

Second-Shift Parenting

by Steven Miller

Your mom's favorite joke right now is how enamored I am with the chair the nurse brought me, the one that converted into a bed. Apparently, it's all I can talk about when people ask about your birth. But really what can I say? If I say the birth was easy, the person I'm talking to would say, "Maybe for you!" If I say it was difficult, they'd add, "Oh yeah? You did a lot of the pushing then?" No, they probably wouldn't say any of this, but these are the sort of low-hanging-fruit jokes I would make. So I limit my commentary to the chair the nurse brought me. Have I already mentioned that it converted into a bed?

After you were born, I started getting to chip in with the whole raising you business. Your mom went through twenty-two hours of unmedicated contractions, then seven hours of Pitocin, and then finally an hour of pushing. She carried you, our most precious cargo, for nine months—through nausea and sleepless nights and a rash that covered the majority of her body—before pushing you miraculously into the world, but I supervised your first bath, so really we're even. Actually, I just sort of stood there while the nurse sponged you off and shot more instructions at me than I could ever possibly remember.

It's hard being a dad. I feel so late to the game. Your mom has been raising you for nine months; I've been at it for nine minutes. And even now I'm left out of a lot. Because I have to work and, you know, can't feed you, I miss all that night parenting everyone raves about.

Okay, so maybe that's not so bad, but I also miss all the day stuff too. I'm a second-shift parent, which is just as expendable as it sounds. Really, I'm an assistant second-shift parent, assistant to the parent, in charge of all those "can't screw it up" tasks like taking your temperature or changing your diaper. Wishing I could do more. And yet I love you with a force that keeps me *working* more at work so that I can play, guilt-free, at home. And it is an all together new

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love. It is the sort of love that comes with new set of instructions for living. And a new definition of what it is to live—and to love.

For instance, I've always taken for granted that *agape*, "The Love of God," was a mystery of the faith that I'd never comprehend. Or worse, I have taken it to mean only the love *I* feel towards God. But then this morning your mom handed me you, because it was my shift. I held you in my arms while you cried until we both fell back to sleep. And in that short hour nap as the sun rose, I dreamt terrible things: Committing accidental crimes and being imprisoned for them. During the day I visited the cells of my fellows, converting their hearts as best I could and trying to remain hopeful and useful. Then, as so often follows the day, even in dreams, the night came and I remembered you at home, crying in your mother's arms, and at this I let out a wail, not a mature crying spell but an infant's bellow—so absolute was my sorrow.

When I woke up to find you in my arms, still fast asleep, it was not the relief of an innocent man set free by the morning, as I have felt many times before. No, it was the relief of the shepherd, the woman who had lost her coin, the father whose son had returned—as if from the dead. And I started to see then, if only briefly and imperfectly, what "The Love of God" really means, because the worst part of my dream wasn't being in dream prison. No, the worst part was not being there to rock you back to sleep when you cried.

