

NOT ERMA BOMBECK:

DIARY OF A FEMINIST 70S MOTHER

Marion Deutsche Cohen

NOTE: Some of these pieces have appeared in the following publications:
Plexus, MOTHERING Magazine, Tuesday Nights (women's anthology), Mom Egg
Review, Blotterature

FORWARD

The purpose of this forward is to talk about the changes I have gone through since the writing, in the mid-70s, of the first drafts of the “story-essays” in this book. Since having and raising my youngest child in the 1980’s and beyond, I have found that my feelings and needs are different, at least in some ways, from when I was writing these “story-essays” and raising my older children. In the years when Devin 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, extremely happy.

While writing the essays in this little book, I did *not* want to be with my children almost constantly. My mindset was that children were often a sort of burden. I loved my children deeply and intensely, and I was never even once sorry I had kids, but I also often felt that they “got in the way”; there were days when I felt I was “stuck watching the kids”. I was in a very different place then from where I am now. In part I have feminism to thank for the change, as well as my own experience and development as a mother and as a person.

My feelings and attitudes in the 70s were, I’m sure, my way – and many women’s and parents’ way – of escaping the “50s mother” syndrome, or rather the more general oppression that society lays on mothers and parents. Where “we” were then was a societal thing. That tendency to feel that children are a threat to everything else in our lives was a reaction to how we were treated by society, and to how mothers and children are so often viewed. Protecting ourselves (I really mean “our selves”, two words) was almost necessary. We were, in a word, afraid. Very afraid. And understandably so.

After awhile, and gradually, I consciously fought the role into which I as mother had been placed and I feel that, to a very large extent, I won that fight. At a 70s feminist

demonstration I had occasion to briefly speak with Selma James, founder of Wages for Women's Work. She said to me, "[As a mother] I couldn't love my children because having children meant I was more oppressed." And yes, the more successfully I fought that oppression – which more than anything meant simply being aware of it – the better I was able to love my children. In particular, I came 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, in many ways a larger family (in my case four living children) is a more reasonable and more supportive setup (a little like a village). Also, there were big changes in circumstances; between writing these "story-essays" and having Devin in 1985 two life-things happened to me and my family: First, my husband (the children's father) was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. Second, that same season, our third baby Kerin died two days after her birth. I have written much 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, 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 together motherhood and feminism. Credit also goes to my then-therapist Kathy Donner for helping me sort it all out, 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 kindergarten and school altogether (and to begin homeschooling). For me, all that went along with throwing off society's shackles in further ways; it was an extension of the women's movement of the 70s and not a contradiction of it.

I believe that mothers constitute an oppressed class. One form this oppression takes in this society is the undermining of motherhood. That causes everyone, mothers and non-

mothers alike, to feel negative towards children (even as people have so many positive feelings toward children). What results is the societal environment described in the following pages, which most mothers experience some form of (even if it doesn't always bother them the same way it bothered me).

I'm sorry about some of the attitudes and feelings that I harbored in the mid-70s. In fact, I apologize. 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, I think, a necessary place for me to temporarily be, in order to reach the place where I have been for awhile. 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, I apologize.

I have been faced with a question: To what extent do I want to make changes in this manuscript? I want to convey the feelings I had; I don't want to be untruthful. Yet I also don't want to convey any message that I no longer believe. I have tried to keep a balance.

Especially, I hope that my main message will be noted: Mothers constitute an oppressed class, and that is neither their fault nor their children's fault. Also, it is not a reason for women to choose to not become mothers. I mean to stay mother-identified and to be supportive of all mothers and children.

In sisterhood and in motherhood – Marion D. Cohen, 2015

1. COLORS

As the train speeds towards 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 maypole, collect 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. Making princesses and castles out of them, that's what. She always puts raindrops with balloons saying hi and suns saying no to the raindrops. And it all fits so 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 pointy and new, and I'll have to say to her, "Elle, it isn't your fault. You didn't break them. You just used them up."

2. LETTING BABIES STAY

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

I expect the program to start with ant colonies and end with kibbutzim. And in the middle I expect mating seals, migrating birds, and primitive human societies. And in fact, "Here we see a mother and father washing their children in the lake" -- we see 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 mischievous "mommy". The expression on his face is yummy 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. He's at that age, four, the age of beautiful ideas.

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

I think back to my own childhood. It always seemed to me that *they* were trying to dish out what I called the "Children of Many Lands" propaganda. "Little Hans of Denmark", "Little Ingebord of Sweden". The ol' "everything's the way it's s'posed to be" bit. Well,

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 lilt-y tunes in music class I always felt dubious. It seemed to me that too often, when they showed “families of faraway and long ago”, the kids were not smiling.

So, back to Arin: “How come they didn’t let the babies stay in the water?”

“I don’t know,” I answer, for the time being. Arin seems satisfied, but soon keeps asking that question from time to 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”. I really did spend a large part of my childhood like that. Whenever I saw books with pictures of “children of many lands”, I’d 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 intermission, 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’s spending his childhood looking after the other children. “Pokey,” I answer, hugging him as I announce clearly. “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, even if I’m projecting, at least he knows I’m feeling *something*, and at least he knows I’d let him stay in the water.

3. THE BIRTHDAY PRESENT

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 were their own birthdays, especially when I let them blow out the candle.

"Well, what about the presents?" I eventually ask with a smirk. 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'd wanted to borrow my scotch-tape 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 her. So she'd used the box of reinforcements I'd given her a long time ago, used whole rows of them to hold the packages together. She'd spent the evening at it, calling out periodically "Mommy, don't come in here."

Well, the first flimsy present is about 3 by 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 out 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 the one with three! That’s the one with three!” And indeed there 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 say. “Well, he SAID he wanted to be a clown,” answers Elle, and Arin nods.) The third picture is of “dinasores”.

The next present is a note; it’s in an envelope . “Dear Mome,” it reads. “I love you and love you and I love you and I like you too 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 tad 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.

4. 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 she smiles mysteriously while you stir in one very tiny circle near the rim of the skillet while the rest of the stew gets burnt.

But I don’t have time for the Simple Pleasures of Life. I’m too busy with the Complicated Pleasure 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 if you’re carrying one of the grocery 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 you learn to feel useful. Well, I think the important thing is you learn to *be* useful. So 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 help with supper. In fact, you can help with breakfast and lunch, too. In fact, you’ll be most welcome to actually *make* breakfast, lunch, and supper. I’ll be so delighted, so grateful, I’ll even offer to help.

5. SICK

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 had had to go in that day he would’ve licked it. And I would’ve licked it if I hadn’t had to go teach Partial Differential Equations at Drexel. Even with a sick kid in the house, we’d’ve licked it. If things were the way Wages for Housework thinks they should be, we’d be given our choice of free private nurse and housekeeper or free stay at a family convalescent home. We wouldn’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, 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 the kids take a message?

If I talk, what I have might develop into bronchitis, like two summers ago. And I'm supposed to read poetry over the radio next Tuesday plus teach my course plus my Math Anxiety 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. "Is this yours?" "Is this mine?" "Are we goin' to Gran'ma's?" "Huh? Huh?" He knows I can't talk. "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 play with all the other kids?

When one member of a nuclear family gets sick, the others have no choice but to also get sick. We *must* contract each other's germs. And we must care for one another. 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 one another's germs.

The laundry's piling up. Likewise dust. Likewise the kids' clutter. We 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 set of all sets which are not members of themselves. The family that cannot take care of itself.

Should I write a story about a sick mother? It would be a Kafkaesque deal, maybe something like my story, "The Eternal Baby," about a beyond-toddler who refuses to be toilet trained. This story could begin, "I don't understand. They KNOW I can't talk. I don't know why they keep asking me things."

The kids keep coming into the mother's room, playing on her bed, jumping on her back. She can't talk. She told them that, whispered a whole explanation, several mornings ago. The effort set her coughing futilely for ten minutes, then lying rigid all that morning in fear and sweat.

If she talks she'll get sicker. Not only for her own sake but for her children's 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 have come to get us by now. Better yet, if she was really sick she'd be in the hospital. The kids come rapping at her locked door. Remember, she can't talk. She can't scold them, explain to them, threaten them. 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, "Oooo, 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 simply croak help. Or she can reach the point where they have to hospitalize her. I can't decide how to make the story end. For political reasons and 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 have to do." I really don't know how to make it end. I was thinking about having her up and leave, like "The Eternal Baby" mother. But where would she go? Remember, she's sick. She can't talk. *How* would she go? I truly 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 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 by giant hands or the patter of little feet.

6. THE TREE

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: "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.' Make 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.'"

So now we're 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."

7. 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 t' 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, and I’m going to the part with the speeches.”

”Oh good!” exclaims 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 matter-of-factly and she smirks.

After awhile the walk seems forever. “Is it time to eat yet?” I’m hearing, and “When’re we gonna get there?” Achilles is never gonna reach that tortoise nor are half distances ever gonna get negligible. Still, eventually we arrive, the kids settle in the day care room downstairs, and I settle in the semi-darkened room with the movie that the Women’s Health Collective is showing.

It isn’t long, though, before I spot a familiar face in the doorway. Uh-oh, ‘way too familiar. It’s none other than Marielle Joy Cohen, my first-born child, and she’s with a young woman with whom she seems to be on very good terms. As the two walk towards me, I see she’s also got one of those mischievous looks on her face.

“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? Inside I’m fuming. First of all, I bargained for full-time day care. How dare they interrupt me? Secondly, I bet 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 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, like crying when I first brought her in the morning. But never of changing her mind midcourse and “missing her mommy”. Some kids, I suppose, do this but Elle never did. Sure, I realize there’s always a first time. And moods change. And I’ll admit to off-days. 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. 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.

How dare they interrupt me? Are mothers never “safe” from their children? Are they always on call? I thought I’d gotten over it, feeling this way. 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.

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, and she’s good and quiet. After the movie I bring her back downstairs, or rather *she* brings *me* downstairs (saying she “misses the day care”), and I go back to the conference. On the way, though, I spot another too-familiar face in the doorway.

Oh no, I groan. It couldn’t be. It just couldn’t. Yes it could, Arin this time. Oh no.

Now, Arin’s not talking much yet. He *couldn’t* have said “I miss my mommy”. 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”. 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 young spots his mommy she can never get rid of him without a scene. He’d be clinging to me forever, 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 whether he missed 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.

8) THE OUTING

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”. Jeff does it just as often, when I’m doing something “important”. Certainly our family is non-sexist enough and certainly I’m not being exploited.

Why, then, do I *feel* exploited? It’s not only that I’m annoyed, not only that I’m tired, maybe bored; not only that I feel like buying a T-shirt that says “I’d rather be writing”. I just don’t happen to feel in the mood for an outing with the kids. And 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 maneuvers the stroller up or down the curb or onto an elevator. He doesn’t get 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 feel 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 smile at *him*. And he doesn’t feel their expectation that his mood be a happy one when and because he’s with kids. Nor does he have Kafkaesque worries that some photographer will catch him looking at the baby and not smiling, He doesn’t get crazy and say things that he doesn’t say when he’s home – 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 ever feel any of this. Not even once has he felt as uptight as I do right now. Honestly, if Elle asks “Can we get more ice cream?” one more time 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 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 workshop leader. And then she says it. “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 writer, see, and I also like to 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.

I'm sure no one ever said that to *Jeff*. "Bet they keep you busy." No one, on the streets or anywhere else, assumes kids keep a man busy. Not *that* busy. And that's why it's easier for men everywhere to watch kids. It's because of the image men have out there in society. Namely, they know everyone else knows they're only slumming.

Feminist-political literature says expectations play a huge part in people's behavior, and that myths propagate themselves. So it's hard for people assigned to certain roles not to play those roles. From "the star treatment" to tracking in schools to "bet they keep you busy". Yeah, since everyone thinks they keep me busy – meaning *too* busy -- maybe they do. The whole thing just makes me nervous.

9. MY SISTERS

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 during the 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. "Yiya, 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 later if I don't. Or because of mother guilt. "I hope you don't mind if I oogle over him like this," I say, "but I haven't seen him all day."

"Oh no, of course not," 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-committal-ness 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 once 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 myths." Both Wendy and Lynda had nodded, but I wasn't sure I had proved it to *them*.

So right now, as the workshop is about to begin, 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," I chant to myself. "Arin's not me. 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. But now Jeff walks over and sits down in one of the chairs near uis. “Arin, you don’t REALLY want Wendy to jump out the window, do you?” he asks.

“U-HUH,” Arin answers. And I refuse, absolutely refuse, to treat Arin any differently from if Wendy and Lynda weren’t here.

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

“Oh, I see,” explains Jeff to Wendy. “He want you to jump out the window so he can rescue you.” And I thinking, I don’t give a damn why he wanted her to jump out the window. 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 mothers 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.

10. PEOPLE WHO JUST LOVE KIDS

Elle and I are sitting in the deli downstairs waiting for our breakfast specials. Jeff and Arin are upstairs packing a few books; we've ordered breakfast specials for them, too. "Hiya, Buddy," calls Elle, to yet another person in the building whom she knows and I don't. Elle and Arin have mentioned Buddy a few times. I think he works at the bar; sometimes he gives the kids quarters.

So I look up and there's Buddy, about six feet of him, maybe 55 years, 200 pounds. And I just have a feeling he's one of 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.

"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. (He has not said "hello Father".)

"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 don't like being 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," says Buddy, "give Mother a hug. Give Mother a biiiig hug."

Now, why do I just hate this? Why does it make me feel degraded? It's the tone in his voice, for one thing. I'm pretty sure I'm not imagining it. It's as though he's making fun of the whole idea of motherhood. As though he's satirizing it, as though he thinks he's above it.

"Ja go swimming today?" Buddy nudges Elle.

"Uh-uh," answers Elle.

"Hey" – turning to me (and not Jeff) – "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."

Now, this *you know* I'm not imagining. "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, albeit with less impact, there is a certain *class* of people who just-love-kids and who also just-hate-mothers.

For this class of people there's some logic to this. If you love children, you want to protect them from their enemies, people who spoil their fun., and who might cause them to be occasionally "bad". After all, 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, or “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” (and not the father’s).

So I’m smiling wisely but sadly, and this is one of those times when I’m not gonna fight it. I’m not in the mood this time. So I simply say, “We’re moving, and our kitchen is all packed up.”

But a minute later I’m no longer smiling wisely but sadly; I’m frowning wisely but sadly.

11. THE FEMINIST THEATRE COLLECTIVE

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

“Hi, Marion,” says Paula as she walks toward us, 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 further 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. “Well, 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 our 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.” I also think about how he looks when Elle puts him in a dress and calls him Susie.

Paula is still squatting. “Hey, Elle, wanna be in our show?”

“U-huh.” Elle is still grinning. And I’m feeling really proud. So far, I’m thinking, I did it just right. Not only non-sexist child-rearing but non-*hetero*-sexist child-rearing. And not only feminist but *radical* feminist. And these radical feminists are obviously happy with the job I did.

While Paula and Elle delight in each other’s attention, I wander around. “This isn’t the usual Painted Bride décor, is it?” I ask sarcastically of another one of the performers. I mean, there’s paper scotch-taped all over the walls and doors, bearing messages like “children should talk in school as much as possible” and “housewives have the right to decide who rapes them.”

“Oh 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. Elle, meanwhile, 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,” Paula says.

“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 is beginning to drift in. I’m glad, and partly relieved, 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 against 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, until they arrive on stage. “I am the lesbian separatist,” pronounces Diedre. “I am woman loving woman, independent of men, forming a beautiful woman-culture.”

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 my babies? Oh, I do see the importance of political, universal feelings, but 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 mimics. “I’ve ALWAYS been liberated.” That I get. She’s touched off my funny bone and my laugh is a belly laugh. Paula now comes to fetch Elle, who gladly dances with her about the room as 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 thing like that,” and she smirks.

Suddenly the spotlight is on the central core of Rites of Women – Dian, Kathy, and Monica. “Hey gang,” calls out 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 Point Academy.” “Far out!” goes Monica. “Yep, we’re gonna get t’ perform for the wives at West Point.”

“Omigosh, what’ll we hit ‘em with?”

“What about Rites of Passage?” “Yeah, that’s good. Let’s start form the beginning, from the birth of woman.” “Okay, let’s try,” Kathy gets on bottom, kneeling over next to Dian, Monica on top. They form a pyramid and Dian calls out, “What’re we doing, anyway?” We all laugh. “It feels good,” hums Monica. Ya hafta know her.

And so the organic theatre grows, is nourished, reaches out. By the time for it to wane Rites of Women is sitting around a fire of candles. “I have a dream,” says Kathy. “I have a dream of women – women, woman, wommin, womon..” Elle thrusts into my hand a picture she’s drawn. “Give it to Paula,” she tells “YOU give it to Paula,” I suggest. “I’m scared to,” she says. “Oh, it’s okay,” I tell her. “Go ‘head.”

Diedre 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.

“I am one with the earth mother,” Paula begins, and she ends with “Diedre, Paula, earth, Diedre, Paula, earth, Diedre, Paula...” “Ummm.” Murmurs around the fire. Then “who

else has a dream?" calls out Monica. Silence. "Who else has a dream?" she repeats. "Give us your dreams," soothes Diedre.

"I have a dream," says Barbara. "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," Elle says.

"That okay," says Paula. "I have a dream," calls out Elle. Everyone laughs, just loudly enough. "What's your dream?" several ask.

"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, Elle," 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,” they insist, “c’mon.” “Uh-UH,” finishes Monica. No, she definitely doesn’t want to share that dream.

“Okay,” they finally conclude. “Who else has a dream?” Silence. “No more dreams?”

“I have a dream.” This from the far right corner. “I dreamt I wrote a book and it won a Pulitzer Prize.” Uh-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.” General silence of less than satisfaction, then “Any more dreams? Visions? Anything else you’d like to share?” But the silence is now permanent. It might be anarchy theatre, I’m thinking, but the audience knows what the teachers want. After the performance Barbara, Paula, and Elle come up to me. “She’s 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 these lesbian separatists are accepting Elle, and therefore me as mother. Soon, 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. “Thanks 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 that 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, I seem sisterly. 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 achievement. For I contributed Elle to the performance. I contributed the monster dream.

12. ARIN ON THE ELEVATOR

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 smile-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.

Un-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 what 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 GOD!!!" 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 reat 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 wait 'til you're a mother," I shout to her, "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 any more. I'm speaking calmly but loudly. And the woman – she's walking with her friends towards her door and will quickly disappear. As I'd predict, 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 sense 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, 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 gotten back and gotten Arin."

"But no one was holding the door for me," I say. "Oh, 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, suppose 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

supposed 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 particular 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.

13. MORE POLITICS

It's happened. The jig is up. Eventually, we knew, it would have to be. Yep, it's happened. Edie's moving out of town. After six years of watching our kids, sometimes overnight and weekends – just three blocks away, available all hours of any day, "I just don't feel RIGHT unless there are lots of kids around", she says – kids of all sizes, shapes, ages, colors, abilities, disabilities -- 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 Street – Child Care Center Program. "Dear Parents. Child Care can play a very important role in your family life. 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 multi-visits and parent-teacher conferences in the plural. 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 together.

“DO YOU KNOW ABOUT OUR INTAKE PROCEDURE?” They must have paid a peptalk artist a lot of money 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. [The caps, by the way, are theirs.] 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 “keep calling us” smacks to me of “keep begging us”. Yes, I can detect clearly the subtle nuances of power.

“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 children so that we can talk freely and comfortably.”

I remember the first time we went to meet Edie. She, Jeff, I, Elle, three-year-old Debbie, seven-year-old Chrissie, one dog, and two cats sprawled out 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 call if you want,” Edie had replied, “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 a kid to get used to the Center, and for me to see how they'd treat my kid at the Center. It wouldn't be much extra trouble for the teachers. It wasn't *any* trouble for Edie.

This kind of one-step reasoning seems to be pretty common 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 as they do to the kids – namely, down.

"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 you 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 crap was discussed in the first interview?

Anger and powerlessness are getting to me. I continue reading. "At the time a child enters the Center, we ask for verification of his birthday, vaccinations, and immunizations."

Damn it, if a kid visits a friend or a playground, she doesn't need to present a vaccination verification. Nor did Edie require one.

"Entering a new place with strange people is a big step for a young child." Damn it again. So any mother returning to work for the first time in years and trying desperately to feel 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.

“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 (those 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 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.

“DO YOU SEE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN A CHILD’S ATTENDANCE AND ADJUSTMENT? The Center is open from 7:00 AM to 6:00 PM. So that every child can feel a part of his group and get the most out of Child Care, it is important that he be 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 AM, and leave no earlier than 3:00 PM. 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 AM. Arin arrived around noon. And every month or so Elle, who since first grade has been going over a friend’s after school, 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? 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? First, it seems, they make the centers over-stimulating, 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, requests for a glass of water, and exciting news that four-years-old Chrissie was teaching her the alphabet, 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 invited to sit at the table too. 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 places, like apartments or 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 very concerned about kids staying *at home* with *non-working* parents for far longer than nine hours a day? How come no one talks about how over- or under-stimulating that might be?

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. Who knows? 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. 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.

14. THE TERRIBLE FIVES

"No matter what you do," he informs me, "I'm not going to change."

Such power he has. Such privilege. He can vomit whatever I feed him, fall whenever I prod him, scream whenever I touch him, die whenever I slap him, (For yes, I do slap him. I have power too, such as it is, and such as I unwisely use it.) And, yes, on the bus he can call out, for all to hear, "I hate all black people." (And yes, I call out, "Honest, honest, I didn't teach him that. I taught him the opposite of that. He's just trying to embarrass me." To any avail? I have no idea. Nobody even says anything.)

Terrible, terrible, 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 un-reasoning. I've tried affection and I've tried anger. And yes, I've tried ignoring, that's what I tried in the first place.

I've tried "The Little Prince" and "Grownups 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". 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 "Ha 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 grown up you'll see that there are other theories too." And I've tried "remember two hours ago when you asked whether I hated you? Well, I didn't then but I do right now."

Yes, gleaming, glaring night. "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 say or do.

He's the devil. He's a discontinuity. He's that kid on Twilight Zone. If we 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. He'll wind up owning us, king of the kitchen and lord of the living room. If he stares at a knife, we'll bleed.

Yes, the terrible fives. And this time I think in terms of family therapy. But when I imagine it, 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 never mean the favorite so don’t accuse me of that. I just mean he was the only whose birth day I heard. Elle had to be resuscitated and Bret was Caesarian, with me asleep, and Kerin died.

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

Yes, boiling night. Boiling, 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 aroun’, 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, I knew-he-could, I knew-he-could. But I didn’t know he would.

15. WHAT DO MOTHERS WANT?

I wanted Elle-at-eleven to Find Something She Really Wants In Life, but I didn’t want what she found 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 dind’t want ner 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, El, 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 continue, about to repeat some things I've been saying over the years, "I know how you feel. 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," Elle 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 modeling?" 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 women 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 like that. They'd all – well, most – kill babies in order to make more money. And I really don't want you helping out those kinds of companies."

Elle smirks. "You're pretty but you're not glamorous." I smirk back. "If you'd cut your hair," she continues, "just a little, 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 try not to show Elle-at-eleven the full extent of my anger and disappointment. I try to realize that she's still learning, trying things out, feelings, questions... Thank Goodness I'm not facing her at the time, otherwise she'd see that look and that look might scare her.

What I do 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 begin. "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 is this: They just weren't used to it. Besides, I'm sure there are lots of heterosexual couples

who don't have children, either because they can't or because they don't want ot. When people love each other it's not in order to have children. Besides, I wonder whether there are some gay couple 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 thinking maybe I did get to her but I'm deeply hurt, and personally offended, because I do identify with gay people, because of what I said about being a woman mathematician – in fact, I too have been called "queer", 'way back in seventh grade, by those two boys sitting to my left. I was, I am, a freak. I am "un-natural" and I was kind of hoping Elle would be too.

I'm hoping some of my arguments will sink in by the time she's grown. For now, though, wriggling a tiny dress over her latest Barbie, she just asks, "Mommy, will you snap this?" And I do.

16. TARA'S MOTHER

It's 10:30 AM. I'm all dressed and washed up. I've finished taking Arin over to 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 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 at a regular fulltime job? I bet they’d still call up MY office rather than the father’s.”

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

I’m not even feeling 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,” 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 Norman 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 – once 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, where 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."

17. WHAT DO THE BABY-SITTERS THINK OF THE MOTHERS?

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 a young woman with a child, neither of whom we'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 fun to PLAY with," she answers, 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 silently, when she turns her head for a minute to check on the kid she's baby-sitting. I'm not exactly sure why but her statement reminds me of some of Jeff's physics 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. They don't understand how great it can feel, being a mother, how intensely great and how ethereal and passionate the feeling can be. They don't realize that children are more than fun to play with. They don't know that giving birth or adopting and listening to the poetic

sometimes philosophical even scientific things kids so often say can inspire and enhance a mother's supposedly non-child work. 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. They also might not understand that motherhood is nothing to be ashamed of; in fact, they might be trying to pass for non-mother.

And yes, that might be because they're understandably scared. 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?) Does she have contemptuous pity for me?

What 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 teenybopper baby-sitter arrives. The mother hastens, conscientiously and supposedly a bit nervously, to clue the sitter in on whatever she should know. The gum-chewing teenybopper 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 too often accusing mothers of being nervous, of talking too much, things like that. But mothers *have* to do all the talking and being nervous because no one else does 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 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 teenyboppers often view their own mothers and maybe that's how they view all

mothers. They conveniently forget that mothers have given birth or adopted, have been romantic in at least that way.

Also, teenyboppers 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 all the same is what they do. And that can be hurtful to the mothers.

So now, sitting outside with Jeff and this sitter, who is not a teenybopper but is like one for our purposes here, I toss my head just as lightly as she just did 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?

19. THREE UNSOLVABLE PROBLEMS OF MOTHERHOOD

#1: Say I decide to make supper early for a change. Get the chicken on the stove, salad on the table, everything ready and waiting before the arsenic hour – ya know, me tired, kids bored, all hungry. BUT: Bitties smells the chicken. Or else he sees, hears, or senses me in the kitchen. And even if Jeff, Elle, and Arin are all around watching and playing with him, kitchen is where he wants to be. So I hear, first crying, then banging on the door. Then, if I decide to let him in, it’s not me he wants but the chicken. Which of course isn’t ready yet, not for another hour.

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. Any hour a mother starts cooking is, by definition, the arsenic house. That’s the first unsolvable problem.

#2: The baby/toddler is hanging or pulling on me and I say “I can’t hold you ‘til I finish writing down just this one line” or “When I’m through combing my hair we can leave.” But of course he continues to hang or pull. And 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 you're simply now able?

Do you explain, however meagerly, or do you 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?

3: The other day a childless friend came over to us in the square. She raced over to the stroller, all excited. "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 answered, "Sometimes things happen WITHOUT our letting them happen." Like Rip van Winkle, maybe it happens anyway, even if you don't drink the wrong potion, 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. 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, logically 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; I call it 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 or get us to blame ourselves. I'm sure I'm not the only mother who sometimes feels, at least subconsciously, that if only she started supper earlier, if only she were more assertive a disciplinarian, 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- nor under-, at all times.

Secondly, these three problems of motherhood are not *really* unsolvable. They're unsolvable only within the context of society's status quo. Put more politically, there is no individual solution; there are only collective solutions. And what they boil down to is some sort of redistribution of both the responsibility and the joy of children. Toddlers should not be within smelling range of the chicken before it's done, which just might mean that somebody besides the mother should be the one making the chicken.

No, this isn't Erma Bombeck. One editor thinks it is. About these motherhood essays he 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 refuse to be black and the solution to sexism is not that people should refuse to be women. Still, John Stuart Mill said "Dissent is the prelude to revolution." And maybe humor, including Erma Bombeck, is the prelude to dissent.

Still, not Erma Bombeck.

20. SORRY NOW

My veins are bubbling. My blood is reddening. 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 need 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’re 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. 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. Babytalk-magazine-type poem, poem that warns, poem 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 all the 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, 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 its 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'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 Realize now.

FOOTNOTES

To #16: Less than 10 years later Jeff DID get sick, VERY sick, chronically sick with multiple sclerosis, so sick that it did indeed put my own life in danger (the kids' lives too). And yes, there weren't answers, or perhaps there were more than one answer. 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 verbal and financial abuse, I left the marriage. Perhaps writing that particular "story-essay" helped me, and ultimately the kids, in some way.

To #17: Ten years later I would write a poem called "What do the home health aids think of the well-spouses?"

