



MOTHERHOOD

odd woman out

A mother feels alienated in the least likely place: her own home.

BY GENEVIEVE FIELD

For the first two minutes of my son's life, I may have been his favorite parent. After a quick, drama-free birth, the doctor placed him—screaming, gooey, writhing—on my chest. He relaxed immediately, sinking into me as if I were a feather bed and he'd just hiked 280 days to get to me. And then my husband, Ted, cut the cord, and my son was whisked away.

While I waited for Finn to get spruced up, I met my maternity-ward roommate. She was propped up in her bed, wearing a pink nightie, a pink robe, pink fuzzy slippers, and a pink hair band in her no-roots blond hair. A pink baby—a girl, I presumed—sucked at her breast. She glanced at my black kimono, then asked, "What did you have?"

"A boy," I said.

"Oooh, you are in for such a treat," she said. "Little boys *loooove* their mommies."

I'd been hearing this for months but had thought my friends were just trying to make

me feel better about the fact that I wasn't going to get my girl. I'd always wanted a girl—no guns, no trucks, no fuss, no muss, I'd joked to Ted. But my bias had deeper roots than that. Growing up, I was one of those shy, earnest A-student types that little boys love to torture. Years of intimidation at the hands of small male humans had left me, well, intimidated by small male humans.

I was sure I had put all this to rest, however, in the weeks before Finn was born, by which time I'd already fallen pretty hard for the spirited, bossy creature inside me. Maybe I was getting exactly what I needed after all.

My first major clue that our relationship wasn't going to be a cakewalk came just hours after our initial meeting. When I opened my robe and offered Finn sustenance, his body went stiff, his lips puckered shut, and I do believe he shuddered. It was a lot like watching Ted recoil from his most reviled food, the olive. Were my pheromones Finn's olives? It was a terrible thought, and I banished it from my

mind. Unwisely (I didn't yet recognize the sheer force of my son's will), I tried for the next six weeks to breast-feed. When I finally surrendered to the breast pump, Finn instantly seemed happier.

But no matter how much love I poured on him (was it too much?), he was still just the littlest bit wary of me. I did witness the pure worship that other boys' mommies had assured me was my right—but with *my* boy, it was for his dad. And no wonder. Their relationship was physical, rowdy, full of mischief, while ours—Finn's and mine—was reflective, gentle, full of books. As much as I love books, I didn't want to be a staid, play-it-safe mom; I just didn't know how to roughhouse with a baby. I didn't know how to roughhouse, period. Ted, on the other hand, was innately confident—he'd dangle the shrieking boy by one foot, toss him in the air like pizza dough, tickle him till Finn's laughter verged on hysteria.

Sometimes I'd try to join the melee, but I felt like a party crasher, the class geek throwing a damper on the cool kids' fun merely by showing up. So I learned to sit back and relax. I would accept my outsider status, take the high road.

Then I went back to work full-time, and Finn *really* made me pay. I felt like I'd been fired from motherhood by my very own son. No more reading Dr. Seuss with a German accent, no more delivering dinner via Playskool dump truck, no more shushing my child to sleep. He wanted Daddy, only Daddy. Ted was mostly sympathetic. "Don't take it personally," he would say. "You know it's just because my job lets me be with him more, don't you?" But once in a while, he'd imply that I was to blame: "If you're so worried about your relationship with your son," he jabbed once, when I had overslept and asked our nanny to make Finn's breakfast, "maybe you should try getting up in the morning to see him." Harsh.

One Saturday afternoon, I asked Ted if he would mind letting me take Finn to the park, just the two of us. "Are you kidding?" Ted said, already sprinting back to bed with the *New York Times* auto section.

"Daddy! Park!" Finn exclaimed.

"Actually, it's Mommy, park," I told him.

"Dadddeeeee! Park!"

It went on like that for a while, but I was determined. I strapped my son, kicking and screaming, into the stroller and headed into the sunshine. We have one of those strollers where you can turn the kid to look either at you or out at the world. It was turned back-

ward, and Finn stared up at me, scowling and sniffing. "Do you want to look forward?" I asked him. Affirmative. Trouble was, I hadn't used the stroller since we had switched out his infant seat for a bigger bassinet, and I wasn't exactly sure how it worked. When I tried to reattach the seat after facing Finn forward, there was no click. There was always supposed to be a click, I remembered from the manual, but it seemed sturdy—

"Pa-a-a-a-a-a-a-r-k!"

Fine, I thought. Just get him there and then fix it. God, I needed a smoke—no, I don't smoke, make that a drink. It was 11:30 in the morning, and I needed a drink. What was I doing, thinking I could raise my son on the weekends? Why was I even surprised?

It happened right in front of my eyes. The wheels hit a bump, and Finn and the stroller seat went flying through the air, landing face-down on the sidewalk. The shoulder straps—I hadn't tightened them! I think I screamed. I could sense people running toward us, cars stopping, as I picked up the bassinet, dread surging through my body. Then Finn screamed. He was alive. Neither of us stopped crying for at least an hour, but he was fine.

I learned one lesson right off the bat that day: "Always listen for the click means *always listen for the click*, dumb-ass." But it wasn't until recently, around Finn's second birthday, that I understood the greater lesson. Actually, it was one I thought I'd learned back in high school: "You can't will someone's love into existence. It *is* or it *isn't*."

Of course, I am Finn's mother, not his wannabe girlfriend, and his love for me is a fact of nature I can feel in my bones when I take a deep breath and stop *trying* to feel it. I do admit I find it deeply satisfying when that love is on display for all the world to see—as it was a few weeks ago, when we had a dinner party, and my little boy clung to my hip while I cooked one-handed. I even felt a twinge of happiness a few days later when, during a bout of stomach flu, Finn insisted on throwing up on *me*, being rocked in *my* arms. At moments like these, I know that the maddening distance I sometimes sense between Finn and me is nobody's fault, just life, and I won't let it ever get the better of us. And thus enlightened, I vow to never again compare our relationship to Finn and Ted's, or to measure how much affection I receive from either of them on any given day. They're just my boys, we're a family, and love is recyclable, anyway. ☺

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HIS LIPS
PUCKERED
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DO BELIEVE HE
SHUDDERED.