



Compass Rose

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Shopping for a Penis

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“When we were in the store, how come God didn’t give me a penis?” asked my three-year-old daughter, Rune. Her wide, bright eyes gazed up into mine. The petulant tone in her voice implied she’d been cheated out of her birthright. The fluorescent lights of the supermarket were suddenly too loud. I blinked. I hadn’t known that my little girl believed in God. Or that He ran a store that distributed body parts. Or even that what defined a girl was what she didn’t have, not what she had. The reason I had taken Rune grocery shopping in the first place was because she had been victimizing her little brother, Samsun, until he was in tears, and she was viciously self-righteous—yet again. Sometimes taking her out of the house was the only way to change that dynamic.

I held her in my arms and looked at the vast array of boxes of cereal on the store shelves and tried to see the world from her point of view. Hardly a day went by without her complaining about Samsun being the boy and not her. I had assumed it was a simple case of jealousy, because he could bump her out of Mommy’s lap anytime he wanted to just by crying. But now I knew it was much deeper than that. Rune had two older sisters, who were three and five when little brother Samsun was born. They thought he was just a baby. Rune was only 18 months older than her little brother, and all she saw when she looked at him was a boy who didn’t deserve to be one, the little whiner.

When Samsun began to crawl, she’d hold her favorite toys in front of him, then when he’d reach for them yell “No!” and yank them away. The harder he wailed, the more satisfied she looked.

Now that he was a toddler, she'd invite him to play make-believe. He'd flush with pleasure to be included in her big-girl important game, but as soon as he got involved, she would change the rules and keep changing them a little bit faster than he could follow. Every day the game ended with her exploding in long, detailed furies and him in a mess of helpless tears. He'd tried as hard as he could, and it wasn't good enough. When I would soothe the little guy, she'd get offended. "Why does he get to be the boy? It's not fair," she would mutter darkly and hide under the kitchen table, anger like a tiny tornado on her face.

Standing under the garish lights of the supermarket, I thought I could read her little mind: If she were the boy, she would be nice as sweetie pie to the baby, because then the crybaby would be the "she"—which made sense to her since she hardly ever cried, and when she did it was usually from frustrated anger at the boy who didn't deserve to be. But I had no idea how to answer her question about why God made her not a boy.

One day, weeks after that trip to the grocery store, I couldn't find Samsun's baby backpack. He was screaming from a tooth coming in. He needed to be walked in that don't-focus-on-me way only a ride in a backpack can do. I looked all over the house, but soon my arms were wearing out along with my patience with his thin, piteous wail. In desperation, I picked up Rune's baby backpack. She hadn't used it in months. Right before I hoisted him onto my back I felt her eyes on me. I remembered how acute the ownership issue is for little kids.

"Rune, is it all right if the baby borrows your backpack? Just for now?"

She looked at me; she looked at him; she looked at the backpack. "Yeah, it's okay. He can have my backpack."

He moaned like a victim of torture. I had one of his legs in before I caught the tone in her voice.

"Are you sure, honey?"

“Yeah,” she said in a casual tone of voice. It was the way adults talk when they’re pretending. I looked carefully at her. Her little face was shut like a garage door. But I really needed to get whining boy behind me. I was about to put him in the rest of the way when I had a vision of her in years to come. It looked like me as a child. I saw her comforting others by denying herself; I saw her gender become proof of her failure; and finally, I saw her little-girl spunk and spitfire turn to ashes, leaving her compliant, pale, and withdrawn. I couldn’t erase my past, but maybe I could change her future. I pulled Samsun out of the backpack. He drooled and whimpered in pain.

“No,” I said huskily. “Samsun is not allowed to go in your backpack. He’s not even allowed to touch it. You’re the only one who can use it, because it’s yours. Let’s see if it still fits.”

I squeezed her into the small, tight baby backpack, then hoisted her onto my shoulders. Carrying hurting-mouth boy in my arms, I walked double-babied around the house until my wife, the breadwinner that year, came home. I gratefully handed over the baby for a nursing and carried little giant girl in the backpack until supper. Rune sank all the way down into the seat and out of sight. I looked in the mirror. I could see a pair of legs dangling down from under my armpits, but no head. When I pulled her out for supper, her face looked scrubbed clean. At the table she had haughty, triumphant things to say to her little brother as usual, but the normal vicious tone in her voice was fading and confused.

I carried her for a few hours a day for months. There were times I wore her on my back in her backpack overlapping shoulder straps with Samsun’s brand-new backpack on my front. I cheerfully took on the temporary burden, convinced that a few months of hard exercise for me would make Samsun less of a victim and help Rune feel loved, and in that way make a difference for the whole world. Even if that wasn’t true, it would make a big difference to me not having to watch her be mean to her little brother.

As the months went by, Rune’s relationship with Samsun slowly moved away from terrorism. When she was four, she had a dream where I told her it was okay to change her name

from Rune to her middle name, Ariella. So we did, even though we had to get quite firm with the preschool about that. When she was five, she taught Samsun how to run races of different kinds from one end of the kitchen to the other...and let him win. Time after time, she let him win—and let him get all puffed up and braggy about it too. Even though after each race she had to take me aside and tell me in a loud whisper she could have easily, easily won!

Each time, I praised my big girl to the skies. If she had so much confidence in her own power that she could let a boy win, that meant God knew exactly what He was doing when she was shopping for a penis in the great body parts store in the sky.