ON GROWING UP

"My daughter encounters social structures with a sense of female entitlement and is cheered on by a raucous chorus of uppity women"

TWO LITTLE GIRLS CHAT IDLY in the back seat of my car. Sara, my bright-eyed, lanky 5-year-old daughter. Jessie, her "big cousin," of the blonde ringlets and straightforward manner. Girl talk is in the air. Intense discussion about neon-yellow socks. Out of the blue, Jessie poses a question. It jolts me from distraction. A lot hangs on how my daughter answers this question, for me. Blithely unaware that her query raises the most murderous issue of her parents' generation, Jessie asks, "What's the difference between boys and girls?" "Boys only wear one earring," Sara replies.

I smile. A triumphant smile. Nearly two decades of feminist theory and political action and, unconsciously, my daughter hands me an icon attesting to the distances we have travelled. What would I have said at her age? That boys are bigger, smarter, stronger? Still, there has been a price. Feminism is wonderful as an ideal, but putting it into practice has been quite another matter. Sara's father and I brought her into the world fully expecting to raise her in an intact family; she grows up instead in two households.

The newspapers bleat statistics about the breakdown of the nuclear family, but let me tell you that statistics give no inkling of what it means, on a personal level, when a family breaks down. It has more to do with taking a deep breath and walking into your child's cheery yellow room, where she is drawing with magic markers at her desk, to tell her that her world is about to cave in. It involves searching the cupboards at bedtime for one of her father's ties because only by clutching this precious relic of his can she make it through the night. It means drawing her near when she sees two beaming parents with their newborn and asks, "Do you think *they* live together, mommy?"

Shortly after my husband and I separated, an uncle whom I adore called to express his regret. He has watched several marriages in our extended family come apart, so he was inured to the news when it was announced, but the words he spoke that day have haunted me. "Wendy," he said, "you know how fond I am of both of you. I'm very sad about this. If this decision will make you happier, then, I guess, it's for the best. But I don't understand you kids today. I don't understand what it is that you want."

Something better, I want to say. Something more just. It hasn't been as clear for us as it was for you. We came to marriage with a stubborn vision in our heads that our lives might include more choices than our mothers'. That we might make relationships of true equals. For a moment, I consider saying these things, but I don't. He will not understand. Sometimes I have trouble understanding them myself.

I am 6, waiting with my mother at the airport for my father's return from a business trip to New York. He travels a lot, my father; I miss him when he is gone. He comes back, not only with trinkets and pretty dresses for my two sisters and me, but also with stories, captivating stories that tell of the places he has been. I press my nose up against the glass door, anxious to spot him debarking. When he does, I break free of my mother's grasp, burst through the door and race out to the tarmac, where I leap into his arms. "Wendy," I hear my mother calling worriedly behind me. "Be careful. Come back." But I pay no attention. Fathers have thrilling adventures; mothers wait patiently at home for them to return. It is in my father's world that I, at 6, long to be.

I am 17. Throughout high school I stand near the top of my class. The year I graduate I win the staff award for best all-round student, and an entrance scholarship to university. None of this matters to me, however, as much as the gap I feel for what I haven't been able to pull off—getting a boyfriend. I would trade all of these successes in a minute for the sweet thrill of showing off to envious girlfriends at my locker the ID bracelet of just one vaguely presentable guy. I can remember sitting at home one New Year's Eve, watching the ball drop in Times Square, thinking what a piece of shit/ *Continued on page 54*

BY WENDY DENNIS

tent invisibility in society. In other words she will feel like a feminist. And—when she has the time—she may act like one too.

As long as childcare workers—surrogate mothers—are paid less than dishwashers, it's ridiculous to talk about the new "status" of motherhood. It will take mothers who refuse to sacrifice either their fierce need to be mothers—with time to *enjoy* their kids, not just cope with them—or their "life" (whether that means a career, or simply the sense of doing important work as a mother) to change the rules. The real challenge to feminism is reconciling work with motherhood. No matter how many nannies a working woman hires, no matter how neat her Day-Timer is, it must strike her, sooner or later, that such a life can be *managed*, but it seems little more than an administrative coup. At the end of the working day, she can say, "Well, at least we're all alive." If she can survive the first several years of motherhood without losing a promotion, her marriage, her sense of humor, or her satisfaction as a mother, she counts herself lucky—no ground was lost. To actually *thrive* in such a situation—to indulge herself as a mother, or in her career—is impossible. To be a parent is to cut corners.

Do we see society bending over backward to help the family? Hardly. Our own particular government, for instance, tried to pretend that family-allowance benefits were somehow not part of the economy, and therefore should not be indexed. Do we see employers putting daycare facilities in the workplace? The very idea smacks of socialism. Do we see companies giving paternity pay or in any way acting as if fathers have an important role to play at home? Not that I have heard of.

In fact, despite all the media mush about the new visibility of maternity these days, I can't see any deep or meaningful changes in the way society views the whole feat of childbearing and childrearing. (The controversy over midwives is a case in point; women are still not deemed capable of ministering to laboring women.)

Motherhood, for most women, is, as it always has been, a lesson in personal and cultural self-effacement. Mothers exist intensely inside, but not "out there." (Fathers who are mothers will know what this means.) With two-career couples, the nuclear urban family simply doesn't work, no matter how deep the ties that bind. Obviously, this is not the fault of children, but of the way society still pushes children and the job of raising them to the periphery.

So the real changes—fourth-gear feminism—may only come when the postfeminist woman adds the job of motherhood to her other jobs. She discovers that it is a radical severance from everything she was; for a short period, she is cut adrift without her work, her former body, her sex life, or even full pay. She becomes an emotional helium balloon unanchored to any identity other than Mother. Some women, to be sure, enjoy dropping out temporarily, but what is odd is that sense of dropping *out*, not into the real world. If having babies isn't the real world—or at least part of it—then what is?

Of course, we may be going through a period of "motherism" as dogmatic as any other platform. But the only way for women to go ahead and be mothers, without taking a leave of absence from life, is to make children and the family more central to the way society functions. And I doubt that it will be ideas that launch these changes. It may simply be the experience of having a baby, and seeing the doors that open, and the doors that quietly shut. A woman may find herself sitting in a chair, probably at 4 a.m., probably with some part of her body aching. She looks at her new baby with limitless love and gratitude, and at the same time she may find herself thinking, "This isn't fair." And it isn't. Not yet.

On growing up

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it was to be a girl. If I were a boy, at least I might have a date tonight. Sure, I would have to risk rejection, but, for me, the *possibility* of rejection was less awful than the certain rejection that came with the powerlessness of having to wait by the phone.

I was so lousy at being a girl. I wasn't pretty in the way you had to be. I had short, frizzy hair when long, silky, iron-your-hair-on-ironing-boards hair was in. I had too many opinions and no talent at all for stifling them. The qualities that had stood me in good stead winning prizes, it seemed to me, were the very same qualities that were sabotaging my possibilities of getting a date. Occasionally, some real nerd would call to ask me out and my mother would say, "Go, dear, it's only for an evening. You might have some fun." And I'd always think, No, I can't go. It's torture. I'm going to have to pretend that he's riveting when he's boring and his jokes are dumb. But I did go, of course. One boy, any boy—a date—was better than no date at all. Finally, I gave up on being a girl and tried to be a boy instead. So I told risqué jokes in class and talked like a trucker, and wound up with a bunch of male buddies who thought I was terrific to consult when they were having problems with their girlfriends.

Then, of course, there was the whole knotty question of sex. The truth is, I wanted to do it. I know now that so did every other girl, but I didn't know that then, and it created some confusion, I can tell you. Every signpost in the culture around me indicated that I wasn't supposed to want to do it. Nice girls didn't do it. I heard boys brag about girls they had screwed in the back seats of cars, but no girl I knew ever bragged of being screwed in the back seat of a car. How to resolve these mixed messages?

At 20, I set off to hitchhike my way through Europe. I can assure you that my main goal is not to see the world's great art. Sex and drugs and rock and roll are in the air, and my interests lie in meeting some dark stranger. I wind up in Morocco with an Arab paramour and watch life go by from the rooftops of Fez. This is my sweet rebellion. At last, like my father, on big, noisy airplanes to faraway places. Free, powerful and alive.

I come home and get married, the following summer, to a nice Jewish boy. Foreign soil is one thing; at home I feel the tug of familiar rules. I keep my own name, and relinquish my aspirations. Somebody's got to do it. I have this crazy dream that I want to write; he wants to get a doctorate. There is no security in writing; we need hard cash to live. So I go into teaching, a nice vocation for a girl. No one forces me to do it. I do it myself, egged on by twenty-one years of female conditioning. The marriage doesn't last very long. It is nobody's fault. We are young. We want different things. When we part, I take with me, along with my share of the Dylan albums, a lesson learned. It is going to take more than a marriage to make me whole.

I give up on men for a while, and discover women. They had always seemed so dull to me before, so humorless, so silly. But suddenly all of these amazingly vital women appear out of nowhere, fulfilling their dreams. The books are coming off the presses fast and furiously, and I am reading them voraciously. I can remember staying up all night to finish *The Female Eunuch* and putting the book down and thinking, Oh my God. This is all so obvious. Why didn't I think of this before?

Then, all those hostile years, prowling the landscape, both guns out of the holster, poised to pick off the enemy. It's all *their* fault. *They* did this to us, the bastards. We have discovered a Truth, and it is now our job to spread the word, thus retooling the entire world, and the men who run it, by tomorrow. I am reading, around this time, Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will*. It has such a stunning impact on me that I call the Rape Crisis Centre the day I finish it to volunteer my services. There are a lot of angry, passionately committed, poorly paid young women in that shabby College Street office, trying to mobilize their anger to move mountains. It is hard to get funds. Everybody is exhausted. At such times there is nothing to do but turn men into voodoo dolls into which we can viciously stick pins. Then I go back home and attend dinner parties, where all the women, including me, clear tables at which men are sitting, discussing life and art. If I make an issue out of this, I'm over-reacting, a hysterical female. All the other women seem to know their place. Those are the moments when I get so weary, so tempted to just give up, even though I know in my heart that giving up is not even an option any more. Inevitably I do make an issue of it though. I rise and deliver a stinging oration—Marc An-

tony-calibre material, I imagine—on the unfairness of it all. I fully expect the men to leap from their chairs, throw off years of conditioning, shout "I believe!" and dutifully begin carrying plates into the kitchen. Their eyes just glaze over. I want to hack them to bits with the carving knife. All of them.

I am on the cusp of 30. By this time, I have been living for a few years with a man I deeply love. I have not thought much about kids before, but, suddenly, almost overnight, it seems, I want them. By now, desperately unfulfilled teaching, I have quit to go to journalism school. In fifteen dizzying, exhilarating, exhausting months I throw myself into my courses, remarry, move into a first home, give birth to a baby and begin a demanding second career as a freelance writer. I am a woman of the '80s. I can have it all. I soon discover that there are a few bugs to be worked out trying to be a woman of the '80s.

First of all, this business of a marriage of equals. Through this period I keep reading about relationships that are supposed to be 50-50, but I look around me and do not *see* anybody living in a truly equal relationship. In most of the marriages I observe that last and work, men are being forced to make certain accommodations, but they are not dividing themselves in the same way that women are. I do not see men clustered in animated circles at parties obsessively trading the nanny stories. The stories bore them. They are not the ones living with that raw panic when support systems break down and the boss still expects you in.

A close friend of mine who by day is a corporate vice-president and by night mothers two children and who, with whatever few gasps of energy she has remaining, tries to be a wife, is so strung out when I call her one evening that she bursts into tears on the phone. She has rushed home from the office that day, leaving before any of the men, because she's got a half-hour to bake a birthday cake for her daughter's party tomorrow and her daughter, being a kid, knocks over the flour and spills sprinkles all over the floor, and my friend goes nuts and starts screaming at her because all she can think of is that she's got to get this task finished before the next one hits, and the next one.

Such strains, and others, begin to take their toll on my own marriage. We each have our own problems and pressures. Our needs begin to clash. Loss of love is not the issue here. We are just two ordinary, decent people trying to live together in a world where all the rules have changed. In the only ways familiar to each of us, we try our best. Oh how we try. There is a lot at stake here. But we are speaking different languages. In the end, we cannot invent the dialogue to bridge the distances between us. I can remember watching an episode of *Hill Street Blues* in which Captain Furillo, who has just separated from his second wife, a tough, smart, ambitious public defender, is out on a dinner date with a female cop. He is in pain, trying to make sense of why his marriage has come apart, and he delivers a line that rivets right through me. It seems to crystallize a truth so many of our generation have had to face. "As my wife says," he comments sadly, "these days, just because two people love each other, it doesn't mean they're going to make each other happy."

My life now is not without its burdens and its pains. It is far from an ideal way to live. But I think it is a better way to live than the way so many of our parents did, staying together because they had to, out of financial need, or for the kids. Feminism taught me that with selfhood come choices. Some of them have been thrilling; some, tough and awful. Recently it struck me that I don't think much about being a feminist any more. I am one. I am much more comfortable being a woman than once I was, freer now to enjoy the simple, time-worn pleasures of being female, such as having some fun with fashion, baking cookies with my daughter. I live no longer by the text. The precepts are wired in. I have worked strenuously to absorb those that seemed to fit and to reject those that didn't. Nor am I obsessed any longer with remodelling men, for their own good, in my holy image. I do what I have to do. So must they. Maybe one day we'll manage it together. Maybe.

Scenes from the present. It is a sunny afternoon. I pick my daughter up at school. Her teacher greets me at the playground gate. "This has been a special day for Sara," she tells me proudly. "She went farther on the monkey bars than any of the boys." I smile. I recall winning a teacher's praise for printing inside the lines. After school, she dresses as Madonna, and comes downstairs to dance a wonderfully sensuous woman-dance in the living room. Together we sing and dance and laugh and I am thinking, How different my daughter's world is from the world I knew. There she struts, rife with the power of her femaleness, my little Eve redeemed.

Yet she inherits a world that still, by and large, belongs to men. They write the laws that she will live by. The boys she outdistances on the monkey bars now may pass her in salaries later. What will happen to her, I wonder, when she discovers that, in this world, men still hold the better cards? Unlike what I experienced, she encounters the social structures not only with a sense of female entitlement, but also cheered on by a raucous chorus of uppity women. I suspect it's going to be tricky keeping this girl down on the farm. Where men will be when she is ready to embrace them, I cannot say. All I can do is wish her the judgment to distinguish those who will meet her on fair terms from those who will not.