

NOT ERMA BOMBECK
the motherhood writings, mid-1970's

Marion D. Cohen

Parts of this book have appeared in: Plexus, HERA, Waterways, MOTHERING,
Tuesday Nights, Plain Brown Wrapper

Poems quoted have appeared in: Reflect, Stride, off our backs, Opposum
Holler Tarot

MOTHERGUILT, pamphlet self-published in 1980

FORWARD

The purpose of this forward is to talk about the changes I have gone through since the writing, in the mid-70's, of the "story-essays" in this book. In the years (meaning two decades) since having my latest child, I have found that my feelings and needs are different, at least in some ways, from when I was writing these "story-essays". In short, in the years when he was a baby and toddler, I found that I wanted to be with him almost constantly. Those were my sincere, and intense, feelings, and I went with them (big-time) and was extremely happy doing so.

While writing these "story-essays", I did NOT want to be with my children almost constantly. I was in a mindset that children were, at least at times, a sort of burden. I loved my children deeply and intensely, and I was never even once sorry that I had kids, but I also often felt that they "got in the way"; there were days when I felt that I was "stuck watching the kids". Let's face it -- I was in a very different place then from where I have recently been.

This was, I'm sure, a throwback from the 50's, and part of "our" (meaning many women's) path of ESCAPING from the harmful and distasteful flavor of 50's motherhood. Where "we" were then was a SOCIETAL thing. That tendency to feel that children were "in the way", and a threat to everything else in our lives, was almost necessary. We were, in a word, AFRAID. Very afraid. And understandably so.

After awhile "we" were able to let go, and to stop being so uptight. For me, that meant coming to see that, the more I mother, the more my writing flourishes. In general, of course, any mother becomes more "relaxed" with time, and in my case with each additional mothering experience. Also, perhaps this child himself has been different, and also, our growing family helped out so much, shared in the responsibilities. Also, there were big changes in circumstances: between writing these chapters and having Devin two life-things happened to me and my family: First, my husband (and the children's father) developed strange physical symptoms (initially, extreme fatigue and inability to walk more than a couple of blocks) and was eventually diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. Second, that same season, our third baby Kerin died two days after birth. On this website, and also in publication, are several books and other writings about these events; here I need mention only the obvious fact that it had innumerable effects on our family, and on my development as a person and as a mother. Also, I was almost 43 when I had Devin, and my husband had been a wheelchair-user for three years, so I realized that Devin would probably be our last baby; this certainly impacted on my feelings and attitude. Also, credit should be given to the books "the Family Bed" and "The Continuum Concept": the latter, in particular, does a very satisfactory job of soldering motherhood to feminism (and vice versa). Credit also goes to my then-therapist Kathy Donner for helping me sort it all out -- specifically, my anger/ frustrations and the role that both my childhood and society played -- thereby making possible the extra-special joy and ecstasy I was privileged to experience during the latter half of my mothering life -- making it possible for me to be willing, in fact anxious, to keep Devin out of day care, to have him sleep in our bed at night, to breastfeed him beyond toddlerhood, and to plan to keep him out of kindergarden and school altogether (and to begin homeschooling). For me, all that represented throwing off society's shackles in

further ways; it was an EXTENSION of the women's movement of the 70's.

I still needed a certain amount of time for myself, but I didn't feel the need for him to be AWAY from me, only quiet or sleeping, or otherwise such that I could write or relax while I was with him. But, for the various reasons mentioned above or perhaps only because of luck, that happened NATURALLY. I didn't have to work at it; in particular, I didn't have to discipline in order to make it happen. Devin just-plain COOPERATED, or more accurately, was busy doing his own thing(s) while I did, or didn't, do mine.

Which brings me back to mothers being an oppressed class. I believe, in fact, that one form this oppression takes is that in this society mothering is undermined. That causes everyone, mothers and non-mothers alike, to feel NEGATIVE towards children (simultaneously if seemingly paradoxically with all the POSITIVE feelings that people have toward children). What results is the societal environment that is described in the following pages, and that most mothers experiencesome form of.

So in the mid-70's, while I was writing these "story-essays", I was "in a different place". And I'm SORRY that I was. In fact, I APOLOGIZE, to whatever extent is appropriate. I apologize to my children, and to anybody else who might have been affected. In particular, I apologize for certain attitudes that I had towards fulltime mothers. It was a necessary place for me to be, in order to reach the place where I am now, and have been for awhile. I still feel bad that I was amiss as a mother in certain ways. (I also think that, at the time, I was deeply, even if not always intensely, frustrated, and subtly guilt-ridden, concerning not having a "real" (meaning fulltime) job or "career". Having all those PARTtime jobs, doing all those workshops, and publishing all those writings and books, helped me a lot in that vein -- as well as helping others -- and I'm NOT sorry about my CAREER choices. Still, not being financially self-sufficient felt weird in various ways.)

And I confess that reading over and re-working these "story-essays" on the word-processor, and getting back in touch with where I was back then, has been at least a little difficult. (In fact, the other night I woke up from, and with, nightmares.) Going into the past usually is.

At any rate, the purpose of this forward is to say that if, in these "story-essays", I have been too unsupportive of "full-time" mothers, or of children, or otherwise politically (or personally) incorrect, I apologize. And I have been faced with various questions: To what extent do I want to make changes in this manuscript? I want to convey the feelings -- in particular, those of feeling that children are often "in the way" -- and I don't want to be untruthful. Yet I also don't want to convey any message that isn't true. So I hope readers will keep that in mind, and that I did try to keep a balance.

Especially, I want my main message noted: Mothers constitute an oppressed class, and that is not their FAULT. Also, it is NOT a reason for women to choose to not become mothers. Mostly, I mean to stay "mother-identified", and to be supportive of ALL mothers and children.

In sisterhood -- and in motherhood --
Marion Cohen, May 13, 2006 (the day before
Mothers' Day !)

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As the train speedstowards Gran'ma and Gran'pa's, Elle very smugly takes out of her bag her most recently acquired possession. "What's this one, Mommy?" she asks, making a selection from the box.

"Blue-green," I answer.

"Oh," she smiles. Then she carefully puts it back and chooses another.

"Read this one," she tells me.

"Sky-blue," I say.

"Oh," she shrugs. "What about this?"

"Magenta."

"Oh."

Together we skip through the rainbows, dance around the mayppole, collect the confetti. When we've gone through the entire box, she handles, in desperation, each one a second time. When she has trouble fitting the pink back in, she fusses only a little. But when the tip of the purple breaks off, she bursts into tears, leans against my arm, and sucks her fingers. I hold her and keep holding her.

I think about what she'll be doing with them all. Making princesses and castles out of them, that's what. She always puts raindrops with balloons saying hi and suns that say no to the raindrops. And it all fits wo well with her perky little nose that curves in just the right spot at just the right angle. She'll make so many fairy-scenes that even the grey will become rounded and dull instead of new and pointy, and I'll have to say to her, "Elle, it isn't your fault, you know. You didn't break them. You just used them up."

* * * *

We're relaxing tonight in the big chair -- me IN, Arin ON -- his head periodically drooping onto mine. "The Human Animal" is the title of this week's NOVA, and TV Week has described it as follows: "Is there such a thing as human nature? Is man's behavior programmed by his genes? The controversy between geneticists and anthropologists continues."

I've been especially anxious to see this program because, for one thing, it might give me some writing ideas and for another, last week when I read at the Walt Whitman Center, I had a discussion with someone who seemed to want to dismiss everything from sexism to sexism as "human nature".

"What's so great about human nature?" I kept exclaiming. "I'M not that crazy about human nature; I don't see what THEY find so holy in it."

Anyway, the program's gonna start with ant colonies, I'm pretty sure, and end with kibbutzim. And in the middle they're gonna show mating seals, migrating birds, and primitive human societies. And in fact, "Here we see a mother and father washing their children in the lake," goes the narrator, as the small mud-colored kids enter the water on their naked parents' backs. "Does that mean it is human nature to nurture one's young? Is the tendency to nurture one's young derived from one's genes?" Then they show the parents carrying the kids out of the lake. The kids are struggling and crying.

"Mommy," says Arin, and it's not his mischeivous "mommy". He's got that yummy expression on his face -- He's been especially yummy add day. -- and I just know he's about to say something genuinely delicious. If it's a question, it'll be a real question, not a demand, and if it's a statement, it'll be something I tell my mother about the next time I call her.

"Mommy," he says, articulating each word, "how come they didn't let the babies stay in the water?"

I think back to my own childhood. It always just seemed to me that THEY were always trying to dish out what I called the "Children of Many Lands" propaganda "Little Hans of Denmark", "Little Ingeborg of Sweden". The ol' objective, tolerant, "everything's the way it's s'pozed to be", "this is the best of all possible worlds" bit. Well, I'm thinking now, what about "Little Adolf of Germany"? I suppose it was just me but I never did trust that "Songs of Faraway and Long Ago" pep-talk. Despite the lilty-y tunes in music class, I always felt dubious. It seemed that, too often they showed "families of faraway and long ago", the kids were not smiling.

So -- "How come they didn't let the babies stay in the water?"

"I don't know," I answer, for the time being, and sssh him. But he keeps on asking from time and time, and in between he sucks one thumb and holds onto his ear with the other.

I think about one of my poems, "Scenes from Childhood", which begins, "I

spent my childhood looking after the other children, and trying to convince myself that they were happy". It's one of those poems that I keep finding new meanings for, both personal and political. I really did spend a large part of my childhood like that; it ran through the years. One of the examples I gave of whas in which I "looked after the other children" was, whenever I saw books with pictures of "children of many lands", I always used to ask my mother, "Do they play?" What I meant was "Were they happy? Were they children? Were they people? Did they have fun?"

Is that what Arin means? Or am I only projecting?

Finally, during intermissio, the one just before the end, Arin climbs into my lap and looks me straight in the face. "Mommy," he tells me, "I DON'T LIKE people who don't let babies stay in the water."

Yes, he really is delicious today. And he really cares about the babies. He's spending his childhood "looking after the other children".

"Pokey," I answer, with a squeeze, "I don't like people who don't let babies stay in the water, either. And I wouldn't not-let babies stay in the water."

Arin hugs me back and seems satisfied, doesn't mention it any more. Even if our symbolisms mean different things, I think, even if the "other children" he "looks after" are different from the ones I looked after, and even if I AM projecting, at least he knows I'm feeling SOMETHING.

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Elle's made a birthday party for me. It's over Gran'ma's house. Gran'ma's made the cake and Elle's made the presents. "The cake" is really some twenty-odd cupcakes, with a candle in mine. For the fifth time today, everybody's singing happy birthday to Mommy/ Marion. Elle and Arin are as excited as though it was their own birthdays. Especially when I let them blow out the candle.

"Well, what about the presents?" I eventually ask. In answer, Elle brings out the shopping bag. I recall two or three evenings ago, when she made and wrapped the presents. All I saw was paper, crayons, and scissors, so I figured it was pictures and notes I'd be getting. She wanted to borrow my scotch-tap but, as this would be the fourth scotch tape she'd be losing, I'd said uh-uh to that. "I'm sure you'll figure something out," I'd told you. So she's used the box of reinforcements I'd given her a long time ago, used whole rows of them to hold the packages together. She's spend the evening at it, calling out periodically, "Mommy, don't come in here."

Well, the first flimsy present is about 3" X 5". When I unwrap it I'm confronted with something just as puzzling as the wrapped present. It's a silhouette, cut out of blue construction paper in the approximate shape of a log with things sticking our one side. "Guess what it is," Elle says.

"A birthday cake?"

"Uh-uh."

"A comb?"

"Uh-uh."

"A menorah?"

"Right!"

Then I start unwrapping the next present and Elle's shouting, "That's the one with three! That's the one with three!" And indeed thee are three pictures in there, drawn on three different colors of paper. The first is of me (Mome, she spells it.), the second of Arin ("I didn't know Arin had one red ear and one green ear," we all go. "Well, he SAID he wanted to be a clown," answered Elle, and Arin nods.), and the third is of "dinasores".

The next present is a note; it's in an envelope and everything. "Dear Mome," it reads. "I love you and love you and I love you and I like you to and I have fun with you too. Love Marielle Joy Elle Cohen."

"Oh, Elle, kids're so FUNNY," I go, and her nose perks up in satisfaction.

But as I continue to unwrap, and to smile and laugh and hug, it strikes me that I feel just a little cheated, just a little disappointed, knowing that none of the presents before me will be a Mexican dress or an acceptance letter for a book or anything that I REALLY want.

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Why am I in such a bad mood? Why do I feel so put-upon? After all, it's not THAT often I get stuck lugging both kids on a downtown errand while Jeff is off doing something "important". I can't even remember the time before this; it must have been over a year ago. And certainly Jeff does it just as often, when I'M doing something "important". Yeah, certainly our family is non-sexist enough and certainly I'm not being exploited.

Why, then do I FEEL exploited? Yeah, why do I feel so damn feminist-political about the whole thing? I mean, it's not only that I'm annoyed, it's not only that I'm tired, maybe bored; it's not only that I feel like buying a T-shirt that says "I'd rather be writing"; it's not only that I just don't happen to feel in the mood for an outing with the kids. It's that I feel OPPRESSED. Why?

I know JEFF doesn't feel this way on HIS outings with the kids. I've talked to him about it and he doesn't. HE doesn't feel angry every time he maneavers the stroller up or down the curb or onto a bus or elevator. HE doesn't get sick and tired of saying thank-you to a zillion helpful strangers, and HE doesn't believe traffic lights are specifically timed and regulated to turn red as soon as he says "Okay, kids, we can cross now". And HE doesn't see the scowls on motorists' faces as they give him the right of way. And HE doesn't feel that he's being forced when he smiles at kind people who smile down at Arin. Nor does he sense that these same people might be wishing they could get to smile at Arin withOUT having to also smile at HIM. True, the kids' incessant talking tends to wear him out, but he doesn't feel that all eyes are upon him, checking that this wear and tear doesn't show. And HE doesn't feel their expectation that his mood be a happy one when and because he's with children. Nor does he have Kafkaesque worries that some photographer will catch him looking at the baby and NOT smiling, nor does he go on to tell that photographer, "Well, NO one can smile ALL the time; our jaws would hurt. Even KIDS don't smile ALL the time." CERTAINLY he doesn't get crazy and say things to the kids that he doesn't say when he's home with them -- moreover, say these things louder than usual -- things like "I TOLD you not to wear your good clothes; now I can't let you play in the mud," just so people won't think he's one of those fussy parents.

No, he doesn't feel or do any of this. So why do I? Repeat: Sure, I can see why SOME fathers pushing strollers look happier than some mothers pushing strollers. It's because they don't do it as often; it's a novelty to them, and to the kids. But Jeff has ALWAYS been pushing strollers, and as often as I. So how come he has so much more patience? How come he doesn't feel degraded, exploited, oppressed, and about to scream any minute? Honestly, if Elle asks "Can we get more ice cream?" once more, and if Arin doesn't stop emitting those sounds which indicate he wants to get out of the stroller, and if that bus doesn't come soon, I'm gonna do more than scream.

Enter admiring stranger in pink coat and flowered hat. She literally captures my attention, smiles down at Arin, then looks again at me, as though to ask my permission or something. I feel like a moderator, or a workshop leader. And then she goes and rubs it in. "Bet they keep YOU busy."

That does it. Especially since I'm almost positive I can detect a glimmer of gloat in that smile. Yes, I am going to do more than scream. I am going to explain.

"No, as a matter of fact, they DON'T keep me busy," I tell her. "During the week they go to the sitter's fulltime so I can do my work. I'm a mathematician, see, and I also like to write and sew and go thrift-shopping and in general do my own things. And they don't keep the sitter busy either because they're too busy keeping THEMSELVES busy."

But the woman just keeps playing peek-a-boo with Arin, while Elle is treacherously clinging to the sleeve of my jacket. But at least I've had a revelation. Now I know why I feel the way I do and Jeff doesn't. Now I see what the difference is.

Betcha no one ever said that to JEFF. "Bet they keep you busy." No one, on the streets or anywhere else assumes that kids keep a MAN busy. Not THAT busy.

And that's why it's easier for men EVERYWHERE to watch kids. Not only because it's new and exciting to them, not only because it's new and exciting to the kids, but because of the image men have out there is society. Namely, THEY know everyone else knows they're only slumming.

And I haven't read all that feminist-political literature for nothing. I know that expectations play a large part in people's behavior, and that myths propagate themselves. So it's hard to people assigned to certain roles not to play those roles. For example, "the star treatment". On the other hand, "tracking" in the schools. And so with boys shunning dolls and girls "liking" stockings and make-up. And on to "bet they keep you busy". Yeah, since everyone thinks they -- and ONLY they -- keep me busy, maybe they do. The whole thing just make me nervous.

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Elle and I are sitting in the living room enjoying some after-dinner quiet. Suddenly the doorbell rings, the doorknob rattles, and the door itself bursts open, all at the same time. It's Jeff arriving on time from picking up Arin at Edie's and it's Wendy arriving on time for the poetry workshop and it's Lynda also arriving on time for the poetry workshop. "I'd like to be home with the kids at least SOME evenings," I'd told them earlier than week, and so we had decided to have all the workshops at my place.

Arin and I are happy to see each other. We haven't seen each other since this morning, and he's looking like a little peach. "Hiya, Yummy," I go, as he walks over to me and puts down kepi and grabs hold of my ear. "You're absolutely delicious, do you know that," I coo, as kepi pops up because it's really too full of energy to stay down for very long. I whisper more sweet nothings into his ear, like "You're as NICE as can BE" and "C'mon, KEEP kepi down."

Then it occurs to me that Wendy and/ or Lynda might think it's some nerve of me to be wasting their time. Or they might think I'm giving Arin all this attention because he's demanding it and I don't know how to say no. Or because I'm afraid he won't leave us alone late if I don't. Or because of motherguilt. "I hope you don't mind if I ogle over him like this," I say, "but I haven't seen him all day."

"Oh, no, of course no," they answer. But they don't seem to share my delight in Arin, nor do they seem to appreciate my genuine non-guilt-ridden motherlove, nor do they seem to be reacting in any way to the whole business. And this non-committalness makes me feel uncomfortable. I can't help superimposing it upon comments made previously by each of them.

"Sometimes I wish I could have a hysterectomy," Wendy had told me, and "I guess I'm just one of those people who can't stand children" is what Lynda had said. I had felt personally involved, if not offended. "Maybe I'll have one kid just to see what it's like," Lynda had added, and this time I had felt definitely offended.

Later the conversation had turned more feminist-political. "I know NON-mothers sometimes feel guilty about NOT having kids," I had said, "but do you know that feminist MOTHERS sometimes feel guilty about HAVING kids? At least I do. I feel I have to prove I really wanted the kids, that I didn't just swallow the motherhood myth." Both Wendy and Lynda had nodded, but I wasn't sure I had proved it to THEM.

So right now I'm kind of anxious for Arin's energy to take over completely, and for Arin to leap off my lap and then all over the house. But when it happens, it's Wendy's lap he leaps into.

Slightly more than politely, Wendy tolerates him, and I feel very personally involved indeed. "Remember, Arin's not me," I keep chanting to myself. "Arin's not me."

Suddenly, in his playful voice, Arin says to Wendy, "I want you to go jump

out the window.”

I refuse, absolutely refuse, to be embarrassed.

“Oh, you DOOOO,” answers Wendy, almost as playfully.

And I refuse, absolutely refuse, to feel relieved.

“Yep, I want you to go jump out the window,” Arin repeats, and I wonder just how much of this repeating Wendy’s gonna be able to take.

Jeff walks over now and sits down in one of the chairs near us. “Arin, you don’t REALLY want Wendy to jump out the window, do you?” he asks.

“U-HUH,” answer Arin.

I refuse, absolutely refuse, to treat Arin any differently from if Wendy and Lynda weren’t here.

And then suddenly Arin clarifies the whole matter. “I wanna be Superman and catch her.”

“Oh, I see,” explains Jeff to Wendy. “He wants you to jump out the window so he can rescue you.”

I don’t give a damn why he wanted her to jump out the window, I’m thinking. I know that, no matter what, the mother gets blamed. And I feel almost certain that Arin KNOWS Wendy and Lynda don’t want kids and that’s why he’s acting like this.

But you know, I always have this hope, this fantasy, that as soon as people who don’t want kids see Arin or Elle, they’ll change their minds. Or at least say, “Well, if I could be sure my kids would be like THEM”. I mean, it really does hurt a mother when people say they don’t like kids or can’t stand kids or don’t want kids; it really does hurt. I don’t mean make her feel insulted or insecure or threatened; I mean hurt.

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5:29 and all is well. Sitting on a bench in the lounge writing a poem, I look up every second or so at the sun-baked world outside. People, cars, pavement... it's our summer world, a high-rise in Washington to replace a high-rise in Philadelphia.

It's 5:29 and a half now and my thoughts are still free to roam; they're getting weary, though.

At 5:30 all hell will break loose. That's when the kids get back from the day-care center. I know exactly what will happen. The van will pull up and two happy smil-y bodies will jump out. They'll hug and kiss me and show me some little souvenir of their day.

Exactly five minutes after that, Arin will suddenly change his mood. It'll begin with one unreasonable request -- for example, to be carried in a position that's uncomfortable for me. If I grant that request, which I won't, he'll counter with another one just as unreasonable. So by the time we get to the elevator he'll be reduced to a kicking screaming mass of baby, and I'll be embarrassed in front of all the other people on the elevator, or at least I'll be angry that I'm SUPPOSED to be embarrassed.

Well, I've got two shopping bags on me, and Elle's got the bag of extra clothes which they take to the center every Monday and bring back every Friday. So we have to SCREAM Arin onto the elevator. Once on, though, we let our packages drop to the floor and relax. We laugh and smile to each other about Arin. We know that in another five minutes his mood will undergo another change. He'll what's known as settle down.

But the people on the elevator don't know that. All they know is what they see. And that makes me very angry. Another things that makes me angry is: Not only am I SUPPOSED to feel embarrassed; I DO feel embarrassed. Yup, in spite of all my Politics-of-Motherhood, I feel embarrassed.

Uh-oh, our floor. So soon?, too soon. Arin's certainly in no condition to walk off by himself, and he's crying so loud he can't hear me when I say that if he doesn't get the fuck off the elevator he's not gonna like what's gonna happen. And remember, my arms are full and so are Elle's. So I quickly and efficiently use my foot to SWEEP Arin off the elevator. I'm definitely not kicking him (although later a friend will say, "It wouldn't have been so bad if you HAD.")

--"OH MY GOOD!!!" gasps a young woman. (She's just gotta be a teacher in a Montessori nursery; I mean, she's just gotta.)

"That's no way to treat a chi-yuld," she informs me, as she gets off at our floor.

I feel the blood rushing to all corners of my body, and I decide, "This is one o' those times when I'm gonna let 'em know." "Just wail 'til you're a mother," I scream, "and you'll find out. You'll find out that there are always

moments when there's nothing you can do. Nothing. If you're ever a mother, you'll know just what I mean. Things can go perfectly smoothly most of the time but there are always times when no matter what you do, it's wrong. No matter what. And even if it's right, it still takes time to have its effect and, by the time it does, the people are gone. So: Next time hold the door for me or pick him up for me instead of judging me. And stop judging mothers in general. In particular, don't judge until you know the whole story."

I'm not ranting and raving anymore; I'm speaking calmly but loudly. And the woman -- she's walking with her friends towards her door and will quickly disappear. Naturally she's not answering me. But I have a feeling she's listening. And she certainly HEARS.

Safe behind our own door, Arin's back to his senses and Elle grabs the nearest toy for them both to settle down with. "Well, I had no choice," I explain to them. "If I HADN'T rushed Arin off the elevator, they all would have been patiently -- sort of -- humming and tapping their feet and waiting for this wishy-washy mother to get her spoiled brat off the elevator. But if I DO rush Arin off the elevator, they get all upset and say that's no way to treat a chi-yuld. Do you think I'm right, El?"

"U-huh," answers Elle. "Except: You could have FIRST put your packages off the elevator and THEN gone back and gotten Arin."

"But no one was holding the door for me," I say. "I guess I could have asked someone, but I felt all hassled."

"Sorry I got mad," I continue, "but people just don't realize what a mother goes through. And it makes me furious. See, I'm still shaking."

Arin is all smiles by now and I hug them both. I know I'm a good mother, I think, but now there's that woman down the hall who thinks otherwise. I'm still seething.

I also feel fear, just a little. Suppose the woman calls the police on me? Says I kicked my chi-yuld in the shins? Says the kid was screaming in the first place because I'd probably mistreated him? Yeah, supposed the police come and reprimand me for being a bad mother, warn me that if I don't watch out, they'll hafta put Arin in a foster home? Or suppose the social workers and the welfare agencies and the teachers come to check on me? To see that I'm doing it right? Following orders correctly?

Well, I remind myself, as long as, when they come to check, they come at various moments, not only one. Then they'll see that I'm a good mother, that it was just at that one moment that I happened to be "kicking" Arin out of the elevator. As long as they check out the whole story, I'm all right.

* * * *

“And now,” announces Wemara, “for our first poet, Marion Cohen. Marion is an unemployed PhD in mathematics and is currently teaching two courses at the Free Woman’s School -- The Politics of Motherhood and a Writing Workshop for Children. She has a book of math-poems coming out in the fall from Seven Woods Press and she’s coordinating this serious with me. Plus -- a little personal touch -- she’ loves New York.” Dramatic hand gesture. “Marion Cohen.”

“Can I go up there with you?” whispers Elle.

“Sure,” I whisper back. “Come on. You can either sit next to me or on the chair.”

As Elle seats herself on the chair, I make myself comfortable on the top of the desk and tell the audience, “For those of you who haven’t met her, this is my daughter Marielle. She’s six. She wanted to come sit up here with me.”

Well, what’s the CRINGE for? nudges a mean little voice. And what’s the EXPLANATION for, for Chrissake?

I shrug, and the voice goes on. Could it be -- and it smirks sarcastically -- could it possibly be that it wasn’t ELLE’S idea at all, but YOURS? And you don’t want anyone thinking YOU’re gimmicky, or that you NEED her here, that you need your kid up here with you, so you put her up to it.

And true, when she was a baby, five months old, we did take her up to Connecticut with us, to my thesis defense. Jeff and my father had watched her in the library next door, while I was thesis-defending, and after one of their more difficult questions I did lightly say to them, “I can’t concentrate. I hear my baby crying.” No one said anything, good or bad, and I felt as though they were all thinking, “Oh, no she doesn’t! She’s not gonna pull THAT one!”

Whadderya trying to pull NOW?, continues the little voice. Well, whatever it is, it’s not gonna work. She’s not a baby anymore and YOU’re not post-partum. You’re not bleeding or cramping; you’re barely the same person who pushed her, or even Arin, out. So people DO have the right to hurt you. In other words, it was your own choice to do Other Things Too and you have to do them at your own risk.

Ignoring the voice, I face the audience. “I write both poems and stories. In fact, I sort of tend to divide everything into three categories -- poem-poems, prose-poems, and poem-prose. So I’ll go from the vague to the political...” As I talk, more-at-ease gives way to completely-at-ease, and --

Well, I tell the voice, there IS something fascinating about the mother who does Other Things Too. Even if she HASN’T just gotten rolled off that delivery table. She might not be bleeding but she’s still got her scars.

Whether this fascination is inherent or cultural or both is unclear but I, for one,

have never taken it for granted, being a mother who does Other Things Too. Whether these Other Things Too are rat-race things or work-ethic things or meaningful things, I just don't take it for granted. It isn't that simple.

--- Seems simple enough to me, snaps the voice. And betcha OTHER mothers don't talk like that.

Probably not, I concede. But maybe if they heard ME they'd say "Wish I'd said that".

And maybe not, snaps the voice.

But I face the audience anyway, get more-than-completely-at-ease, anyway, smile and grin anyway, touch Elle anyway.

* * * *

(Please, Daughter, I'd Rather Do It Myself.)

Yeah, I know it would be fun and educational for you to help me with supper. I know a good mother grins and bears it when the milk gets spilt and the beans flung to the ceiling. I know I'm supposed to smile mysteriously while you stir in one very tiny circle near the rim of the skillet while the rest of the stew get burnt. But frankly, I don't have time for the Simple Pleasures of Life. I'm too busy with the COMPLICATED pleasures of life.

And I just don't feel like supervising while you clean the lettuce that has already been cleaned, and handing you the silverware one by one instead of just dumping the whole thing in the center of the table. I want to be making the salad while the stew simmers, not helping you help me --

"---Helping Mommy?" they always say in the streets if you're carrying one of the bags. "Helping Mommy?" As though it's perfectly okay that you aren't helping in the slightest. I mean, they SEE the bag's dragging on the sidewalk and the top's coming out the bottom. And they KNOW we have two more blocks to go.

I guess they figure that's really not the important thing; the important thing is that you learn to feel useful. Well, I think the important thing is you learn to BE useful. So sure, sure, you can help me make supper -- after you complete a few cooking courses at the Y. THAT's a good place to learn how to make supper. They've got Chinese cooking, vegetarian cooking, gourmet French cooking... and after you've mastered all that, I'll be happy to let you come help with supper. In fact, you can help with breakfast and lunch, too. In fact, you're most welcome to actually MAKE breakfast, lunch, and supper. In fact, I'll be so delighted, so grateful, I'll even offer to help.

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Talk about non-sexist child-rearing! I've got this phrase that catches it all.
"What about Daddy?"

I say it in my lingo, at choice moments. When Elle asks me for a drink and Jeff is nearer the fridge, "What about Daddy?" I flash. When there isn't time for explanations, or when there is, "What about Daddy?" gets the message across.

"Mommy, will you come to the phone and talk to Lara's mother?" asks Elle.

"What about Daddies?" I counter, and Elle smirks. She might find it hard to fit into her world right now. But she'll have it for future reference.

* * * *

It's about 10:30 A.M. I'm all dressed and washed up; in fact, I've finished taking Arin over Edie's and I'm about to settle down with pen and paper. Suddenly the phone rings. Jeff is asleep so I answer it. "Hel-lo, Mrs. Co-hen?" says the horribly familiar voice. "Your daw-ter isn't feeling well; her legs hurt her and she seems to have a fever." Yup, the nurse over at Elle's school.

"You're KIDding," I grunt.

"No. Her teacher sent her down here. Would you like to speak with her?"

"No," I grunt again. "I guess I'll just hafta come get her."

"Dammit!" I scream, hopefully AFTER I've slammed down the receiver. "Can't the SCHOOL take care of her? Suppose I was working? I mean, suppose (God forbid) I had an office and a regular paying job? Well, then I bet they'd still call up MY office rather than the father's."

I'm doing a good job of ranting and raving, but I'm not saying what's just struck me on the back of my head. Which is: Suppose Elle had a chronic illness? Or a permanent disability or something: How would that affect my free time?

I don't even feel guilty about this selfish initial-reaction. "Selfish means just what it says." I shout through the house, as I get ready to leave. "Self-ish. And UN-self-ish people are simply people who have no selves." No, I don't feel any motherguilt about not-even-being-concerned-about-Elle, and that makes me feel good. But I'm also upset. "I'm a mathematician and a writer and a political poet," I shriek at poor Jeff, who is just waking up. "I can't afford to have an invalid around the house. A person like me can't devote her life to one person, even Elle, when she has things to say that are important to MANY people."

Jeff, with whom I've discussed the subject many times and who agrees with me 100% but who is nonetheless not a mother, says something like "Whadder you so worried about? So she's got a virus; what's so terrible?"

"I'll TELL you why I'm so worried," I storm. "I'm worried because I know very well what happens to women who have disabled kids. In fact, I happened to be browsing in the bookstore just yesterday and I read all about it. There was this book called 'Tara: The Miracle Child' or something like that. On the bottom of the front cover it says 'the moving story of a little girl who was determined to get well'. On the back cover it's got words of glowing praise from people like Normal Vincent Peale. And in-BETWEEN the front and back covers it tells what happens to Tara's MOTHER.

"Here's what happens to Tara's mother: She spends eight hours a day manipulating Tara's arms and legs, THAT's what happens to Tara's mother. And of course Tara doesn't like it and she screams and cries, making -- one again -- a villain out of the mother. And that's not all. She spends the rest of her time feeding and dressing Tara, and schlepping her to the orthopedic clinic or something, when they give her feedback on how she's doing and

instructions on how next to proceed ('cause after all, they're the professionals whereas she's just the mother). And she spends the REST of her time making tea and cookies for the high-school volunteers who come to work with Tara, and serving as president of the local chapter of the Something-Something Children's Association. I mean, if Tara had Tay Sachs she'd be president of the local chapter of the Tay Sachs Association. Yes, I know only too well what happens to the mothers of children like Tara. Their husbands write the books and call them 'Tara: The Miracle Child' and they devote maybe one or two sentences to saying 'I don't know how my wife survived this period. I was too busy commuting to work to help out much'. And they praise God for making Tara not be as bad off as she could be, but they don't blame God for making her sick in the first place. And in general they can't decide who to praise most for the 'Miracle' -- Tara, God, or the doctors, but it sure the shit isn't the mother.

"And what that book's REALLY trying to do is get ALL the mothers to COOPERATE, just in case THEY wind up with a kid like Tara, or just in case they're needed in SOME way, which women always or eventually are. Yes," I conclude, "I'm worried. I'm worried that I'm gonna hafta lead a life like Tara's mother. I'm so worried about it that even the slightest possibility of it happening is enough to set me off. I'm worried because I'm a woman and I know very well what the world wants from women. I'm worried for the same reason that I'm worried about being raped."

At this point Jeff -- who, remember, agrees with me 100% -- looks a little sad. "Gee," he says, "I'm glad I'M not sick."

I understand what's making him sad. "I know," I answer. "I'm sorry. "

I imagine ME injured in a car accident. Permanently paralyzed or maybe brain-damaged. I'm also thinking about our vows to love each other forever and ever no matter what. I'm also remembering pushing Elle out. "I don't know," I continue. "I really don't know. There aren't any answers. When things become hellish, there aren't any answers. I'm just worried, that's all."

NOTE, added now, in 2006: Later, as some readers know, Jeff DID get sick, VERY sick, so sick that it did indeed put MY life in danger (and the kids' lives). And yes, there weren't any answers -- or perhaps there were MORE THAN ONE answer. And I accepted them all. I continued to love him, we had two more kids, and later, when I had to be awakened twenty, thirty times a night to tend to him, and when this had been going on for awhile, I insisted that he go live in a nursing home. And when his illness got mental, to the point of verbally (and financially) abusing me, I left him. Perhaps writing that particular "story-essay" helped in some way.

* * * *

Today I'm reading to Elle, neither a classic nor a best seller, but an "unknown" that I picked up at Goodwill, "Magic in the Park" by Ruth Chew. It attracted my attention because it appealed to some of my own ecstasies. From the excerpt on the back cover, for example: "All around was a strange green glow. 'I don't think we're on the island any longer,' Jennifer said slowly. 'I think we're UNDER it.' Mike stared hard at the trees growing upside down. 'You're right, Jen,' he said. 'They're not branches at all. They're ROOTS. We must be under the ground.'"

I'm on page 28. "Jennifer's mother met her when she walked into the apartment. --"

"What about Daddy?" interrupts Elle.

I smirk and continue. "I see you found the peanuts, Jenny. Did the squirrel like them?' 'Yes, but I ate more than he did.' Jennifer followed her mother into the kitchen. She put the nearly empty bag of peanuts on the table. 'I hope you're not too full to eat supper.' Mrs. Mace said. 'I had help eating the peanuts.' Jennifer told her mother about meeting Mike. She didn't tell her about the tree."

I pause, smirk, then pause again, more seriously. "Elle," I say, "I want YOU to tell ME about the tree."

Lying on my lap, Elle reaches up and holds me. "I don't wanna miss the excitement," I explain, and Elle holds me some more.

(The Free-day-care-will-be-provided Blues)

Elle and I are taking turns pushing the stroller towards Chestnut Street. Whoever doesn't push has to carry the bag of diapers and extra clothes.

"We're gonna get to play with the other kids and the toys?" Elle asks.

"Yep," I answer. "You're going to the part of the conference with the kids and the toys. I go to the part with the speeches."

"Oh good!" goes Elle. But a second later she changes her mind. "I wanna hear the speeches with YOU," she whines.

"Well, you're not going to," I tell her simply and she smirks.

A few blocks later and our moods are not quite as gala. Elle is no longer so gung-ho about pushing the stroller and when I push it, she lets the bag drag on the sidewalk. That's the THING about these conferences, I ponder. They have free day care, all right, but what about carting the kids to and from the conference? In fact, that's gonna be even worse because we'll all be tired, and also suppose I meet someone at the conference and we wanna go out with for ice cream and serious conversation?

I also begin to have a few nagging worries. "Free day-care" it said on the flyer. But suppose they were just kidding? Suppose there was a mix-up or something? Suppose they change their minds? Suppose it turns out ya hafta have registered your kids in advance, like for regular day-care centers? And I recall the recent NOW conference, when someone brought her four-month-old up to the day-care desk and they said, "Huh? A baby? We're not EQUIPPED for babies." Well, Arin's two years old, but suppose the day care at this particular conference is only "equipped" for kids over three? Like so many nursery schools. Or suppose they say "Day-care? Oh yes, day care. Well, nobody else brought kids so we told the day-care people to go home." Or suppose, as once actually happened, they say "Oh yes, well, the day-care is at the local local nursery school and they left on a trip at 8:30 this morning."

And more "suppose": Suppose Arin happens to start acting up just as we get to the day-care room and they say "Ykk! We can't handle HIM" ? Or they look at Elle and say "Oh my! She's wearing a dress and carrying a doll. That's not OUR idea of non-sexist child-rearing. We don't allow sexist children at a feminist conference" ?

Yup, I'm having some haggard dragging Kafkaesque thoughts. I also have two nagging dragging kids, complete with "When're we gonna get there?" and "Is it time to eat yet?" it feels as though Achilles is never gonna reach that tortoise, as though the half-distances are never gonna get negligible. But eventually they do and we arrive, in fact, 'way past the point of no return; we get, that is, to 11:00, the kids settled in the day-care room downstairs, me in the semi-darkened room with the movie that the Women's Health Collective is showing.

“Hi,” whispers a voice in front of me.

“Oh, hi,” I answer vaguely.

“Beverly,” says the voice. “Remember, I was at some workshop you were giving...?”

“Oh, right. Politics of Motherhood. How’re ya doin’?”

“Foine.”

“Hey, how come you have your kids with you? There’s day-care downstairs, ya know...”

“Yeah, but MY kids don’t know the people there.”

Damn it, I’m thinking. I thought I explained things like that at my workshop, how sometimes it’s the adults, not kids, who are hung up on things like new experiences and new people. Besides, is she implying that MY kids DO know the people there? And if not, what does THAT imply? About me, that is. But I only shrug, “That’s the fun of it all.”

Just then I spot a familiar face in the doorway. Uh-oh, that face is ‘way TOO familiar; it’s none other than Marielle Joy Cohen, my first-born child. She’s with a young woman with whom she seems to be on very good terms, and she’s got one of those mischevicious looks on her face as the two of them walk toward me.

“She said she missed her mommy,” explains the woman helplessly.

Of course I take Elle onto my lap. I don’t want to disturb the movie. Besides, what will the woman think of me if I don’t? But inside i’m fuming. First of all, I bargained for full-time day-care. How dare they interrupt me?! Secondly, if they had day-care at the places where men worked, they sure as hell wouldn’t pull a stunt like that. “She said she missed her DADDY?” I doubt it. Thirdly, what does this daycare-worker believe Elle does when she misses me and I’m not on the premises?

But mainly, I KNOW -- I’d be willing to stake my life on it -- that Elle didn’t really miss her mommy. She’s been going to the baby-sitter full-time five days a week since she was two. She’s had several changes of baby-sitters, visited and attended several day-care centers and nursery schools, and had all sorts of strangers loving her. Never before has she “said she missed her mommy.”

She has, true, gone through the various ages and stages, such as crying when I first brought her in the morning, but NEVER of changing her mind mid-course and “missing her mommy”. Some kids, I suppose, do this but Elle just never did.

And sure, I realize there’s always a first time. And moods change. And of course I’ll admit to off-days, off-moments. Still, I don’t think Elle really missed her mommy. What’s more likely, I’m thinking, is that one or two of the other kids there started saying they missed their mommies and Elle decided to

take her cue. Play her role might be another way of putting it.

And if the woman had simply said, "Well, I'm sorry but your mommy's not available right now" and then thrust a red or yellow plastic toy in front of her, with a little extra smile and hug, probably Elle would've smirked and stopped missing her mommy.

Anyway -- how DARE they interrupt me? Are mothers never "safe" from their children? Are they always on call? Are they always potentially at work? I thought I'd gotten over it, feeling this way. Long long ago have I stopped not-sleeping at night because the baby might wake up, or feeling more relaxed when the kids are sleeping over Edie's. I haven't felt that way in years. I thought I got over it; I DID get over it.

But now, on my lap, Elle sulks, "I missed you."

"I figured you would," I lingo and smirk, and she smirks back.

Throughout the movie I hold her. She's good and quiet and doesn't prevent me from becoming even more convinced of the fact that the medical profession is hung up on being a profession. After the movie I bring Elle back downstairs -- or rather, ELLE brings ME downstairs (saying she "misses the day-care"...) -- and I go back to the conference-proper. On the way back, though, I spot another too-familiar face in the doorway.

Oh no, I groan. I couldn't be. It just couldn't. Yes, it could.

Arin this time. Oh no.

Now, Arin's not talking yet. He COULDN'T have said "I miss my mummy". But I guess they just expected him to miss his mommy so eventually he did. Especially if the other kids there were prompting him. In fact, maybe these other kids TAUGHT him to say "I miss my mommy". And maybe he didn't even know what it meant when he said it.

Well, I've definitely decided: Elle, maybe, but Arin, no. Once a kid THAT age spots his mommy, she can never get rid of him without a scene. Especially since THIS time the day-care people wouldn't be all new and exciting to him. He'd be clinging to me forever and ever, especially since it's around his naptime. In fact, that's probably why he's here now. He probably started acting fussy and they probably asked him whether he was tired and he probably shook his head no and they probably believed him. Then they probably asked him if he wanted to go see his mommy.

Well, it's NOT gonna work this time. I smirk, cover my face with my hands, duck down under the crowd, and quietly sneak away.

Note, added now, in 2006: That was good practice for "putting Jeff in the nusing home". (And in "Cruel and Unusual", on this website, I wrote, "Women are at risk for becoming care-givers.")

* * * *

Jeff and I are sitting outside in the yard of our building while Elle and Arin climb the tree they're not supposed to climb. A few feet away from us romps this woman with this child, neither of whom I've seen before. "Hi," I say. "Do you live in the building?"

"Oh no," she answers. "HE does but I don't. I'M not his mother; I'm just baby-sitting." I can tell it's terribly important to her that she let me know that.

"Oh," I mutter.

"I'M not gonna have any kids of my own," she continues, smiling.

But I'm not smiling back. For I know only too well what's coming next; I don't have to ask, although I do. "How come?"

"Kids are fund to PLAY with," she answers, predictably, tossing her head lightly. "But I want to be able to come home in the evening and be left in peace."

Jeff and I nudge each other. "Hoo-HA!" we signal to each other, when she turns her head for a minute to check on the kid she's watching. I'm not exactly sure why but she, or her statement, reminds me of some of Jeff's colleagues who say "Oh, I like my work. But when I come home in the evening I want to be greeted by a woman who's warm and loving and doesn't give a hoot about physics."

Oh, I do realize that people who say they're not gonna have kids often have valid reasons. But, I believe, often not. Often it's that they simply don't understand. For one, they don't understand how great it can feel, being a mother, how INTENSELY great the feeling can be. For another, they've swallowed society's myths about mothers and children, and they don't understand that the oppression of mothers is NOT a reason not to be a mother, just as the oppression of black or gay people is NOT a reason not to be black or gay. They also might not understand that motherhood is nothing to be ashamed of; in fact, they might be trying to pass for non-mother. In other words, they're scared. And I can't say I blame them.

But what really gets to me is this: Does she think I don't get left in peace during the evening? Does she think MY life is one big nothing? Does she think I'M now sorry I had kids? (And not Jeff?) More to the point, perhaps, , does she have contemptuous pity for me?

What, in general, DO the baby-sitters think of the mothers?

I recall a scene from the movie "Up the Sandbox" where the parents leave to go to a party and the teeny-bopper baby-sitter arrives. The mother hastens, conscientiously and supposedly a bit nervously, to clue the sitter in on whatever it is she should know. The gum-chewing teeny-bopper keeps nodding her head and drawling, "Sure, sure, okay." The father, gesturing with raised eyebrows to no one in particular, gradually leads the still-explaining mother out of the apartment.

It seems people are always “accusing” mothers of being nervous, of talking too much. But mothers HAVE to do all the talking and being nervous because the fathers don’t, and also because they know they’ll be accused of being bad mothers if they don’t. “Damned if we do and damned if we don’t.” We’re either too nervous or too casual, and different people have different standards as to how to determine which. We couldn’t be fence-sitters even if we wanted to.

But again, what did the baby-sitter in that movie think of the mother?

She probably had the mother all figured out. She probably figured the mother was some rapidly fading beauty whose life and times and thoughts were taken up completely by the kids. Not only that, but taken up in a pre-determined, insensitive, un-individual -- and negative -- way. That’s how teeny-boppers often view their own mothers so that’s how they view ALL mothers. In particular, they conveniently forget that mothers have given birth or adopted, and have been romantic in that way.

Also, teeny-boppers reject motherhood in the same way that they reject all serious things. Possibly they reject it because, deep down inside, they want it. But reject it all the same is what they do. And it doesn’t make things any easier for the mothers.

I never used a teeny-bopper baby-sitter but if I did I know I’d feel the same way I felt ‘way back in high school when I used to give lectures in Math Club. I’d watch the popular kids in the back row all talking and flirting with each other and caring about math enough to get A’s in it and belong to the Math Club and list it on college applications, but not caring about it the way I did. I’d feel like an old fogey, a teacher -- a mother. I’d also feel that I was RIGHT.

So now, sitting outside with Jeff and this baby-sitter, who is not a teeny-bopper but who is like a teeny-bopper for our purposes here, I toss my head just as lightly and tell her, “Well I’D rather be left in peace during the DAY and then come home to the kids in the EVENING.”

But I wish there were time to say more -- or rather, I wish she would listen more. And the question still haunts me: What do the baby-sitters think of the mothers?

NOTE, added now, in 2006: Later I would write, in “The Sitting-Down Hug”:
“What do the home-health aides think of the well-spouse?”

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Elle and I are sitting in the deli downstairs waiting for our breakfast specials. Thank Goodness, we're telling each other, this is one of the last times we'll be eating in this ridiculous deli; pretty soon, whenever we get that last-minute urge to eat out, we'll have our choice of all the better, and less expensive, Center City ethnic restaurants. Jeff and Arin are upstairs packing a few books; Elle and I have ordered breakfast specials for them, too.

"Hiya, Buddy," calls Elle, to yet another person in the building whom she knows and I don't. I've heard Elle and Arin mention Buddy a few times. I think he works at the bar; sometimes he gives the kids quarters. At any rate, he's obviously one o' those people who just-loves kids.

So I look up and there's Buddy, about six feet of him, 55 years, 200 pounds. He's also just gotta be a bachelor. And I bet he's one o' those people who just-loves-kids and who, in his youth, said I just-love-kids-but-not-my-own.

"Hey!" he goes. "How's my girlfriend?"

"Foine," Elle grins. (And I can't help wondering whether maybe Buddy's only partrially kidding about the girlfriend bit.)

"Can I have some of those curls?" he teases.

"Uh-UH." Elle is still grinning.

"Hey, where's your brother?"

"He's upstairs -- oh, here he is." For Jeff and Arin are sliding into the opposite side of the booth.

"Hi, Arin," says buddy.

"Hi," answers Arin.

Then Buddy turns to me. "Hello, Mother," he says.

"Hi," i answer. "The name is Marion." I kind of feel like adding "Or Dr. Cohen, whichever you prefer." I don't like to resort to titles but I just hate to be called Mrs. Cohen, or Mother. And there are certain leering types to whom I don't like to say "Call me Marion". Sometimes it's hard to know what to do.

At this point Arin crawls under the table to visit with Elle and me. "That's right, give Mother a hug," says Buddy. "Give Mother a biiiig hug."

Now, why do I just hate this? Why does it make me feel more degraded than anything else? It's the tone in his voice, for one thing. There's no mis-calculating it. I'm not imagining and I'm not projecting. It's as though he's making fun of the whole idea of motherhood. As though he's satirizing it, as though he's above it. As though HE were the philosopher, rather than me. As though

HE were the writer, rather than me. (AS though, perhaps, mothers can't be philosophers or writers.)

"Ja go swimming today?" Buddy nudges Elle.

"Uh-uh," answers Elle.

"Hey" -- turning to me -- "why don'tcha join a pool for her?"

NOW I KNOW I'm not imagining it. He IS criticizing me, for not "joining a pool for her". I know that look and it is very definitely not just-kidding.

"I'd be happy to join a pool," I answer, "if they were free. But they cost too much money."

Now, this YOU KNOW I'm not imagininng. "Maybe," says Buddy, "maybe if ya cooked 'em breakfast upstairs instead of eating downstairs all the time, you could afford to join a pool."

Now, there might be a twinkle in his eye, but I can't see it. And, smiling wisely but sadly, I reflect: It is very definitely an axiom of life -- an axiom both in the sense that it's a basic principle and in the sense that I can't prove it -- that people who just-love-kids are very often people who just-hate-mothers. To put it more accurately, but with less impact, there is a certain CLASS of people who just-love-kids and who also just-hate-mothers.

It stands to reason, actually. If you love children, you want to protect them, want to protect them from their enemies, people who spoil their fun, who might cause them to be occasionally "bad". After all, as psychologists says, if a Child Is Bad, there must be a Reason. And what better Reason to pick on than the Mother?!

Also, people who just-love-kids are people who want KIDS to just-love THEM, so they probably feel in competition with the mothers. Or downright jealous. "Go to mother, now," they say, and "Here's some delicious candy -- if your mother says it's okay" and "I'M not going to scold her; that's her mother's job."

So I'm smiling wisely but sadly and, unlike the Arin-on-the-elevator incident, this is one o' those times when I'm NOT gonna let 'em know. I'm not in the mood this time. So I give the overt explanation, rather than the real one, as to why we're eating breakfast in the deli every morniung. "We're moving," I say. "And besides, we have bugs in our apartment and they sprayed three times and we can't use the kitchen."

I am, however, no longer smiling wisely but sadly. I'm FROWNING wisely but sadly.

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I've just received the latest issue of A Sampler for Social Change and, turning to the article, Destroying the Ideology of Ageism, I decide it might make a good bedtime story for Elle. "Dependency on older people," I begin, as Elle settles down, not under, but on top of, the covers... "dependency on older people for physical survival needs to be isolated from artificially cultivated dependency on adults for other things -- Well, El, I guess maybe there are too many big words in that sentence -- "

Elle smirks and reaches for another item from her bedtime toy bin.

"Still, this magazine really has some important things to say about kids and mothers, so let me go on: Society needs to function collectively/cooperatively, so that oppressive adult responsibility for kids (primarily the responsibility of mothers), and its corollary, control, don't develop -- oi yoi yoi, I guess this whole article is gonna have too many big words."

Elle doesn't seem to mind. She's too busy slipping another dress on Barbie.

"I guess what I really want you to know," I continue, "is this: See, El, kids get mad at their parents because parents have power over them. But the parents don't necessarily WANNA have power over them; they HAVE to. Society FORCES the parents to have power over the kids, and then the kids think it's the parents' FAULT. (Especially the mothers.) But it ISN'T their fault, see..."

"Mommy, will you snap this?" interrupts Elle.

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One morning, as she's eating her Cheerios, Elle remarks, out of the clear blue, "They should start a 'What about Daddy?' Center."

I laugh. "What ABOUT 'What about Daddy'?" I quip.

"Well, in the center, all the MEN would be sayin' 'The MEN go to work and the WOMEN stay home' and the WOMEN would go 'No, the men AND the women go to work and the kids go to the baby-sitter.' "

"Oh, EI," I smile. "You're so FUNNY," and I hold her and kiss that point where her noseline changes direction.

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As Elle and I walk into the building a half hour before performance time, I search distractedly for a familiar face. "Paula!" I finally shout. "Hi, there!"

"Hi, Marion," says Paula, but her gaze is lowered and her knees are bending.

"This is my daughter Elle," I tell her.

"Oh, hi Elle," says Paula, quickly lowering her body to match Elle's. "Am I glad to see YOU! We NEED a child for our act."

Elle grins.

"Did you get many children the other two nights?" I ask Paula.

"No," she grunts.

"Any at all?" I press.

"Just one. Last night. And that was a MAN-child."

"Aw, c'mon, Paula; you're too particular," I smile. "Was he okay?"

"Yeah, he was okay," Paula shrugs. "He really was. I like WOMAN-children, though."

I choose my words carefully. "Elle has a little brother three years old. And so far he's just fine. We'll see, though. I really will be on the lookout." I'm thinking how I pushed him out three years ago, soon lingo-ing "He can't help it that he's a boy. He doesn't even KNOW he's a boy" and also about how he looks when Elle puts him in a dress and calls him Susie.

But Paula is still squatting. "Hey, Elle, wanna be in our show?"

"U-huh." Elle is still grinning.

I'm really proud of the whole business. I mean, I did it just right. Not only non-sexist child-rearing but non-HETERO-sexist child-rearing. And not only feminist but RADICAL feminist.

While Paula and Elle delight in each other's attention, I wander around. "This isn't the usual Painted Bride decor, is it?" I ask sarcastically of another one of the performers. I mean, there's paper scotch-taped all over the walls and the doors, and the graffiti is of the order of "Children should talk in school as much as possible" and "Housewives have the right to decide who rapes them".

"No, no," she answers. "In fact, the management gave us a bit of trouble over it." I laugh.

Several other friends from the Rites of Women theatre collective are now

beginning to appear from the basement. The first one I recognize is Diedre. Pretty (even in the usual, mass-media sense), dark-haired Diedre, whom Barbara, in one of her poems, compared to a bird. Although I barely know her, I've grown to like her. She's the one who compared these "Elle-stories" to the work of alta and also, there was this other incident. Once, at the intermission of one of Barbara's poetry readings, Barbara said, "Last week someone I didn't know came up to me on the bus and said 'Hey, I remember you. I heard you reading some poems' and..."

"...And admit it," I'd interrupted. "It made you feel great!"

"Yep," said Barbara. "But it was a man."

"Oh, Barbara," I'd smiled. "At this point, I'd be overjoyed to be recognized by anybody at all."

And Diedre -- She was sitting next to me. -- was quick to recognize my admission of vulnerability; she'd put her hand on my shoulder and rubbed back and forth, tenderly.

Anyway, so now I spot Diedre, and I know she knows I'm learning. I give her a hug and a cheek-kiss and she looks pleasantly surprised. The same thing happens with Dian, and with Juie. Julie gives me an extra hearty squeeze. I'm happy to be learning, but I'm confused. Am I doing it right? And if not, are they blaming Jeff for inhibiting me? Are they waiting patiently for me to grow up and become a dyke? And am I -- I don't THINK I am, but am I -- in the process of giving up monogamy?

Elle, of course, is busily meeting, hugging, kissing, and smiling at everyone with no trouble at all. She and Paula suddenly appear at my side. "I love her," says Paula.

I grin. "Thanks," I say. "But I knew you would."

"She's just great," Paula continues.

"I'm gonna be in the show," Elle tells me. "I get t' pass out the candy."

"I figured you would," I smirk.

The audience begins to drift in. At first it's just people who thought it was the night of the photography exhibit, and to whom we all say "Why don't you stay?" but they don't. But soon they begin to arrive in earnest, and the seats are quickly taken up. I'm glad to see a pregnant woman wearing one of those long Mexican embroidered dresses. I compliment her on the dress and on her belly, and add, "Oh, I see we have another child."

With Paula up on stage, Elle comes to sit by me. I'm actually quite relieved to be with her; she's something to hold onto. "Hey, El," I say. "I just wanna tell you: They're gonna be saying some of the things I always say -- ya know, about women 'n' all."

"U-huh," Elle nods.

“They might also say a few things I don’t agree with, like about men or something, but in general, I agree with them.”

“U-huh.” Elle repeats.

I spot Barbara at the door. So does Elle and she runs to greet her. Barbara takes her up in her arms, and the two of them come toward me and sit down.

And now the performance is on. There has been crying in the distance, anguished woman-wails, and now they arrive on stage. “I am the lesbian separatist,” pronounces Diedre. “I am woman-loving-woman, independent of men, forming a beautiful womanculture.” Why can’t I get into womanculture? I wonder. Why do I go into more of an ecstasy over individual matters, like my own poems and pushing out Arin? I DO see the importance of political, universal feelings; why don’t I emote over them as much?

At the other end of the room, Dian begins. “I’ve ALWAYS been an independent woman,” she mimicks. “I’ve ALWAYS been liberated.” She’s touched off my funny bone and my laugh is a belly laugh.

Paula comes to get Elle, who gladly dances with her about the room. Paula begins a kid-chant, to the pitches of “na na, na na, na, na”. “Children are people, too. We wanna be free. We don’t wanna go to school.” Then she brings Elle back. “See?” I whisper to her. “Daddy and I aren’t the ONLY ones who say things like that,” and she smirks.

Suddenly the spotlight is on the central core of Rites of Women -- Dian, Kathy, and Monica. “Hey, gang,” says Dian. “I got news. Guess what? Ya know my friend Evelyn from West Point. Well, she’s arranged for us to get an invitation to perform there.”

“Ya mean, West Point ACADEMY?” exclaims Kathy.

“Yup, West Pont Academy.”

“Far out!” goes Monica.

“Yup, we’re gona gt t’ perform for the wives at West Point.”

“Omigosh, what’ll we it ‘em with?”

“What about Rites of Passage.”

“Yeah, that’s good. And Rites of Torture...”

“U-HUH...”

“We can get in something about World War III.”

“Let’s start from the beginning, from the birth of woman.”

“Okay, let’s try it.”

Kathy gets on bottom, kneeling over, next to Dian, Monica on top. They form

a pyramid but Dian calls out "What're we doing, anyway?"

"It feels good," hums Monica. Ya hafta know her.

And so the organic theatre grows, is nourished, reaches out, towards the sun. By the time for it to wane, Rites of Women is all sitting around a fire of candles. "I have a dream," says Kathy. "I have a dream of women -- women together, women, woman, wommin, womon..."

Elle thrusts into my hand a picture she's drawn. "Give it to Paula," she tells me.

"YOU give it to Paula," I suggest.

"I'm scared to," she says.

"Oh, it's okay," I tell her. "Go 'head."

Diedres overhears the whispers. "Come here, Elle," she says, extending her hand. "I'll take you." With a satisfied grin Elle goes with Diedre, sits down in the circle between her and Paula, and hands Paula the picture. Paula smiles and hugs Elle. Then "I have a dream," says Diedre.

"Tell us your dream," says Monica.

"Well, I wrote it down," says Diedre. "I always like to write 'em down." Everyone laughs.

"I am one with the earth mother," she begins, and she ends with "Diedre, Paula, earth, Diedre, Paula, earth, Diedre, Paula..."

"Ummm", murmurs around the fire.

"I have a dream," says Joan.

"What is your dream?" they ask.

"Well, it starts out bad but it ends up good," says Joan. Supportive sisterly laughter.

"I dreamt I was at the shore and a great wave came up to me and forced me into the ocean." At this point Diedre and Monica make fierce, male waves at Joan.

"Yes," she continues. "And I was terrified... ya know... and it swept me up, into the ocean, and i closed my eyes, and it was all blackness and terror..." Pause. "Then," she begins anew, "I opened my eyes. And I was under the water and I realized that I could breathe... yes, I could breathe... breathe... breathe..." " A single breath travels around the fire.

Then "Who else has a dream?" calls out Monica.

Silence.

"Who else has a dream?" she repeats.

"Ya know," I whisper to Babara. "I'm constantly dreaming and right now I can't think of one single dream!"

"Give us your dreams," soothes Diedre.

"I have a dream," says Barbara. I knew she would. "I dreamt that the Goddess revealed herself to me."

"Um... nice..." they all go.

Then I hear Elle whispering to Paula. "I have a dream."

"Tell us," whispers Paula.

"But it's about monsters," she says.

"That's okay," says paula.

"I have a dream," cal's out Elle. Everyone laughs, just loudly enough.

"What's your dream?" ask enough people.

"I dreamt there was a big monster in my room and I ran into my mommy's room and my daddy put me back in my bed and my mommy too and then they took me over to my babysitters and they cooked me."

Nice laughter. "That's a GOOD dream," says Paula.

"And when you woke up, did you keep feeling your skin to make sure it wasn't burning?" asks Joan.

"U-huh," answers Elle. She's in her glory. Paula is quietly hugging her and she's as smug as can be. Still, Diedre wants to know, "Who else has a dream?"

Silence.

"Hey, Monica, what about YOUR dream?" coaxes Dian.

"Yeah, what ABOUT that dream?" chimes in the remainder of the group.

Monica shrugs modestly. "What dream?" she asks.

"Aw, c'mon -- YOU know what dream. The one you told us about last week..."

But now Monica is more than modest. "Oh no, not THAT one!" she gasps.

"Yep, that one... c'mon.." they insist.

"Uh-UH," finishes Monica, and I feel that it's something other than modesty.

"Okay," they conclude. "Who else has a dream?"

Silence.

“No more dreams?”

“I have a dream.” This from the far corner. “I dreamt I wrote a book and it wons a Pulitzer Prize.”

U-oh, I think. That’s NOT what they want. It’s womanglory they’re after, not personal glory.

“What was the book about?” asks Barbara.

“I don’t know” is the answer.

General silence of dissatisfaction.

“Any more dreams?” someone calls out. “Visions? Anything else you’d like to share?”

Silence. It may be anarchy theatre, but the audience knows what the teachers want. And I think about some of my dreams. I don’t mean the dark dreams, like the ones in which I know it’s a dream so I decide to strangle all the people I see but instead they wind up tickling me. I mean the feminist dreams, any dream that could by any stretch of the imagination be called even remotely feminist. The one, for example, about the two woman encased in glass. They couldn’t breathe but then they didn’t need to breathe. Still, the inability to make even a slight breath frightened them. The thing about that dream was that the women couldn’t talk so they couldn’t even TRY to convince people to release them. They couldn’t even try.

But THEY wouldn’t want that dream. That was no vision.

After the performance, Barbara, Paula, and Elle come up to me. “She just great,” says Paula again.

“Marion, if you ever need a part-parent,” adds Barbara. “I’m sure Rites of Women would be interested.”

“Oh, I would too -- DEFINITELY,” I beam, but no one takes me up on it (then or later). I’m pleased, however, that “the dykes” are accepting Elle, and therefore me as mother. And in the car on the way home, after cleaning up and jump-roping, Elle calls from the back seat, “Paula?”

“Yes, Elle.”

“Would you hold me?”

“Of course.”

So Elle climbs into the front seat. “Gee, that was a great performance,” I say. “Thaks for telling me about it, Barbara.”

“Oh, thank YOU for coming,” answers Barbara. “And thanks for bringing Elle.”

And then it just suddenly slips out, whether or not it should have. “Yeah, SHE’s the one you REALLY appreciated.”

“I’m glad YOU came, too,” says Barbara.

“Thanks,” I say, momentarily resting my head on her shoulder and assuring myself, yes, I’m doing that correctly.

“I’M also glad you came, “ says Paula, and I momentarily rest my arm on hers.

Yes, I think, I seem spontaneous. And I DID contribute something to the performance. Yes, just this once I can allow myself the luxury of giving myself credit for my child’s achievements. For I contributed ELLE to the performance. I contributed the monster dream.

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“When did you first find OUT about ‘What about Daddy?’ “ asks Elle.

* * * *

I feel very despairing today. We had the third meeting of my Politics of Motherhood workshop last night. At the first class only two people had shown up -- one quite late, practically at the end, and the other was a person named Holly. I'd been very pleased with the way that first class had gone, mostly because Holly was quite responsive. For example, after I read my Motherguilt essay, she said, "It's all so true".

Well, at the second class, she hadn't been there. Hadn't called to let us know, either. I called her the next morning and it turned out she'd had the flu and hadn't been able to call. She still sounded friendly, but she told me that she had developed high blood pressure (She's in the last month of her second pregnancy.) and her doctor had said she should take it easy and she might have to drop out of the course. I know I made it quite clear to her that I wanted to be notified if she did.

Well, yesterday at the third session she wasn't there, either. Neither were three other people. So I called them right from there and when I got to Holly, here's what happened: Her husband (I assume it was her husband.) answered the phone and when I asked to speak with Holly, he asked "Who is this?" And I knew right away, from the tone in his voice, that something was up. "Marion," I answered.

"Well, I'm sorry but Holly's not about to come to the phone right now."

I knew something was wrong. "What's wrong?" I asked. "I mean, what's the matter?"

"Nothing's the matter," he said. How can I describe that tone -- that smug, calm, provoking male voice?

"I can tell something's the matter," I persisted.

And you're not gonna believe some of the things he said. For example, "Marion, I don't know WHY you keep calling."

"Huh?" I exclaimed. "Huh? I mean, wow! I mean, why SHOULDN'T I call? We're all waiting for her and we were wondering where she is." I said everything I could think of, in the hope that something might work. "You can't hold her down forever." and "she certainly seemed happy with the course before; we didn't say anything to make her feel threatened and she didn't seem to feel threatened" and "I'm really sorry that you feel this way."

At one point he said "You seem pretty hard up if you're calling up all your students." I should've explained that this was like a consciousness-raising group, and we needed everyone to be there, to be committed -- and that I was the facilitator, not the teacher. And that it's common practice to call and check on all the members if they don't show, partly on the theory that one of the reasons some people don't show is that they feel their presence couldn't possibly be needed. And I could possibly also have gotten in somehow that I'm also familiar with teaching regular college courses.

What I did answer was “It’s not a matter of being hard up; it’s a matter of caring. We care about her and we’d like to know what’s wrong.”

“Well, I’ll have her call you later,” he said. I doubted that, but I said, “I hope you do” and I ended with “I’m sorry you’re like this; I’m sorry it has to be this way. I... I’m just sorry.”

No wonder Barbar’a a separatist. No wonder I have fewer male friends that even she has. No wonder the women’s movement preaches sisterhood.

I feel so despairing. I can’t even write too well about it. All I know is: Holly sort of reminds me of the women in my dream who were encased in glass.

Now, in 2006 (and before that also), I know better. I’m wondering whether I was assuming things that I shouldn’t have, whether there were other reasons besides women’s oppression by men that her husband talked that way to me, whether perhaps there was some problem with the pregnancy that they were both worried about. In fact, a couple of years later I lost a full-term baby and thought back to that incident. “Omigod!” I thought. “Suppose something bad happened with their baby.” I hope their baby is all right.”

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A day-care center. By Marielle Cohen.

On weekdays and on Weekends.

On weekdays it costs \$2.

On weekends it costs \$5.

On Weekdays it starts at 10 AM.

And sometimes it starts at 2:00.

On Weekends it starts at 10:00 AM to 5:00 PM.

There will be fun and games.

and the Little Children will have their naps at 2:00 PM.

but if they are asleep when the Parents come to Pick the Children up
the Children can sleep over.

You do not have to bring your

Child everyday.

Children of any age can come.

Lunch will be served. Lunchtime is 1:30.

The teacher is Marielle J. Cohen and Marion D. C.

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“We have a little curly-haired boy” -- this over the loud-speaker at the super-market -- “who says his name is Arin and he’s looking for his mommy.”

Very non-chalantly, Elle and I make our way to the office, as Jeff checks out the groceries. “What about Daddy?” I call out, as loud as I can.

* * * *

(Arin and The terrible five's)

Terrible, terrible. "No matter what you do," he says, "I'm not going to change."

Such power he has. He can vomit whatever I feed him. He can fall whenever I prod him. He can scream whenever I touch him. He can die whenever I spank him.

He can frame me up. He can frame me down.

And I've tried everything, everything. I've tried patience and I've tried impatience. I've tried reasoning and I've tried non-reasoning. I've tried affection and I've tried spanking. I've tried ignoring (That's what I tried in the first place.) and I've tried not-ignoring.

I've tried "The Little Prince" and "Grown-ups Cry Too" and when I try "Sometimes I Get Angry" I change the angry to mad.

I've also tried "Raggedy Ann" and "The Bully of Barkham Street" and my own "Arin-at-Five". Yeah, I'm a poet, remember? Of COURSE I've tried feelings. I've tried his feelings and I've tried my feelings. I've tried good feelings and I've tried bad feelings. I've tried "You know, this isn't just something you're experimenting with. This is for real." And I've tried, "Yes, I know exactly what you mean when you say God's MAKING you be bad but when you grow up you'll see that there are other theories too." And I've tried "Remember two hours ago when you asked if I hated you? Well, I didn't then but I do now."

Yes, gleaming, glaring night. He said so himself: "No matter what you do, it's not going to work." He's a bad seed. He's a vitamin deficiency. He's a mutant. He's someone else's mind in the body I pushed out. He's a robot programmed to plead, "Please, Mommy, please don't hit me like that again" no matter what I do or say.

He's the devil. He's a discontinuity. He's that kid on Twilight Zone; if I decide to get him a dog to help him adjust, the dog will turn out to be a dark-bad-magic dog and will teach him a few tricks. We'll wind up owning us -- king of the kitchen, lord of the livingroom. If he stares at a knife, we'll bleed.

Yes, the terrible five's. And this time I think in terms of family therapy. But when I imagine that, anger is what I feel. I imagine walking into her office and saying "Hi, good-woman-feminist-political-personal-family-therapist. It's not my fault."

"Oh, there must be SOMETHING," I imagine her murmuring.

And then I imagine putting to her the question: What if there isn't ?

My best baby, too. That's what I always tell him. "You're the best baby."

I don't mean the FAVORITE, so don't accuse me of playing favorites. I mean he was the only one who's birthcry I heard. Elle had to be resuscitated and Bret was Cesarean and Kerin died.

My best baby. Breastfed for two and a half years -- No, I wasn't over-protective, over-bearing, or over-anything. Both of us simply loved it.

Yes, boiling night. Broiling night. Roaring, rearing, roaming night. Dr. Spock couldn't handle him. Freud couldn't handle him. John Holt couldn't handle him. Mary Poppins couldn't handle him. YOU couldn't handle him.

He can frame me up. He can frame me down. He can frame me around, all over town. He can put me in. He can put me out. He can put me back in. And shake me all about.

He's the little engine that can. He knows-he-can, he knows-he-can, he knows-he-can, he knows-he-can.

I knew-he-could, I knew-he-could. But I didn't know he WOULD.

* * * *

Three absolutely positively unsolvable problems of motherhood:

Number 1: Say I decide to make supper early for a change. Get the chicken on the stove, the salad on the table, everything ready and waiting before “the arsenic hour” -- ya know, me tired, kids bored, all hungry. Or at least before the after-6:00 guilt sets in. BUT:

Bitties smells the chicken. If not, he sees, hears, or sense me in the kitchen. And even if Jeff, Elle, and Arin are all around watching and playing with him, the kitchen is where he wants to be. So I hear, first crying, then banging on the door. And then, once I decide to let him in (for whatever reason -- I like having him around, I’m almost finished anyway, or I have no choice), it’s not me he wants but the chicken.

Which of course isn’t ready yet, not for an hour.

So the problem is: NO time is early enough to start supper. No matter WHEN I start, Bitties will sniff that chicken. It’s IMPOSSIBLE to escape the arsenic hour. WHATEVER hour you start cooking is, by definition, the arsenic hour. The arsenic-house problem is as unsolvable as the general fifth-degree polynomial equation.

Problem Number 2: The baby/ toddler is hanging or pulling on you and you say “I can’t hold you ‘til I finish writing down just this one line” or “What I’m through combing my hair, we can leave.” But of course he continues to hang or pull. Well, once you’re through, how can you convey to him that it’s not that you’ve GIVEN up and are letting him have his own way, but that you’re simply NOW ABLE ?

Do you explain, however meagerly, or do you just say nothing? Or do you cut off your nose to spite your face and specifically NOT hold him, NOT leave, even though you’re now ready and able to. Well?

Number 3: The other day a friend, a childhood friend, came over to us in the park. She raced over to the stroller, all excited, exclaiming, “Hiya, Bret. Wanna come for a ride with just-me, give mommy a little rest?” Usually he’s all gung-ho for that kind of thing but that time he made a sour face and turned away.

That was okay with me but my friend said (possibly to hide her hurt), “Oh, Marion, he sure is ATTACHED. I didn’t know YOU would let THAT kind of thing happen.”

Very seriously I said to her, “Sometimes things happen WITHOUT our letting them happen.” Like “Rip Van Winkle”; it happens anyway, even if you don’t drink the wrong potent, even if you don’t fall asleep.

And maybe kids get “over-attached”, not only because of the way the mothers act with them, but also because the mothers are THERE. Like Mount Everest. Yeah, and sometimes we can’t HELP being there. Like during the arsenic hour. We have no choice but to be there.

Three, at the very least, unsolvable problems. But this isn't Erma Bombeck. No, I'm not only trying to make you laugh, or cry. There's a CONTEXT to these three unsolvable problems, there's politics, the Politics of Motherhood.

First of all, like with other workers, people seem to persist in believing that mothers are in control. This way they can blame us if things don't go right. They even sometimes get US to blame OURSELVES. I'm sure, for example, that I'm not the only mother who sometimes feels, at least subconsciously, that IF ONLY she started supper earlier, or IF ONLY she were more In Touch with her children, or more assertive a disciplinarian, or if only she Fostered More Independence, then the arsenic hour would be banished from the clock, toddlers would learn cause and effect in one easy lesson, and children would be just the right amount of attached, neither over or under, at all times.

Secondly, these three problems of motherhood are not REALLY unsolvable. They're just unsolvable within the realm of status quo. Meaning society's status quo. Put more politically, there is no INDIVIDUAL solution; there are only collective solutions. What boils down to is some sort of redistribution of both the responsibility and the joy of children. To be specific, toddlers should not be within smelling range of the chicken before it's done, which probably means that somebody besides the mother should make the chicken.

No, this isn't Erma Bombeck. Or I HOPE it isn't. One editor thinks it is. He expressed an interest in "doing" a book of my poetry but what captured his heart was my "Cantor" poem (full title, "They Put Cantor Away", about a real-life mathematician who was in and out of mental institutions). He wanted to know whether I had any MORE poems like that so I sent him several other math poems but he didn't feel they were "like that". And about "The Care and Feeding of the Sick Child" -- which begins "The sick child must remain at home at all times. / She must not visit friends / school / baby-sitters..." and which ends "No one must be exposed to the germs of the sick child / except the mother" -- about that poem, which feminist audiences have adored -- that editor wrote "Erma Bombeck, okay?"

No. Not Erma Bombeck. Mothers constitute an oppressed class. Erma Bombeck didn't say that. Mothers should NOT constitute an oppressed class. And the solution to mothers constituting an oppressed class is NOT that women refuse to become mothers. Just as the solution to racism is not that people should all be white, or pass for white. Ditto women, gay, and so on.

Once, in my "Ogden Nash days", I wrote a rhyming poem about "the numerous / conservative humorists". That's Erma Bombeck. And John Stuart Mill said "Dissent is the prelude to revolution". And maybe humor is the prelude to dissent. And I feel, right now, left of revolution.

Anyway, not Erma Bombeck.

* * * *

(More politics)

It's happened. The jig is up. Eventually, we knew, it would have to be.

Yep, it's happened. Edie's moved out of town. After six years of watching our kids --sometimes overnight and weekends -- she's moving on us.

So now I'm starting to find out even more about the big cruel world out there. Right now, for example, I'm looking over the mimeographed sheet presented to me when I went to investigate the Franklin Day Care Center.

THE BOARD OF EDUCATION, goes the heading. Parkway at 21st St. -- Child Care Center Program -- and so on. "Dear Parents. Child Care can play a very important role in your family life. [Yer dern tootin', I'm thinking] So that the Center can serve you well, we will need to work together."

I know what's coming. They haven't said it yet, but by "work together" they mean -- I just know it -- things like parent-teacher conferences and multi-visits to the school. All kinds of time-consuming trivia which guilt-ridden mothers make a grab for, and which plenty of good day-care centers operate without. They also mean "work together" on THEIR terms; in other words, NOT really work together.

DO YOU KNOW ABOUT OUR INTAKE PROCEDURE? They must have paid a peptalk artist a week's salary to compose this letter. "You have now taken the FIRST STEP in our intake process by registering your child at the Center. If we have no immediate vacancy, your child will be placed on the WAITING LIST. We ask that you CALL US EVERY MONTH so that we will know of your continued interest. If we do not hear from you regularly, we will assume that you are no longer interested in our services and your child will be taken off our waiting list."

I'm beginning to feel a bit depressed. Isn't registering in the first place sufficient evidence of our interest? How insecure can they get? And what's the big deal, anyway? If they just keep us on the waiting list, and then let us know when a vacancy turns up, and it turns out we're no longer interested, they'll find out soon enough. And to me "keep calling us" means "keep begging us". Yes, I can detect clearly the subtle nuances of power. "That's how it is" runs the under-current. "Take it or leave it." Oh, we have a choice, all right, a choice between their day-care center and NO day-care center.

"When we have a vacancy," begins the third paragraph, "and are able to consider your child, the NEXT STEP is for us to plan an interview." Yep, we're supposed to wait around for months, calling every month, until they get around to CONSIDERING our child and PLANNING an interview. "This takes approximately two hours and may necessitate that you take some time off from work. We ask that you come without your child so that we can talk freely and comfortably." If we don't have day-care, how are we working? And also, if we don't have day-care, who's watching our child so that we can come without him?

I remember the first time we went to meet Edie. She, Jeff, I, Elle, their three-year-old Debbie, one dog, and two cats sprawled around in her living room. It was extremely easy to talk “freely and comfortably”, and after we did, “Just bring ‘er over any time you want,” said Edie.

“Well, we’ll call first,” said Jeff.

“Oh, you can if you want,” said Edie. “But it really doesn’t matter. I’m always here.”

Can’t the Child Care Center itself provide child-care during the interview? It IS a child-care center, isn’t it? In fact, wouldn’t that be a good chance for the kid to get used to the Center, and for ME to see how they’d treat my kid at the Center (and actually, the fact that they don’t want him here unless he’s actually enrolled gives me some idea...) ? It wouldn’t be much extra trouble for the teachers. How many interviews take place at one time, anyway?

This kind of “one-step reasoning” is pretty familiar in situations involving schools. “Don’t chew gum because then you can’t concentrate on your work.” “Come without your child so that we can talk freely and comfortably.” They talk the same way to the mothers that they do to the kids. Namely, down.

I read on. “Between one and three weeks after the first interview, we will plan a SECOND interview to discuss your child’s eligibility. At this time we will discuss your child’s needs in relation to the Center’s services.”

Now, if the second interview deals with our child’s eligibility and needs in relation to the Center’s services, what the shit was discussed in the first interview? And in the “between one and three weeks” between the first and the second interview, what are mother and child doing “in relation to” the mother’s work?

More and more anger and powerlessness getting to me, I continue reading. “At the time a child enters the Center, we ask for verification of his birthday, vaccinations, and immunizations.” Now, I probably have a chip on my shoulder but still, that feels like keeping everybody in line. Birth certificates are to keep births in hospitals, and vaccinations are to keep pediatricians and social workers in business. All to keep parents and children off the streets, as well as make us appreciative of all the complicated difficult wonderful things they’re doing for us. Also, maybe, to make these things as involved as possible, and day care as inaccessible as possible. It’s NOT to keep kids healthy and happy; after all, if a kid visits a friend or a playground, she doesn’t need to present a vaccination verification. Nor did Edie require one.

And now comes the plug for motherguilt. “Entering a new place with strange people is a big step for a young child”. So any mother returning to work for the first time in years and trying desperately to be casual about it is doomed from the start.

It’s a vicious cycle. First they see to it that children don’t get the opportunity to be in day-care until the age of three, then they suddenly call it a “big step” and point the accusing finger at the mother. As Jeff says, “It’s all just an

excuse for exploiting women.”

“If we decide together,” continues the sheet, “that Child Care is an appropriate service for your child, we must then think about how we may help him adjust well to his experience. The Center has a GRADUAL VISITING period for every pre-school child. Because your child needs you [guilt, guilt], we ask that you be present for the first morning or longer, depending on his need.”

Gloomily I anticipate sitting on a bench in the Center, making conversation with the teachers (these all-holy experts, even though I’ve taught in day-care centers myself), while Arin plays excitedly and forgets me for the first few minutes, then (seeing that I’m there -- that I HAVE to be there) comes back to hang on me after this initial excitement wears off. I see myself feeling self-conscious about that, trying to explain to the teachers without ADMITTING that I’m trying to explain. And I see Arin on the SECOND day, acting surprised when I leave, surprised and perhaps cheated, as though he thought I would always be staying there, as though he thought I came with the Center or something. Indeed, my presence for the first few hours would ease him into this “new place with strange people” about as much as a bedtime story eases him into sleep.

When Arin went to his first day-care center -- This was in Washington two summers ago. -- the van came to pick him up at 7:34 A.M. Grinning on that first day, he climbed into the back seat and began playing with the other kids. Once there, I’m told, he ate his meals, took his nap, played games, and finally came back in the van safe and sound, still grinning. That was at 17 months.

“DO YOU SEE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN A CHILD’S ATTENDANCE AND ADJUSTMENT? The Center is open from 7:00 A.M. to 6:00 P.M. So that every child can feel a part of his group and get the most out of Child Care, it is important that he is present for a meaningful part of the day. It is for this reason that PRE-SCHOOL children are required to be at the Center NO LATER than 9:00 A.M., and leave no earlier than 3:00 P.M. SCHOOL-AGE children are required to stay at the Center at least one hour after school.”

Anna at Edie’s used to go two days a week. Mimi arrived every day around 7:00 A.M. Arin arrived around noon. And every month or so Elle, who’s been taking care of herself or going over a friend’s after school since first grade, would get to missing the gang at Edie’s so would come with me to pick up Arin and maybe wind up sleeping over, along with several of Edie’s other “alumni”. Edie’s grandchildren would also visit once in a while. And every one of those kids most definitely “felt part of his group and got the most out of Child Care.”

What IS this business about “a meaningful part of the day”? All I want is someone to watch my kid; all Arin wants is people to be with. That’s all he’d get if he stayed home with me, isn’t it? That’s all he got at Edie’s. Why do they have to make everything such a big deal? Suppose my job didn’t start ‘til noon? Suppose Arin and I liked to sleep late? Or spend the morning together? Suppose I were a waitress and worked the 2:00 - 10:00 shift, and wanted to bring him at 1:00 and have a relative pick him up at 6:00? I don’t care if they have certified teachers. I don’t care if they teach cognitive skills. I just want them to take care of my kid.

“While it is important for children to be involved in the many activities in their group, preschool children can benefit from only so much. Too long a day is no better than one too short. Thus, preschool children should stay at the Center NO LONGER than nine hours.” Same one-step reasoning. So day-care centers are destined to be such a big deal -- so “over-stimulating”, as they say -- that young children cannot “tolerate” them for more than nine hours at a time, even with naps? It seems first they make the centers over-stimulating, and then they say don’t keep your kids there longer than nine hours because it’s over-stimulating.

The first day Elle stayed at Edie’s we came to pick her up at 5:00, assuming that was the time most convenient for Edie. Elle was very happy to see us, and came running with hugs and kisses and requests for a glass of water, but no way did she want to go home. “Everyone else gets to eat here,” she told us. And sure enough, there were all the kids, three or four of them, sitting around the table while Edie dished out the stew. Jeff and I had to wait while Elle finished her supper. (We were also offered stew.) And after that, if for any reason we had to pick her up before they’d had supper, Edie had to pack her a doggie-bag. And no matter what time we picked her up, ever, she always wanted to know whether Debbie could come over HER house now.

Well, HOW COME day-care centers have to be such a big deal? Can’t they be just-plain regular places, like houses, for kids to eat, sleep, play, and learn in, and where they can stay ad infinitum, like they do at home or when they visit a friend? Or go to Edie’s?

And how come, by the way, how come no one seems so concerned about kids staying AT HOME with their NON-working parents for far far longer than nine hours a day? How come no one talks about how over-, or under-stimulating THAT might be?

Some people believe that more than a HALF-day will “tire out” young children, so they send their kids to HALF-day nursery schools. That is, they would replace the Board of Ed’s statement about nine hours with a corresponding one about three hours. Which is right?

Maybe if day care centers weren’t such a big deal, they could have plenty of 24-hour ones without much ado. If people didn’t equate day-care with pre-school education, we could have more day-care.

Maybe THEY WANT it to be a big deal, and for the same reason as THEY want welfare and clinics to be a big deal -- namely, because THEY don’t really want it at all.

Well, what am I to do? That’s how society views child care so what can I do about it? Even the FEMINIST articles talk about the dangers of day-care centers becoming “mere baby-sitting”. So where does that leave me? It leaves me on an endless resigned search for a day-care center that offers nothing but “mere baby-sitting”. Either that, or an actual “mere baby-sitter”. Like Edie.

* * * *

Sick. The whole family sick. The nuclear family when it gets sick. If that isn't political, I don't know what is.

It was probably working that made us sick. If Jeff hadn't gone in that day, he would've licked it. Even with a sick kid in the house. And I would've licked it, too, in spite of two sick kids in the house, if I hadn't had to go teach that Drexel course. And I know this sounds far too political but I do actually believe, *al la Wages for Housework*, that as worker's we're entitled to our choice of free private nurse/ housekeeper or free stay at a family convalescent home. Yup, they should have them. We shouldn't have to wake up in the morning and worry about how and whether we're gonna get our breakfasts. And, later on in the day, lunch and supper.

Who heats up the soup? Who gets out the bowls? Who's the least sick? Who wins out by being the most sick? How do we get food into the house in the first place? Who calls the doctor? Who calls up to say who won't be at work or school? Who answers the phone? Can Elle, if not Arin, take a message?

Remember, if I talk, then when I have might develop into bronchitis, like two summers ago, and I'll be laid up for a month and I'm supposed to read over the radio next Tuesday plus teach the Drexel course plus that Temple workshop starts in February.

Well, who answers the phone? Better yet, who answers Arin's questions? After a week of this he's bound to ask a few, just for the sake of asking. "Is this yours?" "Is this mine?" "Are we goin' to Gran'ma's?" "Huh? Huh? Huh?" He KNOWS I can't talk, yet "Ya have anything for me to play with? Can you take me out to play in the snow? Can I go to Edie's NOW?" He's the well-est of us all, but is he well enough to go? If he is, who brings him?

I guess the most political thing of all is that, when one member of a nuclear family gets sick, the others have no choice but to also get sick. We MUST contract each others' germs. And we MUST care for each other. There is no one else.

Hospitals are for diseases that are emergency, not merely inconvenient, annoying, or inefficient. So we must knowingly and helplessly expose ourselves to each others' germs.

The laundry's piling up. Likewise the dust. Likewise the kids' clutter. We probably all resent each other for not being able to take GOOD care of us. It's a very inward kind of logic, like Russell's paradox, the sets of all sets which are not members of themselves -- the family which cannot take care of itself. The family which cannot take care of its members.

Should I write a story about a sick mother? It would be a Kafkaesque deal, maybe something like "The Eternal Baby". It could begin: "I DON'T understand. They KNOW I can't talk. I don't know WHY they keep ASKING me things." It would be a raging success at readings, a flop at the editors'

desks.

The kids keep coming into the mother's room. Playing on her bed, jumping on her back. She can't talk. She had TOLD them that, had whispered an explanation all about it, several mornings ago. The effort had set her coughing futilely for ten minutes, then lying rigid all that morning in fear and sweat. She's REALLY sick. She's truly can't talk. If she talks, she'll get sicker. Not only for her own sake but for her children as well, she must get better.

Maybe I'll make her a single mother. Reduce the story to its essence: The kids are killing her.

Society, the doctors, friends and acquaintances don't take her illness seriously, so neither can the kids. If she was really sick, they figure, someone would've come to get us by now. Better yet -- if she were really sick, she'd be in the hospital.

The kids come rapping at her locked door. Remember, she can't talk. She can't tell them that if they don't shut the fuck up they're not gonna like what's gonna happen. They rap for half an hour before their childlike minds, usually so quick-thinking, get the idea. Then they blast the TV. Or get hurt. Or shout, "Ooooo, wait'll mommy sees what you did."

She'd get better if they didn't keep waking her up. She has trouble sleeping and somehow, whenever she drops off, she's awakened by pounding on that door.

She can't phone for help because, remember, she can't talk. By this time, one word would send her into spasms. Of course, she can just croak help. Or she can reach the point where they have to hospitalize her. I can't decide how to make it end. For political reasons, and I guess also for personal reasons, it has to end something like "The Eternal Baby". She has to run away, not be rescued. She can't be the long-suffering woman. It has to be society, reality, that she's fighting, not herself.

Maybe I could have her drop notes out the window. Or write a letter to a friend. But then I might have to have nobody answer the notes and letter. They all think "Well, there are certain things in Life you just hafta do."

I really don't know how to make it end. I was thinking about having her just up and leave, like the Eternal Baby mother. But then, where would she go? Remember, she's sick. And she can't talk. That's important to the story. So where would she go? And HOW would she go? I really don't know. I haven't figured out the ending yet. But I can't just let her wither and die. I can't leave her -- although, image-wise, this is tempting -- I can't leave her locked in her room, as though inside a sweat-box, or as though she were a bug in a jar and the jar were being shaken about by giant hands, or the patter of little feet.

* * * *

I wanted Elle at eleven to Find Something She Really Wants In Life, but I didn't want what she found and wants to be a model. No, I didn't want her to want me to load the camera with expensive color film and snap her in 24 ridiculous contortions, none of them smiling. And I didn't want her to want us to enroll her next year in the Barbizon School. (I was hoping she was just kidding but the other day I saw her pause in front of that place on Walnut Street and stare far too pensively.)

I didn't want her to want to know who to contact to get on TV commercials, nor to want to spend her money getting her hair feathered and straightened. (Oops! almost thought she said "tarred and feathered" !)

"Ma, "she says, "I'm TALKING to you. And you're making me feel like I'm saying something wrong, like you're laughing at me."

"I AM," I quip, then "Come ON, EI, YOU know how I feel."

She smirks. Then she turns to one of her magazines, the one with Brooke Shields on the cover.

"Oh, I know how you feel," I continue, repeating what I've been saying over the years. "You like the idea of being beautiful and not having to do anything but sit there and look beautiful and have everybody dress you up and admire you. We ALL like that idea, just a little; I know I do. But that's not the way it is..."

"Oh, I know THAT," she retorts. "See, here, it say 'Being a model isn't always glamorous. It's hard work..."

I smirk .

"Just what IS it you have against modelling?" she asks.

I laugh. "Well, I'll tell you again. First of all, the main thing: It doesn't do anything good for the world. In fact, it does BAD things for the world. Like, if you get to be a FAMOUS model, with your pictures in all the papers and everything, all the OTHER woman will be looking at you and thinking 'Why can't I look like that?' and they'll wear their hair and clothes just like you and instead of being satisfied with the way THEY look, and what THEY are, they'll spend their lives trying to be like you, and always feel bad that they can't. Oh, it won't always be obvious; usually it'll be subtle, sort of subconscious; it'll be a current running through their lives. But the main thing is this: See, when you model -- well, WHAT do you model?"

"Not poetry!" I answer myself. "Yeah, not poetry, that's for sure. Clothes, right? Maybe perfume. But PRODUCTS. You model products, for the companies to sell. And remember that movie, 'Bottle Babies' ? Well, almost ALL companies are that that. They'd all -- well, most -- kill babies in order to make more money. And I really don't want you helping out those companies."

Elle's still staring at Brooke Shields. "EI," I go, "do you think that I'M not

glamorous. And do you wanna make sure you grow up to be more glamorous than me?”

Elle smirks. “You’re PRETTY but you’re not glamorous.” I smirk back.

“If you’d cut your hair, just a little,” she continues, “and not wear those big boots...”

And I CERTAINLY didn’t want Elle at eleven to inform me, “Ya know, I really don’t approve of gay any more. It just doesn’t seem natural. I mean, couples are supposed to have children and everything...”

Yeah, I tried not to show Elle at eleven the full extent of my anger and disappointment. I tried to realize that she was still learning, trying things out, feelings, questions. Thank Goodness I wasn’t facing her at the time, otherwise she’d’ve seen that look, and that look might have scared her.

What I did was take three deep breaths, smirk, and give a whole string of arguments, one after the other, and hope that at least one would do the trick, immediately or eventually. “That’s the argument people use against birth control,” I began. “That’s also the argument people used to use, and some still do, against interracial marriage. That’s also the way a lot of people in my high school used to feel about my being a mathematician; they just didn’t think it was natural for a woman to be a mathematician. But really what it was was: They just weren’t used to it. Besides, there are lots of heterosexual couples who don’t have children -- either because they can’t or because they don’t want to. When people love each other it’s not in order to have children. Besides, I wonder whether there are some gay couples who would LIKE to have children together and are sorry that they can’t. But the main thing is: I can’t exactly explain this, but I don’t believe in this ‘natural’ business; I don’t believe people have to ‘fit in’ and be like everybody else...”

I think maybe I did get to her, but I was deeply hurt, personally offended, because I do identify with gay people, because of what I said about being a women mathematician -- in fact, I too have been called “queer”. I was, I am, a freak. I am “un-natural” and I was kind of hoping Elle would be too.

* * * *

My veins are bubbling. My blood is reddening. My body is the vibrating string, from Partial Differential Equations.

There is no solution. I have just read one of those poems which says that I'm always telling my children "Just a minute" and by the time I stop saying that it will be too late and I'll Realize and be sorry.

I need to address that poem: Poem, there's something you have to know: I Realize NOW. I'm sorry NOW.

Only yesterday we were all sitting around the table and I was in a mood and I wistfully moaned, "Gee, if only I weren't a writer, what a good mother I could be, what fun we could have. Every morning we could sit down at breakfast and decide what we'll all gonna do today..." and Elle, twelve and usually so supportive, got wistful herself and exclaimed, "Oh mommy, STOP being a writer -- right NOW." And Arin, eight and practical, asked, "So why don't you just quit?"

Yes, I realize NOW. I'm sorry NOW. I know only too well I will one day be sorrier. I know only too well the zoos, Sesame Places, Great Adventures, and playgrounds which arise in front of our cars, buses, and trains like ships out of the sea. I know only too well all the movies they tell me are playing this week and won't be playing next week.

Oh, I feel it now. So I try. I try to take them once a week. And I try to take them out to eat afterwards. But there's a poem in my head, there are two poems in my head, there's that Doubleday letter, there's that anthology introduction. And there's August, its midpoint newly gone, its end newly come. August, the non-day-care month.

Oh poem, or what calls itself poem. Oh, Babytalk-magazine-type poem, poem that warns, poems that preaches, poem that says I will be sorry -- I AM sorry.

But I already don't dry the dishes. I already don't iron pillowcases. I already don't go to demonstrations. I already don't write fiction. How can I leave out food? How can I forget bills? And how can I rule out that grocery shopping detour in order to get them THEIR kind of bread?

I AM busy right now. And they really MUST wait. "Just a minute," I say. It's wishful promising. It'll be at least five minutes.

Dammit, I AM busy right now. And if you-poem really cared about my children, you'd offer to come slice the celery.

Oh poem, typical poem, sentimental moralizing poem, guilt-tripping poem, playing-into-the-hands-of-the-system poem, dangerous malicious poem -- even as I say "Just a minute", every TIME I say "Just a minute", I know, I realize, and I'm sorry.

And poem, O poem, poem that ends "...and none of the work / that was so important then / means anything to me now" -- come on, poem, that won't be true and you know it. My poems will be in books, the books will be in houses, the houses will contain children. It will SO mean something, and not only to me.

And another thing, poem: Pretend I heeded you. Pretend I never said "Just a minute". Pretend I never even said "Just a second". Suppose I spent every second with my kids. Well, I'd STILL be sorry.

Time doesn't pass as a punishment. Time doesn't pass for spite, because it's feelings are hurt. Time doesn't pout, "You refuse to appreciate me? Okay, I'll show you." Time passes no matter what we do.

Sure, there's that element of regrets-vs-no-regrets. Sure, there's that element of It's-better-to-have-loved-and-lost-than-never-to-have-loved-at-all. But when thirty, forty, fifty years go by and I say "I'm sorry", I won't be meaning I apologize. When fifty, sixty, seventy years are down the tube, it won't be because I said "Wait a minute" at least once a minute. And I can't spend my minutes grabbing too much now just because I won't be getting enough later.

O poem, beginner's poem, cute little innocent poem, lovable poem whose curls I laughingly ruffle, O child-in-itself poem -- it happens anyway. Time used wisely is still time. Time used wisely is still used. Either way I'll be sorry.

O poem that emotes, poem that accuses, I know now. I'm Cassandra and I know. I'm Cassandra and there's nothing I can do. I know, I cry, I stamp, I throb. Only too agonizingly, I know now.