

Real Emergency

In line at four-year-old Megan's nursery school registration, the J. Crew Moms intimidate me. They look confident, and I don't understand this, because I didn't know mothers found self-assurance in uniforms. And once again, I have to admit that, for me, the mothering business is complicated. Whenever I think I've figured out one of Megan's or Libby's stages, everything changes. The week when nursing Megan finally felt natural, she crawled away and said, "Cup." And this newest phase of mothering—wearing the correct clothing, making socially appropriate chit-chat, filling out a clipboard full of forms with legible intelligible information—scares me more than anything.

I've spent the past few years curled up under fluffy blankies on the sofa, watching the Little Mermaid, munching Cheerios, finger painting, playing dress-up, reading Goodnight Moon five hundred times, mothering me mothering them.

Nothing about that prepared me for this: standing in line with Perfectly Pressed Brushed Twill and Wide Waisted Corduroy. I shift Libby to my other hip and look down at my faded running shorts and pink high tops, and yearn for a camel-colored trench coat, honey shoulder-length hair that layers neatly at the nape of my neck, and a good navy blue Coach handbag. And Megan isn't dressed right, either. She's going through an all-pink I-wanna-be-a-princess stage. I let her pick out her own clothes, thinking it's good for her developing sense of self. But looking down at her old pink dancing tights, the seams racing up the front, her foofy tutu and her Malibu Barbie sweatshirt with the grape juice stain-streaking Barbie's hair, I worry that she looks like a neglected child. I search her outfit for something to redeem us, find fifteen beaded necklaces strapped around her neck in an out-of-date Madonna tribute. At home, they looked creatively Bohemian. Here they look plain weird.

In the grocery store sometimes, I stand at the citrus display and wonder how I'm supposed to know which type of orange to select. Sure, I know the difference between blood and tangelo, navel and Valencia, but why can't I just make a choice and move on? I watch other women with their lists punch through the store like professional shoppers, never stopping to question what they put in their carts. I tried to explain this to Brad, my Ivy-League-anesthesiologist-in-training husband, but before he could respond, his beeper beeped and he was off to a real emergency.

Megan tugs at my leg. "Can I get a cookie, Mommy?" She points at the cookies and juice beside the extra-curricular activity table. I heard the woman wearing a tortoise shell headband say the cookies were for later. "Not now," I say, using this woman's exact emphasis and tone, and Megan looks at me as if I've transformed into Gregor from The Metamorphosis.

I look down, find a couple of dog hairs stuck to my thigh. A woman buttoned into a navy blue permanent pressed blazer turns to me as if I'm supposed to strike up a conversation. My heart cramps my chest. I'm as afraid as I was in seventh grade, when we moved to the new neighborhood after my parent's divorce just before my mother's first breakdown, when I wore brand new straight-legged jeans the first day of school and the other girls all wore hip-hugging bell-bottoms and I knew I would always be different. No matter what I say to the woman in the blue blazer, it won't come out right.

That's when Libby, my two-year-old, does a back-dive out of my arms that raises my sweatshirt to expose my running bra and causes the clipboard and all the appropriate papers to fly and land in a disheveled heap at my feet. Then she beats her way straight to the cookie table and knocks the plate of Pepperidge Farm Pirouettes to the floor.

Megan tugs at my shorts. "Now can I have a cookie?"

I shrug and bend over and sweep the papers and dust mites and a sticky wad of something into my arms, then follow Megan following Libby. Beneath the table, I decide I can go right out and buy Megan muted clothes and prudent shoes and a miniature L.L. Bean backpack. I can. But that won't change the fact that I'm heading into a phase of mothering that requires skills I might never possess.

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The next morning, I can't find anything that matches. The house offers only left-footed shoes and clashing socks. By 10 a.m., I give up and tell Megan we're taking the day off and plop beside her and Libby on the couch to watch the mermaid stand up to the sea witch again. I love skipping school and cuddling on the couch. Why can't mothering stay as simple as this?

Just as the sea witch is rising up into an overwhelmingly monstrous state and before the Little Mermaid manages to escape, my mother calls to announce she's found God at the Great White Evangelical Church in Kalamazoo.

"I can't take this right now," I say, and I place down the phone. I can't deal with her games, her lunacy. Not that I've ever enjoyed it in the past. See, she knows how to rope me in. Funny and smart, she gets the basic absurdity of existence. What gets me is she's probably the reason I can't help but feel life's pretenses. I told her once she would have made a good eccentric friend—because friendship, unlike daughterhood, would allow me to keep my distance from her rope, which still rises like a snake and twists around my neck. I know about necks and cords from my experience with Megan, who was nearly strangled to death during childbirth by our umbilical cord.

Last I saw Mother, she came to help with Megan days after Megan's birth. Mother insisted on taking a bath and slipped on a bar of soap when she tried to step out of the water. When I heard her scream, I ran upstairs to lift her out of the tub and dry her and assess the damage, and Brad came into the bathroom and said, "What the hell's going on here? Claire's just had a c-section. She's not supposed to do any lifting."

Mother glanced at him and snarled. "You lack compassion, young man. Not a good thing in a health care provider. Nor a husband." She glared at me.

Then Megan began howling. I turned toward her voice and headed to the door—and Mother fell again. I guess I hadn't realized how hard she'd been leaning against me. Brad waved me out the door. Once I was

in Megan's room, I heard Mother shriek and Brad calling her a crazy melodramatic manipulative something. Then she told him he was not the man I should have married, and that since I'd married him, I'd become uptight and cold and shallow. I was nursing Megan, or trying to—she was a very fussy nurser—when I heard Brad say, "That's it. You're going home." Mother said, "But my plane doesn't leave until Sunday." Megan lost my nipple and struggled to latch on, and then I allowed myself to lose myself in nursing.

Then I heard the front door open. "In the cab, Jane," Brad said. Mother let out a curdled scream, "I *hate* you, you Nazi."

Mother has been drowning my whole life. She made dying her reason for being, which reflected itself in chronic depression and attempted suicide. She earned a Ph.D. in Existential Philosophy to understand better, but that nearly killed her, too: massive debt, too many years of academia, countless applications for philosophy professor jobs that didn't exist. And after that, the real health problems began; just before she turned forty, a doctor found a suspicious hematoma on the underside of her earlobe. "I always knew I'd die young, like Marilyn," she said. The nodule turned out to be benign. The year after that, her thyroid went so out of whack she gained fifty pounds. Pills stabilized that, but lately she's been getting EKG's every six weeks. She claims a heart can only take so much before it wears down.

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The following morning, Megan and Libby and I manage to find what we need and make it to nursery school on time. In the cubby room, I'm thinking about how together and organized I can be—and Megan's juice box falls out of her Barbie lunch box

"Did you know Barbie was originally modeled after a German pin-up doll manufactured to E-X-C-I-T-E men?" a mother asks me.

I want to say, "Now I understand my attraction." But when the mother picks up the juice box and refuses to hand it back to me until I promise I will consider the consequences of my actions and Megan bursts into tears and the mother looks at me as if I've pinched Megan to make

her cry, I lose my train of thought.

After school, we all play in the park. Megan and Libby run over to the monkey bars with such abandon I want to laugh and cry and thank God I can bear witness to the innocence of childhood. When Megan wraps her legs over the bars and flips upside down, the blood rushes to her translucent forehead, and I see how unique and determined she is—and, in that moment, nothing else matters. I think about how, since the first time I held her in my arms, I wanted only to love her the right way. How hard I've tried. How I've tried so hard to be unlike my mother, I can barely see myself anymore. I can only see Megan and Libby and milky breasts and Goodnight Moon and princess dresses and a love so big it embraces almost all of us.

I strap the girls in the running stroller and run us home, straight uphill. The harder I push, the more rapidly the girls lull to sleep. By the time I reach our front door, they're napping, and I'm clothed by sweat, and my ankles are sore. I think I should take up swimming, because all of this pounding on my limbs is exacerbating my pain: water, I know, is more forgiving than pavement.

That night, after I tuck the girls into bed, I draw myself a warm bath. I sprinkle in lavender oil and line the edge of the tub with candles. In the uncertain light, I make a life I assessment. A hard-working and faithful doctor for a husband. Two healthy children. Excellent financial prospects just around the corner. How can I complain?

I'm responsible, I realize all at once, for doing this mother-and-wife thing. I feel crushing weight on my chest. It's hard to breathe. I see Mother the day I found her in our tub when I'd been ten years old, her wrists slit, blood everywhere, head underwater, hair floating like seaweed. I screamed then—and pleaded, and extended my hand. Upright, she glared at me and said something about how hard it was for a mother to mother and live. Then I stared at all the shiny white tiles on our bathroom floor dotted with blood and thought, for just a moment, about how they would never come clean.

Now, inhaling lavender oil, I try to imagine how it might feel to

be submerged: water entering my nose and my mouth, water filling my lungs. The tub feels as if it's sliding up my back, and my head drifts down, and water smothers my face like a shroud I can't disclaim.

"Mommy?" Megan calls. "I had that bad dream again."

"It's just a dream, honey," I say, and I bolt upright.

"Can I sleep with you?"

I try not to consider saying no. "Go crawl in," I say. "Warm up my side. I'll be there after I dry myself off."

I hesitate, anticipating the chill of emergence. Then I hoist myself out of the tub and reach for Brad's robe. He's rotating through obstetrics this month, away most nights, alleviating other women's labor pains. I lift his robe off the hook and wrap myself in absorbent terry cloth and feel water trickle around my ankle bones and puddle at my feet. After drying myself thoroughly, I change into my satin nightgown and open the door and walk down the hall.

When I climb into bed, I knock How to Parent, How to Live the Life you Deserve, and Why am I Afraid to Love? off my bedside table and onto the floor. I stare at their open pages and think about how long I've worried that everyone but me seems born with instructions for life.

I peel back the comforter and find Megan curled into herself. I tuck myself beneath the sheet, then nuzzle the top of her head and hug her with all of my strength. The heat she generates decreases and increases with each breath, and these moments I understand.