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AND BABY MAKES 3

Fatherhood 101

In January of 1997, my wife Alberta and I spent the night in the maternity ward. It was a great night. The birth of our first child went very quickly.

Maybe too quickly. The regular contractions started at around 10 p.m. They plateaued about seven to eight minutes apart about 11 p.m., so I went downstairs to watch sports highlights.

We had heard all these horror stories about long deliveries.

"Our labour was 14 hours long." "Our labour was 19 years and counting." "Oh yeah, in the play *Waiting for Godot*, he never arrives."

I tried to block it out. Sports highlights are a man's way of relaxing. Cavemen, of course, attended to fire and security. It was the same thing with me in my cave; I needed to attend to the overall security and health of the NHL.

At about 11:20 p.m., she gave me the nod. We sped down to the hospital in our new Subaru. I helped Alberta through the twisty corridors of Prince George Regional Hospital. She had to stop and lean against the wall a few times.

"We're not lost, honey. Don't you worry. I'm sure we're not lost."

When we found the maternity ward, the older nurse gave me a glare: turns out Alberta was fully dilated.

"Took your time, eh?"

I tried to explain. She frowned. She lectured. I asked for another nurse. This was not easy, but it worked. I have what is called in TV cop show parlance good "suction," meaning I can be very convincing if I have to be.

After the delivery, my wife was fine, but she had torn pretty badly. Our baby boy was strong and healthy, although after the delivery both of us nearly fainted during the stitching. There was blood. I remember watching 64 minutes tick off the clock while the doctor worked. She was so pale that it hurt me.

I watched her holding our son, and then I watched Dr. Kwan's forehead beading up with sweat; his eyes said that if he stitched fast, things would be fine. The dark and slippery floor. I got dizzy, but the curtains helped me stay up. Reciting hockey statistics helped me, too.

Like Stan Mikita scored 1,467 points in his career. What a guy. What a name.

On the third day, the nurse showed us how to hit the road. I learned to wrap my son up. Once bundled, he fit nicely in the crook of my arm like a football. He was solid. Nearly eight pounds. Fat cheeks. Covered in tiny spots. Hair all wild over his forehead like a mini-Cro-Magnon man.

Kind of like me.

The nurse showed us how to set him up in the car seat. I concentrated during the lesson.

Bringing a kid home from the hospital is serious. You don't want to crash the car and



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send your first kid, on his first drive, flying through the windshield like a torpedo.

"Listen," the nurse said. "Your wife is going to be in bed for two weeks. You're going to be taking care of the baby."

"No problem," I replied

Let me warn you now about this kind of bush league over-confidence.

They finally released us late Saturday afternoon. Our new split level in the suburbs sat waiting. My wife didn't notice the fresh vacuum marks all over the house. She didn't notice the smell of tuna casserole covered with mushroom soup.

"I just need to lie down," she said.

"Hey, Beckett," I said holding my son. "We waited a long time for you."

That's when I felt this deep low-frequency vibration. Perhaps an earthquake had ripped through town? Oh, no. The vibration came from him.

Diaper time. Cottage cheese time. Hold your breath time.

You should know one thing about changing a newborn's diaper. This is true even if the kid has just pooped against the direction of gravity and you're cleaning curds up his back to his neck. The rule is that a newborn's poop is perfume, is delightfully wonderful, is nearly consumable - when compared to the diaper of a two year old.

The flashbacks. We will not get into this horror.

After I had cleaned the bum, washed the bum and covered the bum with goo, I tried snapping up the fancy designer sleeper that my cousin, Harold, had sent.

Not good.

I frantically rummaged around our new baby clothing and found this terry cloth bag thing with a head hole, arms and a drawstring at the end.

Now, this was a piece of baby clothing invented by a man. I needed to get at least 30 of them. I needed to replace the drawstring with one of the cords you see on sleeping bags.

My wife fed our boy in bed. She slept with him a little. I set up dinner. We smiled foolishly at each other.

A few nights later, she told me the new deal.

"You're going to sleep with him. In the

other room."

"I'll need milk," I said defensively.

"I've already expressed and frozen some."

Now, I'll skip through the stuff that most men have trouble with when taking care of a baby. I've seen guys struggle to make it past the one-hour mark. My advice is that if you can't last an hour with your own kid, you'd better man up and fight through it no matter how much your wife thinks you can't pull it off.

Yes, it's overwhelming. Yes, stinky time is stinky time. But the more time you spend alone with your kid, the better.

But sleeping with your baby at night is a different matter. This is what separates the amateurs from the pros. This is where you step it up. This is playoff time, boys.

When your kid cries, usually you look for one thing - the hand off.

The key here is not to be afraid of a little crying. Baby crying is baby communicating. It's like learning a new language. You've got to listen and experiment. Some cries mean food. Other cries mean I want to slap the light switch 50 times. Some cries say look at me, hold me close and make me feel loved.

This last category, in case you didn't know, is the goal, the Stanley Cup. (What a name for a top award.)

Those nights with my baby were some of the best moments of my life. At first, I spent a lot of time wondering what to do about the crying. I couldn't tell if he was hungry or cold or a combination of everything.

I walked around with him on my shoulder. I cleaned his little belly cord with a Q-tip. I sang him songs. When it got late, I made up a little bed on the floor. I stripped off my shirt and held him to my bare chest. I held him tight while he sucked on the bottle. Man, this baby had incredible suction. Kind of like me.

I stared at his tiny face. He was sucking intently. He was curling his toes. Slurp, slurp.

I felt something descend onto me. I closed my eyes and let the feeling fill me. He stopped sucking and pushed out the plastic nipple. I picked him up and patted his back until he burped.

I lay down beside him again. I felt an energy flowing through me as I held his body. It took me a while, after all, I am a man, but I knew what this energy was.

It was love. I knew it had to be love.

I remember feeling like I was sparkling, like I could light up the universe.

This is who I am now, I thought. This is who I am. Your father. Always your father. I'm taking care of you now. It's me and you and the beautiful woman asleep in the next room.

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