

The Three of Us

by GARY E. EDDEY



We had just missed the bus: the usual three in a row had gone by. At 9:15, the sun had not yet managed to break through the December clouds. With John and Ann-Michele getting cold quickly, I hailed a cab.

"Eighty-fourth and Madison, please."

John, 4½ years old, jumped into the back and slid over to the other door, though not before counting the number of stickers taped to the back of the front seat. I lifted Ann-Michele out of her stroller and held her in my arm, while I balanced on my left foot and collapsed the stroller with my free hand and right foot. Ann-Michele, 14 months old, was able to crawl in on the back seat held up only by her brother who was still counting the stickers.

"Daddy," John yelled, "she's grabbing the man's stickers. Daddy, stop her." The cabbie looked annoyed but I didn't have time to worry about his thoughts as I struggled to get the stroller into the back seat. "It should fit," I thought—and finally it did, but not before partially tearing off one of the no-smoking stickers. "Daddy, watch the sticker," John yelled.

Ten minutes later we were let off at 84th and Madison Avenue. The exit from the cab went more smoothly and quietly than our entrance. I lifted Ann-Michele, who was now pulling at the yellow no-smoking sticker, and put her in the stroller. John, in his bargaining mode, announced that he was only walking two blocks and asked where we were going.

"There," I pointed across the street to a brown apartment building. We were headed to a new gallery, the San Francisco Ship Model Gallery. The models of the ships would, I thought, help us pass the time

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while we awaited the results of my wife's surgery. She was having her gallbladder removed. It was elective surgery, and I was not expecting any complications, but I was a bit nervous.

"Only TWO blocks, daddy," John repeated emphatically holding two fingers up.

"We're here," I repeated.

The doors of the gallery were hard to negotiate, stroller or not. I caught Ann-Michele's hand against the door frame. She cried out. I bent down to rub her hand as the wind blew the outer door hard against my back. "Damn!" Ann-Michele looked up at me, her soft round face showing a concern that surprised me.

"Hello, may I be of help? Hi, little fella."

The manager looked down at John pleasantly, and I introduced us and asked if we might look around. "I think that would be OK," he said in what I suspected was his customary high-pitched nasal voice. Ann-Michele climbed out of the stroller, and John began peeling off his outer layers of clothing and throwing them into the stroller.

"This is neat." John loved the place already. Ann-Michele was squealing with delight not because of the model ships but because her brother was in his playful mood. They played well together but, I was hoping, not too well in this gallery.

As the manager walked back to his office, my son asked in his non-stop inquiring way, "Daddy, why does this man talk funny?"

"Shh."

"Daddy!!! Why does he talk funny I asked," raising his voice. Although the manager must have heard, he did not look particularly upset, and

I was able to quiet them both down and put Michele back into the stroller. The gallery was smaller than I had anticipated, and we clearly were not going to spend much time here—or money for that matter as the cheapest item was \$1,800. Within 20 minutes, we had already seen everything twice, and John and Ann-Michele were more than ready to go. The manager thanked us, appearing not to have minded my children at all, and handed me his business card and said goodbye as we negotiated the two front doors once again.

After food and drink at a local deli, we arrived home at 10:30 and I called the recovery room at the hospital to see if my wife was out of the operating room. Being a pediatric resident at the same hospital where your wife is having her surgery does have some advantages, and being able to call the recovery room, speak to the head nurse and get an accurate, concise summary of Ilene's condition was one of them. I was told she was doing very well, had just required some more pain medication and should be going to the floor soon.

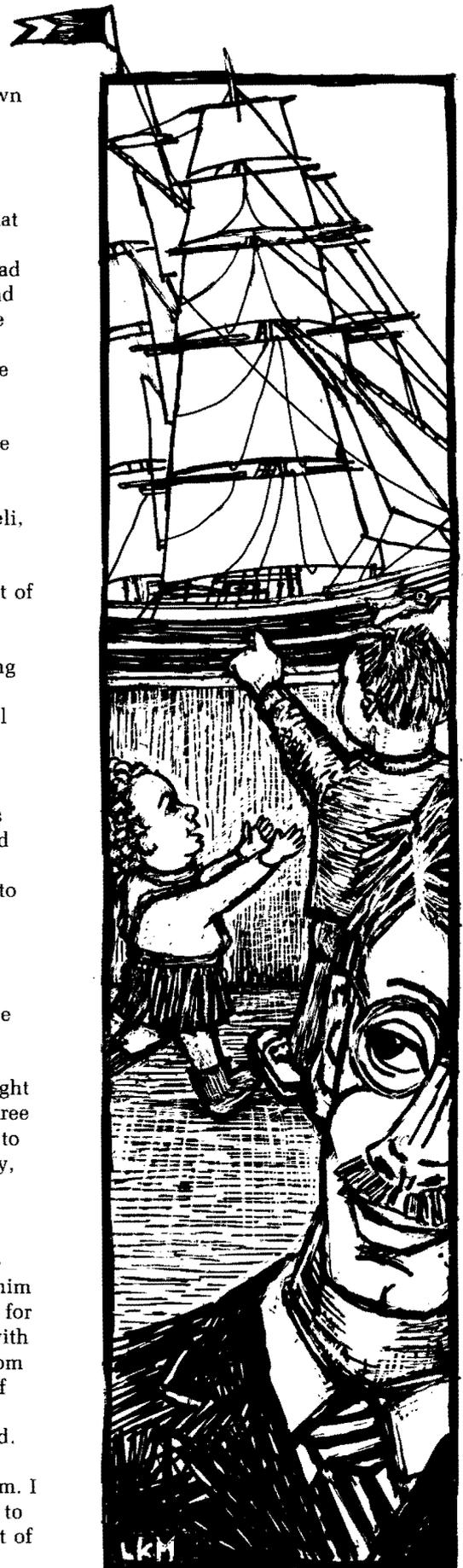
"To the floor. Already!"

"Oh yes, she has been here in the recovery room since 9:15."

I thanked her, hung up and thought to myself that, even before the three of us were climbing into the cab to head up to the model-ship gallery, Ilene was already out of the operating room and doing well.

I waited for John's afternoon pre-school session to start, dropped him off and, since I had not arranged for a babysitter, took Ann-Michele with me to the hospital. My wife's room was near the pediatric house-staff office, where I would be able to leave Ann-Michele while I visited.

Ilene was in a large four-bed room. I found her sleepy but responding to my voice, first saying she felt out of



it but at the same time feeling very distinctly the pain at the abdominal incision. Shortly after I arrived she became more alert and less concerned about her pain and began pressing me on how John and Ann-Michele were doing.

My wife did not attempt to hide that she was more worried about the children's being at home with me than she was about her own condition. Despite the fact that I was a third-year resident in pediatrics, that I'd been selected a chief resident for the following year and had a strong interest in primary care, Ilene believed I was too self-absorbed to be able to take care of our children on a day-to-day basis. "You are going to read and ignore them," she had said. "You are not going to be able to shop and plan meals."

I told Ilene that both Ann-Michele and John had a good time on our outing this morning but that last night John had broken into tears. I was sitting in the living room watching TV, with Ann-Michele playing on the floor nearby, when suddenly we heard John crying from his bedroom. Just a few minutes earlier he had been drawing contentedly at the dining room table. I walked back to his bedroom to find him sitting on his bed, in his usual cross-legged position, crying softly, tears rolling down both cheeks.

"John, are you crying because you miss mommy?"

He nodded. I hugged him, assured him that mom was OK, that I missed her also. He let me hold him for a few minutes before looking up, questioning: "Mommy is going to be gone for a long time, isn't she, daddy?"

"No, John, only four or five days."

"But, daddy, that IS a long time," and he began to cry louder.

We sat silently for several minutes after he stopped crying. He then

crawled off the end of the bed towards a pile of his toys and began to play. His sister walked into the room, and, seeing that he was playing and no longer crying, smiled and babbled something as if to say, "Let's play, John."

I explained to Ilene that John had remained quieter than usual that evening as the two of them played together until bedtime.

"What time did you put them to bed?"

"Around nine o'clock," I lied. They really had not gone to bed until around 9:45—and Ilene and I had worked hard getting them in the habit of bed by 8:30.

"Did they both sleep through the night?"

"Of course." By this time she was whispering words again and I knew she needed to be left alone to rest.

I went back to the pediatric house-staff office to pick up Ann-Michele, who by this time had won the hearts of her "babysitters," and headed over to the food store to shop for dinner just in time to run back and pick up John from school.

I never particularly liked making dinner and seemed to have a vague recollection of someone's having offered to make it. In any event, I was too tired to cook, and we ordered out.

After dinner John asked if he could call his mother.

"Yes, go ahead, call her."

John dialed twice before reaching Ilene. Our phone bill would show 170 local calls that month, probably half of them from John to my wife. The phone kept separation problems to a minimum for John. Ann-Michele developed sleeping problems only after my wife returned home.

While John was talking to my wife on the phone and Ann-Michele played on the floor, I suddenly was aware of my anxiousness about being home alone with my children. Not only was this the first time that John or Ann-Michele would be away from their mother for more than 24 hours, it would also be the first time that I had ever been alone with them without my wife for that amount of time. It was somewhat like being on call in an intensive care unit when nothing was going wrong but you knew something could at any moment.

After John hung up and before the babysitter arrived, he played with his Baby Bobby, a toy that used to be a favorite but that I hadn't seen him play with in a long time. Tonight he seemed to spend great effort in comforting his doll, wrapping him in a blanket, etc. He would not share with his sister or allow me to help him wrap the doll up in the oversized blanket. When his sister began howling because she wasn't allowed to play, he ran into his room and brought back her cabbage patch doll which distracted her from his playing. I asked John what Baby Bobby was doing and he said simply, "He is sleeping." And that was it; he hugged his doll until an interesting TV show came on.

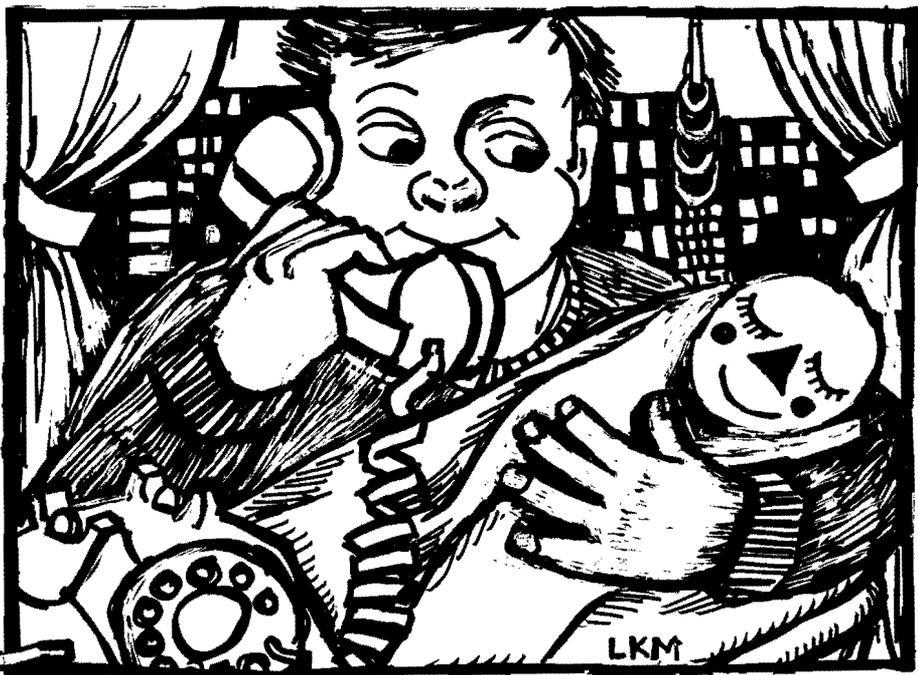
That night when I went back to see Ilene, she was less pale but in more pain. Her left hand was slightly swollen and tender due to an IV infiltration, and she complained more about her hand than she did about the abdominal incision.

"What did you make the children for dinner?" she said.

"Food."

"You ordered out, didn't you?"

"They ate well though," I said. At first John said that he wasn't eating and that was that. I told him this was all I had to offer him and that was that!



Ilene being in a fair amount of pain, I cut my visit short and returned home to find the children enjoying the company of the babysitter. I carried Ann-Michele back to her crib, and she smiled and laughed as I held her. When I placed her in the crib, she quickly sat up as I left the room.

“Go to sleep, Ann-Michele,” I said softly. She lay down, rolled over to the corner of her white crib that I had rebuilt several years back for John. She then placed her feet up against the sides of the crib, looking away toward the ceiling. I left the room without hearing any crying or stirring. Five minutes later she was sound asleep.

Before putting John to bed, I explained again that mommy was doing very well, that the operation was over and that now she was only “sleepy.”

“Can I call her again, daddy? Please, daddy, please?”

“Not now, she is probably asleep. In the morning you can.” He

understood. No acting out tonight. No asking for numerous drinks of water, no asking that a dozen books be read to him. He fell asleep quickly.

It was 9:30. With the children safely abed, the apartment suddenly became deeply peaceful. Sounds from the street far below became more noticeable than those within the apartment. Savoring the change, I lay on the couch, alone with some new-found sense of parenthood.

It was Friday afternoon, my wife was post-op day five. Five days of scheduling and organizing activities for the children while at the same time planning and executing shopping trips to the foodstore, working it all out in such a way as to make the day run smoothly. Actually, nothing ran smoothly, but it was possible to have fun as long as you didn't expect to get everything—or at times anything—accomplished. On this Friday the children and I would purchase Ilene's Christmas gift, a guitar. We would all buy it together, a gift from the three of us to her.

It was cold but not windy, a good day for a walk. Getting Ann-Michele dressed in two layers of clothing took about half an hour. She looked good in her new winter jacket with her matching hat and mittens that her mother had just purchased and that I would lose by the end of the day. John was dressed and yelling for us to hurry up.

“Daddy, I told you I'm not going with you.”

“Where are you going?”

“I said I wasn't going.”

“I asked you, where are you going?”

“I said I'm not going if you don't hurry up.”

We decided to walk across town in the direction of our favorite pizza places. When the line at the shop was long at the first place we came to, I suggested that we try another, but John convinced me that the line wasn't that long and that it would move fast! Sure enough, it wasn't long before we had our pizzas and were seated at a table long enough to give us room to maneuver. Finding the right place to sit in a restaurant in New York City is not all that easy when you have a stroller and children. With the pizza, John and I had soda and Ann-Michele had milk that I had dutifully remembered to put in the backpack hung on the back of the stroller. Eating pizza together for the three of us was more than just a meal. When I had been away or asleep and not had the chance to spend time with them, an outing with them in the limited time we had together was usually to a pizza place. We had been to a lot of them in the city.

We finished quickly and were on our way across town again in search of Ilene's present. John got tired and

sat on the stroller on top of his sister. Ann-Michele was protected by a safety bar that was built into the stroller. They faced each other and played with each other when there was not anything interesting on the streets to look at.

The walk across and down to midtown was getting colder as the wind picked up and sliced into our faces. Finally we reached West 48th Street, where the music stores are located. We were all very cold and savored the warmth of the store. Thirty minutes later we had purchased a guitar for Ilene and were bundling up to face the cold. Ann-Michele was still cold, her legs were red and she was becoming irritable. A woman behind the counter offered her a lollipop, which appeased her for the time being.

I knew it was cold, but I thought I could grab a cab and get home soon. I was wrong. We walked and waited and walked and waited some more. John was cold, I was cold, and Ann-Michele was frozen. Her lips started to bleed and the lollipop froze to her mouth tearing off several layers of skin. We quickly walked into a grocery store on Sixth Avenue to clean her up and were greeted by the assistant manager, who was quite concerned about her and provided anything that we needed to clean up. She was obviously cold, her legs were icy and I was getting concerned too.

After warming up we headed out into the streets for another attempt to find a ride home. Ann-Michele started screaming when we left the food store as she knew how cold and uncomfortable she was going to be. I decided that she had to be carried in my arms. John would push the empty stroller and I would carry the guitar in my free hand. Three blocks and 15 minutes later, a cab stopped and shortly we were home.

In the apartment I tried to settle the children down. Ann-Michele wanted the lollipop that I had thrown away, then settled for some small pieces of cheese. Shortly she began crying again. Her legs were frozen, and I was worried. What kind of pediatrician was it who would let his daughter get frostbite? I had put the wrong kind of pants on her, something that probably no mother in the world would have done. I had not planned ahead and dressed her warmly enough for sudden cold, windy weather changes.

To work with children all day and night and not be able to see your own children grates on the soul. John had been born just prior to a summer vacation while I was in medical school. I was able to spend enormous amounts of time getting to know him, and getting to know him was instantaneous. Ann-Michele was born during my most depressing rotation, as a second-year resident at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center. Hours spent with my new daughter were few and far between during those next 12 months. It was no wonder that this time alone with my children meant so much to me. I

began feeling what it was like to be a primary caregiver—mistakes, frustrations and all.

Ilene's progress was good, and she was expected to be home on the sixth post-operative day. The night before, I was up alone after putting my children to bed, reflecting about the past week, what I had learned about the day-to-day running of a household and how Ilene surely would be proud of me for keeping things together despite the frozen leg incident.

"You really have done a good job," I could hear her say now. In some way I almost found myself regretting her coming home and the change that would make in my newly-found bond with my daughter.

We were up early the next day. John was excited, and his mood caught up Ann-Michele. There was much to do before Ilene was to come home. I paid a housekeeper to clean up, arranged for a babysitter and headed off to pick up my wife. Within an hour we were four again.





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nurses residence, this stained glass now brightens the lobby
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