

ONE

*I*t is early evening. I am suckling my infant son. We sit on the rocking chair in the nursery. Gently I rock backwards and forwards, pushing up and down with my toes. The lamp casts a golden glow over us. We are picture perfect, ‘Madonna and Child in the Candlelight’, a study for the old masters.

I look down at my son, at Zach. The small dimple on his temple works in and out with his efforts at drawing the milk from my body. His eyes are almost closed. I cradle my hand around his head; it is covered with a fuzz of hair, almost not human in its softness. I run my fingers over the dents in his

skull, pleasantly concave to my touch. I press gently. They yield, a little.

I have always been fascinated by these unfinished areas on a baby's head. It is where they are most vulnerable, where the hard bone of childhood is yet to form. It is one of the reasons human infants must be tended so carefully and nurtured for so long.

What would happen if I press too hard, I wonder. What would happen if I took a skewer and broke the skin of his fontanelle, if I pushed it further until it met the soft resistance of my child's brain? If I continued pushing, would the steel cleave a pathway of immediate destruction and death, or would the results of its passage be more benign? Would the wound heal? Perhaps there would never be any obvious effect, or perhaps Zach would continue to grow for a time, until one day a mass of scar tissue pierced the trajectory of his development, keeping him forever looped in eternal childhood.

Even as I protect my baby so carefully, these are questions upon which I cannot help but ponder. It is the creative destructiveness of my motherhood; the alternating tide with which I wrestle.

Now Zach is almost sated. His sucking has slowed, but he is unwilling to relinquish the comfort of my

breast. I insert my little finger between his lips and my nipple, carefully breaking the suction of his mouth. He pulls at the air in a desperate attempt to regain contact with my body, but then his head falls back. He is asleep. Breast milk, warmth and gentle rocking are powerful opiates.

I cradle Zach firmly to my body, rise to my feet and slip to the cot. Leaning over, I lie him gently on his side. One little fist rests on the sheet, the other is relaxed against his head. His skin is amber in the lamplight. I press my lips to his cheek, feeling the firm softness of very young flesh. In his sleep my child is archetypal, as am I, his mother and protector.

Tiptoeing, I move silently from the room. Closing the door behind me, I hold my breath and listen to the sounds of the house. From Cassie's room there is silence, from Zach's not a noise. Both children are asleep. I breathe again.

Remaining there a moment, I allow my pent-up energies to begin their dissipation. Sometimes at this hour I feel I might collapse, as if only the fast-forward movement of the day has kept me upright for so long. Now that I have an interval before the duties of the night begin, I am heavy and inert, a rag doll stuffed with lead.

I look at the clock in the hallway; it is seven-thirty, half an hour until Daniel arrives home from work. What will I do with this precious time? I decide to read. I made it to the library last week. ‘A small victory for mothers everywhere,’ I’d joked to Daniel.

But I ignore the books, piled so hopefully near the sofa. Instead I pick up the newspaper. When you are as tired as I am it is easier to focus on things in small bursts.

I try to turn the pages of the paper without rustling them. Rustling papers wake Cassie. There is a competition between the child and the written word for my attention. During the day I read standing at the kitchen bench. I turn the pages stealthily; occasionally I turn on the tap as though I am washing up. Then my daughter can’t be sure what I am doing. In these small things, at least, I maintain some control, some power.

Tonight, I scan local politics and run my eye over the world news. All this is perfunctory, a prelude to the letters. I have always enjoyed the letters page. Once I was a frequent contributor. I enjoyed seeing my name in print; I could argue esoteric points with the best of them. Now I am an armchair intellectual;

I observe from the sidelines as the regulars carry on their debates and trade their witty observations without me.

There's a discussion on child care being conducted in the letters page at the moment. Isn't there always? Those who have the time and energy, those without children, argue back and forth, quoting studies that invariably contradict each other.

We, Daniel and I, solved our domestic debate simply. I quit work. 'It won't be forever,' Daniel assured me, 'just until the children start school.' I agreed because I was too tired to argue. I have been too tired ever since. My views, my desires, my wishes have been silenced by exhaustion. I wear fatigue like a mantle; sometimes it settles over my head so tightly that I cannot think. Often I cannot finish sentences. My neurones stop mid-leap and I am left voiceless. My children have taken away my ability to speak. Thankfully they, my children, are sufficiently distracting that my lapses are rarely noticed.

Those with whom I now socialise are unlikely to care anyway. Those with whom I mix can be summed up with one word: 'mothers'. Once I knew no mothers, except my own desultory example of one. Once, if I met a full-time, stay-at-home mother I would not

have known what to say to her. I would have devised an excuse to leave, to drink with someone else who was able to speak my kind of language. In those days my girlfriends and I were women who did things; who had fabulous jobs, successful businesses, rich boyfriends. We were witty and indestructible, a force with which to be reckoned. We worked, we exercised, we socialised – but most of all we had enough sleep to be able to function as rational human beings.

Now my regular social circle is a group of women who were herded together by the local early-childhood clinic for one reason only: our success at procreation. We cling together like jetsam thrown from a sinking ship. Perhaps I cling harder than most because the group provides the yardstick by which I can measure my behaviour. I am sometimes terribly afraid that without the group I would have no idea of how to be a mother at all.



The mothers' group met at my house today; there were five of us. That meant five toddlers, two babies, two pregnant mums and Rachael. Rachael is the one member of the group I do not like. She is a redhead,

short and built hard, like a coiled spring. Her eyes penetrate; they see too much. Beneath her gaze I fumble; I am unsure. I dislike Rachael for the way she makes me feel, but deep down my reaction to her gaze makes me dislike myself more.

The group of mothers tries hard to be like larger society. We air-kiss, sometimes we discuss politics, we swap recipes. Often there are undercurrents of personality conflict, battles that nearly erupt and have to be smoothed over. There is much gossip and, apart from Rachael, a certain amount of mutual support. After all, most of us had no idea what we were taking on when we embarked on this motherhood business. Members of the group have even assumed roles of sorts: there is the organiser, the cook, the pessimist, the financial controller. We are a soap opera in miniature.

But always, in the midst of the intrigue and socialising, we are looking out for our children, to ensure they are safe, to ensure they will not be the child to first gouge out the eye of another. Our conversations are disjointed, our attention spans short: most of us are operating under conditions of extreme sleep deprivation. Not all of the mutterings make much sense. What a social study we would be!

'I've been trying to get Christopher off the dummy.'

'He's only one and a bit, Michael still has his. When he goes to bed anyway.'

'Yeah, I wouldn't mind that, but Christopher uses his all the time.'

'Yeah, Charlotte too. It's getting embarrassing. She's getting *big*.'

'Shit! Simon is into the CDs.'

Mad scuffling as a vain attempt is made to save the CD tower. Several minutes are spent collecting the CDs and removing them to my bedroom.

'Mind if I make another cup of tea?'

'Did you see the horrible accident last night, where the car was run over by the truck?'

'A truck! How many were killed? Charlotte, get away from that plant! No! Naughty girl!'

'Hey Odette, how come Jo couldn't make it?'

'Tamara's sick.'

'I saw them yesterday. She's bought a bike seat for Tamara and they go riding a lot. Jo's lost a heap of weight.'

'Really? It's ages since I've seen her.'

'Is it okay if I open the door for them to go outside?'

'Is she getting over her man . . . What's his name?'

‘Gavin?’

‘Yeah, Gavin.’

‘I think so, but it was a huge shock. Apparently he’d been having the affair all through her pregnancy.’

‘Bastard!’

‘I’d cut his dick off.’

‘No way. I’d never allow myself to get that close to it again.’

‘Get away from those rose bushes. You’ll get scratched.’

‘Who’s for coffee and who wants tea? Jessica, can you pass me those cups?’

‘I need another cup of coffee. I’m so tired I can barely keep my eyes open.’

‘Tell you what, our sex life’s been a shocker lately. It’s like Simon knows when we want to do it and wakes up!’

‘At least you feel like doing it. I don’t have the energy anymore.’

‘Me neither.’

‘Sam bought me a black negligee thingy for my birthday. What a joke! It was two sizes too small. I told him to keep his fantasies to himself.’

‘Hey, have you begun toilet training yet? Mum says I was done by now.’

And so it went on. I think I may have fallen asleep at one point. My head hit hard against the back of the sofa. It was lucky I didn't drop Zach.

Sometimes I yearn for an unbroken conversation: a conversation that is not centred around babies or husbands, or how tired we all are; a conversation that progresses somewhere in linear time instead of weaving and ducking around snotty kids; a conversation that has a purpose and an outcome. Now we talk to fill time, not to solve problems. We are people thrown together, who try desperately to have something in common besides our children.

Tonight I will attempt to complete a crossword. Once I was good at word puzzles, cryptic ones in particular. I always had a flair for language: an ability to make my point; a capacity for being noticed. My Year 6 teacher said I would go far. What is far, I wonder. Is this it?

