

I will carry your water

How can someone so small be so forceful? Andy is pulling me with all of his three year old might and I have to admit that it is pretty mighty. I honestly did not think my boy would have the patience to wait this long to see Arthur Armadillo but here I stand, corrected. Or rather, here I am being dragged to see a man in an 8 foot tall armadillo costume, corrected.

Andy was a surprise. Valerie and I had been together three years and had never used a condom. She refused to go on the pill. We didn't have sex before we got married; Valerie had issues with intimacy and abandonment. She has never talked much about her childhood but I know it was rocky. Her mom bounced in and out of a few clinics when Val was in high school. She was this broken thing when we started dating. Anyways, I was afraid that sex would shatter all the pieces she obviously held so loosely together.

And then we got married and she seemed like this different animal. I guess *animal* is actually the best word, really. She was wild. She couldn't be satiated. We had sex all the time, all over the house. I mean, I'd be like in the laundry room, which was really a closet more than a room, and she come behind me and just start grinding into me, like thrusting her hips into my ass like she was the guy or something. She wanted it all the time. I mean not that I was complaining or anything, it's just that it was a one-eighty.

Yet, as much as we did it, clawing at each other, popping buttons and overturning potted plants and all, she never got pregnant. Three years of this carnal feast, where we would just throw each other down in the hallway or once even in the backyard while the neighbors were hosting a barbeque, and she was never even late. And then, one morning I'm toasting English muffins, the most nondescript, plain breakfast food ever, and she comes into the kitchen, walks right past me at the toaster and hurls into the sink. She stands there, slack-jawed, the rims of her eyes red from the effort of dredging up last night's Bolognese, and just looks at me. I knew immediately. I whooped and picked her up, spun her around the kitchen until she started pounding me on the back, telling me she's going to vomit again. She went straight to the bathroom when I put her down. She locked the door and started the shower but I could hear her hiccupping over the patter of the water. I knew she nervous but I also knew we needed verification so I left her there and ran out to the CVS over on Broad Street. I bought one of each kind of pregnancy test. I also bought an anniversary card, even though it wasn't our anniversary but the card rack didn't have a "Hey, we did it! We're pregnant!" card so I thought this was the next best thing.

Every test came back positive but Valerie was still weirded out. She's not good at articulating how she's feeling. I remember my mom asked me after I first brought her home if she had been a druggie. She hadn't of course; Valerie is a new-age kind of hippy who eats Super foods and uses a crystal for deodorant but I knew what my

mom meant. Valerie seems like she is made of glass or spun sugar, something fragile but also something born out of fire. She has this kind of unknowable face, like you could swear she has freckles but the next time you look at her, her skin is as blank as paper.

So then we were pregnant and it seemed like madness, like we were playing at being grownups. Valerie became guarded again. I guess she felt like the pregnancy, if not the baby, was more hers because she was one doing all the real work. She insisted on going to her pregnancy check-ups alone, which was cool because I don't think my boss would have let me take off that time anyway. I don't know; looking back on it now maybe I should have asked to be more involved. I was just so happy and I thought eventually, Val would be happy too. Honestly, I've never known how much I should try and push Valerie. You always hear about fight-or-flight situations and I always figured that Valerie would just fly. I busied myself with assembling the nursery and making practice drives to the hospital.

Then Andy bursts into the world. I mean even his birth was this *thing*, like he just climbed out of the womb. Valerie's water broke while she was standing at the stove making lentil soup and we both just looked at each other because she was only 37 weeks. I see her lips form this little perfect "O" and I know she is doing the math and she is worried that the baby's lungs aren't fully developed. I read her face like a teleprompter and then she starts hiccupping. My mom had scared us enough with stories about my own arrival, how my dad went on a fishing trip and she had a to

take a cab by herself to the hospital, so I had planned for anything. I had a bag packed and a backpack full of lollipops and magazines stashed in the Subaru. I just walked over and turned off the stove and picked her up. I carried her to the car and strapped her into her seat and told her it would all be fine... and it was. It was fine. It was like Andy heard me too and essentially said, "Yeah, I'll take it from here" cause by the time we arrived at Glenside General she was dilated to 8 centimeters and I swear to you, she didn't even really have to push. Andy arrived, with what can only be described as a great set of lungs, about 30 minutes after we got to the hospital.

Valerie needed some extra time at Glenside after Andy was born. I know she wanted to breastfeed and she tried really hard that first 36 hours but Andy never really latched on and Valerie... I don't know. I think she sort of took it personally. One of the night nurses overheard her saying...something, something to the baby like "Why can't you" or like that and they called me and told me to come back to the hospital immediately. I had actually just gone home to shower and change so it was really no biggie but I get back and Valerie is crying and when she sees me come into the room it's like something deep in her was just allowed to go over the dam.

And I just stop breathing. I stand there in the doorway of my wife's hospital room and she is wailing and reaching for me and her body is wracked. I see she is remarkably thin. I see the dark half crescents under her eyes. I see her ragged fingernails, chewed and gnashed for the last 10 months. I'm standing there holding my breath, holding my hand over my heart to keep it from beating out of my chest

and she says, "I can't love you both. I can't. I just can't. There is no way for me to do this. I cannot. Just please don't ask me to do this. There is not enough of me."

Andy is now tackling one of Arthur Armadillo's legs and I am struck by the pure joy this kid radiates. He bears hugs the hell out of life. Jeanette at Happy Land Day Care can barely contain herself when he throws himself into her arms each morning; she's not supposed to have favorites but Andy is everyone's favorite all the time. He hugs every last child goodbye at the end of the day, even snot-nose Pierce who I wouldn't touch with a ten-foot pole.

Arthur Armadillo is reaching into his Magic Basket, handing out books to the cluster of kids gathered at his knees. He hands Andy the *Arthur Armadillo Goes to The Doctor* book and Andy gives him his 24-karat smile. He looks up into the puffy armadillo head and says in his little warbly voice, "This sure is the best book, Arthur. I'm going to read with it my mom when I get home." Arthur can't really voice a response so he taps his big plush claw on Andy's head a few times and gives me what I am guessing is meant to be a Thumb's Up with his other claw. I fist-bump Arthur and scoop up my boy.

We are on almost home when Andy starts singing.

"Don't worry. Don't cry. I'll never say goodbye. I'm here. I'm your father. Let me now. I'll carry your water."

I look at him in the rearview, thinking that he might be looking at me while he's singing this but he's in his little *Andy World*, kicking his tiny Keds and looking out his window.

"That's a mighty nice song, Bud. You learn that at Happy Land?"

He turns his bright little face to meet my eyes in the mirror. He smiles and wrinkles up his nose. He puts his finger to his mouth like he's trying to shush me. He laughs and shakes his head back and forth.

We are home and as I am unbuckling Andy from his seat, Valerie comes out the front door. She steps off the porch, claps her hands and squats to Andy's level as he runs to her, almost knocking her over with the full impact of his embrace. He cups his little hand around her ear and whispers something to her and they both turn their eyes to me and laugh. As she stands up with our son, the late afternoon sun shines upon her face. I stand next to the Subaru, one hand upon it bracing me, the other over my heart as it feels it might beat out of my chest. Andy puts his face to her cheek and I cannot tell where her freckles begin or his end.

