

this way out

The Babyproofer

By Larry Doyle

THE BABY DOESN'T LIKE HIS FLAK JACKET. It's Kevlar, the lightest material capable of stopping a large-caliber bullet, but it's awfully hot, and it makes it hard for the little guy to sit up. Which is just as well, because a sitting baby, the babyproofer says, is a sitting duck.

We got our babyproofer through a friend, who came to visit after the baby was born and had a cow. There are so many dead babies in this house, she said, her fingers fluttering about. The wife got pretty upset, but this friend—really more my wife's friend—caressed her head, blotted her cheeks, and said the important thing was that our baby wasn't dead yet and there was still a chance we could stop the baby before he killed himself.

The babyproofer cost seventy-five dollars an hour.

There's a dead baby, he said, not a foot in the door, re the staircase. Then in a bouncing gesture along the baseboard: Dead baby, dead baby, dead baby . . . What is *that*?

What, that penny?

Dead baby.

Our poor baby died so many times during that initial consultation: 187, according to the babyproofer's written assessment; it seemed like more. Dead baby in the toilet. Dead baby down the disposal. Dead baby with my scissors plunged into his carotid artery.

The babyproofer turned to me at one point. Just curious, did you *want* to have this baby?

The babyproofer needed a \$10,000 retainer.

For that kind of money, I said, just trying to lighten the mood a little, we could buy a whole new baby.

The wife did not laugh; the babyproofer stood up.

I haven't lost a baby yet, he said. But who knows, maybe I am a little overcautious. Why don't you just buy one of those babyproofing books? They only cost about twenty bucks.

The babyproofer went through the initial ten grand rather quickly. In fairness, a lot of it was materials: thirty-four ceramic outlet guards at \$19.95 each (the plastic ones, my wife agreed, weren't darling, and they leached a substance that caused fatty tumors in cancer-prone mice); sixty-two baby gates at \$39.95; four safes (pharmaceuticals, soaps, and bath products; cleaning supplies; cooking and eating utensils; and assorted swallowables) at \$195. The Cuisinatal Food Reprocessor alone cost \$3,000, but it does puree at twice the FDA's shockingly lax standards and can strain out some of your larger, more harmful bacteria. There was some debate in our house whether we really needed six baby dummies (at \$699 per!), but I suppose the wife is right—if even one of them is stolen, it's probably worth it.

Beyond the money, we've had to make a lot of adjustments to create what the babyproofer calls a survival-friendly environment. Some of it makes sense, like not allowing anyone



who has been to Africa, Southeast Asia, or Mexico into the house. But the hospital scrub-down before every diaper change seems excessive; it's so heart-wrenching with the baby crying the whole time. And I do miss TV, though not enough to risk coming home one day to find my lazy, violent, obese baby with a television set toppled on his head.

The thing I hated most was getting rid of the dog, but what could I do? It kept tasting the baby.

I haven't been sleeping much. I sit up in bed, worrying about all the money we've spent but also whether we've spent enough. I go through each of the 187 dead babies in my head, running their fatal scenarios against the prophylactic measures we've taken. Did I remember to spin the combination on the toilet? Did I stare at the bedside monitor, waiting for the baby to flatline, which he does five or six times a night? So far, it's just been that he's pulled off his wires, but running in there five or six times a night and fumbling around for those shock paddles, it takes something out of you.

My wife and the babyproofer are driving up to Ojai for a weekend seminar on antioxidant baby massage at some resort. I forget exactly why they can't take the baby; the spa supplies its own practice infants for insurance reasons, maybe.

So here I am, left holding the baby.

He is so beautiful. I want to lift the polarized visor of his helmet to get a better look; I want to kiss his cheeks, his nose, his forehead—damn the salmonella. But I can't. I know that. I rock the baby gently, in no more than a 20 degree arc, no more than twenty oscillations per minute, whispering in the five-to-ten-decibel range, *Please don't die, baby. Please don't die.* Not on my shift. ■