* that bad, and sometimes—often—it is, we murmur, "Must Simon say that *quite* so meanly?" The judges—all of them—get crueler every year. Randy no longer obfuscates: he comes out and says, "That just wasn't any good at all, man." Even Paula, "the nice judge"—the former cheerleader and former pop star, as improprietly dressed and coiffed as any of the female contestants—winces now and says, "Well, honey, you gave it your all, and that's what

counts. You look beautiful, by the way.” From her, that’s as good as saying, “America, vote her *out!*”

But even as I complain about the meanness of the judges, I think about what Flannery O’Connor said when she was asked if courses in creative writing don’t stifle young writers: that the fact is they don’t stifle enough of them.

We mute the TV during commercials. Besides judging the judges, we talk about the contestants. Not their singing, necessarily, or not just their singing. Both Grace and I love back story (the kind of thing Glen tells us has ruined the TV broadcast of the Olympics, which he used to enjoy “before those cheesy human interest stories took it over”).

Last year, during *Idol’s* second season, Grace picked her favorite singer early on, during auditions, based almost entirely (the “almost” is a gift to Grace, since she *still* insists that Julia had a good voice) on the story that unspooled around her, the kind of story that appeals most to my daughter: a story of triumph (talent and hard work) over adversity (in the form of lazy, less gifted, mean-spirited other girls). During stage two or three of the auditions, the other young women with whom Julia had been matched for the traditional group performance treated her badly. They were dismissive and contemptuous. But Julia the hairdresser persevered and made it! Grace was beside herself with delight. And when Julia was finally eliminated, quite late in the competition, Grace wept, and I wept along with her—but for *her*, because she was so disappointed, not for Julia, who’d stayed in against all odds and good sense.

Even more than the back story, Grace and I get swept up in the ongoing story of the relationships between the characters, the contestants—“the idols,” Grace casually calls them—that play out week by week. I like seeing the characters themselves change as the weeks pass. You can actually see them changing, see it in the way they carry themselves (Fantasia softened; Diana grew up), the way they treat one another, and of course in their singing. “Of course,” I say, as if this were the whole point of the show. But it isn’t, *of course*, not entirely. The point *is* the story: it’s watching the characters change as they must in any good story: characters wanting something and changing as they strive for it, fail to get it, begin *to* get it, slip and fall and pick themselves up again. The protagonists change, the relationships change, the story unspools.

And then there are the songs. Thanks to three seasons' worth of *American Idol*, my daughter now knows Al Green, Janis Joplin, and Bonnie Raitt. It's thanks to *American Idol* that when I pop in a tape in the morning on our way to school, Grace in the backseat sings along with "Respect" and "Chain of Fools." It's thanks to *American Idol* that she knows both Aretha's version of "Natural Woman" and Carole King's—because one thing leads to another, and every Tuesday night, Grace turns to me and asks, "Whose song is this one?" and, "Do we have that on a record?" And we nearly always do.

I don't even mind that some of the "idols" screw up (dumb down, misunderstand, flatten, shriek, or over-sing) some of my all-time favorite songs, because my favorite songs are being sung on TV, and after the show, Grace and I will listen to the originals. I hear her playing them all week long, teaching herself the words. Mornings, I can hear her in the shower singing "How Can You Mend A Broken Heart?"

And the girls in her class who used to give her (the one who doesn't play soccer, who uses what her fourth grade teacher derisively called "fifty-dollar words") such a wide berth are duly impressed both by her command of song lyrics and her familiarity with "the originals" of the songs they hear each week on the show. "Oh," I've heard Grace say, "I loved Trenyce's cover of 'Proud Mary,' too. But really you should hear Tina Turner's. And then if you hear the Creedence version, well, you can hardly believe it's the same song."

It's thanks to *American Idol* that my daughter has learned to work the turntable, so she can play the records in my collection whenever she wants to, whether I'm around or not. The other kids think she's a technological wizard and a musical genius.

There's another aspect of our watching *American Idol* that I had no way of knowing would figure in when we first started, the summer she was nine. By our third *American Idol* season, January through May 2004, it was the only thing she'd let me do with her anymore. The little girl who came to sit on the edge of my bed and hold my hand when I had the flu that first summer is gone forever, replaced by a "preteen" who will ask me to take her ice skating but forbid me to skate anywhere near her, who will not allow me to touch her in public (and even in private, kissing is now out of the question, except at bedtime). We use the walkie-talkies she got

for Christmas—from her father, clever man—to keep tabs on each other when we go shoe-shopping, rather than her having to endure the humiliation (she shudders, and doesn't bother pretending she's cold) of shopping with her *mother*. But week after week, all this spring, she sat beside me on Tuesday and Wednesday nights, and we talked our way through the commercials, and afterwards I dug out the records she'd requested.

But here's something funny. Just as *American Idol* has brought us together at a moment when she's otherwise drifting off, and at the same time gained her a measure of acceptance and even respect within the circles she travels every day, it has set me apart from the world *I* have to live in daily. Almost everyone I know either thinks I'm being *camp* when I mention how much I enjoy the show, or—if they take me seriously—they get worked up over it. *That garbage! The worst sort of trash!* I understand their reaction, of course—I mean, in general, I understand anger about the silliness and ugliness and shallowness of popular culture. It's been known to upset me, too. It *still* upsets me. But have they actually seen *this* show? I ask timidly. It's, you know, a talent show. My husband at least has forced himself to watch it, a few minutes at a time, once or twice each season, trying to participate in something his wife and daughter are enjoying—trying to be a good sport. But he can't take it. "This is *horrible*," he says. "How can you stand it?" But then he can't stand *any* pop music, he has to admit. (He doesn't consider this an "admission." It's a point of pride. And he doesn't count Hendrix, heavy metal, punk rock, or blues as "pop." Pop means *pap*, to him.) He says the same thing when I put Norah Jones on the stereo; or Anita Baker, Grace's latest favorite; or Sinatra, for that matter.

The very name of the show, I can tell, irritates people—the idea that "America" is willing to *idolize* the winner of a talent show (indeed, that "America idolizes" its celebrities in the first place). Well—as my daughter would say—*dub*. *She* knows better. She says equably, with just the slightest rolling of her eyes, "They don't mean 'idol' *literally*. They mean 'idol' as, like, a synonym for 'star,' that they're *making* the person a star." She pauses. "That's what's cool about it. That it's possible to do that."

That's what I said, isn't it? It's such a porous category: *star*.

I should confess that not everyone gets angry or imagines irony as the default. Some people express sympathy or empathy—they know how it is

to have to sit beside a child and endure kiddie entertainment—a Disney cartoon, *Spy Kids*. But *I* don't know. Grace hates going to the movies, especially kids' movies. She always has. She hates the noise and the giant faces, the trumped-up anxiety designed to satisfy a kid's supposed need for stimulation and excitement, the frantic pace that's tailor-made for her supposedly short attention span. She doesn't like action or thrills or suspense any more than I do.

Except for the kind of suspense offered by *Idol*—the human drama of striving and disappointment: who will make it and who won't? And on *American Idol* nobody (except Christina Christian, that one time) is ever in physical peril. Don't tell Grace and me that no one *really* gets hurt in a movie, that it's "just a movie." We are in absolute agreement about this: if you're aware the whole time that it's "just" a movie—aware enough to keep what happens from being upsetting or scary—then you can't possibly live in the dream of it. You can't possibly enjoy it the way we enjoy our episodes of *American Idol*, recklessly and wholeheartedly.

We love that dream, the dream that's so much like real life they call it "reality television." It's real life but with focused, specific, concentrated drama, *high* drama packed into an hour—much less than an hour, once you take out all the commercials, of which there are a staggering number (but Grace and I don't mind, because that's when we get the chance to talk about what we've just seen and heard; it's better this way, not having to store up all that conversation until the end).

The spectacle of untrained, "pure" talent—and the spectacle of its absence, or the presence of too little of it to overcome the odds against it becoming manifest, becoming *viable* (because the odds are *always* against it)—is pure pleasure for us both. And so we watch and listen together, week after week, clapping and laughing and groaning and shrieking and falling back on the couch cushions in dismay or joy.

And we're both aware, always, that the show has given us a whole new angle in dealing with the people who surround us when we go out into the world—each of our worlds. It's never a bad thing, I've told my daughter, who believes me—who still believes everything I tell her, although perhaps not for much longer—to try a new angle, to get a glimpse of what it's like on the other side. To surprise oneself. To surprise others. To take pleasure in something that others take pleasure in. To take pleasure in something that almost no one else in one's own world takes pleasure in.

To *take* pleasure.

To listen to voices lifted in hope, however misplaced or futile.

To hope. To celebrate hope.

To keep one's mind and heart open to the possibility, always, of celebration—of pure, unadulterated, screaming, clapping, confetti-throwing, tearful, goofy, glorious *rapture*.