

DAVE B. BARRY



It's 6 p.m., and we're waiting for our 12-year-old son, Rob, to return from a quick bike ride. We're going to go out to dinner to celebrate the fact that, for the 1,000th consecutive night, we have figured out an excuse to not cook at home.

We're locking up the house when a young man comes to the door and asks if we have a son.

"There's been an accident," he says.

"Is it bad?" Beth asks.

"There's blood everywhere," he says.

Sometimes I wonder if parenthood is such a good idea. Sometimes I envy fish and frogs and lobsters and other animals that just emit their young in egg form, then swim or hop or lobster-scoot away from the scene, free of responsibility, immune from anguish. I can remember when there was nobody in my world as important to me as me. Oh, I loved other people — my wife, my family, my friends — and I would have been distraught if something bad happened to them. But I knew I'd still be here. And that was the really important thing.

Rob changed that. Right at birth. When he came out, looking like a cranky old prune, he didn't cry. Beth, instantly a mom, kept saying, through her haze of labor pain, "Why isn't he crying? Why isn't he crying?" The nurse said sometimes they don't cry, but I could see that the doctor thought something was wrong, because he was trying to do something with Rob's mouth, and he was having trouble. He whispered something to the nurse and took Rob away, and the nurse kept saying this was routine, but we knew it wasn't. I stood there, wearing my goofy hospital outfit, holding Beth's hand, trying to cope with two staggering thoughts: First, I had a child — *I had a child* — and second, *maybe my child was in trouble*.

That was the most sickeningly vulnerable feeling I'd ever felt.

And I didn't even know Rob yet.

It turned out he was OK — just a little blockage. The doctor gave him back to us, and we quickly became traditional first-time parents, wrapped in a woolly cocoon of joy and exhaustion, taking a genuine intellectual interest in poop, marveling at the thrill we felt, the *connection*, when our son's tiny hand squeezed our fingers.

But the feeling of vulnerability didn't go away. It only got worse, always lurking inside, forcing me to accept that I wasn't in control any more, not when I knew my universe could be trashed at any moment because of unpredictable, uncontrollable developments on this newborn comet, zooming through. When he was happy, I was happier than I'd ever been; but when he was in trouble . . . I can remember every detail of the time when, at 10 months, he got a bad fever, 106 degrees, his tiny body burning, and I carried him into the hospital, thinking *I can't take this, please, let me be able to stop this, please, give me this fever, take it out of this little boy and put it in me, please* . . .

But you can't do that. You can't

make it happen to you. You have to watch it happen to your child, and it never gets any easier, does it?

Now Beth and I are in the car, and I'm driving too fast, but I have to; I have to see what I don't want to see. Up ahead some people are gathered on the side of the road, and a woman is kneeling — she has blood on her dress, a lot of blood — and lying in front of her, on his back, his face covered with blood is . . .

"Oh God," says Beth. "Oh God."

This is where it ends, for some parents. Right here, on the roadside. My heart breaks for these parents. I don't know that I could survive it.

Now I'm opening the door, stumbling out of the car toward Rob. He's moving his right hand. *He's waving at me*. He's giving me a weak, bloody smile, trying to reassure me.

"It's my fault," he's saying. "I'm sorry. It's my fault."

"It's OK!" I'm saying. "It's OK!"

Please let it be OK.

"I'm sorry," the bloody-dress woman is saying. "I'm so sorry." She was driving the car that collided with Rob. He went through the windshield, then was thrown back out onto the road, 40 feet, according to the ambulance guys.

"This is my worst nightmare," the woman is saying.

"I'm sorry," Rob is saying.

"It's OK!" I'm saying. "You're going to be OK!"

Please.

He was OK. A broken leg, some skin scraped off, a lot of stitches, but nothing that won't heal. He'll be getting

out of his cast in a couple of months, getting on with his ever-busier life, his friends, his school, his stuff; he'll be growing bigger, moving faster, this bright comet-boy who streaked into my universe 12 years ago and is already starting to arc his way back out, farther from me, from my control, from my sight.

But that little hand will never let go of my finger.

I'm sorry. This was supposed to be a hilarious column about how Beth and I were getting ready to go out for a nice dinner at 6 p.m. and wound up eating lukewarm cheeseburgers at 11 p.m. on a table in the Miami Children's Hospital emergency room; and how Rob, after politely thanking a very nice nurse for helping him sit up, threw up on her; and other comical events. But this is how the column turned out. Next week I promise to return to Booger Journalism.

In closing, here's a Public Service Message for you young readers from Rob Barry, who won't be walking for a while, but can still operate a keyboard:

I know that bike helmets look really nerdy, and that was my argument. But I don't think I'll ever say that again. Make SURE you wear your helmets. And WATCH OUT FOR CARS.

Uneasy Rider

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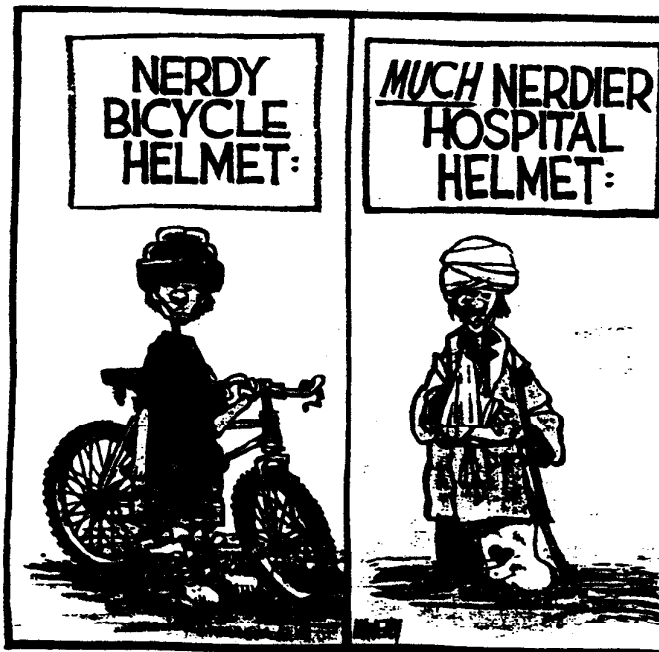


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