

Dad

For A Day

ANDREW BOYD



RITA BERNSTEIN

A big part of being a man, it seems, is being a dad. As I've gotten older and watched many of my peers get married and start families, I've begun wondering whether I shouldn't have a kid, too. But getting one, it turns out, is not so simple. With no partner at the moment, and with kidnapping still illegal in New York State, I've chosen to rent.

Today I'll be renting Steve and Jean's two boys: Sydney, age two; and Sebastien, nine months. The five of us are

headed upstate — in a rental car, appropriately enough — to the wedding of Jeremy and Alice, mutual friends of ours who will likely soon have kids of their own, which they might someday rent out to me.

"You're going to be our au pair today," Steve says, handing me a few bags to take down to the car. "There's a French maid's outfit in the bedroom closet. We'd like you to put it on before we hit the road."

Though I'm not getting paid for helping with child care, there are definite perks: free ride, free place to sleep at the bed-and-breakfast, and free father-hormone-stirring moments.

"If you want, I can sit in the back with the kids for the first leg," Steve offers.

"Oh, no, I'm good," I say. "You hang with Jean. The au pair must earn his keep."

I buckle Sydney in and, as we roll up the street, begin feeding Sebastien a bottle of milk. Soon enough we're playing peekaboo. I'm in. I've successfully penetrated the secret world of fatherhood.

Over the next hour of on-the-job training I learn that those space-age-looking plastic cups with the screw-on lids and spouts, to keep the juice from spilling, are not as secure as they look. I learn that parents sometimes fill a bottle with dry formula and add the water later (though I don't learn why). I learn that Tylenol comes in a liquid form with a handy eyedropper top, which is great for teething infants whose swallowing coordination is not yet up to "Here, take two of these." I learn that repurposed rock stars have spawned a huge submarket of the music industry by recording kids' music that's designed not to drive parents insane. Finally, I learn that when twenty-three pounds of blond innocence falls asleep against your rib cage, a complex brew of hormones — both murderously protective and heartbreakingly tender — stir and awaken.

"How you doing back there?" Steve asks.

"Sydney's sleeping."

"Need me to spell you after the next stop?"

"No, this is good."

And it was. Maybe a little too good, because in my mind I was saying: *Don't you dare try to take your kid away from me.* The father hormones were kicking in a little too hard.

"You sure you're OK?"

The kid is leaning against me, buddy, not you. Can't you see that? I'm the fucking au pair, man.

"Andrew," Jean says, "have you ever wanted kids?"

"I've got these two right here, don't I?"

"What about your own?"

"Well, I'm open to it, but I was never one of those people who've known their whole life that —"

"They were never on my radar, either," Steve interrupts.

"Jean likes kids; I don't. . . . Don't get me wrong: I like *my* kids, but I never expected having them to be the culmination of my humanity."

"Yeah, it's still hard for me to imagine it," I say. "I had a boss back in Boston, and I've never forgotten what he told me about having his first kid. He said, 'You know how before you take acid for the first time, you can only imagine it's going to be like a stronger kind of weed? But then it's like a whole, mind-blowing other world? Well, having a kid is like that.'"

"Actually, it's more like sniffing glue," Steve says.

Jean ignores him. "Being a mom is the hardest and also the best thing I've ever done. It's been a total life change."

"The wife of that same boss said it was like using emotional muscles you never knew you had."

"Yeah," Jean agrees, "and every day is a full workout."

Halfway to Woodstock, we exit the

highway and pull into a McDonald's. That's when I see it: the Machine in action. With military precision, straps are loosened, plastic buckles undone, diaper bags bundled, and kids shouldered. The objective — a table at McDonald's — is secured without resistance. Having a family drills you in all the core soldierly virtues: operational precision, unit cohesion, command and control, get-in-get-out surgical strikes, and leaving no one behind. In fact Steve, Jean, Sydney, and Sebastien are part of a family-military-industrial complex, of which McDonald's Happy Meals are an integral part.

"Kids flame out in fifteen minutes," Steve says as he snaps Sebastien's car seat into the booster chair and unpacks the bite-size Chicken McNuggets, sliding them toward Sydney with an encouraging look. Jean, meanwhile, has transferred the milk from its minijug to Sebastien's bottle. "It's all about speed," Steve continues as Jean feeds Sebastien pre-cut slices of Apple Dippers out of a resealable plastic pouch, "and keeping them amused as you go." Steve makes his last point while dancing the Happy Meal Sharkboy action figure up and down on Sydney's shoulder.

Fourteen and a half minutes later we wipe down the table-top and redeploy back to the car. Steve's driving now. I'm in the passenger seat. Jean's in back with the kids. Sydney is dozing, and Sebastien is drooling in a quizzical way. "You guys are an incredible team," I tell them.

"Couldn't do it without McDonald's Happy Meals," Steve says.

"No, no, watching you guys operate — you have to be so forgiving with each other, so generous, so completely in the moment."

"We're not always such a well-oiled machine," Jean says. "I love having a family, but at the same time, I'm a feminist, and I'm resentful that I have to do more of the work."

"I didn't see any of that in McDonald's."

"Trust me, I can be a real bitch."

I look over at Steve. He nods and shrugs at the same time. His nod says: *Yup, she can be a real bitch.* His shrug says: *But she does do a lot more of the work. She's the mom. She makes this family happen.* And finally his mouth says: "I have no idea how single parents do it."

"I have double no idea," I say. "I've always hoped to meet a girl who's a 'maybe,' like me — young enough that we can be maybes together for a few years. Then we could become a yes or a no — together."

"So you're at least half serious about it?" asks Jean.

"Yeah, my dad's death was a big deal. It made me think I'd want someone to be around for me, the way I was around for him. But that also seems like a selfishly weird reason to have a kid. I can never figure out: do people have kids for the kids or for themselves? Either way it's a bit strange. I mean, why do it for the kids? They don't even exist yet. And having a kid for yourself seems a bit paradoxical."

"Not so paradoxical," Jean says. "I've never been happier, actually."

"One of the great payoffs of having kids," Steve says, "besides

having little hamsters that grow up and can talk to you, is losing your ego. It's like there is no longer an autonomous self, per se. You have to approach everything as part of a collective unit. In the family, socialism is not an ideal; it's a necessity. It's beyond ironic that conservatives have laid claim to 'family values.'

"So if I get myself a little hamster, I'll finally understand *Das Kapital*?"

"Oh, no. Kids might make you more human, but definitely not more intelligent. If anything, the opposite."

"I don't think my brain will ever quite recover from these last three years," Jean says, "with all the hormones and not sleeping. I think it's permanently damaged."

Maybe Steve was right: parenthood is more like sniffing glue.

We reach Woodstock and poke along

the main street, where it seems a few concertgoers from 1969 have stuck around to become watercolor and drip-candle entrepreneurs. At our quaint little bed-and-breakfast, we unload — family of four in the big bed; au pair on the fold-out cot. Jean walks into town for some coffee while Steve and I take the boys down to the nearby creek to explore. Will the little fishes bite Sydney's toes? Can Uncle Andrew make a rock skip ten times across the water? We meet back at the room, shower, get our wedding duds on, and head out for the happiest day in Alice and Jeremy's lives.

An hour later I'm sitting in a white folding chair. Yellow, red, and purple tulip petals are strewn across the slate courtyard. A slight breeze rustles the fall leaves, and the late-afternoon sun bathes the bride and groom. After the ceremony there's the usual drinking and dancing and flirting and toasts. And then there's the drive back to our bed-and-breakfast.

By the time we take our leave, it's way past the kids' bedtime. Steve is the designated driver, and Jean — the designated partyer and therefore a little tipsy — is sitting in the back with the kids. Sebastien, who's teething, is right on the edge of losing it, and Sydney, though still as blond and innocent as he was when he dozed off against my rib cage this morning, is growing cranky. I have the uncomfortable feeling that I'm about to cross over into the dark side of faux fatherhood.

My intuition is confirmed when Sydney vomits up his wedding dinner — salmon with cucumber-dill sauce — all over the seat. Steve pulls over, and I reach back to help Jean remove the vomit-strewn miniature pants from said bundle of blond innocence. Sebastien is screaming in overtired teething agony, my rented wife is drunk, we can't find the liquid Tylenol, and we have directions only from the B&B to the wedding, not from the wedding to the B&B. Somehow, now that it's dark, everything looks very different, and what was a left turn five glasses of wine ago is now a right, and vice versa. To top it all off, we realize we left a diaper bag at the wedding reception, so now we have to go back to get it.

Diaper bag retrieved, we get back on the road and promptly

become lost once more. "Sydney is throwing up again," Jean says matter-of-factly. I'm still holding his cute little vomit-strewn pants out the window from the first time. I try to imagine that one day the cute little pants I'm holding out the window will be strewn with my own kid's vomit, and that it will be my own drunk and screaming family whose happiness and survival will be at stake as I try to reverse-engineer the directions on the wedding invite and steer them to safe harbor through the dark wilds of ill-marked country roads. And, thanks to some strange alchemy of stirred-up father hormones, there is nothing I could wish for more.

Eventually, and to the great relief of all, we make it back to our bed-and-breakfast, at which point the family machine kicks into disaster-control mode. Jean unbuckles Sebastien from the car seat, takes him inside, finds the liquid Tylenol, and administers it. I wash out the vomit-strewn pants, which seem to have become my personal totem of fatherhood. Steve takes Sydney into the bathroom and cleans him up. Jean changes into a nightgown, and she and Sydney climb into bed together. Even with the Tylenol, Sebastien is still screaming. I grab some towels and head outside to mop off the car seats. And strangely, given that cleaning up vomit falls pretty universally into the "not fun" column, cleaning up Sydney's vomit makes me happy.

"Well, Andrew," Steve says after we've left Jean and Sydney curled up in bed to take Sebastien for a stroll down Woodstock's midnight roadsides, "today's well-oiled family machine was tonight's squeaky rust bucket."

"And a fine rust bucket you've got there, sir."

Sebastien has fallen asleep, but Steve and I keep strolling.

"Tonight was about as bad as it gets. Fatherhood should be a cakewalk for you after this."

"It wasn't so bad. I mean, no one's nursing a black eye, and you haven't slept with the au pair or anything."

"You never put the maid outfit on."

"True, but —"

"Seriously, you definitely earned your keep."

We return to the room, brush our teeth, and say our good nights. Steve lays Sebastien down gently between himself and Jean, and the four of them rest side by side in the one big bed, snuggled together. A sleeping machine.

Lying on the fold-out cot, listening to them breathe, I feel a part of and also not a part of this rented family. I'm still surprised at the strange happiness that's come over me. Is this what fatherhood feels like, or is it just the flushed heart of a new convert? I wonder whether cleaning up vomit will still be a transcendent experience after the tenth or twentieth time. Steve and Jean have to do this every day. They are the foot soldiers in the family-military-industrial complex. Tomorrow morning at 0600 hours — or 0500, or 0300 — they'll be awakened by a reveille of crying, screaming, hunger, and love. Tired and aching (and, in Jean's case, slightly hung over), they'll get up and do it all over again. The saving grace of being dad for a day — as well as its great tragedy, of course — is that I get to walk away. ■