



Man  
Babies

Richard  
Van Camp

## Man Babies

Oy! If you're forty-five and you're still living at home, you're a little man baby, and shame on you! You should be cutting wood and hauling water and hunting and shoveling snow for your family and Elders. That's the only reason you should be home. You should be cooking for your parents every single night.

Am I the only one who's noticed that we have an epidemic of little man babies running around? I can't be. I refuse to be. Look at all the track pant- and hoodie-wearing Bong Generation scruffians out there. Most dads look like ex-cons now. What happened?

I'll tell you a good story, but, boy, I'm mad now. As soon as I said the MB words I got mad.

Well, a friend of mine in Fort Smith—he's a wildlife officer—he met the most beautiful woman—*oh!* This was it, he said: she was the reason he'd been waiting, right? He hunts, he traps, he's a wildlife officer, right? He goes after the poachers. Anyone who wastes meat—holy man, good luck. You'll wake up with a pillow over your face at four in the morning with a shotgun pressing your nose. No, it's

not that bad, but he's as tough as they come.

First time Steve saw Karen, she had just moved back to town and was out trapping with her dad. Her cheeks were flushed, she had snow frost in her hair, she was wearing beaver-lined gauntlets and had a Ski-Doo suit on. Karen's smile just blew him away, and he asked her out for coffee in front of her father, surprising them all.

"Go for it," her dad said. "Steve's a good man."

Steve blushed, he told me.

Fast-forward to five dates later. Steve is just so happy now. The wait is over. Here they're wining and dining each other, doing the grinder on the dance floor to "Love Hurts" by Nazareth at closing time at JJ's. Everything is great, right? Even when they two-step, the crowd stops to watch, hey.

Karen was up for anything. Steve said: always happy, a great cook, the perfect bush buddy, and so in touch with herself and straight-up sexy. She was all kinds of woman, I guess.

The one thing, though, was her son was still staying with Karen at her house. She called him Baby. That was her boy. Dude, if your mom's still calling you Baby at twenty-eight and you're still living at home being an Xbox champion, looking for the fire axe in *World of Warcraft*, rocking your little hockey socks and your little track pants—if you're too busy playing Nintendo to work and earn, right, we may have a situation of learned helplessness.

And that is what the government is counting on: that our warriors will remain couch potatoes. That our languages and customs will die. That we will fade out.

So, you know, everything was going good for Steve and his lady, but it was already on his radar about Baby and he said to Karen, "So, you know ... when we move in together, you know, I hope Baby gets his own pl—"

"Oh yeah," she cut in. "We talked about it. Baby said he's gonna move out. He has plans."

But Steve felt a worry 'cause Karen was still paying for her son's Telus bill every month: six hundred bucks, hey! His phone bill was six hundred bucks every month. And how many times did Steve hear, "Oh, Baby needs a bit more money. Baby's Ski-Doo went through the ice. Maybe I should get him a new one."

"Didn't he have insurance?"

"He forgot to get it," I guess Karen said.

Steve felt fear curl up cold inside of him. But he bided his time, and then one day he said, "Okay, it's only three weeks until we're moving in together. How's it going with Baby?"

"Oh, Baby's got it all lined up," she said. "Everything is going okay. Don't you worry."

"Okay," Steve says.

But then I guess Karen said something else.

"Where is this coming from?" she asked Steve point-blank.

"What?"

"I'm feeling pressure from you to kick my own son out of the life I want to build with you. I really don't like this," she said.

"Sorry," Steve said. He felt himself backsliding, but he had to make his point.

"Come on," she said to him. "If we're going to move in together, we need to be honest. You're a proud Dene man. I get it. Baby never had that. You're his first positive role model. My dream is your dream: to have him learn from you, and then we'll send him on his way. Or, even better, once he's learned all he can from you, he'll get bored with coming home to us, and he'll move out all happy and fulfilled."

Steve made himself nod.

"So," Karen said to him, "what is your greatest fear with me? Be honest."

Steve was scared, but he summoned up his courage. "I, uh, I don't want to invest years of my life with someone if this isn't forever. I may have missed the window for my own kids, but I want a life partner. I want a wife. I want to be the best husband and father for a family I can be proud of."

"But?"

Shit! She was too good.

"But I can't be proud of a son who'll mooch and be in the way of my dream."

There. He'd said it. He tiptoed his eyes in her direction. She was looking down, as if struck.

"Well," she said. "I need time to think about this, because me and Baby, we're a package deal."

*Maybe it's a bad deal*, Steve thought, but he pushed the worry away. "What is your worst fear with me?" he asked her, even though he already knew.

"My biggest fear is you coming between me and my son," she said.

Steve could feel his blood start to boil. He didn't want to fight. "I need to go for a walk," he said.

"Okay," she said. "I'll cook supper."

Steve was putting on his boots and parka when Karen came over to him. "I crawled through my own blood once to get Baby out of his father's drunken grip. Baby had an ear infection, and he wouldn't stop crying. It was forty below outside."

Karen stood so strong in his kitchen holding herself, Steve said. "He hit me so hard I couldn't see straight for a week," she told him. "I had two black eyes. I got to Baby just in time."

"Holy shit," Steve said to her. It was all he could think of. Karen let Steve hold her, but she did not cry. "If you don't want us, tell me now," she said to him.

"I want you to move in with me. And I want Baby to get his own place. He's welcome at our place any time."

As soon as Steve said that last line, he told me, he could feel cold air rushing into his home. But he let that be. Karen had given him a lot to think about.

He reminded himself that he would have the power to end it for the first six months. After that, they'd be common law. By then, she could go after what he had. He had to protect himself.

Steve and I, we have so many friends, too many friends, both men and women, who have aged fast and hard from choosing the wrong partner. Steve did not want to join the miserable people he saw with their deflated faces, taking the long way home because home was the last place they ever wanted to be.

Steve decided he would mark his calendar once Karen moved in. Karen and Baby would either make his life wonderful or they'd make it a misery. If it took misery for a bit with Baby for things to become wonderful with Karen again, and if marriage was on the horizon, well... "Let's just see how this goes," he said to himself.

In the meantime, Steve kept checking in, kept checking with Karen: "How's Baby doing?" "Did Baby check out those job leads I printed up for him?" "Any word?" He noticed that his house felt chilly all the time now, even when he sat closer to his wood stove.

As they'd agreed, Karen moved in the day her lease expired. Everything was going good until guess who showed up with four Glad garbage bags at 11:00 p.m. that first night?

Baby!

"Oh, you know," Karen said to Steve. "Baby's place didn't work out. I didn't have enough for his damage deposit. Can he just stay on our couch until the end of the month?"

Steve let out the biggest soul sigh. What could he say?

Because what he heard was, "Can Baby just live on your couch for the rest of your life? Can my loser face of a dink nose son eat you out of house and home? Can my Big Rhino Baby hot-knife Jamaican finger hash with your best knives every day at 4:30? Can Baby shave his pubes in your bathtub before you go for a bath?"

Anyways. So Baby moved in and set up his Xbox, started calling his friends over. And he started eating—and I mean face-down-in-everything eating. And he didn't

clean—he didn't do dishes, didn't vacuum. Nothing. By Day Three, Steve's home had taken on a man stench of nachos and balls' sweat.

Basically, his whole place smelled like Frog Ass.

After a couple of weeks, Steve came over to my place for coffee, and he told me: "You know, I'm a patient man. I'm nice until I'm not nice anymore. So I'll say, 'Hey, Baby, do you want to go see that cinnamon bear out by the airport? You know, there's a moose swimming across the river. I got an extra quad—let's go watch.'"

But Baby would just chew his cud and watch tv and say, "Nope. I'm good," Steve complained to me.

So Steve would try again: "Hey, Baby. The northern lights are out tonight. You know, they're all red. That only happens once every twelve—"

"Nope," Baby would say. He would wipe the milk from his cereal off his chin and smear it onto Steve's couch. "I'm good."

Yeah, so everything was still kinda good with Karen, Steve said. Even though there was a man baby living on his couch, right? Even though the tv was on all night. Even though the place reeked of marijuana and Baby smoked in the bathroom. All the while Steve kept asking Karen, "What's going on? Any movement with Baby moving out?"

Stuff like that. He told me that he'd listen to himself and think, *You're nagging. You're bullying.* But when was Baby moving out?

Karen would say, "He just needs a bit more time." Or "You know he's had a rough life, right?"

We've all had rough lives, Steve wanted to say, but

hard work, good schooling, dear friends, our country foods, a sweet love and a healthy family can cure most anything.

So one day, Steve told me, he caught this poacher in the South Slave. This guy had killed seventeen cow moose in one year. All the wasted meat, you wouldn't believe it, and Steve was after him. He was after him. Finally, he caught him. "This guy is gonna go to jail," he told me. "I seized his truck and his guns. We documented spent cartridges on the floor. The guy was shooting out of his truck, right? Really bad guy."

Steve thanked the Creator and gave thanks to his dad and uncles for showing him all they knew when it came to tracking. That's how he had got the bad guy. After he handed the poacher over to the RCMP, he said to himself, "I'm just going home. When I get home I'm gonna cook. I'm gonna do a chicken stir-fry in my wok. I'm gonna make apple pie right from scratch. And bannock! I'm going to make my world-famous bannock with bear grease and the best tea ever, spruce tea. Ori. Oh, it's gonna be great, you know? And I'm gonna kiss my woman all night long. I'm just going to spoil her. I'm going to celebrate. How many months have I been after this guy, and I got him. I got him!"

Steve told me he did a little jig as he walked out of the cop shop. He even recited the Classic Dene motto, "When you're good you're good."

So Steve got all the groceries and left them at the house, ready to go, before he did some errands, and then he picked Karen up from her work. They smooched it up

and then headed home. As they drove, Steve was planning the evening. He was so happy. He was going to put on CKLB. It would take him an hour or so to get the rice cooked and slice and dice the veggies as he fried up the chicken. His sweetie was happy and proud of him, but just as they pulled up to Steve's house, her emergency cell-phone rings. She's a counsellor for abused women, and this is the phone she has to sleep beside.

"I gotta take this," she said to him.

"Don't worry about it, Babe," Steve told her. "I'm going to go in there and I'm gonna cook for you. I'm gonna show you how it's done. There's a reason you love me, and I'm gonna remind you what it is."

So he goes into the house, and right away he smells cigarette smoke, booze, pot, and there's Baby on the couch with his Xbox. Baby looks at Steve and says, "Hey, Steve. The store closes in about seventeen minutes. You guys better go buy something. I'm hungry."

And Steve goes, "What do you mean? I got all that stuff for the chicken stir-fry. I'm gonna cook—"

"Ate it," Baby said. "I got the munchies."

That was the moment Steve snapped. You know when northern men snap they get quiet, even quieter than when northerri women get mad? So Steve told me he walked to the fridge. "I opened it up, and the food was all gone. There were dirty dishes everywhere. There were cigarette butts in my sink. There was an empty nickey in my sink. I looked over at him, and, Baby, right away, he started yelling, "Mom! Mummy! Mum! Mum! Mum! Mum! Mum!"

So I guess Steve said to him, "She can't hear you. She's in the garage taking a call, probably saving a woman's life. It's just you and me now."

"Mummy!" Baby yelled again. He grabbed his phone. "I'm gonna text her."

Steve was all business by then, I guess. He told Baby, "You can text your mom all you want, but here's the deal: you're out of here right now. You showed up with four Glad garbage bags. There are four bags right there under the sink. You're going to go live with your grandpa. You have five minutes, starting right now."

"Or?" Baby asked.

Steve made two fists and leaned in so close that his nose was almost touching Baby's. "Or you're gonna get it."

"Mummy! Mum! Mummy!" Baby started bawling.

Steve said to him, "Listen to yourself. You're twenty-eight years old and you're calling for your mom. You don't got any money. You don't cook. You don't clean. Your mother has given everything for you." Steve glanced at his watch. "Now you have three and a half minutes."

Baby looked at Steve and lowered his voice. "You really think my mom's gonna pick you over me?"

Steve says, "Well, we're gonna find out because if she picks you she's out too. We're done!"

"Take it easy!" Baby says to him.

Steve says, "No. I'm serious! Go! Right now!"

"Hmmmph!" Baby yelled. "This is bullshit!" He jumped up and grabbed four Glad garbage bags. He ran back for his Xbox. He grabbed his little Wii. He went racing down the hall and snatched his razor and toothbrush

out of the bathroom, and then he stuffed his clothes into the bags. "This is bullshit!" he yelled again.

"Yes it is," Steve said and looked at his watch again. "One minute."

Baby's little chin was just trembling, I guess, and Steve got the giggles. He felt good, he said. Every once in a while, just like his uncle had told him, a good fight clears out the cholesterol, hey?

Baby took off down the road, dragging his four garbage bags. He wore his little jacket, his little track pants, little Nike high tops, right?

Steve was watching him, already feeling so much better.

But all of a sudden Baby dropped his bags and started dancing, Steve said.

Then Baby was racing across the road, back and forth. It was like something out of WWF, Steve told me. He could not believe his eyes—or ears. "You know what?" Baby yelled. "You think you're a hero, Steve. But you're really a ZERO. You hear me?"

Steve frowned. "Is that the best tell-off you got? I was using that in kindergarten. What's next? You gonna tell me you didn't go to high school, you went to school high?"

Baby stopped. "Okay, I wasn't going to do this, but I'm going to do this. You made me." Baby then pretended to sing into a pretend microphone. Baby started strutting.

He puffed up his chest and he started rapping, kind of. Steve could barely make out the words but the tune was familiar. "Wait a minute," Steve said. No way. Was Baby pretending to be the lead singer of Rage Against the Machine? Was he singing "Killing in the Name" to him?

Baby didn't let up. He was jumping up and down while holding his imaginary microphone. He then started giving Steve the middle finger. Steve got the giggles. For a temper tantrum in the middle of the road, this was too much.

"Why are you laughing?" Baby yelled. "This song was written for you, Decider!!"

And Steve yell-laughed, "Decider? Are you kidding me, Baby? That's Rage Against the Machine! I was singing that in my basement in my gouchies in Grade 7, before you were even born."

Baby was stunned. He gave Steve the finger again before slipping on ice and cracking the back of his head on the road.

Steve looked over his shoulder; he told me. Any minute Karen was going to come through that door. Thankfully, Baby got up, grabbed his Glad garbage bags and continued on down the street.

Steve watched him go until he vanished. And he didn't feel bad at all. He was thinking about how good it would feel for Baby to find his own place, to set it up the way he wanted it. He was thinking about Baby buying his first truck, that first drive home from the dealership. The pride that everyone deserves to feel when they do something special. Steve noticed that Baby's cellphone was lying in the snow. He didn't feel bad about that either.

When Karen came in, she looked around. "Where's Baby? What happened?"

"Oh," Steve said to her. "It's the most amazing thing. Baby decided to live with your dad."

Karen narrowed her eyes at him. "What? My dad is really hard on Baby. He makes him cut wood and stack wood and fill the woodbox and check the nets with him twice a day"

Steve smiled at her. "Well, he said he wants to learn from the best."

Karen frowned. "I'll just call him."

"Oh no," Steve said. "That's the thing. He said he wants to do this. Hey, you know what? I'll take you out for supper. Let's go for—"

She held up her hand. "No, I want to call Baby. I need to call my son."

Steve knew Baby's phone was still lying on the road. He'd get it later. Or maybe he wouldn't. Karen tried and tried, but no answer. She was frantic, Steve said. He saw something in her that he hadn't noticed before: guilt and regret. She was trying to make up for something. That's what this was about. Karen was trying to make up for something, and Baby was milking it to the max.

Steve said, "Sweetheart, I'm asking you. There are no groceries, because they're all gone. I'm hungry. I know you are, too. Let's make this a date night. Let me take you out."

Karen finally agreed, Steve said. They went out to the restaurant. Usually, they'd be there for four hours, dancing and watching the game. This time, they lasted about fifteen minutes, because Karen said she wanted to go home. She was worried about Baby. Maybe he'd come back. She wanted to call him on their land line.

Steve knew that was it. So they went home and the snow was falling hard, hey. As soon as they got in the



house, the phone started ringing, and Baby was on the other end.

Fear sweat erupted all over Steve's body. His nipples inverted. His balls sucked back in. He was in survival mode, hey?

Karen hung up and she said, "Did you kick my son out of this house?"

Steve just told her the truth. "You're goddamned right I kicked him out, because he's a little man baby! He's twenty-eight years old and he's a mooch! He eats all our food! He's smoking dope in my bathroom!"

He gave her all his reasons. Then Karen said, "He's back tonight or I'm gone."

"Well, then, I guess you're gone," Steve said to her. "Cause you're not helping him. At twenty-eight, Baby is a man. He should be shovelling! He should be cutting wood! He should be gathering rat root! Every time that the caribou or the moose are out, he should be hunting for the Elders! He should be learning from me how to make snowshoes—right? He should be learning from me how to hunt and trap and make the best damn dry meat in the South Slave. I've given him a hundred opportunities. We're not helping him, so if you want him back, you can go too. I'm willing to risk a broken heart for the rest of my life."

"Well, hold on now," Karen said. "Let's not get too carried away."

Steve and Karen kept talking, and I guess little Baby he got tired of being bossed around by his grandpa, because after three days of it he went down to the Friendship

Centre. He filled out every application: NAIT, SAIT, Grant MacEwan, U of A, right? He filled out every application to work with Highways. Anything to get out of Grandpa's house, eh? Even the diamond mines: two weeks in, two weeks out—anything. Right? Well, he got accepted into NAIT.

So Baby showed up at Steve's house while Karen was at work, and he said, "Steve, I just came over to say goodbye."

Steve had already heard the good news, but he decided to play dumb. "Where you going?"

"Uh, well, I got accepted into NAIT in Edmonton. My grandpa is a veteran, so I got a scholarship. I'm gonna learn how to be a carpenter."

And Steve goes, "Well, that's great. Need a ride to the airport?"

And Baby goes, "No, I'm driving down with a friend."

Steve told me he saw tears in Baby's eyes.

Right away, as soon as he was gone, Karen started sending Baby money.

So, that's the first part of the story. But it was rough on Steve. He was worried he might have been wrong about Baby being alone in the city, because how far can you push a little MB before he snaps, right?

Steve said that fall he and Karen found each other again: sleeping in, movies, smuggling, cooking, hosting, visiting, cruising. Everything he had loved in her was back again. But he was worried, so he decided to do some research. He didn't want Baby to be his enemy. He wanted Baby to become a man he could be proud of. He wanted

Baby to become a provider, a protector, a nurturer. What he found out, through his research on the computer at the office and coffee sessions at the Pelican Restaurant, was that Baby's father was a professional Baby-maker who never paid a cent in alimony or maintenance. Karen told him she'd heard 75 per cent of boys who watch their moms get hit will hit their partners later on. So she and her boy had left Baby's father with just the clothes on their backs. She wanted Baby to know a home without fear, violence, belittling, intimidation.

Hearing all this, Steve thought about Baby. The way Baby hid on the couch. His silence. His quiet watching when Steve and Karen were together. Baby was a scared little boy waiting to be welcomed into the family he should have had years ago.

But, Steve said, all that information, it didn't change his position on Baby needing to blaze his own trail at twenty-eight. Too much time had passed with Baby being treated like a, well, baby.

So, come December, Baby started emailing his mom even more often. And Karen relayed to Steve, "Baby is coming back for Christmas! Ohhh!! He's got a girlfriend. He's got a happy life! My boy lost thirty pounds!"

For the next ten days, Steve said, Karen was cooking, baking, singing, getting the house clean. She was so excited.

On December 21, Baby drives all the way up to Fort Smith in his new truck. Steve came over to give me an update. He didn't say anything to Karen, but he was worried Baby would say he wasn't going back. He was worried

that Baby would want to move back in. He was worried his last four months of bliss were about to come to an end.

So Baby arrived at the house, Steve told me, and holy man he looked good. Baby was trim. He had two new earrings in. Gold. He had a leather jacket. You could hear it scrunch with every move, Steve said. It sounded like a big iguana was in the house every time Baby flexed. New boots even! I saw his new truck in the driveway, and it looked good.

Karen had put up a WELCOME HOME! WE MISSED YOU! sign, I guess. Steve spent all night blowing up balloons. Gave himself asthma, almost blew a lung. He made a feast that night, and I guess everyone was there: Baby's grandpa was there, cousins were there, nieces were there, buddies were there, and, man, Baby looked good! You could smell his leather jacket fresh from The Leather Ranch in West Edmonton Mall, Steve said. A city haircut and a new little belt buckle, and Baby told everybody he was really good. He was getting B-pluses and A-minuses and the instructors were looking out for him. He'd met a beautiful Cye woman. But Steve had a feeling, he told me, that there was gonna be a showdown.

Steve did the dishes. He stayed in the kitchen, made fresh bannock, kept the coffee going, you know. Finally, at the end of the night, everyone cleared out. They were patting Steve on the back. "Man, that was good cookin'. Mahsi cho!" Even Baby's grandfather was smiling after going back for thirds.

Steve was still wondering what was going to happen,

though. When Karen went to have a shower, Baby says to him, "Steve, can I talk to you out in the backyard?"

"Sure," Steve told him. "Give me two minutes here. Just finishing up these dishes."

After Baby went outside, Steve told me, he put on a short jacket so Baby couldn't grab it, in case they got into a fight. He tucked his braids in so Baby couldn't choke him out with them. He got his big hiking boots on so he could have traction in the snow. No gloves. He kept it bare knuckles, 'cause he knew things were gonna get bloody, eh?

So Steve and Baby were out in the back, just circling each other with the northern lights snapping above them.

"Well, how are things?" Steve asked Baby.

"Things are good," Baby says.

"Oh, yeah? How are you liking the city?"

"Oh, I love it," Baby said to Steve. "I seen AC/DC, GNR. It was good. Saw Platinum Blonde at the River Cree."

"Oh yeah?" Steve said. "So, what do you wanna talk about?"

And then I guess Baby said, "Uh, well, there's a couple things. Number one I just, it's hard for me to say, but I want to say thank you."

Steve was stunned, he told me. "You want to thank me for what?"

So Baby said, "It's terrifying when you don't know what you want to do. Like my friends, we graduated from high school, and then one wants to be a doctor, one wants to be a nurse, one's gonna be an engineer, one's getting into the military, another's gonna be a dad. Everybody had all these plans except me."

"Go on," Steve said to him. He was still keeping his distance from Baby, he told me, just in case.

"Well," Baby said, "when I went down to the city, nobody knew me. Nobody looked me in the eye when I walked down the street. I was lonely. And I was scared. I mostly just stayed home and frickin' studied, because I wanted to know what people were talking about in class. And I started going for tutoring, checking in with the Elders and the counsellors. They got Elders in Residence, even. You know, I started learning some things about myself. I'm not proud of it, man. I'm twenty-eight. I'm not getting any younger. I feel like I'm catching up to the world. Plus I dropped thirty pounds."

I guess Steve just nodded, and Baby kept going.

"And I found somebody special," Baby said. "She's making me moccasins right now. Can you believe that? Hey! I need your recipe for moose dry meat. I want to make some for her before I go back."

"Oh. No problem," Steve said. "It's Back Eddy's and liquid smoke. You use an ulu to cut the meat really thin. I'll show you how to do it."

"Okay," Baby says to Steve. "So that's part one."

And here they started circling each other again in the backyard, eh? Steve was worried, and he said to Baby,

"What's part two?"

"Well," Baby said, "when I was down there in the city I took boxing."

*This is it!* Steve thought. "Oh you did, did you?" he said to Baby.

"Yeah. I'm good. You know, in about two years from

now, I'll have my Golden Gloves status. These fists are gonna be registered as lethal weapons."

Steve smiled to keep things friendly, he told me. "Oh yeah? Good for you."

"Yeah," Baby said. "I came back here with a plan."

Steve's mouth started to water, he told me, at the prospect of a full-on fisticuff session. "What's your plan?" he said to Baby.

"I came here to knock you right out," Baby said.

So Steve said to him, "Well, let's talk about this before you stretch me out."

Baby looked like he was almost crying, Steve said. I guess Baby told Steve, "Nobody ever stood over me before and gave me five minutes to leave what I was trusting as a safe home for me and my morn. My grandpa is a good man, but he's tough and he's hard, you know. I wasn't used to working like that. And the whole time I was down there in the city, I was scared. 'Cause nobody knows you, nobody's looking out for you, nobody has time for each other down there. So, anyways, I came here to knock you out. I want to punch you right in the nose."

And I guess Steve said to him, "All right," he says, "let's make a deal!"

And Baby goes, "What?"

"I could lose my job if I get an assault charge, you know?" Steve said to him. "So no matter what happens, you gotta give me your word you won't call the cops after."

He told me that Baby, his chin just started wiggling then.

"I'll even let you have the first hit," Steve told him. "I got a glass jaw. Drive me right there. Maybe you'll get lucky."

"Ah, I guess Baby said, not so confident now."

So Steve went, "Okay, so that's the rules: no cops and you get the first hit. But I'm here to tell you," he told Baby, "bigger men than you have frickin' dropped faster than they can frickin' blink. So let's go. You better make it good, Junior."

And then I guess Baby dropped his hands. "Or we could just hug," he said to Steve.

And Steve went, "Well, you decide. I could definitely get into a fight tonight. I wouldn't mind punching the back of your head through the front of your face. What do you say? Let's chuck some knuckles!"

"No," I guess Baby said. "We're good. We're gonna hug. Hugging's good. A hug and we're good, okay? Here I go. I'm going to let you hug me."

So Baby held his arms out, Steve told me, and Steve couldn't resist. He hugged him just hard, boy, as if he were his own son.

Just then Karen came out to see what was happening and she discovered them just holding each other up, boy.

"Ah!" She smiled and walked out to join them. "There's my men."

And that was the moment, Steve told me, that they became a family.