

Waiting
for
Athena



JOHN SCALZI

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ATHENA**

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INTRODUCTION:

When I began writing the Whatever in late 1998, I was fortunate to have a ready subject: My wife Kristine was pregnant with our first (and to date only) child, Athena. Not entirely unexpectedly I found the process of pregnancy fascinating; probably more fascinating than Krissy did because among other things I wasn't actually the one having to carry another person around in my abdomen.

On the writing end of things these entries are also interesting because the writing is very much in line with the tone of the earliest Whatever entries, which is to say, not nearly as snarky and unhinged as I could be later. I blame parenthood.

If you are a parent, I figure these entries will bring back memories; if you're not a parent yet (but want to be at some point), here's what you have to look forward to.

THE ENDGAME

Oct
16
1998

We began the endgame of the pregnancy yesterday by heading over to the hospital in Reston where Krissy plans on having the baby. We were given the choice between a hospital in Reston and one in Leesburg; Reston is closer, and we both agreed that there would be something odd about going all the way out to Leesburg to have our child born. We don't go to Leesburg otherwise, whereas Reston is well within our territorial circle—we putter back and forth between it and Sterling to see friends, work, do shopping and so on. It's a matter of psychic comfort; when you are bringing a new life into the world, you don't want to do it some place where you feel you're just passing through.

We went to take a tour of the maternity ward. Apparently these things happen regularly, because we weren't the only couple there. There were six or seven couples, consisting of women at about seven to eight months pregnant, and their husbands/boyfriends, all of whom had the slightly befuddled expression that I've recognized on myself more than once: The one that signals awareness that a child is coming, but that the actual concept of having a child has not sunk all the way in. All the women were absent-mindedly patting their bellies; they know the baby is coming, and I think the pats were a sort of maternal

Morse code. *See*, they were saying to their babies, *this is the place you'll meet the world. It's not a strange place to you anymore.*

The nurse who led the tour was just the sort of woman you want leading the tour: Nice, warm, plump, and generically mothering. However, she kept popping the pleasant maternity bubble by bringing up, early and often, the specter of antibiotic-resistant bacteria. Thanks to 50 years of wanton antibiotic abuse, there are now strains of formerly defeatable bugs that have developed resistance to even the most caustic antibiotics; toss the antibiotic equivalent of hydrochloric acid in these bugs' faces, and they just laugh at you and ask for a towel.

Stuff that used to be cleared up by a shot of penicillin can now kill you dead. That of course presents a serious problem, both to the new baby, whose immunological system is not all there at birth, and to the mother, who after giving birth is likely to have open wounds in the form of an episiotomy or a c-section, or just "normal" tearing during the birth process (reminder: Birth is not clean and easy, like it was for Phoebe on "Friends"). So, here's a note to all you people who chomped down antibiotics like they were Pez: Thanks a lot.

Because of the new super-bugs, the hospital has instituted some stringent visitor policies for the mother. First, no visiting children in the maternity ward—children, you see, are like petri dishes with Keds, and trade bacteria like baseball cards. The hospital doesn't want a kid breathing on mom and baby the strain of resistant staph that they picked up at recess. Siblings are allowed, but apparently not on the bed, and they're not allowed to hold the baby, either.

All of which, you know, is perfectly fine with me. I know all about these super-resistant bugs, and the further they're kept away from my wife and baby, the happier I'll be. I would have been fine hearing about the scourge of SuperStaph just once, but as Krissy pointed out, not everyone grasps the concept that

these bugs can kill you now. There are probably some moms who would allow the kids on the bed because they want to show big sis the new baby right away, and to heck with an annoying bug. For these people, driving the point home with a big, clunky sledgehammer is the only way to do it.

Other visiting rules: only two people at a time, and during the birth, only the husband/boyfriend/significant other and one other person can be present. Apparently some people were bringing in up to a dozen people at a time into the birthing room, to share in the experience. Which of course begs the question: Who *are* these people? This ain't the Super Bowl, after all. You don't invite a bunch of pals over, set out chips and salsa, and cheer on the home team after every contraction.

It was good for me to go to the hospital and take the tour, because as I mentioned earlier, the reality of the small human who will be in my care has not yet set in. Yes, my wife is obviously pregnant. Yes, we've turned one of the bedrooms into a nursery. Yes, we've picked out a name. Yes, I write and joke about it all, all the time. But the fact is, it just hasn't set in. Fundamentally, I can't get my brain around it yet. I've always thought I would have children, but I still have no idea about what it is to be a *father*—all the things that entails. It's still all theoretical. Hospital tours and birthing classes (which are coming up in a couple of weeks) are bringing home the fact of the baby to me, but I'm still waiting for the Dad Thing to kick in. I want to know how it feels.

I had just a small glimpse of it in the hospital. At one point in the tour, our nurse guide took us to the neo-natal unit; you know, where they store the babies right after the birth. The picture window that the dads and the relatives smoosh themselves up against is in this narrow corridor, and not especially well-designed to accommodate a large group of people, so I and some of the other husbands stepped back just a little to give

the women room to look. While that was happening, behind me a new baby was having its paperwork done at the receiving desk: Height weight sex and such. That done, the baby was then whisked into the neo-natal unit.

The corridor was narrow enough that I got a good look at the baby: Eyes wide, alert, looking around and probably wondering, as much as newborn babies can, where it was and what all these blurry shapes were doing around it. It was, in fact, the first actual newborn baby I'd ever seen—I mean, within an hour or two of the birth. As the baby went by, it hit me that I would have one of those of my own soon, and at that moment I really, really wanted to hold that baby. I wanted to get an idea of what it was like, to hold my child and have her whole world be that space in my arms that contained her.

For that second, I think I got it. I think I want more of that. I want to be a father.

BABYSITTING DUTY

Oct
26
1998

Krissy volunteered us for babysitting duty this last weekend; her friend Jennifer and her husband had tickets to a Capitals game, and since they're one of the very few Washington area sports teams with anything approaching a winning record (they did get to the Stanley Cup finals last year, after all), they decided it might be worth the time to go see. While they probably could have taken their baby to the game, it's unlikely he would have gotten anything out of it, and besides, it's dangerous for women to nurse anywhere where video cameras are hooked up to arena-sized screens and manned by guys looking for something interesting to fill up screen time between on-ice fights.

So we got the call. Krissy was only too happy to do it—she wants practice with a baby before ours pops out (and she wants *me* to have practice as well, which is probably more to the point). There's also the issue of reciprocal sitting; some months from now, *we'll* want to go out as a couple, and we'll call up Jennifer and hand off our own adorable little drooler for a few hours. Thus gently do we ease into the interdependent Circle of Parents, a world of babysitting, PTA meetings and discussions about childhood flu medicines. It was almost painless.

The baby in question was Bobby, three months old and the spitting image (and I mean that literally) of Elmer Fudd. Put a dinky hunter's cap on his head and a wee little stuffed shotgun in his hands, and you could almost hear the lisp. Bobby came in at just over 12 pounds, which means he weighs about half as much as our cat. This was good. I don't have any problem handling the cat. Bobby logically enough looked to be about half as much trouble. Maybe this baby thing won't be so hard.

If this were fiction, having just written what I did, this would be the point where Bobby turns into a squalling little hurricane of wailing trouble for the next six hours. But in fact he presented almost no problem for us the whole time he visited. First off, at three months old, Bobby wasn't going anywhere we didn't put him; when you have no neck muscles to speak of, forward motion of any sort is pretty much out of the question. Secondly, Bobby's agenda was reasonably straightforward: Keep me fed, keep me dry. If both of these were accomplished, he was pretty much content to lie there and wiggle occasionally.

Oh, he did have his moments of angst, between when he decided it was feeding time and when we retrieved the bottle from the warmer. During those moments, his crying sounded eerily like he was asking "Why?" "Why?" I was wondering what he was asking "why" about: Why don't I have my bottle? Why was I placed here on this planet? Why aren't I at the Capitals game? Bobby ultimately kept the existential nature of the queries to himself. Maybe later, when he's, oh, 28 or so, I'll ask him what he was thinking. I'm sure he'll remember.

I did a feeding and a reasonable portion of baby-holding, enough to reassure myself and my wife that the first thing I won't do when we have our own baby is to drop her on her head. Krissy handled the baby the rest of the time; as it happened, she had a remarkably convenient little shelf on which to store the baby, namely, her own very pregnant belly.

Bobby seemed to enjoy lying there on top of it, but the other baby involved was apparently less pleased; Krissy noted that our baby was kicking her especially hard in the ribs that night.

Well, who could blame her. It's already pretty crowded in there; put another baby on top, and it's a dogpile. Either that, or our baby was trying to get a message to Bobby: *Get your own mom. This one's taken.* Intrauterine jealousy, next on Ricki Lake.

TELEMARKETERS Vs. THE PREGNANT WOMAN

Oct
28
1998

Krissy had to come home from work yesterday; the baby was lying in a funny position (weird “funny” as opposed to amusing “funny”—if it had been the latter, we’d have headed over to the imaging center and put the results on “World’s Funniest Sonograms”), so her doctor told her to lie down and put her feet up. Unfortunately, Krissy’s not so good with the leisure thing, even when it is medically prescribed, and she had to do something to keep herself amused. So she antagonized a phone solicitor.

The solicitor was calling from CitiBank, from which we have one of our credit cards. She was trying to sell Krissy some sort of supplemental health insurance, the sort that is practically useless, but which plays to the fears of an uninformed populace (“You’ll be protected in the event of a water landing!”). Additionally, they don’t tell you that they are trying to sell you anything: Instead, they ask to send you information on the program, and in the course of obtaining information from you, they maneuver you into a three month “trial,” after which, if you do not actively seek them out to stop it, they begin charging you.

Krissy knew all this because at some point in the recent past a dim-witted spouse of hers who shall remain nameless

wasn't paying attention and signed up for it on another card, and Krissy had to spend two hours on the phone with credit card apparatchiks to get it removed from the account. It took a threat to transfer the balance and close the card to convince the apparatchiks to drop it (why didn't the dim-witted spouse take care of it? Well, if he's dumb enough to get it in the first place, how likely is it that he'll get himself *out* of it?). Krissy had no intention of getting the stuff being offered, but here she was, pregnant and bored, with a perky little dope on the phone—a dangerous combination if there ever was one.

Krissy's attack plan was to be bovinely placid for large portions of the time while information was being extracted, and then, at one particularly sensitive point or another, to lash out violently at the solicitor. This is an excellent technique, since the poor souls who are getting paid \$7 an hour to call are trained only in dealing with either dazed compliance or outright hostility; intermittent irrationality confuses and frightens them.

As it did this woman Krissy was torturing. Krissy went along happily enough, giving the woman information, until the woman asked for where she was born. Krissy flew into a rage and demanded to know for what possible reason her birthplace was important to the proceedings. In addition to being an excellent question (unless you were born in Bhopal around the time of that gas leak, or outside Chernobyl while the core was breaching, one birth site is as good as another), it's the exact sort of question about which a paranoid response makes folks nervous. *Why* is this person so worked up about where she was born? Is she in the Federal Witness Relocation project? Will procuring her birthplace expose her to retribution from the Gambino family? Will they come after *me* next?

Rather than deal with the ramifications of having apparently enraged Krissy, the solicitor transferred Krissy over to her supervisor, who was specifically trained, or so it may be

assumed, to deal with angry, irrational folks. So of course, when the guy spoke with Krissy, she reverted back to her placid compliance mode, pleasantly providing the fellow with information. The guy got it all down, punched it up, and then thanked Krissy for enrolling in the program.

The trap was sprung. What are you talking about? Krissy snarled into the phone. I never said to enroll me in the program.

This confused the fellow, who had naturally assumed that, since she was allowing him to take down the information, that that was what she was doing. It was then that Krissy reminded him that at the start of the phone call, she was told that she would be sent information *only*. Enrolling was never part of the deal.

Well, said the fellow, it's a free three-month thing. You can opt out after the three month period. Sure, Krissy said, but I don't want to take time out of my day to call you people to cancel.

It's just a phone call, the guy said. To which Krissy said: So? Does not making a phone call take time? *My* time at that?

So you won't make even a 30-second phone call, the guy asked. Hell, no, Krissy replied. And then the guy hung up on her.

Which, you understand, is the holy grail of phone solicitor antagonism. They are trained to keep you on the phone for as long as possible, and never to take "no" for an answer. The recipient is always the person who terminates the call. To get this guy irritated enough that he cut the connection is a great moral victory for us all—it means they can be beaten at their own game.

There are some of you who might feel a little sympathy for these folks, but don't. From my point of view, anyone who calls you up to sell you something you didn't ask for, and then tries to trick you into buying it, deserves all the antagonism you can offer up. Especially the supervisor in the story: The poor bimchette Krissy went up against in the beginning can possibly

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be excused because she was just reading off a script. But we can assume the supervisor knew what he was doing. Which of course, makes the hang-up even more sweet.

Anyway, if you have any lingering sympathy, remember this: Every minute Krissy was giving these people the run-around was a minute they were too busy to call you. If you enjoyed your dinner in peace last night, you can thank my wife. I'm sure she'd tell you you're welcome.

Now, I'm off to call CitiBank to complain to them that one of their supervisors rudely hung up on my wife. Talk about poor customer service!

THE PROBLEMS OF FATHERHOOD

Nov
11
1998

I went to three bookstores yesterday, looking at books about how to be a father. I had no intention of buying any; I was doing research. I've been fiddling with an idea for a book about being a stay-at-home father, and so my agent ordered me to hit the bookstores to find out what sorts of books like my idea were out there. He also asked me to find out how many children are being born each year (3,912,139 in the US in 1997) and how many stay-at-home dads there are (at least 1.9 million according to the Census Bureau). The idea of all of this is to be able to make a clear argument to book publishers that a book like mine needs to be on the market, and (as an aside) that I'm the one that should write it.

So off I went to the parenting sections, in which you learn two things. The first is that when people think the word "parenting," they're actually meaning "mothering"; nine out of the ten books that are on parenting are either explicitly or implicitly aimed at the moms. This is of course because of the fact that nine out of ten times, it is the mother that's doing the primary child-rearing, whereas the men are off doing whatever—assumed to be overworking, underparticipating, or just simply gone and boinking some chippy half their age.

The second thing is that the fatherhood books that do exist largely assume some deficiency on the part of the father—lots

of books on how to cram your kid into your workday, or how to be a good divorced father, or how to be the father of a troubled kid (which is to say, not how to make your kid troubled, but how to deal with one that has troubles). Very few books that assume the father is not working from a some sort of hole. As may be expected, all these books are painfully earnest. After all, if you're reading a father's book, you've probably failed in some way and thus have a lot to make up. No interesting reading for you, my friend.

It depressed me. If you were to go on what you find in our nation's bookstores, you'd reach the conclusion that men don't give a damn about parenting, except for when they've screwed things up so badly they need an operating manual to get themselves out of it. Now, let me be clear, I firmly believe that there are indeed bad dads. But I refuse to believe that every man who becomes a father starts off the parental journey with the thought: *Get me out of here.*

I'll say this much. The book I want to write will assume a sane, interested and committed father. It will also assume that a sane, interested and committed father wants to read a parenting book that doesn't read like punishment. I might be wrong on both counts, but in this case, I'd rather be wrong than right.

THE TERROR OF BIRTHING

Nov
12
1998

Horror stories from the nurses teaching our birthing class last night, of deliveries delayed and induced, babies born mid-squat and babies who refused to budge. The women in the class, all between seven and eight months gone, would gasp and groan. The men would also gasp and groan, but their hearts weren't into it. They're not going to have to go through it, and thus it's like listening to your pal tell you about an injury he sustained playing a sport you don't care for. *You busted your knee playing lacrosse? Hey, that's awful. Get me another beer, why don't ya?*

Our class is taught by two nurses. The first one looks and sounds like Jewel, if Jewel never made it big, aged another couple of decades and settled for a life teaching maternity classes in a Lutheran preschool. There's nothing wrong with that, of course. Indeed, the world would be a better place if Jewel had not made it big. Jewel might not think so, but it's not as if she's entirely objective about the matter.

The other nurse looks like she should be behind the counter of a successful Danish pastry shop; large, blonde, cheerful looking, an air of confidence and competence. She's slowly taking over the class from the other one, which is just fine for most of us, since she's less pixellated. You don't want to have to parse through what the person who is teaching you about birth is

saying, after all. These women don't have the time. They're on a schedule.

The second nurse brings along her teenage daughter to help with the class. The daughter is basically the floor model and is used to show off the various positions for resting, birthing and relaxation that we're supposed to be learning. It's helpful, but it's also distracting, since the daughter is thin and lithe and very not pregnant, none of which any of the women taking the class are. The women look at the daughter and think: *I used to look like that*. The men look at the daughter and think: *I used to fool around with women who looked like that*. It's difficult to say who is more depressed.

The daughter can't help herself on the matter. She's a teenager, and thus, not a realistic body model for anyone who is not themselves a teen and burning calories like they were soaked in kerosene. Anyway, it can't last. We have proof of that in the form of the mom, who has had four children and looks it. She doesn't look bad, mind you; she is in fact attractive in that cheerful, big, here-have-another-sticky-bun sort of way. But she is neither thin nor lithe, and it appears to have been some time since that has ever been the case. The mother and daughter are a nice tableau: *This is your body before four pregnancies. This is your body after. Any questions?* You can't say our birthing class doesn't let you know in advance what you're getting yourself into.

FUN WITH EPIDURALS

Nov
25
1998

Last night the teachers in our birthing class had everyone in the class hook their fingers in their mouths, pull as hard as they could, and hold it for what seemed like the better part of an hour. It looked like training for audience members of a UPN sitcom. After going on long enough that my lips were sending the signal that I could expect retaliatory chapping for several days, we were told we could relax. That was, we were told, a vague approximation of a single contraction.

At that point, if I were a pregnant woman, I would have run (well, waddled) screaming from the room. The average first-time labor goes on for *fourteen hours*. Fourteen hours of that, I would go nuts. I mean, *really* nuts. We're talking clawing the walls, cursing men, viciously attacking the doctors and nurses that were there to assist me, hitting anything within reach. Since I've been led to understand women very frequently do just this, I've made a note to myself: *Bring body padding to delivery room.*

It wasn't coincidence that our little lip-stretching exercise was given the same night we had a serious discussion about the variety of painkillers available to a pregnant woman during delivery. Chief in these discussions was the epidural. If you're not familiar with this procedure (and why would you be, unless you've had a pregnancy and/or a kidney stone), basically

they stick a needle part of the way into your spinal column and numb the nerves that control the lower half of your body. The good news is that the pain of labor goes away; the bad news is that you can't move or control anything below your belly button. Welcome to the world of catheters and forceps.

Epidurals are very popular with hospitals these days, presumably because it gives the doctors a little more control. This makes perfect sense to me—if the woman whose baby you're delivering is gouging holes in the wall because of the pain, she is probably going to be more difficult to manage than one who can't move at all. But, on the flip side of this, the woman has little or no control of the birthing process; it's hard to push when you can't feel your abdomen. This is a powerful disincentive to some women, who feel that when you're going to give birth, it's the mother who should be doing the work, and to hell with the control freak desires of the delivery room doctor.

My wife, for the record, falls into the second camp. She's planning to do the birth epidural-free, primarily because she wants to be in control and to feel the birth; it's important to her. I won't argue the point with her because it's not my argument to make. Personally, I think that in her position I would want to be heavily anesthetized. *Heavily*. But I'm not in her position. Also, I suspect her tolerance for pain is higher than my own. She gets a cut or bruise and she feels irritation, not pain: *Stupid cut, messing with my day* instead of *I'm bleeding from an artery, it's all going black*.

Still, that's going to be a lot of pain, and I'm a little concerned, for her well-being as well as mine. Birthing pain is often transmitted from wife to husband by use of the hands. When Krissy whips her fingers into my mouth and starts pulling, screaming, *you did this to me*, I'll be wishing for that epidural. For me, if not for her.

THE BREASTFEEDING MAFIA

Dec
2
1998

My wife is about to start hitting the bottle. The baby bottle, that is—after months of constant pressure to breast-feed by nurses, doctors, books, videos, magazines, and random television ads, my wife is ready to tell them all to go to hell and whip out the can of formula.

Two events yesterday exacerbated her rage. The first was this video we got in our birthing class about how to tend to the baby the first few days it is home, from the people at Lamaze (I was, for the record, unaware that it was actually a brand name). Interspersed between ads that hawked everything from breast pumps to cord blood storage there was some actual useful information, so it's hard to say that it was an entire waste of time.

However, the first twenty minutes or so of the video were really nothing more than a Leche League love-fest: We were presented with a nurse who went off, at length, about how she hadn't wanted to breast-feed, but once she started, she never wanted to stop. It completed her, made her feel euphoric, and so on. It was disturbing. If you have replaced the words "breast feeding" with "heroin," you would have thought this woman was a pathetic junkie.

The second was in the actual birthing class; the women were assigned the job of coming up with a list of the disad-

vantages of breast-feeding. The idea, from our instructors' point of view, was that she could then refute all these disadvantages. The women came up with what I thought was actually a pretty convincing list: Chapped nipples, leaking, lack of privacy, and so forth. Our instructor beamed serenity and swept them away. Well, or tried to minimize them, which I'm not sure the women in class bought entirely.

Krissy didn't, and in fact came out of the class, as previously mentioned, just about ready to ditch the breast-feeding idea altogether. The issue is not actually the pros and cons of breast-feeding *per se*, it's how the message is being handled, and Krissy feels like we're being hammered in the head about it.

And we are, through no fault of our own. Our parents' generation was one that got the signal that breast-feeding was something that was optional at best—heck, why go through the trouble when science has created baby formula for you (This is also the era in which Tang was drunk more than actual orange juice; the two events are probably somehow related). Nowadays, the medical opinion pendulum has swung back to breast feeding, and there's apparently some panic in the medical community that this generation of mothers will keep its boobs holstered, because that's what their mothers did, or because, thanks to MTV and poor educational systems, they're all as dumb as rocks. Whatever the cause, we're getting the hard sell.

Krissy also related a story which solidified her opposition to the breast-feeding secret police: While the women were coming up with their list of disadvantages, one of them mentioned a friend who had just delivered a baby. As soon as the baby had gotten out of the birth canal, the nurses took it and put it on the mother's tummy, which isn't a bad thing at all. But then the nurses grabbed one of the the mother's breasts, pulled it out, and began massaging it to stimulate the milk flow. All

without first asking the mother if that's what she wanted, or even allowing the mother to do it all herself, somewhat more discreetly.

Krissy was shocked; her position on her breasts (and not unreasonably so) is that no one touches them for *any* reason without her permission. The nurse who just reaches for one without clearing it is going to end up with a black eye, courtesy of the new mom. More to the point, Krissy was also amazed that the nurses are just assuming they know what the mom wants without asking her.

This goes to Krissy's general feeling that *she* is going to be the one in charge of the birth, not the medical staff (this is also, if you'll recall from last week, why Krissy is also adamant against the epidural). I pity the poor doctor or nurse who comes in and tries to take charge of the birth from Krissy; she'll wrap a blood pressure cuff around their neck and pump it until their head pops right off.

When all is said and done, Krissy will indeed breast-feed, for at least the first few months; despite the hard sell, it is in fact the best thing for the baby, and Krissy has the "mega-mom" gene in her—it's hard for me to imagine her doing something less than what's absolutely the best thing. But she sure as hell won't do it because she's being told to. I admire that in my wife, among the several thousand other reasons I have to admire her.

While the women in our birthing class were coming up with the disadvantages of breast-feed, the menfolk were assigned the duty of coming up with a list of the advantages. We did a pretty good job of it, mostly because I had just read the breast-feeding chapter of "What To Expect in the First Year" and was showing off. Our list included: Better nutrition, easier to digest, convenient, provides antibodies, allows the woman's body to get back into shape, and the fact that it is also scenic (this is obviously an advantage only for the menfolk).

When we were done, our instructor noted that we had forgotten an important one: It's also cheaper than having to pay for formula.

Of course, us menfolk acted outraged. We would never put an economic consideration on what's best for the baby, ever. But you could tell that at the mention of money savings, the internal calculators clicked on: *If wife breast-fed for (x) number of months, we could save (y) amount of money, which could go towards....a large screen TV.* Suddenly, the case for breast-feeding became a lot more compelling.

I blame the teacher. Our intentions up to that point were pure (well, except for the "scenic" crack). Now, we're all motivated by 61 diagonal inches of viewing pleasure. It's just so very sad.

THE FATHER YOU ARE

Dec
22
1998

At some point you stop wondering about the father you will become, and start wondering at the father you *are*."

Without making too much of the fact, those words came to me in a dream.

They were, in fact, entirely inappropriate to the dream in question, which involved, for reasons I cannot even begin to explain, jogging. Nevertheless, in my dream, I heard those words clear as a bell, superimposed on the dream like a dubbing accident in a foreign film. The part of my brain that knows that I am dreaming (the same part that wakes me whenever a dream nudges into nightmare territory, or, alternately, becomes far too stupid to stand anymore) grabbed onto the words with a vengeance; they were the words I had ringing in my head when I woke up, and they've been more or less at the forefront of my brain ever since.

As a general rule, I'm wary about relying on dreams as a font of practical observation in my life. Sure, mystics and sages and such use them all the time, but I somehow doubt Buddha or Gandhi had a lot of dreams where they were the only person naked in the school cafeteria. The only practical advice one can glean from a dream like that is: *Wear pants when you leave the house*. You already know that. Or should, anyway.

Still, those words have clear meaning for me. It's now possible to count in hours, not days, the time remaining before I am a father; within the space of those short hours, all my theories on the sort of father I could be, should be and will be will be set aside as I get to meet the father that I actually *am*. Am I terrified? You bet.

Lots of reasons for that. Without going into Ricki Lake-like detail, my own father did, by any measure, a remarkably poor job of being a parent; I'm not worried about suddenly becoming my father (by the age of 29, you had damn well better be yourself), but I am vaguely worried that some "parental screw-up" gene has been passed along and is lurking in my DNA, just waiting for the birth of a child to switch on. Like adult onset diabetes, except that instead of having to amputate a leg, I'll have to amputate my relationship with my kid.

A more realistic and immediate worry is just the simple fact that I have no freakin' clue what I'm doing. This has, of course, never stopped me before—indeed, most of my friends would be pleased to tell you that I have made a life out of having no freakin' clue what I was doing before I actually started to do it (and only the slightest of clues even after I was in the thick of it). True enough, but in previous cases, the only person my cluelessness would affect was *me*, or possibly another adult who could bail out of the situation if required. *This* situation features a small human who is, in fact, *stuck* with me. She can't trade up to another, more clueful, model after the fifth or fifteenth time I've screwed something up.

Let me be clear: I *expect* to be a good father. None of the aforementioned fears and concerns are intended as an excuse or rationalization to allow me to sit around, leg up on the couch arm, planning my grand escape to Taos with a 19-year-old Blockbuster clerk, while Krissy is left to handle the actual child-rearing (among other things, who really wants to go to Taos?).

I know myself well enough to know that I'm not going to be a side-swipe father, opting for cameo appearances. I just don't want to screw it up, that's all. In that respect, I don't think it's a bad thing to have a healthy amount of worry about all the ways you, as a parent-to-be, can take a header.

For the record, here's how I think I'll be as a dad. From the ages of newborn to about two or three, I'll be pretty much your basic dad: Changing diapers, playing with the baby, keeping her from poking her adorable little fingers into wall sockets and the mouths of angry bears, that sort of thing. From about three to twelve, I'll be The Coolest Dad in The World, because **a)** I know everything, so whenever she asks "why is..." I'll have an answer, and **b)** I'm a big dorky goofball. Which is fun when you're a little kid.

However, these exact qualities will make me The World's Most Embarrassing Dad from the ages of thirteen to twenty-two, good for just two things: Rides to the mall and college tuition. From about twenty-three onward, I expect I'll be pretty cool again. Now, I'm aware that this basic plan will probably have nothing to do with reality; the real world tends to get in the way of such things (thus the quote from the dream). But when I wonder about the father I will be, this is what I see.

What a strange time and place that I am in right now, to be so close to having your life be so different forever, yet to still be in the same place you have been all your life. I feel unmoored, jarred off the usual track of time; I walk through my house and think of all the things that I am doing for the last time as a not-father. You can take this to a ridiculous extreme, as I did when I made myself a peanut butter-and-jelly sandwich—my last one without a child!—and got sort of misty-eyed about it. But you see what I'm getting at. I'm trying as hard as I can to see my world *now*, because whether in subtle or obvious ways, I'm not going to see it the same way soon.

JOHN SCALZI

I'm still wondering about the father I will be. I'm ready to be father I will become. I'm waiting for the child whose presence moves me into the present tense, whose arrival allows me to say, finally, *this is the father you are*.

Soon, now. Soon enough.

*My daughter Athena Marie Scalzi was born
December 23, 1998.*

LETTER TO ATHENA

Dec
24
1998

Dear Athena:
When you were born, God decided that it should snow. Not much, just enough to cover the ground with a powdery white crust that terrified drivers. *Snow!* They said. *I better drive five miles an hour!* And they did, somehow still managing to tip their minivans and sport utility vehicles into light poles, highway medians, mailboxes, and each other. It took me the better part of an hour to drive the five miles home from the hospital in which you were born, watching grown men and women slip and slide in their vehicles in front of me. I of course, drove perfectly. As you grow, Athena, you will discover that I do *everything* perfectly. Do not listen to those who would tell you your dad is a raging doofus. They are sad, sad people, even though most of them are among my best of friends.

You can't blame most of those people for being upset with the snow on the ground, Athena. They didn't know what it meant. You see, when you were born, the world was changed, permanently, forever. One minute you were not in this world, the next you were. This was a momentous occasion, one that should have been marked. God, being God, decided to note it in the appropriate way: Changing the world. One minute there was no snow on the ground, the next there was (well, technically,

it *accumulated*. But it did so while your mother was laboring to bring you into this world. By the time you arrived, it covered as far as the eye could see).

I think God's choice was an appropriate one. Sure, he could have gone and done something flashy. Like a star in the sky. But he's already done *that*. And by all reports you have to actually be a blood relation for Him to make that sort of effort. But the snow was *right*: It was the first snow of the season, so it was new. It doesn't snow here often, so it was unusual, remarkable. There was just a little, so it was fragile. And as it blanketed the ground to the edges of the horizon, it was beautiful. It made everything else beautiful. It was, in short, like you.

You were not pleased to be brought into this world, Athena. From the moment you hit the air, you loudly complained to everyone in earshot. *Hey*, you said. *I was comfortable in there! No one told me about this. I was **not** consulted.* I was pleased to hear it. Both sides of your family tree have a strong sense of self, Athena, that is frequently confused with stubbornness. Your displeasure about being out of the loop on this whole birth thing is a good indication that the family traits are well in evidence. It won't make raising you easy, I'm sure. But it will make it interesting, which, in the end, is a better state of affairs.

Besides, Athena, take it from me: It's really not such a bad place. Yes, yes, it has wars, and hunger, and pain, and bad TV. But that's why you have parents. We're going to do what we can to protect you from those things (ironically, it'll be the bad TV that's going to be the hardest to save you from. If I'm lucky, the first you'll hear of the Teletubbies, Barney and Rugrats will be when you're a teenager). But it's also a place where wonderful things can and do happen, best evidenced by your own birth. I think you'll be happy here. We're going to try to make you happy.

Athena, I'm just rambling. It's been less than a full day since your birth, and still my emotions are so jumbled I hardly

know what to do with myself. Writing is how I try to sort them out, but they're resisting. All I feel, all I have felt since you've been born, is an enduring sense of joy. After you were born, the nurses whisked you to your birthing station, where they did the things they had to do: Put air in your face so you would pink up (you were born a rather striking shade of magenta), put the band on you so you wouldn't be confused with one of the five other babies who shared your birthday, inked your feet for footprints, and so on. After they were done with that, they wrapped you tight in three blankets (which prompted me to turn to your mother and say, *Congratulations, you've given birth to a burrito*). And then you were handed to me.

Oh, Athena. Words don't come for what I felt then. Here you were. Here you *are*—my daughter, the work of mine and your mother's conjoined souls. All I could do was cry, cry and hold my head against your mother's hand. It was overwhelming. It still is. I try to find the words that express everything I felt—that I *am* feeling, even as I write this—and I fail. I fail spectacularly. It doesn't translate in the world of words. None fit. Except for these: Athena Marie. Your name. And the word: *Welcome*.

Welcome, Athena. Welcome to this world, to our home, to our love. Welcome to everything. Your mother and I are so happy to see you. We're so happy. I thank God and your mother for you. The snow on the ground only told us what we already knew: Everything is changed. Welcome Athena. Welcome.

Welcome.

