



Crap, I'm Thirty

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Two months ago I woke in a cold-sweat realization that my factory warranty had run out. I thought back to all the maintenance I'd wished I'd done while it was free, all those times I ran the engine in the passing lane, not thinking of long term wear and tear. But it's too late now. Those regrets will remain regrets. There's no going back. I'm thirty.

The good news is I'm married. I'm not pregnant, however, and neither is my wife. This is a problem for me because, like most middle-aged men, narcissism has overtaken nihilism and child-rearing has become my only hope for immortality—that and cloning, but you saw what happened to John Kerry.

The problem with children is—well, children. I remember how much of a thankless little yahoo I was to my parents, and I couldn't imagine inflicting that misery upon myself. But nature bangs its drum, and I am assaulted with an unquenchable urge to reproduce.

The barbarian in me wants to have boys, five or six, who will beat the crap out of all the other boys in the neighborhood, string their shoes together, and throw them over telephone wires (the shoes, not the boys). When I'm at the hockey game, and junior gets sent to the penalty box for hip-checking the goalie so hard his appendix explodes, I want to look to the guy next to me and say smugly, "That's my kid."

I want daughters, too. Beautiful daughters, who will be smart and vestal until their twenty-first birthdays, when they will marry charming, ambitious, and intelligent young men who will treat them well, or else face the ass-kicking of their lives by their five steel-chewing, gargantuan brothers-in-law. They will all go to college, of course, where they will major in engineering and start a technology company that will single-handedly reverse the American trade deficit and put a man on Mars.

Then I will smile my happy smile and lie in state, while my wealthy children fund the synthetic reconstruction of my body so that I have the appearance and heft of a young Marlon Brando, along with integrated extra-human powers, like a heat/death ray that I can fire from my eyes and wolverine-like claws that can extend instantly from my knuckles.

I'd like to see somebody fuck with me on the subway after that.

But I won't take the subway, because my kids will have erected a family compound in the high Sierras, complete with helipad and integrated air defense systems, as well as an emerald-tiled kidney-shaped pool where I can float and dream and let the years trickle by in a happy stream.

And when I wake up from that absurd fantasy I'll face the reality of the small, thankless, human-shaped monsters who have occupied my house, emptied my refrigerator, and replaced my bourbon with watered-down Yoo-hoo while I was golfing. I'll sit in my chair, sipping Yoo-hoo over ice, and try in futility to reason out how the payoff for all those years of changing stinking, rot-filled diapers turned out to be goddamned teenagers.

Finally, I will send them off to college, an experience that in many developing Asian economies is an opportunity to advance your education and add to the GDP, but in America has become a function for converting a parent's dream retirement into four years of fraternity parties and empty bottles of Robitussin.

It's not their fault, though. It's the way they're raised. So it's your fault. And you won't get one shred of thanks for your lousy parenting until they turn—well, until they turn thirty! By then you're at least sixty in my case, and couldn't give a bent copper about a "thank you" because you have other things to worry about, like back aches and memory loss. So what's the point?

And so here I am. My body is at its sorry peak; my mind is ready for decay. I have no children yet, but I'm sure I will someday. I can almost see the smiling face of a compact homunculus whose soul is a magical weave of me and my wife.

There is, perhaps, a glint in the child's eyes that makes me think of something precious lost and now regained. I turn to my wife, my heart in my throat, and say, "Honey, I think the baby wants his Robitussin."