BUMPING INTO MR. RAVIOLI

A theory of business, and its hero.

BY ADAM GOPNIK

My daughter Olivia, who just turned thirteen, has an imaginary friend whose name is Charlie Ravioli. Olivia is growing up in Manhattan, and so Charlie Ravioli has a lot of local traits: he lives in an apartment on Madison and Lexington, he dines on grilled chicken, fruit, and water, and, having reached the age of seven and a half, he feels, or is thought, "old." But the most peculiarly local thing about Olivia's imaginary playmate is this: he is always too busy to play with her. She holds her toy cell phone up to her ear, and we hear her talk into it: "Ravioli? It's Olivia... It's Olivia. Come and play? O.K. Call me. Bye." Then she snaps it shut, and shakes her head. "I always get his machine," she says. Or she will say, "I spoke to Ravioli today." "Did you have fun?" my wife and I ask. "No. He was busy working. On a television" (leaving it up in the air if he repairs electronic devices or has his own talk show).

On a good day, she "bumps into" her invisible friend and they go to a coffee shop. "I bumped into Charlie Ravioli," she announces at dinner (after a day when, of course, she stayed home, played, had a nap, had lunch, paid a visit to the Central Park Zoo, and then had another nap). "We had coffee, but then he had to run." She sighs, sometimes, at her inability to make their schedules mesh, but she accepts it as inevitable, just the way life is. "I bumped into Charlie Ravioli today," she says. "He was working." Then she adds brightly: "But we hopped into a taxi." What happened then? we ask. "We grabbed lunch," she says.

It seemed obvious that Ravioli was a romantic figure of the big exotic life that went on outside her little limited life of parks and playgrounds—drawn, in particular, from a nearly perfect, mynah-bird-like imitation of the words she hears her mother use when she talks about her day with her friends. ("How was your day?") Sighing, "Oh, you know. I tried to make a date with Meg, but I couldn't find her, so I left a message on her machine. Then I bumped into Emily after that meeting I had in SoHo, and we had coffee and then she had to run, but by then Meg had reached me on my cell and we arranged..."

I was concerned, though, that Charlie Ravioli might also be the sign of some trauma, some loneliness in Olivia's life reflected in imaginary form. It seems odd to have an imaginary playmate who is always too busy to play with you," Martha, my wife, said to me. "Shouldn't your imaginary playmate be someone you tell secrets to and, I don't know, sing songs with? It shouldn't be someone who's always hopping into taxis?"

We thought, at first, that her older brother Luke might be the original of Charlie Ravioli. (For one thing, he is also seven and a half, though we were fairly sure that this age was merely Olivia's marker for As I Old As I Can Be.) He is too busy to play with her much anymore. He has become a true New York child, with the schedule of a Cabinet secretary: chess club on Monday, T-ball on Tuesday, tournament on Saturday, play dates and after-school conferences to fill in the gaps. But Olivia, though she counts days, does not yet really have days. She has a day, and into this day she has introduced the figure of Charlie Ravioli—in order, it dawned on us, to insist that she does have days, because she is too hard to share them, that she does have an independent social life, by virtue of being too busy to have one.

Yet Charlie Ravioli was becoming so constant and oddly discouraging a companion—"He cancelled lunch. Again," Olivia would say—that we thought we ought to look into it. One of my sisters is a developmental psychologist who specializes in close scientific studies of what goes on inside the heads of one- and two- and three-year-olds. Though she grew up in the nearly East, she lives in California now, where she grows beans in her garden and keeps an organicimaloes. I e-mailed this sister for help.
with the Ravioli issue—how concerned should we be?—and she sent me back an e-mail, along with an attachment, and, after several failed cell-phone connections, we at last spoke on a land line.

It turned out that there is a recent book on this very subject by the psychologist Majorie Taylor, called "Imaginary Companions and the Children Who Create Them," and my sister had just written a review of it. She insisted that Charlie Ravioli was nothing to be worried about. Olivia was right on target, in fact. Most under-sevens (sixty-three per cent, to be scientific) have an invisible friend, and children create their imaginary playmates not out of trauma but out of a sense of the possibilities of fiction—sometimes as figures of pure fantasy, sometimes, as Olivia had done, as observations of grownups assembled in tranquility and given a name. I learned about the invisible companions Taylor studied: Baintor, who is invisible because he lives in the light; Station Pheta, who hunts sea anemones on the beach. Charlie Ravioli seemed pavement-bound by comparison.

up: "The children with invisible friends often interrupt the interviewer to remind her, with a certain note of concern for her sanity, that these characters were, after all, just pretend." I also learned that some children, as they get older, turn out to possess what child psychologists call a "parasomnium." A parasomnium is a society thought up by a child—an invented universe with a distinctive language, geography, and history. (The Beorics invented a couple of parasomniums when they were children.) Not all children who have an imaginary friend invent a parasomnium, but the two might, I think, be related. Like a lonely ambassador from Alpha Centauri in a fifty-six sci-fi movie who, misunderstood by paranoid earth scientists, cannot bring the life-saving news from his planet, perhaps the invisible friend also gets an indifferent or hostile response, and then we never find out about the beautiful parasomnium he comes from.

"Don't worry about it," my sister said in a late-night phone call. "Knowing things made up while thinking that it matters is what all fiction is about. She's putting a name on a series of manners."

"But he seems so real to her," I objected. "Of course he is. I mean, who's more real to you, Becky Sharp or Gandalf or the guy down the hall? Giving a manner a name makes it real."

I paused. "I grasp that it's normal for her to have an imaginary friend," I said, "but have you ever heard of an imaginary friend who's too busy to play with you?"

She thought about it. "No," she said. "I'm sure that doesn't occur anywhere in the research literature. That sounds completely New York." And then she hung up.

The real question, I saw, was not why this friend?" but "Why this fiction? Why, as Olivia had seen so clearly, are grownups in New York so busy, and so obsessed with the language of busy-ness that it dominates their conversation? Why are New Yorkers always bumping into Charlie Ravioli and grabbing lunch, instead of sitting down with him and exchanging intimacies, as friends should, as people do in Paris and Rome? Why is busy-ness the stuff our children make their invisible friends from, as country children make them from light and sand?

This seems like an odd question. New Yorkers are busy for obvious reasons: they have husbands and wives and careers and children, they have the Gau-guin show to see and their personal trainers and accountants to visit. But the more I think about this the more I think it is—well, a lot of Ravioli. We are instructed to believe that we are busier because we have to work harder to be more productive, but everybody knows that busyness and productivity have a dubious, arriage relationship. Most of our struggle in New York, in fact, is to be less busy in order to do more work.

Constant, exhausting, no-time-to-meet-your-friends Charlie Ravioli-style busyness arises as an affliction in modern life long after the other parts of bourgeois city manners did. Business long predates busyness. In the seventeenth and eigh-
RETURN TO ACHZIV

Every year we come back here, to Achziv, every year at this appointed time, as in the Bible, we return to the house where we were together years back, the house destroyed entirely, and in its place a lovely field of grass above the shoreline. But we return to the house and still go up the stairs, our legs in motion, and we duck our heads to keep from hitting the low lintel that is not there, the bowing and the bending of the heads like a wondrous ceremony.
This, too, is the beginning of a new religion.

—Yehuda Amichai
(Translated from the Hebrew, by Bernard Haim)

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complete in advance of their delivery. A letter, though it may engender a response, is meant to be complete in itself. Neither the Apostle Paul nor Horace Walpole ever ends an epistle with "Give me a call and let's discuss." By contrast, it is in the nature of the telegram to be a skeletal version of another thing—a communication that opens more than it closes. The nineteenth-century telegram came with those busy-threatening words "Letter follows."

Every device that has evolved from the telegram shares the same character. E-mails end with a suggestion for a phone call ("Anyway, let's meet and/or talk soon"), faxes with a request for an e-mail, answering-machine messages with a request for a fax. All are devices of perpetually suspended communication. My wife recalls a moment last fall when she got a telephone message from a friend asking her to check her e-mail apropos a phone call she needed to make vis-à-vis a fax they had both received asking for more information about a bed they were thinking of buying from Ireland online and having sent to America by Federal Express—a grand slam of incomplete communication.

In most of the Western world outside New York, the press of trains and of telegraphic communication was alleviated by those other two great transformers: the car and the television. While the train and the telegraph (and their love children, subways and commuter trains and e-mail) pushed people together, the car and the television pulled people apart—taking them out to the suburbs and sitting them down in front of a static spectacle. New York, though, almost uniquely got hit by a double dose of the first two technologies, and a very limited dose of the second two. Car life—car obsession, car-defined habits—is more absent here than almost anywhere else in the country, while television, though obviously present, is less family prevalent here. New York is still a subject of television, and we compare "Sex and the City" to sex and the city; they are not yet quite the same. I see two grids of busy-ness remain dominant: the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century grid of bump and run, and the late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century postmodern grid of virtual call and echo. Busyness is felt so intensely here because we are both crowded and overloaded. We exit the apartment into a still dense nineteenth-century grid of street corners and restaurants full of people, and come home to the late-twentieth-century grid of faxes and e-mails and overwhelming incompleteness.

We walk across the Park on a Sunday morning and bump into our friend the baker and our old acquaintance from graduate school (what has she been doing now?) and someone we have been avoiding for three weeks. They all invite us for brunch, and we would love to, but we are too busy. We bump into Charlie Ravioli, grab a coffee with him—and come home to find three e-mails and a message on our cell phone from him, wondering where we are. The crowding of our space has been reinforced by a crowding of our time, and the only way to protect ourselves is to build structures of perpetual denial: I'll see you next week, let's talk soon. We build rhetorical battles around our lives to keep the crowding out, only to find that we have let nobody we love in.

Like Charlie Ravioli, we hop into taxis and leave messages on answering machines to avoid our acquaintances, and find that we keep missing our friends. I have one intimate who lives just across the Park from me, whom I e-mail often, and whom I am fortunate to see two or three times a year. We are always busy. He has become my Charlie Ravioli, my invisible friend. I am sure that he misses me—just as Charlie Ravioli, I realized, must tell his other friends that he is sorry he does not see Olivia more often.

Once I sensed the nature of his predicament, I began to feel more sympathetic toward Charlie Ravioli. I got to know him better, too. We learned more about what Ravioli did in the brief breathing spaces in his busy life when he could sit down with Olivia and dish. "Ravioli read your book," Olivia announced, for instance, one night at dinner. "He didn't like it much." We also found out that Ravioli had joined a gym, that he was going to the beach in the summer, but he was too busy, and that he was working on a "show." (It isn’t a very
good show," she added candidly.) Charlie Ravioli, in other words, was just another New Yorker: fit, opinionated, and trying to break into show business.

I think we would have learned to live happily with Charlie Ravioli had it not been for the appearance of Laurie. She threw us both a curve; Olivia had been mentioning a new persona almost as often as she mentioned Ravioli. "I talked to Laurie today," she would begin. "She says Ravioli is busy." Or she would be closeted with her play phone. "Who are you talking to, darling?" I would ask. "Laurie," she would say. "We're talking about Ravioli." We surmised that Laurie was, so to speak, the Linda Tripp of the Ravioli operation—the person you spoke to for consolation when the big creep was ignoring you.

But a little while later a more ominous side of Laurie's role began to appear. "Laurie tells Ravioli I'm calling," I heard Olivia say. I pressed her about who, exactly, Laurie was. Olivia shook her head. "She works for Ravioli," she said.

And then it came to us, with sickening clarity: Laurie was not the patient friend who consoled you for Charlie's absence. Laurie was the bright-toned person who answered Ravioli's phone and told you that unfortunately Mr. Ravioli was in a meeting. "Laurie says Ravioli is too busy to play," Olivia announced sadly one morning. Things seemed to be deteriorating; now Ravioli was too busy even to say he was too busy.

I got back on the phone with my sister. "Have you ever heard of an imaginary friend with an assistant?" I asked.

She paused. "Imaginary friends don't have assistants," she said. "That's not only not in the literature, that's just...I mean—in California they don't have assistants."

"You think we should look into it?"

"I think you should move," she said flatly.

Martha was of the same mind. "An imaginary playmate shouldn't have an assistant," she said miserably. "An imaginary playmate shouldn't have an agent. An imaginary playmate shouldn't have a publicist or a personal trainer or a cat—" an imaginary playmate shouldn't have pets. An imaginary playmate should just play. With the child who imagined it." She started leaving on my pillow real estate brochures picturing quaint houses in New Jersey and Connecticut, unhaunted by busy invisible friends and their entanglements.

Not long after the appearance of Laurie, though, something remarkable happened. Olivia would begin to tell us tales of her frustrations with Charlie Ravioli, and, after telling us, again, that he was too busy to play, she would tell us what she had done instead. Astounding and panic-stricken tales poured out of her: she had been to a chess tournament and brought home a trophy; she had gone to a circus and told jokes. Searching for Charlie Ravioli, she had "saved all the animals in the zoo"; heading home in a taxi after a quick coffee with Ravioli, she took over the steering wheel and "got all the money." From the statements of daily life emerged the fantasy of victory. She had dreamed of a normal life with a few close friends, and to settle for worldwide fame and the front page of the tabloids. The existence of an imaginary friend had liberated her into a panic-struck, but it was a curiously New York paranoia—it was the unobtainable writer's paradise. "Read a window. Charlie Ravioli, prince of busyness, was not an end but a means: a way out onto the street in her head, a declaration of potential independence.

Business is our art form, our civic ritual, our way of being. Many friends have said to me that they love New York in a way they never did before, and their love, I've noticed, takes for its object all the things that used to exasperate them—the curious combination of freedom, self-made fences, and paralyzing preoccupation that the city provides. "How did you spend the day?" Martha and I, now, ask each other, and then, instead of listing her incidents, she says merely, "Oh, you know...just...bumping into Charlie Ravioli," meaning, just bumbling from obligation to electronic entreaty, just spotting a friend and snatching a sandwich, just being busy, just living in New York. If everything we've binned in the past year could be summed up in a phrase, it's that we want to go bumping into Charlie Ravioli for as long as we can.

Olivia still hopes to have him to herself someday. As I work late at night in the "study" (an old hallway, an Aalto screen) I keep near the "nursery" (an ancient pantry, a glass-brick wall), I can hear her shift into pre-sleep, still muttering to herself. She is still trying to reach her closest friend. "Ravioli? Ravioli?" she means as she turns over into her pillow and clutches her blanket, and then she whispers, almost to herself, "Tell him call me. Tell him call me when he comes home."