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My mom had the good sense to stay away when Courtney was born, understanding that this first birth would be stressful, and that Jenny and I should experience it as a couple, that we should work through this particular challenge together as we have every time we've faced trouble. And, of course, Dad decided not to come.

But Jenny's parents, they were right there the whole time, arriving just one day before Jenny was to be induced.

Mr. and Mrs. Kelling shrugged off my meek suggestions that they might want to get a hotel saying that, No, of course, what they wanted was "tight family time." Tight family bonding time with their daughter and her husband and the, quote, newest member of their family. And of course it was Jenny's body, not mine, filling then with that heavy life, so she felt scared and—I say this with love—she very simply wanted her mommy there.

Looking at it from both her perspective and theirs, of course I understand Jenny needing her mom and dad, and I can understand the grandparents' desire to feel involved, their wanting to see the baby from the moment it comes out. But let me just say that the last thing you, if you're the prospective father, the last thing you actually need when the love of your life is going through these last throes of pregnancy—or, for that matter, after the birth, when your newborn baby is screaming for the fourth straight hour—the last thing you need is some mother-in-law poking her head into your bedroom and asking you where you keep, and this is just one example, where you keep your cinnamon—because the mother-in-law says there is simply no way she can drink her tea without a dash of cinnamon.

And you, as the new dad, by this point, you've seen your wife in months of slow-building discomfort and then, finally, terrible agony, all of which you have no control over whatsoever. You've seen her split open, and then the much-anticipated bundle of joy, this baby, comes out and starts screaming, and shows no signs of stopping.

All this is happening, you finally get the love of your life home from the hospital, and then you're trying to come and go from work—Well, that's why she's here, to take care of me while you're at work, the wife

says—but you also want to take care of your family. This is your job, too. And now, in addition, you need to entertain two out-of-towners who've moved into your living room, who don't know their way around the city, which is a big city, and as if you have any idea where the cinnamon is or even if you have any freaking cinnamon.

Late in the visit, Jenny's parents invited some other relatives, cousins or something, to come for the day. So less than twenty-four hours before the parents are scheduled to leave, we have six people sitting in our living room compared to just the four. And all of these people, they want to touch the baby, my one-week-old girl, and hold the baby, and all of that. But then the cousins, who don't have kids—it is worth noting that these cousins are childless and child-free—these cousins begin quite clearly getting uncomfortable with Courtney's crying.

It's Jenny's family, so I do the honorable thing and take Courtney to the bedroom, to our one bedroom, to calm her down while Jenny and her family take the chance to chat.

In there I try to give her a bottle, which I've not done a lot because Jenny is breastfeeding, but I'm trying, and the kid won't take it. She won't take the bottle. It's not until afterward that I realize there's something wrong with the nipple, with the tip, and there's no milk, or in any case very little milk, coming out. And so Courtney isn't getting any milk at all, and she's hungry and she's crying first and then screaming, and at the time she's not supposed to be old enough to have tears, but she starts crying. My little baby who I'm supposed to be calming down. And I know Jenny's relatives, my in-laws, that everyone out there can hear, and I know what they must be thinking about me, hearing my baby cry like that.

So now I'm feeling trapped, in this little ten-by-ten room crammed with baby things, a changing table and other necessities for which there is no room whatsoever—and plus of course the in-laws' suitcases and clothes, their sneakers and dress shirts—me with nothing but a bottle that the kid tries sucking on but can't get any milk and so then keeps screaming, and I can't get her to stop.

I hug her, and she fights, and I bounce her on my leg, and she fights, and so then finally what I do is just kind of let her bounce on the bed.

I mean to lay her down, but I guess I'm agitated at this point already and when I lay her down she bounces a little, getting laid down on the bed, which surprises her. And then for two tension-filled seconds, she's finally quiet.

The silence is gratifying in a way. But at the same time I'm sure I've

broken her.

Without warning, I feel my chest fill with terror, and remorse, for letting a poor child drop on the bed, but also with this anger I can't quite describe—so that when the shock wears off and she starts screaming again, only this time on the bed and not in my arms—all I want to do is cover her mouth. Cover her one-week-old screaming mouth. And this thought, this thought that I'm the kind of dad who's ready to grip a hand over his infant daughter's mouth—

After that, even after the in-laws left and we had the place to ourselves, I didn't want to be alone with her. I wanted to tell Jenny about it, but I couldn't. I'd been such an ass about her parents coming, and all along I'd assumed and said that the frustration was about them being here. About the apartment being so small and there being so many people crammed in. And now everything should be fine.

So I sat on the fear and waited.

The tactic worked, actually. With Jenny paying attention to the child and me, instead of to the child plus the in-laws and me, I began to feel confident, like I could handle this whole ordeal, fatherhood. She's wonderful, Jenny, when she's not quite so pregnant and grumpy. She supports me through these moods.

A couple of weeks after the in-laws left, when the baby was asleep and Jenny mentioned that we needed diapers, I didn't feel too much like going out so I offered to stay, to watch the kid, to just sip on my beer but then hold Courtney if she woke up. Feeling confident.

This would have been okay, I honestly believe, if Jenny hadn't let the door slam on her way out. I won't say she slammed it intentionally because I don't think she did, but she didn't especially work to ease the door closed either. Courtney woke up right away. Jenny not even down the hall—I almost ran after her. And the child began crying again.

I went and looked at her in the crib. Screaming, crying, eyes squeezed shut as if—well, as if something were painfully wrong, when there was nothing wrong at all.

At this point Jenny would have been just down the stairs. But it's only a five-minute walk to the drug store, five minutes back. I didn't go after her. I knew I could get through ten minutes.

I put down my beer, picked up Courtney and tried to hold her, but she didn't want me. Women are built for holding babies. They smell like milk, like food, like home. Men don't. I laid her along my forearm and swung her there, back and forth, as if I were carrying a football. I've seen other fathers do this.

But she kept screaming. Yelling, crying. Her diaper was dry. She wouldn't take the bottle.

I tried to hush her—shhh shhh shhh—but I did it too loud. The sound frightened her, and she twitched, splayed her arms outward, and this movement—her own, unexpected movement—this startled her even more. She twisted her mouth into an angry grimace and wailed, agonized just to have me hold her.

I walked with her along the hallway a few times in the football-carry, her screaming as though I were throttling her.

Jenny never has trouble quieting the baby.

I got angry for wanting my wife there. If there's one thing I've always known, it's that I won't be like my father, a guy who ran from the room every time my little brother needed a diaper changed. My father who drank beer on the weekends and fell asleep in his chair, drunk.

When I catch my wife staring at me, when my daughter startles herself awake in the middle of the night, I close my eyes and see myself standing in the hallway, finishing my beer, trying to calm this screaming girl.

I see this moment again and again, gritting my teeth.

My jaw hurts from clenching it, so I open my mouth wide and rotate my neck, trying to work out the tension. I hold Courtney close to my face. I smile, show teeth. I stick out my tongue and blow a raspberry. I goo, I gaa.

She screams.

"Honey," I say, "it's okay. You're okay. You're happy. Just stop."

She screams. She flails her arms.

I lay her in her crib and walk the hall one time by myself. I rotate my arms, to work out the knot that's forming between my shoulder blades. I walk alone into the bathroom, the kitchen, the bedroom. Her room's all the way at the end of the hall, but I can still hear her screaming, her frustration at my ineptitude.

At the opposite end of the hall, alone, I scream once myself. To force out the tension.

She stops crying for a moment, like she did when I bounced her on the bed. But just for a moment.

I rush to the end of the hall and look down at her angry, pained face in the crib. My appearance is so sudden that, again, she splays her arms and legs in fright.

I frighten her. I scare my little baby.

She doesn't want me. She wants Jenny.

Be quiet, I say.

Tears stream along her cheek onto the mattress of the crib.

Please, I say, just shut up.

Shut up shut up shut up.

I reach down and put a hand over her mouth, so tiny I can cover it with just the outer edge of my palm, and she screams through my hand.

"For me, please, honey."

I clench my jaw, take my hand away. I should be locked up. Jenny should divorce me before anything happens.

Courtney screams louder. Angrier. The knot in my back feels like a rock growing out of my spine. I look at her in the crib, screaming. I reach down. I cover her mouth and her nose, using barely half my palm.

I want to be a good father. I will be a good father. But I'm not up to this. Anyone who looks at me can see that I'm not up to this.

Courtney screams through my hand.

With my hand over her mouth, the screaming sounds a lifetime away.

She opens her eyes wide in surprise. She's never known what it means to be denied air to breathe.

Get used to it. This is life.

Jenny's key enters the lock, I take my hand away, wipe at my eyes, and watch my baby gasp.

So this moment stays. Every time I close my eyes—whenever I try to relax—this is the moment I see. The moment in which I realize just how much trouble the three of us are in.