

Mother

Estelle Shanley

Despite the unseasonable warmth of a February day, the child wheezes and rolls her head restlessly from side to side. Too sick to cry. Too tired to move, except for the perpetual roll of her head on the cotton sheet that has been changed twice in one hour. It is the instinctive movement that eases the pain of infected ears. A built-in hypnotic lullaby, the first indication that the small infant can do something by herself.

Temperature soars. Ice packs bear coldness and bring relief to the scalding skin. Outside, the early buds respond to sunshine and warmth, and the breeze holds promise and the taste of spring. Parents, new to the helplessness of a sick child, coax themselves out of doors for a walk, a talk, a drive. A respite away from the sickroom. A reprieve from the worry.

I rock. I bathe her. I hold the tiny hand that curls and clings a finger. I hope they come home. I hope they stay away long enough to rest their minds. I hope they return to a well child.

The voice on the telephone is her voice. I fake a make-believe vocal tone, mimicking a business caretaker, a stranger in the house. The mother is not here, please phone back later. The voice is strong, the tone efficient. The woman persists, her voice a blend of welcome and denial.

She knows, despite the years of our silence, that it is I, yet she is unable to say, "Is it you, my eldest daughter, who is now a grandmother?" We are trapped in an electronic moment, bonded by birth, separated for disagreements too old, too gray and muddled to explain. We are tied again, if only briefly, by this wheezing infant.

She talks. Questions about the baby. Comments about the weather. An update about the end to sunshine and the impending storm. She has prepared for its arrival, as always she has done. She has pulled "all the plugs" except for the television. After this she will sit in the dark, softened by the glow of TV, feeling full or feeling empty because she reached out to kin on a telephone line.

Thunder rumbles in the distance. Lightning streaks across the sky. I am unable to call her by name. I am afraid of its emotion. Like her, I am incapable of intimacy. Thunder rattles and interferes with the telephone. Static, more static, more lightening, and heavier thuds of thunder. I explain that earlier the sick child was bundled up and taken for a walk. Around and around a suburban block. One house the same as the other. Dumb place to walk. Nothing to admire except window curtains and the color of painted shutters. Meet the occasional person en route from back door to automobile. They smile, almost reluctantly. They exchange no words.

The air does good and breathing is less harried. The child, less clammy, less gray, smiles weakly and concentrates on the rhythm of a congested chest.

Across the static come the accusatory statements about the foolishness of a walk. Outside with pneumonia. Her tone is mocking and critical. The pulse quickens, the old wounds begin to throb. The doctor approved, I retort. The air is good, the weather then mild. There was no risk. The judgment was sound.

Appetite is discussed. The necessity to drink water to counteract the dryness of medication. The child refuses. Sugar in the water will make it better, the matriarch advises. I laugh. It is a fond sound. It draws her in. For a moment we bask comfortably in the suggestion of confiding, pitting ourselves against the new woman's generation.

Tea and honey, she suggests. No, I admonish, in tones less harsh than the admonishment from a daughter who is a new mother. It isn't done. Honey is unsterile. Not good for babies. She curses. Jesus Christ! Holy Mother of God.

I join her. We are in harmony as if in the Kyrie of Gregorian chant. Jesus Christ! How did we rear them? You, me. Me, her? Lightening again. We wait for the crackle to cease. Hang up, she says. We do not understand the danger of lightening through a telephone wire, but it's in the genes, this fear of electrical rays that scan the skies at random. We disconnect the thread of a wire that connected us momentarily. There may never be a connection again.

