

0 the Humanities

by [Judd Baroff](#) (September 2022)



After Papa was done with banging in the kitchen, he came upstairs to dress Sara and wash her face. Normally she would have been allowed to do these things herself, but this night Papa had a party and so Sara needed special pigtails, a dress so long it tripped her, and a freckled faced so scrubbed her cheeks looked just like tomatoes even before she blushed. Taking a soft brown belt from her closet, she cinched it close and tucked a sword there to complete the getup.

“Wouldn’t you rather your magnet angel downstairs?”

“No way. I got that for you,” she said, “Besides, someone needs to have a sword.”

“Isn’t it somewhat combative for a party?” Papa asked.

“I don’t think so. I think it’s a rule that every party needs at least one person armed. What if you invited a pooka by accident? I doubt guacamole is going to scare it away.”

Papa gave his little bark laugh and said, “No. Probably not. Maybe Dr. Lisa Ortiz would scare him off?”

Sara said, “Papa, that’s mean.”

He laughed again. “So it is. So it is. I’m sorry.”

The doorbell rang and they trundled downstairs. Papa opened it and let in a fierce cold wind and two guests.

“Xander, Amber,” Papa said, “Welcome. This is my daughter, Sara. Sara, this is Xander Ariti and Amber Laurence.”

“Martin!” They both said. Martin was Papa’s other name, in the same way that Superman was also Clark Kent.

Mr. Ariti was a dark man about the size and shape of a particularly daring villain, complete with an active mustache. He took off his coat as if he were a matador and smiled down at her with all the good nature of a drunk uncle. She liked him immediately.

Ms. Laurence, on the other hand, was tall and thin. She looked at their house as if she were Cruella de Ville coming over to see a dear friend long absent from the neighborhood. Not exactly scary, but she worried Sara all the same. Ms. Laurence removed her long, full coat in slow motion. She too looked down at Sara, though with her Sara felt it.

Ms. Laurence said, "Well, aren't you a dear?"

Sara tried to figure out how her dress or pigtails made her look like a four-legged grass-muncher, but then she realized Ms. Laurence must have meant a dear person. Then Mr. Ariti contradicted her.

"No. She couldn't be bought at any price. Right Martin?"

"That you are," Papa said.

Sara had tugged twice at that speech puzzle when the doorbell rang again. Papa opened it for another blast of Arctic wind and Dr. Lisa Ortiz, Dr. Luis Ortiz, and another man.

"Perfect timing," Papa said. "Come in, come in. Let me take your coats."

Dr. Luis Ortiz said, "Thank you, Martin."

Dr. Lisa Ortiz said, "Jacob, this is Martin's daughter, Sara. Sara, this is Jacob, our son."

"Hello," Sara said.

"Hi," said the man.

Papa said, "The wine is behind me. Can I offer you anything,

Jacob?"

"I'll take a beer if you've got it, but I'm fine with wine too."

Papa looked to Dr. and Dr. Ortiz before saying, "Okay."

"We think it's much saner," said Dr. Lisa Ortiz, "Like the French do it. No silly Puritan notions."

People started filtering out of the hallway, which was good because it had gotten rather cramped with all the grown-ups there. Dr. Lisa Ortiz took Sara aside as they were about to cross into the Living Room.

"I have a gift for you." She reached into a bag half-as-large as Sara herself and took out an unwrapped box almost as big as the bag itself.

"And what is it?" Papa asked her.

"I ... a car?"

The box had a picture of a car on it, but it also had a laptop and those wifi waves that were on everything.

"A remote-controlled car," she said.

"Not quite," corrected Dr. Lisa Ortiz. "This is a programmable car."

"Thank you," Sara said.

"How nice," Papa said.

"A programmable car?" Asked Ms. Laurence, "That's quite advanced."

"I thought so as well," said Dr. Lisa Ortiz, "But the age guidelines are quite young, and a woman at my book club said her son just loves it. Plus, I figure, you have to start them

young or they won't start at all. You'd be just embarrassed to see how few girls are in Jacob's classes."

"Right," said Mr. Super-villain, "You're going to be an engineer, eh?" Jacob confirmed he was. "Saw your parents' professions and thought you might like something just a little more down to Earth?"

Taking the beer from Papa, Jacob said, "Thanks, Martin. Something like that. I do like books, but I just want to be done with school, and I also like making things. I was split between architecture and engineering, but I can't draw."

People started to settle in the living room and Sara looked up at the clock. Papa said that dinner was at seven and then she could go up to her room. It was now three-thirty. No—Sara mixed up the hands again—six-fifteen.

"You hear that Martin," said Dr. Luis Ortiz, "Xander here teasing us about our pie-in-the-sky careers. I forget, Xander, what year did da Vinci paint the Sistine Chapel?"

"Michelangelo and 1508 to 1515," he said. "At least, I think so. He's just a bit before my time."

Sara could not believe Mr. Xander had been born in the 1500s. That was just after Columbus and the Conquistadors and would make him almost five-hundred and much older than Abraham had been before he died.

Dr. Lisa Ortiz said, "All I'm saying is that we can't be so hard on ourselves. The world is hard enough on us as it is. We're hemorrhaging students, and we can't afford to, literally can't afford to."

Sara thought of dryads and wished grownups would talk sense.

Dr. Lisa Ortiz continued, "And Xander here talking down the humanities when he studies Picasso for Fu—" she looked to Sara, smiled tight. "Well, it's not helping."

"See Jacob," said Dr. Luis Ortiz, "You're betraying The Cause."

"Sorry Pop," said Jacob. "Always thought it was a Woody Allen thing—wouldn't join a club who'd have me as a member."

Ms. Laurence came to stand next to Sara, and she said, "Did you put your hair in pigtails yourself?"

"No. I want to cut off all my hair like Sinbad, who was bald, but Papa won't let me."

"Oh no?" Ms. Laurence looked at the rest of the group, "Well. That's what we all know about Martin, an inveterate sexist. Absolutely wants to keep us girls in chains."

"No, Amber," said Dr. Luis Ortiz, "Just you. For your own safety, you understand."

"Actually," said Sara, hurrying to make sure they understood, "Papa says Mom wouldn't be happy."

There was a pause like a hiccup.

"And why would she be," Mr. Xander said, "With such beautiful hair."

Ms. Laurence said, "With such fine features too. You're going to be quite a beauty." Here she paused, like an actor on stage, "She must get that from her dad, right Martin?"

Papa was quite handsome. He looked just the actor from *It's a Wonderful Life*. The first time she'd seen the movie, she'd thought it must be Papa just putting a voice on. But she read the credits and found out it was James Stewart.

"You're very kind, Amber," Papa said.

Dr. Luis Ortiz coughed.

"Oh never mind looks, Martin. You could charm whiskey out of

Hemingway's hand."

"Yes," said Sara, "Thank you, Ms. Laurence."

Everyone except Jacob laughed, and Sara's face turned further into a tomato quite against her will.

"You've been demoted, Amber," said Dr. Lisa Ortiz.

"It's Dr. Laurence, Sara," said Papa. "Dr. Laurence is an expert in Virginia Wolfe."

"Oh. Sorry."

Dr. Laurence said, "It's quite all right, my dear. I bet all this grown-up conversation is a bit boring."

"No! It's... um... cool."

Everyone laughed again, even Jacob, and once again she was a tomato.

Happily they ignored her until dinner and she could fantasize about Sinbad and James Stewart and what it would be like if Sinbad tried to steal a ship that Mr. Stewart was in, and how Mr. Stewart would flummox his way around, knocking over boxes trying to stop him while Sinbad would just march steadily forward with his curved sword. Eventually someone would have to save Mr. Stewart, for while she knew he could escape from Sinbad, at least for a while, she couldn't see how he'd be able to beat Sinbad in a sword fight. Before she could figure out if King Arthur or Eustace from Narnia would come and save him, Papa called them all to dinner.

She sat between Dr. Laurence and Jacob, which was nice, and across from Dr. Lisa Ortiz, which was less nice. Jacob drank beer and spoke only slightly more often than she did. When Papa served the main dish, Jacob asked if she wanted a sip with the smile grownups wore which told you they wanted you to say no.

"Yes please," she said.

Surprised, he stammered out an apology while his mother and Dr. Laurence laughed. For once, she'd made someone else the tomato.

After they ate, Dr. Laurence asked what her favorite books were, and Papa, from across the table and in the middle of a conversation with Dr. Luis Ortiz, told everyone that they'd just finished *Pride and Prejudice* the other night. He meant they'd finished it the Monday before, not last night, which had been Thursday. She didn't know why grown-ups spoke so fuzzily.

"One of my all-time favorites," said Dr. Laurence. "How did you like it?"

"It was okay, but nothing happened. If a boy I knew was being as mean as Mr. Darcy, I would have punched him." That got a laugh from Dr. Lisa Ortiz and Mr. Xander, "But there was no fighting! Someone said something about war with France, but you don't get to see it at all."

"If you want a book about war with France," said Jacob, "I can recommend one or two. *Master and Commander*, especially."

"Don't Jacob," said his mother, "That's way too old for her."

"If you hadn't said anything, she'd have just skipped over those parts. Now she'll probably search for them." To Sara, he said, "It's got all the fighting with France you could ever want."

Papa said, "I have the books upstairs. I don't mind."

All the grownups started talking then, but Sara leaned over to Jacob so she could whisper into his ear. She ended up on her knees with palms on the table trying to get close enough.

"Do you like war books?" She asked Jacob.

Papa said, "Sara, sit down please."

"Sorry Papa."

Jacob leaned over so they could whisper still, and he didn't have to do much more than bend his neck.

"Adventure stories of every kind," he said. "My favorite might be *Ivanhoe*, but that probably is a little too old for you. Do you know *Lord of the Rings*?"

"Papa's just started reading it!"

"Great. Where're you at?"

"They just found left the Shire."

Jacob smiled, the sort of smile people used with babies and Sara was almost offended but then he said, with no joke in his voice at all, "And what do you think happens next?"

She thought about this.

"Well, I bet they get separated somewhere. The heroes are always getting separated somewhere. But do they find Gandalf again?"

"Maybe." He put up his hands in surrender. "I'm not going to spoil anything. If it was your story, would they?"

They spent the rest of dinner talking about how she would finish *Lord of the Rings* if she were writing it. She had so much fun that she invited Jacob to sit with her near the piano where all her action figures were. There, she set directly to making up another story.

"So," she said, importantly, "When we opened the door earlier, it was really cold outside. So I was thinking—it's a really cold night, roaring and snowing like with Good King Winces."

"King Winces?"

"Yes," and she said, and then she sang, "'Good King Wences last looked out on this feast of season.'"

"Oh right," he said, laughing at himself, "I forgot that one."

Sara wondered how you could forget a Christmas carol, but she didn't say anything for fear of being rude.

Jacob said, "So it's blisteringly cold out like with Good King Wences, and then what happens?"

"I'm not making this all up on my own. What do you think happens?"

"Okay. Okay. So—what if the King is going to help a beggar, like in the song."

"Bore-ring," she sang. "That's what already happened. Something else should happen."

"How about if he was going to help a beggar, but he got lost. Because he knows his land normally, right? But snow makes everything strange and hard to see."

"Yes. Yes. And just then a ... troll? Ogre? No—a matador comes at him with a ... with a pistol!"

Slowly, he said, "A matador?"

"Right? That's so cool!"

"Okay, a matador comes at him with a pistol. He's a horrible, cranky old man whom everyone hates, and he goes ..."

"'I want all your gold!'"

"Now who's being boring? Let's have something more exciting than gold, please."

"Right. All right."

Sara thought. She'd thought of the cold wind from earlier to

start her story. Maybe she could remember something else to keep it going.

"I've got it! He says, 'I want the Holy Grail,' because the King definitely has it. That's how he became King in the first place!"

"Of course," Jacob said, "And he goes, 'I'd like to give it to you,' although of course he'd like no such thing, 'But I can't give it to you because I left it with my guard ... my guard ...'"

"Peter the Pirate. It should be Sinbad, but Papa says you're not allowed to use the names and stuff that other people write. So they travel down to Peter the Pirate and he says, 'I would give you the Holy Grail, but you have to pass these tests three.'"

Jacob said, "And the Matador—Matthew the Matador? —doesn't like this and orders the King to just give him the Holy Grail, but he's all like, 'I can't do that. Even I can't retrieve the Grail without passing these three tests.'"

Sara took her Sinbad action figure, her matador action figure, and a Gandalf action figure whom she pretended was Good King Winces, and then she searched around for another figurine, finally stumbling on a minotaur.

"So the first test is fighting a minotaur—except, I think minotaurs belong in mazes."

"This one doesn't," Jacob said. "He has no sense of direction, and so they have to keep him out of mazes entirely."

"That makes sense," Sara said, "So Matthew the Matador fights Marvin the Minotaur and beats him. He then goes on to the next test and it's ..."

"A test of math?"

She said, "No. That's dumb."

"Of course. Sorry. How about sailing?"

"Yes! These are the tests of Peter the Pirate, and matadors should be good with bulls but they're not very good with boats, so he has to sail from where the tests are out to this island."

"And not just sail," Jacob said, "But find and bring back a golden ... a golden ..."

"Parrot!" she said, thinking again of *It's a Wonderful Life*, "He has to bring back a golden parrot!"

"Does it talk?"

"Of course it talks!"

Jacob said, "Okay. So he brings back a golden parrot—it insults him all the way—"

"—Yes, it calls him stinky feet and feather face and ..."

"Poopy-head?"

"No. Eww ... that's gross."

"Okay, okay. The parrot calls him crazy pants too. What's the next test?"

Sara thought, and nothing came immediately to mind. There must be something cool and new, but all she could think of was arguing for the best wishes with a genie, finding a sword in a stone, fixing the hyperdrive on a ship, and they were all so old and boring.

"Wait a second," she said, "Let me go get my markers and my paper. I think better when I draw."

She scampered out of the room, through the dining room, and around the fireplace to the start of the stairs. She passed by Papa's den on the way. Inside were two men, and she stopped

and grabbed her sword when she saw them, thinking at first that they were robbers. But then she heard their voices and she realized it was Papa and Dr. Luis Ortiz.

“ ... a bit less than brave, though,” Papa said.

“She just doesn’t like confrontation. I am sorry I had to be the one to tell you.”

“She’s the Dean. Confrontation is the job.”

Dr. Luis Ortiz came close to him, put a hand on his shoulder. “Part of, but there’s no need to argue the point.”

“I just bought the house, Luis. What’ll I do?”

“I’m sorry, Martin. As Lisa said, we’re shedding students in the humanities and even if we cut half the faculty, we couldn’t actually pay for ourselves. It’s all the students like Jacob, and the grants his professors get, that pay the bills at this point.” There was another hiccup pause. “We’ll give you any recommendation you need.”

“Yeah... thanks... great.”

“Look, we’re sorry you invited everyone. We thought it’d be just a quiet dinner.”

They talked low and sad, like that time grandma died. Sara stepped as softly as she could upstairs to get her markers and paper. By the time she’d found both, she’d forgotten about the conversation and so ran downstairs like a squeaky choo-choo. She found Jacob on the couch, talking with all the other grownups.

“I have markers and paper and I figured out what the final test should be.”

“What?” Jacob said.

Before she could tell him, Dr. Lisa Ortiz butted in, saying,

"I'm afraid we have to go, Sara. It's getting late. We were just saying that."

"Could you please let him stay just one second, Dr. Ortiz. I need to tell him about Good King Winces's last test."

Dr. Lisa Ortiz said, "We really don't want to press on your father's hospitality, Sara."

"Oh Papa doesn't mind. Do you Papa?"

Papa, who, though he sat on the couch, seemed to be doing some astral projection, now came back into himself. He smiled at her, melting his face like Narnia melted when the Kings and Queens showed up.

"Of course not. You should tell him the end of your story. That is, unless the Doctors Ortiz mind."

They said they did not, so she ignored them entirely and focused on Jacob.

"So ... Remember how you said Matthew the Matador was after Good King Winces because everyone hated him?"

"Yes..."

"Well, Good King Winces must have known that, right? He's not stupid. He got the Grail somehow. So, his third test would be very, very simple. After Matthew the Matador returned with the golden parrot, all he would have to do is bring a friend to the third test. A real friend, not one of those people who sit with you at lunch but then talk about you behind your back. That's all he has to do."

Jacob got it immediately. "But he can't do that, because he's so mean and cantankerous that he has no friends."

"Exactly!" She said, though she had no idea what 'can-tank orcas' were.

"It's a good story," Jacob said. "You should write it down."

Everyone left after that, the Ortizes quite quickly and then Mr. Villain and Dr. Laurence very slowly. Dr. Laurence kept hugging Papa, so much so that Sara had almost asked, 'Are you going to be my new mommy?' which always seemed to scare people off and end the scene on TV. But Papa looked like he needed the hugs so she sat on the floor with the open box of the car you could program, and she started piecing the LEGO-like blocks together.

"Night Sara," Dr. Laurence said—finally.

"Night Dr. Laurence."

"Night Sara," said Mr. Villain.

"Goodnight," said Sara.

Eons later, with the LEGO-like car abandoned in the hallway, Sara sat at the at the dining room table drawing the story she and Jacob had made up together. In the kitchen, Papa was doing the dishes and pouring soda. Not that Sara remembered anyone having soda, but it sounded like when you poured soda into a cup from the bottle. She heard Papa place another dish upon the rack and sigh like blacksmith's bellows just as she drew the third door to Sinbad the Sailor's tests, a sprawling master-work twice as tall as an ogre with two hearts in the center of it, one at the edge of each door, so when the door was closed the two hearts touched and it was obvious the door was meant to be opened by friendship.

Papa was making no more dish noises, so Sara rose from her seat and padded into the kitchen. Papa stood before the sink, leaning on his elbows. From her angle, it looked like he was trying to stick his whole fist into his mouth. She'd tried that once, on a dare. It hadn't worked.

On the floor behind him, his angel magnet had fallen off the

fridge.

“You dropped your angel, Papa,” she said. She held it out to him.

Instead of taking it, he took her. He picked her right up and threw her into the air as if she were a little girl.

“I’ve got her right here, thank you.”

“You’re so silly,” she said. And she hugged him.

“Indeed I am. Now, why don’t you tell me about that story you and Jacob made up?”

So she did.

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