

Crybaby

*Two Canadian gnomes equal
one Terminator.*

On her way out the door, my wife reminded me that there were diapers in the bottom of the stroller. Also, that our oldest had refused breakfast—“stay on top of that.” And if our daughter, who had recently turned four, refused to cooperate, she could talk to Mommy on the phone. “Your cell is charged, right?”

I chuckled and gave my wife a hug. “Honey, there’s nothing to worry about, I’ve got this.” Relieved by my confidence, she let out a long, deep sigh, rubbed her temples, and rapidly blinked. “Whatever,” she said eventually, then left for the day to visit her sister in Brooklyn.

I closed the door. My wife was by all accounts a wonderful mother, but with one problem: she worried too much. Sure, the kids could be trouble. But they were kids, weren’t they? They need to make mistakes. It’s how they learn.

As these insights streamed forth, I heard a fist connecting with flesh in the kid’s room, followed by a shout. I stood passively and listened, waiting for them to settle the dispute on their own.

Then I heard another fist-on-flesh smack, to the chest maybe, or the belly. Then came what I immediately recognized as a large plastic train careening into a wall. The next sound was tougher—my best guess was my daughter falling on the plastic train, then that train flipping up and hitting her back in the face. But enough was enough, and it was time to see how good I was at guessing.

When I arrived in the kids’ room, well, it wasn’t pretty. They were at each other’s throats. But then, after taking stock and inhaling deeply, I told them they were acting like absolute monsters. I said this using my “Daddy is angry and screaming at you” voice. And for whatever reason that made it much, much worse.

Fighting. Yelling. Spitting. Crying. Spiraling. It went on like this for hours. It became clear that I was entirely powerless to stop them, so I tried a different approach.

I put the screaming baby in his crib, so he could take a nap or whatever. I plopped the older two in front of the TV and put on *PAW Patrol*. I retreated to the kitchen, where the sound of pups extinguishing a fire drowned out the baby’s cries. And as the baby lost gusto and things finally quieted down, I whipped out my phone and took a much-needed break from the strains of parenting.

I had forgotten all about lunch, and boy was I hungry. I went to open the fridge, but something was stuck in front, blocking the light.

To my complete surprise, out of the fridge tumbled two small men. They were approximately the size of microwave ovens and wore identical green jumpsuits. On the breast pocket of one was an image of a moose, on the other a... hockey puck? In their tiny hands each held a blazingly sharp machete.

These gnomes were super-agile; falling out of the fridge, they each did a few somersaults on the linoleum and came up in a fighting stance. I held back a yelp, hoping not to disturb the baby’s nap.

“It’s him, eh?” said the one with the moose patch on his pocket. He spat on my kitchen floor. “You disgusting piece of human garbage!”

“Do I—know you?” I sputtered.

“It’s time to act. For a better future, eh?” said Moose.

“For a better future—eh!” said Puck, raising his machete above his head.



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"Take money," I said, my voice crackling, as I opened my wallet and realized I was out of cash. "Or my debit card, I'll give you the PIN. What about Israel bonds? Do you take those? They're in a shoebox in the closet."

"Silence! There is one thing we want, and it is not Israel bonds." Puck raised his machete even higher, grinning murderously.

Suddenly, I understood. I looked

"Go ahead," Puck said, "crying helps." Then Puck turned to me. "Go back in time, eliminate the dictator, that's our mission. Stop the war before it even has a chance to start," he said, and then gestured widely. "This is why we're here."

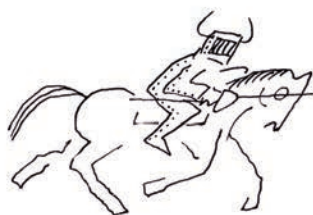
I wanted to tell my kids to turn that idiotic TV off—Daddy needed quiet to think. But I didn't dare; these Canadians were clearly as crazy as they were short. "You think *I'm* going to turn into

"Unless we act now!" shouted Puck, shaking his machete.

"This is insane," I said. "You're both insane."

"In the future, your shittiness as a father is legend," Moose said. "Everyone knows the stories. They are repeated at underground weddings and clandestine circumcisions."

"Gatherings of two or more are strictly prohibited," Puck chimed in. Then



BANG

tim hunt

straight into their eyes. "Kidnappers," I whispered. Then, in as hard and menacing a voice as I could muster while wearing soft pants, I hissed, "Here's a word of warning: don't lay a fucking finger on my children, or I will *hunt you down and make you suffer*."

The little men looked at each other. And then, they started laughing. Big, hearty laughs. Much deeper laughs than I thought could come out of bodies that small. I'd been maximum threatening and they were *ticked*. Oh shit.

"Worried about his kids?!"

Moose and Puck just kept laughing, to the point where it stopped being sinister and became irritating.

"Tell me what is going on!" I wanted to shout this, but I choked it into a strangled whisper—the last thing I needed was to wake the baby.

Moose took a deep breath and wiped his eyes. "I guess we can tell him, eh?" He stood up a little straighter. "My colleague and I are part of the Canadian Imperial Time Squad."

Puck chimed in. "We are here to take your life, eh? To prevent the rise of a terrible dictator."

"The worst ever," Moose said. "The future is a terrible place. Endless war. The climate crisis allowed his rise. And then, the slaughter began..." Moose's voice broke. The other agent placed his hand on his shoulder.

some sort of dictator?"

Again, they laughed.

"Quit laughing! Two mini-Canadians break into my home, hide in my fridge—"

"Right, OK," Moose said. "No laughing." They both tried to compose themselves.

"Yes, let's be professional," Puck said, pulling out a piece of paper. "I have here a warrant declaring—but look at his face, he still thinks it's him!" They collapsed into fresh gales of mirth.

Just then, I heard my kids in the other room. "Give me the remote or I'll scream in your ear!" my son said. My daughter shouted back that she wouldn't. "Give! It! Now!" he screamed directly into her ear. Something about how he shouted—it sounded almost German.

The two gnomes heard it, too, and it made their laughter dry up in an instant.

"*Him?*" I said. "But he's just a kid."

"Our quantum scientists have flawlessly reconstructed the events leading to your son's rise to power," Moose said. He took an instrument from his pocket; on its screen was a rapidly vibrating line. "This squiggle means we are close to the crucial moment. The moment when he becomes a broken individual, broken beyond repair, beyond imagination. And it is due to you and your very, very bad parenting."

added sourly, "Unless they're rallies for 'Dear Leader.'"

Moose continued. "Books detailing your failures were quite popular as cautionary gifts to expectant parents. Your son became enraged and outlawed them. But people still made their own, so he banned paper."

"Even then, the tales lived on," Puck said. "People passed them down orally. They declaimed you in verse."

"Like *The Iliad*," Moose said, "except about how shitty you are at parenting."

"Your failures are the basis of our entire culture," said Puck. "Everybody has a favorite shitty-Michael story! Mine's 'That time when Michael yelled at his kids and then hid in the kitchen.'"

"Without giving them lunch," Moose said, hissing the words disdainfully.

"It was an exhausting morning," I said. "My wife went to Brooklyn, and they were so bad for me."

"Boo-fucking-hoo! Daddy had a bwad mowning," Moose said in an unnecessarily mean baby voice.

"Well, thirty-two years later, your boy personally chopped off nearly all my digits!" Puck spat, jabbing my chest with a one-fingered hand. "All because you didn't want to deal with your kids' drama, you piece of fatherly scum!"

Moose wedged himself between us. "Puck! Remember your training," he said. "We knew he was going to suck. Don't let that compromise the mission."

Let the machete do the talking, eh.”

“Eh,” Puck said, in an apologetic tone. I could hear, in the other room, that my son was sitting on my daughter’s head. She was clearly in pain. Any louder and they would certainly wake the baby. Who would have to deal with that? Me. Ugh, this morning was the worst.

Moose read my mind. “Soon, the boy will shout at his sister and wake the baby. And that’s when you cross the final line.”

“You give him a time out, you rat-bastard,” Puck whispered.

“Won’t he deserve it?” I said, weakly.

“And then, through tears, he will ask you why only he is being punished, how is this his fault? Then you will lose your temper at him. Again. You will yell. But not because of anything he did. Just because you are a bad dad and a giant infant, surpassing any child in your selfish immaturity.”

Puck stepped forward. “Your death will ensure that this line is not crossed.”

“Hold on a sec.” My mind was racing a mile-a-minute; this was a lot to take in. “Before you kill me, let’s just make sure everything matches up. I mean, this stuff is complicated. Maybe some other dude is the cause of this mess. You’ll have sat in that fridge for nothing.”

“Our quantum scientists—”

“Have you considered Hitler? I know who Hitler is, which means you didn’t go back and kill him. If you have a time machine, why not start with him?” I asked.

Moose just shook his head.

“Clueless, just clueless,” Moose said.

Puck gave me an icy stare. “There is no comparison between your son and Hitler.”

“He’s like triple Hitler,” Moose added. “On a good day.”

I had to play for time, it was my only move left. “I apologize if this is insensitive,” I asked, “but why are you so short? Are all the people in the future this small?”

“Wow. He went there.”

“And launching into it with that faux-polite apology. That’s another shitty-Michael story for the file. Shall I remember it, or will you?” Moose asked.

“Oh, I’ll remember it,” said Puck.

Moose said, “Our size is a consequence of our work. I don’t have time

to explain it more. If there is a hell, ask Satan about ‘time dilation.’ Basically, each mission, you get shorter.”

“The blood of our victims has made us small,” said Puck, smiling.

“And now, time to die.” Both raised their machetes.

Just then, a shout rang from the living room. As these Canadians had foretold, my son pulled his sister’s hair, and then pushed her off the couch. There was a loud thud and then a scream. And then, from the back of the apartment, the baby cried.

Really? The kids chose now to wake the baby? Just as I was starting to make some progress with the Canuck gnome death squad?

“Stop it!” I shouted into the living room. “Stop! Or I swear...”

I didn’t get to finish the sentence.

“Quickly! Now!” I heard the pleasant sound of their blades whistling through the air, humming together.

In the end, there was no pain.

Only darkness.

I was in the kitchen, fiddling with my iPhone while the kids watched TV in the living room. It was their second, maybe tenth *PAW Patrol* in a row, I couldn’t say for sure. The baby was finally asleep after I’d let him cry in his crib. On my phone I was watching videos of dolphins who had grown deeply attached to their trainers. The dolphins had learned, in time, to kiss these caretakers. I wondered if there was a dolphin out there that might do that to me.

Just then, I realized I was starving. I opened the fridge. To my surprise, out tumbled two small men wearing green jumpsuits. They were armed with machetes. They were quite short.

“Let’s give it another shot!” said the one with a moose on his pocket.

“You said that last time,” said the one with a hockey puck on his uniform, doing a few somersaults on his way out the fridge.

“What is going on?” I asked.

“I think it’s your turn, eh?” said Puck, coming up in a fighting stance.

“Thank you, I lost track,” said Moose, doing several flips across my kitchen floor.

I wanted to tell them something, to ask them to be quieter, to explain that I couldn’t think straight right now, I just needed a minute to rest and eat while the kids watched TV. But I didn’t have the chance.

There was no pain.

Then, darkness.

I opened the fridge and out tumbled two extremely small men armed with machetes.

“Let’s try stabbing together this time, eh?” said the one with a puck on his pocket, mid-air.

“Simul-stabbing, a good idea,” said the other.

“On the count of three.”

“One.”

“Two.”

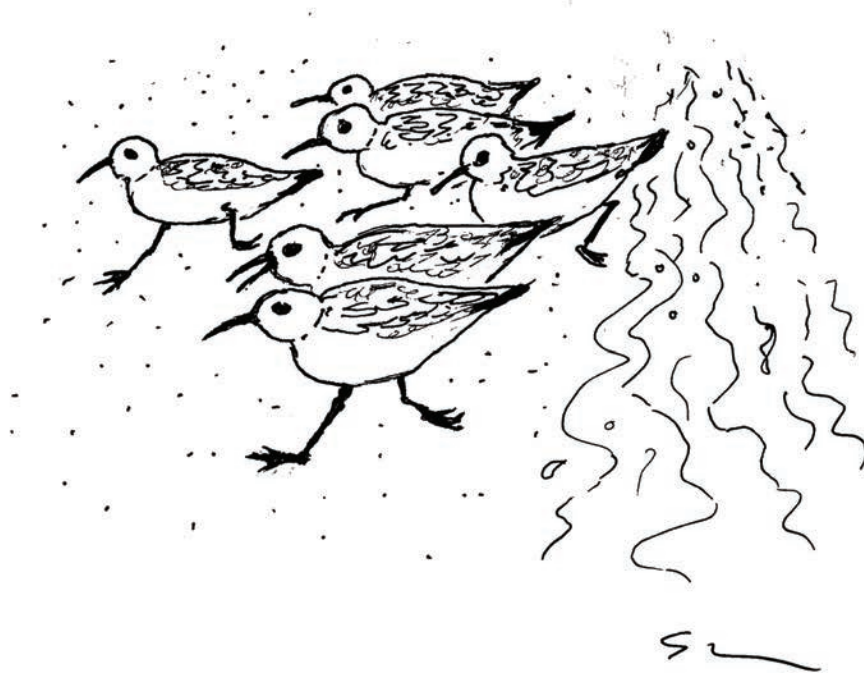
“Hold on now,” I said.

“Three.”

“Are you guys Canad—”



MARK WINTER (CHICAGO)



"Are we just going to run suicides again all day?."

There was really quite a bit of pain. Then, darkness.

Kids! TV! Baby! Crib! Hungry! Fridge! Dudes! Eh! Stab! Pain! Bleed! Bleed! Die!
Darkness.

Iopened the fridge and out tumbled two extremely small men in green jumpsuits. They were, to reiterate, extremely small, each roughly as large as a pineapple. In their hands were blazing sharp machetes, which they gripped tightly though the huge blades were much larger than their bodies. They seemed awfully tired.

The taller of the two, who had a moose on his uniform, spoke in a high-pitched squawk. I couldn't make out what he was saying, so I leaned closer. I think he said that he was going to kill me on account of how I was such a shitty dad, that he and his buddy had killed me many times before, and that they would keep killing me for the rest of time if that's what it took to prevent Triple-Hitler and alter their terrible future.

At least I think that's what he said. He was very hard to hear.

From the other room, my son shouted at his sister. "Give me the remote or I'll scream in your ear!" he said, but my

daughter refused. Any louder and they would certainly wake the baby.

I sighed. Everyone was so unhappy in this apartment: my kids, these two tiny killers (a strong instinct told me they were Canadian), and most of all, me. I didn't need to be told I was failing as a parent. All morning I had made everyone miserable. That's why I was here, hiding in the kitchen, giving everyone a break from myself.

I thought of what I could say to get these pocket assassins to leave me alone. I could think of nothing. They hated me and there was nothing to do about it. I just wanted another chance, but I didn't know how to get one. Suddenly, I started to cry. The tears came in big sobs that I couldn't stop. They came out much louder than I thought they would.

So loud, in fact, that I woke the baby. Everybody was making noise now. The kids were screaming, the baby was crying, and I was sobbing too, but also the two guys were squawking at each other with their tiny voices.

The assassins were having a disagreement. The one with a tiny puck on his shirt kept gesturing at me with his weapon. The one with the moose shrugged his shoulders while pointing to his fancy-looking instrument. Eventually, Puck threw his machete down. It

rattled on my tile floor as he crossed his arms and pouted.

Moose motioned for me to bend over and look at his instrument's futuristic screen. I wiped my tears and tried to listen to his cartoonishly high voice. There was something important happening, he said, something they had never yet seen in all their attempts.

"It is the closest we've ever gotten," he told me. "Triple Hitler Threat Reading is near zero."

"Wow," I sniffled, pretending to understand. "Just great."

Moose told me that to have changed the odds, I must have somehow realized something that made me a less-shitty parent. I nodded, but only because he still had the machete. I have a policy of agreeing with anything machete-holders say. Anyway, all I had realized was that I couldn't control how these sad little people felt about me, only how I treated them. What did that have to do with parenting?

"The vibrations are clear," he continued. "Our fate is no longer certain. The Triple Hitler may never arise."

"And if he does?" Puck said with a smile, "we'll just come back and kill you again."

With that, the two men shook my finger and somersaulted back into the fridge. There was a bright flash followed by a *frzap!* Then, they were gone for good. The mayonnaise wobbled a little, then stopped.

Now it was just me and the kids again. The older two had missed out on the whole machete thing and were fighting on the couch as if nothing had happened. The baby was shrieking like a maniac. The noise made my head spin, and I felt myself growing tense and upset at their screaming and cruelty, that old familiar feeling.

I went back to the kitchen and opened the fridge. I checked the produce drawers and all the shelves. No tiny Canadians, as far as I could tell. I removed a bowl of cold macaroni and scooped it onto three plates. I picked up three miserable, screaming children and shoved plates of pasta in front of each. I squirted ketchup on their pasta, and they shoveled it into their mouths. And I, their caretaker, smiled at them while they ate, until our tears had dried and we all had gotten what we needed. **B**