

Beowulf Is Pillow

by Steven Miller

"You can't die," Susan says as I carve the first of two chickens.

"I wasn't planning on it."

It's eleven at night and she has appeared behind me to tell me this.

"Also, you can't leave."

"I won't leave," I assure her. "Even if I die, I'll just come back and haunt you."

"That would be nice."

"Not when I jump out of the cabinet first thing in the morning."

"Why would you do that?"

"Because I'll be a ghost. Obviously."

"Obviously."

Now that school is back in session, we move through our days like cage fighters, tagging in and out of matches: The Battle of the Bottle, The Diaper Duel, The Pout Bout. So while I'm assembling a casserole for tomorrow, Susan feeds Margot. While she washes bottles, I tell the big kids a bed-time story, usually featuring Simba (Lion King) and Celeste (Babar). Parenting is a team sport, and today we are getting routed.

"Really, though, if you leave, I'll never know what Charlie is talking about again," Susan continues.

This evening, while I was away for a meeting, the kids kept asking to play basketball. We do not have a hoop. A ball. Any game that could be confused with basketball. Nor does anyone we know.

When I finally came home, I immediately produced my phone and played them a current favorite: a cartoon of a man being pummeled by a dozen basketballs.

This sort of miscommunication happens daily now that Charlie is speaking more and more. Whether it's a request for Tiger Box (Frosted Flakes cereal) or Tarty Free (a Toy Story Three picture book he loves) or the most recent desperate demand for Beowulf to be brought to his bed, communicating with our toddler has become

a coded affair. Bonnie used to act things out, a mini game of charades where she would pretend to eat pizza, bowl, or climb a ladder. Charlie has not developed this theatrical bent. Instead, he stomps a single foot and repeats again and again. Earlier tonight, it was "Beowulf, Beowulf, BEOWULF!!" he was demanding.

"At least he's literary," I said to Susan then.

"At least," she replied.

It is officially midnight now. The chickens are carved and most of the grease cleaned up. Everyone is in bed except for Margot and me. I look over and see her passed out in her Bumbo. Face squished against shoulder, shoulder squished against the rest of her. I can't help but think she looks like a little chicken.

Tomorrow is another early morning, another busy day, but right now it's quiet. So quiet I can hear the dripping of the faucet I need to fix, the buzzing of the fridge, the breathing of my little chicken, and I breathe, am conscious of just breathing, not breathing while doing.

Then I hear it: the pitter-patter of little feet.

"Daddy?"

"Yes, Bonnie?"

"Are you finally going to sleep?"

"Yes, Bonnie."

"When you're asleep, I'm going to come sneak into your bed."

"Okay, honey."

"Hooray!" she says and scampers off.

Some battles just aren't worth fighting.

