

Walking with my Baby

by [Jeff Ingber](#) (December 2023)



Self portrait of the artist with his daughter,
Brita— Carl Larsson, 1895

The stretchy-wrap baby carrier is snug on me like a piece of armor. My one-month-old daughter, a tiny sunbeam in her bright yellow cotton onesie, is sleeping peacefully, her round face nestled against my chest and her chubby legs comfortably protruding. *Houston, we are a go for launch!*

“Hon, I’m leaving now,” I shout as I head toward the front door to our apartment.

My wife calls out from the kitchen, “Remember, it says in the instructions that she should be at a height where you can kiss the top of her head.”

“Yup,” I respond, loudly smooching Arielle’s soft, woolly fuzz for emphasis.

“And check that she doesn’t have room to slump down!”

“I did!”

My assurances lacking credibility, Linda hurries toward me to perform a final inspection. “Did you take the formula?”

I tap on the side of the slim backpack slung over my shoulder and then grant her a military salute. “*Ja wohl, mein Kommandant!*”

Disregarding her dubious expression, I venture out, hiking down three flights of stairs to emerge into a cream white lobby adorned with full-length mirrors, jute rugs, and framed photos of old Forest Hills, Queens. As usual, the sectional couch near the front entrance plays host to Henoah, the elderly man who’s our downstairs neighbor. In his weathered hands is today’s *New York Post*, whose headline blares, “Hurricane Alicia Kills 17 in Texas.” In spite of the icy air

conditioning, he wears shorts and open-toed sandals. His short-sleeve, button-down shirt exposes a left forearm sporting a faded dark blue tattoo of a set of numbers.

He looks up and studies me. "Kinda hot for a walk, isn't it?" he asks rhetorically, displaying a slight Polish accent.

"Hench, you'd be hot in a blizzard."

He waves dismissively. "God made air conditioning for a reason." Hench taps on the newspaper's front page. "Hey, they named a hurricane after your daughter."

"Not quite. Her name's Arielle."

He nods his approval. "A lovely name. You know what it means in Hebrew?"

"Yup. Means 'lion of God' in Hebrew. Or 'lioness' in this case." I chuckle. "Although I'm not sure I want to raise a lioness. Perhaps something between that and a lamb."

Hench frowns and then points his index finger to the sky. "More importantly, in the Rosh Hashanah prayer, the plural, *Ariellim*, means 'angels.' The angels that surround us, and do God's bidding."

Who knew? "I like that! I gotta tell my wife that her angel really is an angel."

Hench's gaze shifts from me to an abstract middle distance. "Maybe you shouldn't," he mutters.

"Why not?"

He places a hand over his eyes, much like my mother does right after lighting the Sabbath candles, preserving the sanctity of the moment. "Because there are no angels," he intones.

"Depends on your definition of 'angel,'" I retort cheerfully. "I believe I have some in my life."

Henoch's lips curl into a half grin, the closest expression to a smile I've ever seen from my erudite friend. "Enjoy your walk," he offers.

"Enjoy your paper."

As I start toward the front door lobby, Henoch calls out, "It goes so fast!" When I turn to acknowledge his statement, my friend's face is pinched, and he's blinking back tears.

"What's the matter?" I blurt out.

Henoch clasps one hand inside the other and kneads his knuckles. "It's nothing."

I lower myself onto the spot on the couch next to Henoch, and grip his shoulder. The silence hangs a veil between us for an awkward few seconds.

"My daughter's name started with an 'A' also," he whispers.

"You had a daughter?" I say softly. "I didn't know that."

Henoch stares into an amorphous middle distance—a sacred memory no doubt playing across the screen of his watery eyes. "She wasn't much older than your daughter when I last saw her."

My heart squeezes tight, robbing the air from my lungs. "I'm so sorry," I manage to croak out. Then, more firmly, "So very sorry."

Without warning, hot tears sting my eyes. "Tell me about your daughter. And your wife."

He covers his cheeks with a hand, pressing his lips together and fighting to maintain composure. "Thank you for asking. But, perhaps, another time."

I think to press my request further, but the expression in Henoch's eyes forbids that. He pats my hand. "Do me a favor,

Jeff.”

“Anything.”

Henoch conjures up a lopsided grin, as if an impish being had slipped into his body. “Keep checking her breathing.”

After additional small talk that Henoch manages to engage in with a facade of good cheer, I exit the building. Stepping underneath a swollen sun in its blue womb, I inspect my napping child to verify that her tiny chest is indeed moving in and out. Then, after kissing her eggshell smooth cheek, I take a left turn that leads me in the direction of Forest Park. A block down, in front of a charming Tudor-style brick house, a woman in her fifties whose hair is a cloud of gray-white is crouched barefoot in rich soil by a bed of flowers, as if whispering to them.

“Paula, your garden is even more gorgeous than usual,” I pipe out.

She whips her head around, then smiles and rises. “Been awhile, Jeff. I was hoping to meet your new daughter.”

Dropping her trowel, Paula hurries over and squats to be at eye level with my baby. A black-and-gold-plated medallion reading “One Day at a Time” dangles from her neck. After taking in Arielle’s delicate features and sweet milk scent, Paula leans in to peck an ear that resembles a pink shell. “The most beautiful flower of them all,” she pronounces.

“Yes, she is.” I quickly add, “Fortunately, she looks like my wife.”

Paula lets out a chuckle that resembles a goose honk. “Men always say that. I don’t know why. You’re a handsome man.”

I hike my shoulders into a modest shrug. “How’s your family, Paula? Didn’t you tell me that your daughter is pregnant?”

A gust of wind catches strands of hair and tosses them in her eyes. Paula bites her lip, letting my words seep inside her. "Yes. She should have given birth by now. Her due date was weeks ago."

Puzzled, I maintain a happy demeanor. "Boy or girl?"

"Dunno." Her shoulders droop. "I guess I should have told you. I'm estranged from my daughter. She lives in California, and I haven't seen or heard from her in years. I got the news of her pregnancy from her father."

"Sorry to hear this."

She sucks in a breath. "I could blame my daughter. Cry 'woe is me.' That would be the easy way out. But, after thousands of bucks spent on shrinks, I've finally accepted that the fault is entirely mine."

Stunned by this admission from a mere acquaintance, I wait, like a voyeur, for further explanation. Paula gazes back at a spot in her garden where a brilliant orange-red-winged monarch butterfly hovers around pink milkweed. "Another realization I've come to is how much life is like a garden."

She pauses, searching my eyes for understanding. "Sure," I respond. "You need to nurture a garden—good soil, proper fertilizer, enough water and sunlight. And you need to nurture every important relationship."

Paula scrunches up her face. I quickly add, "And nurture *yourself*."

I glow in the satisfaction of imparted wisdom until Paula shakes her head vehemently. "No, that's the easy interpretation. But not the critical one."

She sweeps her arm out. "A garden can be so beautiful. So perfect. But its wonders always are temporary. Often painfully so."

She points toward Arielle. "I had perfect moments when my daughter was her age. Many of them."

What do I say to comfort her? I'm so bad at these kinds of conversations.

Paula rescues me with a wag of her finger. "Keep today in your memory. Because you never know."

"I will," I assure her. "I will."

As I turn to leave, she adds, "And make sure she's hydrated!"

Blocks later, past the entrance to the park, I reach a playground overflowing with children chasing each other, climbing monkey bars, and reaching to the sky on swings. On one curved slide, several kids line up at the top and then barrel down, piling onto each other at the bottom in a jumble of arms and legs.

Thirst creeps into my throat. I plop down on a wooden bench shaded by a thick-branched red oak tree and grab a Poland Spring from a pocket on the carrier. Within a minute, the commotion wakens Arielle. I press her to my heart, then nudge a formula bottle into her mouth. She drinks while staring calmly at the whirlwind of activity around her.

I crane my neck to better view her. "That'll be you in a few years, Sweets," I whisper. Arielle's eyes rise to meet mine, as if she understands my words.

A young woman thin as a reed, who's walking a pure white Maltese with a dainty red bow on its forehead, enters the playground. Her russet hair is pulled back into a scrunchie, the silken straw ends puffing out. Her elegant neck is wrapped in a string of diamonds that glow like white fire in the sunlight. Smaller diamonds sparkle from her wrists and ears.

Her face is familiar to me, and I scour my mind to recall that the last time I saw her was with Linda. The two women had

exchanged pleasantries. When we make eye contact, she stops and shoves her sunglasses to the top of her head. Shielding her eyes, the woman surveys my daughter and then beams. "She's an angel."

I smirk, thinking back to my conversation with Henoah. "Thanks."

Recognizing my struggle to recollect her name, the woman saves me. "I'm Lola. I know your wife from yoga."

I stick out my hand. "Jeff. And this is Arielle."

"Congrats! How's Linda doing?"

I rap my knuckles on the top of the bench. "Knock on wood, she's tired, but well."

Her dog spots a poodle on the other side of the playground fence. It begins to bark ferociously and strain at its leash. The harsh noise startles Arielle, who begins to cry.

"Snowball!" Lola admonishes, to no avail. For an animal that appears to weigh no more than five pounds, Snowball demonstrates surprising strength.

As I nuzzle Arielle and kiss the swirl of hair at the crown of her head, Lola pouts and announces, "Sorry!"

"It's okay. She'll be fine in a minute." I pat the space next to me. "Would you like to sit?"

She glances at her designer gold watch. "I would, but I have a pedicure appointment."

I order myself not to look, but my eyes stray south of their own volition to the sight of her open-toed sandals. Her toenails appear perfectly shaped, with tidy cuticles and unchipped crimson polish. Lola chortles. "I go to the salon weekly. Guess I'm just obsessed with my appearance," she

announces.

“Well, you should know that your obsession is paying dividends.”

I immediately slap myself mentally for blurting out words that cannot be interpreted as anything but flirtatious. I quickly add, “See you again soon, I hope. I’m sure I’ll be back to this playground.”

A storm cloud passes across Lola’s face. She wipes a line of sweat from her brow and then leans down to grasp my forearm. “You and Linda are so lucky,” she says, emphasizing the last word. “A child isn’t in the cards for my husband and me.”

Once again this morning, I find myself offering an, “I’m sorry.”

Lola shrugs, her eyes shimmering. “Well, at least I have Snowball.”

“And your husband,” I add.

She winks. “Yeah, him too.”

Once Lola is out of sight, I wander the verdant expanses of the park and then return to the familiar sanctuary of the playground bench. Little Arielle becomes engrossed in a lone pigeon’s theatrical display of strutting and pecking. I press her body closer to me, cognizant of every movement of her hands and feet, every rise and fall of her breath, every whistling and gurgling sound as if they’re a limb.

When my daughter shuts her eyes, the nights of interrupted sleep catch up to me and I lean back and follow suit. When I stir, perched next to us is a young woman holding a bouquet of wildflowers. Sunlight shines off lustrous toffee hair whose silken strands frame her face in a soft halo before tumbling to bare, delicate shoulders. Her eyes crinkle as she smiles at us. Her face is elusive, obscured as if a fog had descended

upon the bench. Nonetheless, a radiant beauty emanates from her.

“What’s your baby’s name?” Her voice is musical, like the notes of a lullaby.

“Arielle.”

In her twinkling, widened eyes are the lights of distant stars. “That’s my name!”

My eyebrows hike up. “Really!?”

She leans over and squeezes my daughter’s marshmallow toe, gently enough to not stir her. A smile plays on her lips. “Let me guess. Did you get it from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*?”

Should I admit to being too much of a philistine to read Shakespeare? “I have to confess—my wife and I got the name from a Woody Allen movie.”

Her silvery laughter is like the sound of wind chimes. “Well, just so you know, in *The Tempest*, Arielle is a mystical spirit imprisoned in a pine tree by a witch, then rescued by a sorcerer. In return, he serves the sorcerer until he earns his freedom.”

“He?”

A breeze kicks up, causing her hair to flutter like ribbons. “I think the character is beyond gender, but it’s spelled in the masculine manner.”

“Interesting. What do you make of this spirit?”

“It’s wonderful!” she gushes. “Gentle. Passionate. And possessing great magical powers.”

Her infectious joy spurs me to ask, “Do you possess great magical powers?”

Her answer is to stare at a puffy cloud directly overhead, which hangs precariously low as if about to drop from the sky. At that moment, my daughter awakens. The two Arielles gaze at each other. The younger one's eyes sparkle, and her lips, tinged with pink, stretch into a wide arc, presenting a level of radiance I've never seen her display.

Without warning, the woman stands and glides away from me with the grace of a dancer, her visage morphing into a fiery silhouette. My heart squeezes. I want to run after her, but cannot move. Her image becomes blurred, as if we are separated by a shroud. My breathing turns panic-attack fast as I shout out, "Will you be back here again?"

She whirls around. "Yes. After I earn my freedom!"

Words form in my mouth, as if I'm possessed. "I love you!" I scream.

Her voice, gentle and passionate, fills the space between us. "I love you too, Dad."

[Table of Contents](#)

Jeff Ingber is the author of books, short stories, and screenplays, for which he has won numerous awards. His first screenplay was the basis for the 2019 film entitled "Crypto," starring Kurt Russell. One of his novels, entitled *Shattered Lives*, was made into a documentary film by MacTavish Productions. He's had his short stories published in various journals and magazines. You can learn more about his works at jeffingber.com.

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