

Daily Reports by Robert Reed

The author tells us that "Daily Reports" is based loosely on his daughter's daycare situation -- a woman in her home with a handful of little kids -- as well as local troubles with West Nile Disease. Further inspiration came from a couple of dead crows set in a curious position that he happened to see while driving to the daycare.

There are brief scenes in this story that may be disturbing to some.

NAME: Tichelle

DATE: 4/5/81

FEEDINGS: 6 oz Polar B. Standard -- 8, 9, 10:30, 11:15, 12 (2X), 2, 3, 4, 4:45

DIAPERS: 9, 6 BMs -- (Analysis enclosed, all norm)

SLEEP: 4 hrs, 13 min total/norm REM

PLAY: Smart links, stuffed okapi -- prefers bright reds and oranges

ENHANCEMENTS: Norm

PROGNOSIS: Excellent

NEEDS/NEWS:

Tichelle had a wonderful first day. She seems to enjoy her new friends, and everybody very much likes her. Smiles and giggles all around!

Thank you for entrusting your daughter to me. As I mentioned before, I do appreciate your concerns. With their resources and large staffs, the full-care centers certainly seem to have much to offer both newborns and their working parents. While I'm just one person inside her own little house, looking after four tiny children. But you have seen my facilities, and you've studied my references. Frankly, we all know the advantages in having just a few children in one location. In all honesty, I can't imagine a better environment for Tichelle -- save for inside your own home, sealed up with you.

Again, thank you. You have a lovely, lovely daughter, and she has such an easy temperament, too. Plus an appetite! (I had to change my autonurse's cleaning parameters. With so many diaper changes, I didn't want anyone rubbing her bottom raw.)

Tichelle

5/9/81

FEEDINGS: 8 oz Polar B. Standard -- 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 (X3), 1, 2, 2:45, 3:15, 4, 5

DIAPERS: 19, 8 BMs (Analysis enclosed, note microflora censuses results)

SLEEP: 3 hrs, 11 min -- REM excellent

PLAY: Mr. Dodo, interactive gym were favorites

ENHANCEMENTS: Norm, save for SynGene Package 44/Tamborine. You might wish to contact your pediatrician, as a precaution.

PROGNOSIS: Excellent, as always

NEEDS/NEWS:

Tichelle had a good day! She sang and sang, even in her sleep. If you wish, I could record some portion of her dreams. It makes a wonderful addition to the baby's scrapbook!

Need food, diapers, and updated protocols for the autonurse, by Monday.

Tomorrow is payday. Thank you, in advance!

Tichelle

6/22/81

FEEDINGS: Self-feeding -- (total consumption: 107 oz Polar B. Prime)

BATHROOM: 1st accident-free day! BM, urine samples shipped to physician, as requested.
(Reimbursement voucher enclosed)

SLEEP: 3 hrs, 23 min -- much REM

PLAY: Crawling everywhere; wrestling with Florence, Gavin; watching birds at feeder (she loves the new red birds); book-time with Your Beautiful World volumes

ENHANCEMENTS: Norm -- (The neurological add-ons are blending nicely. Question on LackLee 14: Are these serotonin levels correct?)

PROGNOSIS: Excellent immune responses, as promised!

NEEDS/NEWS:

Another good day!

I don't know if I mentioned this before, but Gavin is very much taken by your daughter. Her appetite and rapid growth have always been subjects of fascination for him. (He will always be quite small.) But as Tichelle grows and becomes more active, he finds even more reasons to like her. (Who doesn't?)

Gavin is my oldest -- nearly three now -- and for the moment, he is my most communicative child. Today, for instance. He was playing with your daughter, trying to teach her how to say her own name. He was persistent and very sweet, saying, "Tichelle, Tichelle. I like saying Tichelle. You try it. Tichelle, Tichelle." But, of course, her mouth isn't quite ready yet. Eventually he wore her out, and she fell asleep, and little Gavin came to me, wearing this wonderful smile.

"I'll marry Tichelle," he promised me. "As soon as we're both grown up."

"Will you?" I asked.

"In another five years," he said, unaware that her growth curve is quite a bit steeper than his. "We'll both be grown up, and ready," he told me with his endearing confidence.

I thought you should know. Not even five months old, and your daughter already is breaking hearts.

Tichelle

7/31/81

FEEDINGS: 111 oz Polar B. Special, 5 Soysalm cakes

BATHROOM: Norm

SLEEP: 2 hrs, 14 min (REM -- see enclosed note)

PLAY: With Gavin, many games

ENHANCEMENTS: Norm, apparently

PROGNOSIS: Fine

NEEDS/NEWS:

It was a good day, in general.

There was a rather bad nightmare, however. Which happens, and I wouldn't normally mention it. Tichelle went down for her afternoon nap and woke early, screaming. Roaring, really. But as it happens, her dreams were being recorded -- my autonurse was spliced into the appropriate add-on, running tests -- and I captured what awakened her, and what made her cry for most of the next half-hour.

Gavin talks to your daughter. With the best of intentions, he has tried to explain the world to her, and why she is as she is. He is quite bright, and would be even without his add-ons. And maybe I haven't been careful enough, letting him speak as he wishes. But these concepts are quite abstract, and Tichelle shouldn't be able to comprehend abstractions yet. You showed me all of the projections, and her verbal skills don't seem to exceed those wondrous predictions.

But I'm afraid she comprehends more than we realize. Watch the recording. In one sense, yes, it is a traditional monster-from-the-darkness dream. But if you notice the crude details of her monster: The changing crystalline face; the syringe-like tail; the monster's blinding speed. To me, there is one obvious explanation, and because she is so young -- advanced, but only along certain avenues -- Tichelle needs to be protected from unnecessary fears.

I have already warned Gavin not to talk about these matters.

"But she has to know," he told me.

"She has plenty of time to learn," I replied, with my stern voice. "Both of you have all the time in the world, darling."

Tichelle

8/17/81

FEEDINGS: 90 oz Special, 11 Soysalms

BATHROOM: Norm

SLEEP: 3 hrs, 3 min

PLAY: Constant, many toys and games

ENHANCEMENTS: Norm

PROGNOSIS: Good, with concerns -- (note NEWS!)

NEEDS/NEWS:

As you know, we've enjoyed our little walks during the cool of the morning. And I assure you, before we go outside, I always check the Epidemiology Network first, reading the updates and making sure there are no alerts. I never take children anywhere without protection, and then only if we are at the standard Alpha-level threat. So I had no warning. None. And really, I can't see how anything bad will come from this. But I wanted you to know.

We saw a pair of dead birds today.

On the next block, a group of boys were playing. They were grown boys, big and strong and proud of their new bodies. One boy would throw a football high in the air -- higher than any tree -- and my children and I watched the ball rise and rise, and then finally fall again, carried up the street by the wind.

I watched the ball hit the ground, and that's when I saw the birds. They were large and black, like old-fashioned crows. I suppose the boys had found them first, and as a joke, they set one corpse directly behind the other. It was a sick and vulgar display, and exactly in character with boys. But instead of reprimanding them, I turned us around and started straight for home.

Unfortunately, Gavin noticed the birds. He was sitting behind Tichelle in the wagon. Pointing, he said, "Canaries."

I said, "Quiet."

Tichelle repeated the word, "Canaries?"

"That's what we call them," her friend explained.

"Why?" your daughter inquired.

By then, I was misting the air and fitting masks over the children's faces. And the autonurse was calling the Health Department, as a precaution.

"Canaries were old-time birds," Gavin said through his mask. "They were little birds put in cages. People used them to see if the coast was clear."

"Coast?" Tichelle asked. "What coast?"

"I don't know," he admitted. Then he looked at me, asking, "Could you explain it to Tichelle?"

We were halfway home. Of course, I was pulling at the wagon, trying to make it move as fast as possible. "There aren't any real canaries anymore," I explained. "We just call them that."

"All the birds are new," Gavin chimed in.

"New?" Tichelle asked.

"Every year," I told her, "we make many, many new kind of birds. Out of pieces of old birds, and brand new pieces too."

I wasn't doing a good job of explaining. But frankly, I was under a fair measure of stress just then.

Yet your daughter seemed to understand.

Nodding, she said, "Like us. Like me. Canaries are?"

I said, "Yes, dear. They're a little bit like you."

"And then they grow up," she announced. "They grow up and get their always-bodies, don't they?"

Always-bodies. That was her name for them.

I didn't have the heart to tell her. And Gavin, bless him, thought to look at me first, and I shook my head, and we made it home without any ugly revelations. I did notice several of this year's little red birds in the trees, acting ill. But even if it is a new plague, there's very little risk to the children. As I explained later to Gavin, canaries and humans share very little in the way of genetics anymore. One of us is weak for the finest of reasons, allowing diseases to prosper in their cul-de-sac gene pools, while the rest of us are designed to be exceptionally, wondrously strong.

Tichelle

8/25/81

FEEDINGS, ETC: Home for the day

NEEDS/NEWS:

The news is disturbing, yes. But at least this year's strains appeared overseas, giving us a few days to make ready.

On that note: I want to take this opportunity to remind you that I am here. When you hired me in the spring, I agreed not only to care for Tichelle while you were at work, but also, should the need arise, to supply a safe house in times of severe need. I have ample stockpiles of food and pure water here. My home is equal to most public shelters, and since I care for fewer children, the likelihood of contamination is statistically reduced. Obviously, if you decide to place her in a free public shelter, I will understand. It is your right to choose what is best for your daughter. And if you should keep her with you, inside your own home ... well, that's your right, too. The laws are perfectly clear on this issue. Although I can say, after some painful personal experience, that most people's homes are not nearly as secure as their owners choose to believe.

I am not trying to alarm or dissuade.

Obviously, I want what is best for Tichelle, and I trust you completely to make these important decisions.

(By the way. Isn't it alarming, that ugliness with the cockroaches in Amsterdam?)

Tichelle

8/26/81

FEEDINGS: 60 oz Maintenance, 12 Soysalms

BATHROOM: Norm

SLEEP: 3 hrs 55 min

PLAY: Occasional, but distracted

ENHANCEMENTS: Norm

PROGNOSIS: See NEWS

NEEDS/NEWS:

Such an awful day.

I know you hoped for another night or two with Tichelle. Like you, I really believed we had several days before these new bugs found their way to us. But I promise, I'll keep you up to date with everything, and of course you can speak to Tichelle any time, and watch her from your home, and if you must, you can try to get a quarantine pass -- although from what I have seen and heard, I doubt that any shelter will be taking new children after midnight.

Two of my own didn't come this morning, as it happens. Florence went to the private shelter up in Breckonridge, while Rikki is at home with his parents. And everybody misses them terribly.

Gavin assures me that he will help care for Tichelle. The sweet boy.

Again, don't worry. At least don't make yourself sick with your concerns. My house has been sealed since you left, and nobody but myself can leave or enter. And I won't do either unless it is absolutely necessary.

By the way:

Today, to educate and entertain, I showed the children what happens when I use the airlock. I sealed the inner door, waving and smiling, and then the radiation bath flash-cooked my robe as well as my skin-clothes. When I stepped back into the house, Tichelle giggled and pointed at me, calling me, "Shiny woman!"

"I'm old," I explained. "I got this body long ago. This is how everybody's had to look back then, honey."

I can assume that you do not have a metallic exoskeleton.

Or hasn't Tichelle ever seen a naked adult? If not, my apologies, and I hope we can find our sense of humor here.

Tichelle

9/5/81

FEEDING: Cultured beef, soysalms, banana cakes, cheese and crackers

BATHROOM: Norm (BMs frozen for future analysis)

SLEEP: 11 hrs, 2 min (out of 24)

PLAY: Norm, surprisingly

ENHANCEMENTS: Good, but autonurse needs updated protocols

PROGNOSIS: see NEWS

NEWS/NEEDS:

I'm trying to keep her informed, but at the same time, I don't want to tell her too much. Yet every night, usually three or four times, Tichelle wakes up screaming. Her nightmares are full of dying birds and adaptive phages, and I'm amazed by what she comprehends. What are you telling her when you speak to her by link-up? (Not a criticism, just an enquiry.)

I'm relying on Gavin to show Tichelle that there is nothing to fear, that we are perfectly safe. The plagues come every year, he promises. This year just happens to be early by a month or two. "But the sickness can't come through these walls," he told his best friend. (She is twice his size now, and so pretty.) "Look out the windows," he said, pointing at the monitors on my walls. "Do you see anything bad outside?"

Of course she can't see the phages. Gifted as she is, I doubt if she appreciates how very tiny they are.

"No," she said, shaking her pretty face. "Nothing bad."

My monitors are showing digitals of better days. Of course I took that simple precaution. Otherwise, Tichelle, and all of us, would be staring at a landscape littered with the bodies of dead and rotting birds.

Tichelle

9/19/81

NEEDS/NEWS:

I understand your concerns. And yes, it remains your right. But I think we need to remember what's best for Tichelle. For her sake, all of us need to be strong and wait this trouble out.

Speaking of your daughter: She has begun to walk. I knew she was trying, but I didn't think she was making any real progress. (It is odd how some skills have been accelerated so much, while others, by design or by accident, are only a little ahead of schedule.) Anyway, I was in the kitchen, overseeing lunch, and when I came into the living room, both she and Gavin had disappeared.

They were in absolutely no danger. My house would have barred their way and warned me of trouble. I quickly found them in my bedroom. Tichelle was standing, one hand sweetly set on Gavin's head, using him to help to maintain her balance.

They were looking at the portraits that I keep on my wall, and Tichelle noticed that some of the frames were black, while others were white. "Why?" she asked.

She was looking at the oldest portraits.

Gavin knew the reason. Quietly, he said, "They are dead now."

She glanced at me with a doubting expression. I had to shrug, and nod. "I was taking care of them," I admitted. "The first year of the plagues. A lot of years ago, it was."

It hurts, just talking about it.

Again, Tichelle asked, "Why?"

"Because we didn't know how to protect them. Or anybody. The diseases came and took away a lot of people, adults as well as -- "

"Why?"

What could I tell her? I tried to distract her, pointing at all the smiling faces framed with white. "You see? After the first few years, we learned enough. Grown-up people got safe new bodies, and we learned how to protect our children until they were big enough and old enough to get their..." I hesitated, and then remembered her term for it. "To get their always-bodies."

She nodded, as if satisfied.

"And we grow up fast," little Gavin boasted. "I'll be grown up in just two years!"

Tichelle looked down at him -- it's astonishing to realize that she is almost as tall as me now -- and very carefully, she removed her hand from his head.

Standing by herself, choking with frustration, she asked, "But why?"

"Why what, honey?" I asked.

She whispered something to Gavin. Something painful, and complicated, and she plainly wanted her friend to explain it to me.

The boy straightened, and with his own pain, he admitted, "She's worried about the cockroaches."

Everybody is. But I didn't say that.

"The sicknesses," he continued. "They were just supposed to kill just people. Right?"

"Angry, stupid people built the first diseases. Because they didn't like themselves, or anyone." I don't know how else to say such awful things. "They were hoping to push us into extinction, and they didn't."

"Canaries," Tichelle muttered. "Birds?"

In brief, I tried to explain. What was meant to kill humans had a hundred ways to mutate and improve itself, and when there weren't any more susceptible people, new plagues arose, killing the apes. The monkeys. And then, all mammals. The birds were next. Followed by reptiles, and amphibians, and fish.

But that's where it ended. For years and years, only one little branch of the living world was in danger: The creatures who just happened to have backbones.

"Cockroaches?" Tichelle pressed.

I had to nod, touching her lightly. "The plagues are getting worse again," I admitted.

Your daughter lost her balance just then.

She wasn't hurt. She is almost grown, but she still has a baby's flexibility and youthful bones. Then after a

little cry, she started crawling back toward the living room, Gavin walking beside her with a hand resting on her broad back. And I was crying too, looking at all those faces -- living and dead, all of them still so precious to me.

Tichelle

10/3/81

NEEDS/NEWS:

And now, the trees are dying.

I never thought this was possible. Even in my own worst nightmares, I couldn't imagine that these super-plagues would find pathways into every corner of the organic world. And from what I have read, only a few alarmists -- crackpots, really -- ever seriously brought up this grim possibility.

While the children sleep, I do nothing but watch the horrible news from around the world, and always, the Epidemiology Network. And I cry. The experts keep claiming that the plagues -- How many are there now officially? Forty thousand? -- will reach some new equilibrium.

No wildfire ever burns the forest entirely bare, and it will be the same for us. There will be safe havens. The biosphere will endure, if in a shriveled and much simpler form. They say. And I hope they know their business.

But what if they are hopeless optimists?

Then we will survive regardless. Of that, I am certain. Life on Earth will cease to be organic, but there will be life. Yet until we learn how to conceive and give birth to entirely inorganic children, it looks as if Tichelle will belong to the last generation of human beings.

It is her honor, and it is my duty to protect her.

By the way, we heard you today. We heard you tapping at the airlock and the walls. Your daughter asked about the sound, and I said that it was just canaries hitting the house with their sharp bills.

I know you want what's best for your girl.

And I can appreciate how awful everything must seem today and for the visible future.

But please, don't visit again. Even with a thorough decontamination, I can't assure Tichelle's safety, or Gavin's. And while you do have some say about your daughter's life, I can't let you endanger the other little one in my life.

Tichelle

10/7/81

NEEDS/NEWS:

You can't appreciate how horrible my day has been. It hurts to say so, but I genuinely feel that you are too self-centered to understand anything that doesn't directly concern you.

First of all, I learned this morning that both Rikki and Florence have died. They were exposed to different pathogens, one after a seal failure and the other because of inadequate decontamination, and now I have to set their pictures inside awful black frames.

And then, with barely enough time to absorb that tragedy, I receive this incredible court order signed by some incompetent judge. How did you find such an idiot? Is the world outside that panicked that a person of authority would sign the death-sentence of a small child, just to satisfy your selfish desires?

If you take Tichelle from me, she will die.

I don't care what you claim to have in the way of equipment and precautions. It is too dangerous. It is impossible and selfish, and I wish that you would just come out and admit what you are really thinking: You can't stand the idea of your daughter growing up without you. Better to have her die in your arms than live safely in another person's very safe house.

In one sense, I pity you.

But mostly, I think that what you consider as being good, decent behavior is nothing but the self-possessed ravings of an immature mind.

Tichelle

10/11/81

NEEDS/NEWS:

Yes, I can see you standing outside. And no, I will not open the airlock.

If you must, find help. But don't go to the Haven Commission, because they know me and understand what children need. If I were you, I would approach that stupid judge who signed this criminal order. Maybe he knows some equally stupid police officers that are bored enough and have the tools necessary.

And no, I will not let you speak to your daughter again. Whatever you told her in your last conversation, it has done nothing but cause her to weep and wail, and she has worn her fingertips bloody, trying to dig her way through my walls.

Tichelle

10/12/81

NEEDS/NEWS:

I am sorry, very sorry, to have to deliver this news to you.

Tichelle died last night. The illness was swift and relatively painless, which is a very real blessing. To the best of its ability, my autonurse has studied the illness, and the tentative judgment is that she was contaminated weeks ago by a bacteria-sized particle, and after some slow growth of various benign phages, a mutation found a weakness in the protective layers around her basic metabolism.

I know that we have had our difficulties lately. Both sides, I'm afraid, have said some unkind words. But I can't be more honest when I tell you that this is all sad, and I am very sorry, and I hope you can

remember your daughter always.

(As a precaution for just this kind of event, Tichelle was sealed in her own sleeping chamber. No detectable phages escaped. Following standard protocols, I incinerated her body and the contents of her chamber, including the books and stuffed dinosaurs. I will leave the ashes in a container behind the airlock's outer door. They are yours. And again, my heartfelt condolences.)

Gavin

6/8/83

NEEDS/NEWS:

I know that I haven't been reporting as regularly or as thoroughly as you would like. But for reasons that I can only now give, I have been very busy. Consumed, we should say. In another two weeks, according to the latest estimate, the plagues will be officially declared extinct. The organic biosphere has been removed, sadly, but the nuclear detonations and gamma-ray baths have killed the last of the hibernating phages, and it will be safe again for your son to move about in the free air. (With a few precautions, of course. Always.)

He is a fine young man. I know you have missed him, and I know he misses you, and speaks about you often. As soon as he leaves my house, he will be ready for what he and I have called his always-body. In fact, he has picked it out already -- a small body, bright and handsome and absolutely in keeping with his sweet personality.

But this is not my big news today.

Over these last weeks, I have been planning a wedding. Your son's wedding, to be exact.

I know this comes as a shock. Who has he lived with for nearly two years, except for me? Well, honestly, I am letting you in on a very large secret here. His girlfriend for the last two years is still living with us, in secret. I have manipulated every byte of data that leaves this house, helping to foster this illusion of one child being raised by one old woman. But Tichelle has always been here. Always out of camera sight, and always happy.

They make a striking couple, I can tell you.

"I want to be married while I'm still organic," Tichelle has informed me, on many occasions. "I want to know what it's like. Before I have to give up this body and all. You know?"

You are gaining a bright, beautiful daughter-in-law.

Gavin spends his days smiling, thinking about the coming ceremony. It will be performed by a Justice of the Peace in Old Nevada. Of course, you are invited. And when Tichelle feels it is time, she will contact her own family, inviting them as she explains a few things. She did not sicken, much less die. The ashes that they took home were made from spoiled foods and worn-out toys. It was all a ruse to keep her with me, and safe.

I expect legal troubles. But what's the worst they can do to me? Take away my license to operate a day-care center?

The happy couple will honeymoon in my own bedroom.

As you may recall, I keep pictures of my children in that room. White frames, and black, they watch over me in the night.

This morning, with one little arm thrown over his fiance's broad shoulder, Gavin asked, "Do you want these pictures taken down? You know, before we ... you know...?"

And Tichelle just kissed him on the top of his head, and smiled.

"I'll see them if they're on the wall or in a box," she confessed. "Either way, they're in my mind. So no, leave them up. Leave them where they belong. Okay, little darling? Okay?"