SPEAKING OF CHIDREN

***Barbara Holland***

*This extract is taken from Barbara Holland’s celebrated volume, Mother’s Day or the view from in here, published in 1980. This essay delightfully examines the idea of having more than one child and the consequent expenses of parents.*

One child is outnumbered. You can brainwash it. You can make it do what you want it to do, carry it to parties and toss it on the bed with the coats, lug it in a backpack through the Adirondacks, teach it to say “How do you do?” and pass the hors d’oeuvres. Plural children are a counter culture in the house. You and your husband are outnumbered. A creeping, irresistible tide of Lagos and Lincoln Logs and doll clothes and doll clothes and matchbox cars seeps into the living room and cannot be turned back. You no longer go to the New York for the weekend, you go to Disneyland instead, and dine at six instead of seven or eight. You pack up everything and move because schools are better somewhere else. You spend long hours in social converse with you would never otherwise have met at all, because your children know their children.

Relentlessly, year by year, you are pushed backwards, shouting helplessly, from your own life to theirs. Your own errands are wedged into time left over and after you’ve taken the children somewhere and brought them home again. When they get older, you’re lucky if you get to use your telephone one try out of six, with one child, you and your husband are still yourselves; you have merely acquired an extra thing, like a Yorkshire terrier or an electric toothbrush. More than one and you’re a family, and the piano keys are covered with jelly and whenever you try to talk to each other somebody says, “Who’s he? Do I know him? Why is she going to divorce him doesn’t she like him anymore?” and after a while you give up.

I have read that it’s terribly important to a healthy marriage that the wife set aside some quiet private time to chat with the husband preferably when she gets home from work, or they get home from work, just half an hour. Peace, privacy, a couple of martins, and “How was your day dear? Is the new man working out all right?”

I would like to get my personal hands on the people who keep suggesting this, and find out how I’m expecting to manage.

Now I want everyone to play quietly and nicely in your rooms for half an hour, while mommy talks to daddy.”

“I want to talk to daddy too.”

“Later, sweetie. Right now is going to be our private time together, and then later you can have private time with him, okay?”

“What are going to talk about?”

“Oh… I don’t know. Things. Now you play nicely and don’t interrupt us, all right?”

“What if it’s something important?”

“It better be terribly important.”

Peace. Privacy. The well-chilled martini.

“And how was your day dear?”

“Well, as a matter of fact-”

An ominous splintering crash overhead, and you both glance apprehensively at the ceiling. Silence.

“As a matter of fact, something rather interesting seems to be brewing. Scott was saying-“

Feet on the stairs. A child, and another child behind it.