

THE LAST GESTURE

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“How did you do it?” It’s a question frequently asked. A question to which there probably are no answers. No answers that anyone could lay out categorically as one would, say, how to make guava jelly or papaya marmalade (which I love to do to this day, now and then). Still it keeps cropping up, “How did you raise your kids?” If I had the answer, does anyone out there want to know? And the kids, grown up now, all five of them and self-directed adults, don’t they have a say in the whole business of growing up the way they did with the kind of mother that they did have—best keep quiet and let the years put the memories away.

Then there’s the other question: What do you think of motherhood? When it comes to that, I find myself even dumber. For motherhood is just something you go through with as little thought as possible, aside from all that it requires of your body, and afterwards, your time and any effort it might demand, whether you have ever thought of those requirements or not. Thinking back, the things one had to do or did were a matter of course, they just seemed to happen—from the tearing of the flesh in the motions of parturition, to feeding, to reshaping your body to create hollows where a body may cradle or finding a place on one’s shoulder where a head might rest, motherhood claiming all that it requires from you just like that, and you had no choice in the matter but to go ahead and act as instinct and intuition demanded. When all is said and done, all you have are random memories, and all it comes down to is the last gesture.

It’s a month late. The child is expected in October, and half of November is almost gone, I am still big as a house. I do not walk; I waddle. I cannot lie on my back. My center of gravity has shifted to my belly. The middle of my body bloats with the unaccustomed weight. Lying on my side, I sag like a badly stuffed sack.

Maybe you got the dates wrong, Tita Meding, my nurse aunt, tells me. I am seeing Dr. Ramiro on a weekly basis now. He palpates my belly, checks

the infant's head, and brings his stethoscope down to listen to the heartbeat. He nods his head and does not appear bothered. You're both fine, he tells me, the baby's head is well-engaged. Nothing to worry about.

So I go home and try not to think of anything. I attend to the tasks of the household. I go to market, buy fish, vegetables, fruit, stocking up the household for when I would stop doing all these for the Big Event. I am too uncomfortable and uneasy to read. I cook. Count the layette over and over. Recheck the small suitcase stuffed with the things I will bring when I go to the hospital. Nothing much else to do now but wait. On the 15th of November while tending the rice slowly cooking, I feel a rush of fluid down my thighs. It splashes on to the floor at my feet. It's here, I tell myself without panic.

It's now, I tell him, but there's no pain yet. He gives a slight nod. We eat lunch untroubled.

We go to the doctor's clinic, and he examines me for the nth time that month. Go to the hospital when the pains are coming in regular intervals, he tells me. In the meantime, go home. Relax.

I go home as he advised, put on a napkin to catch the drip, and go about the usual business of the household. I am relaxed.

Tita Meding comes to visit and tells me: You might dry up.

So what do I do? Is there a way to stop this leaking? She shakes her head. It goes on for two days.

On the third day, supper over, I feel the first twinges. An hour passes, and the pain is coming in regular intervals now.

Let's go, I tell him. It's time.

She arrives at dawn, the 17th of November 1970, beautiful and perfect, my first daughter.

While they are cleaning me up, I say to myself: You are complete now, you have become a mother. As they wheel me back to my room, I ask myself: What does it mean, complete? I feel for my last rib—it's still in the old place. My womb feels hollow. Complete, back to myself. Except for that little bit of flesh which had been torn from me out there in the nursery. I am all by myself again. I hear an infant crying. It must be cold. They'll be bundling her up soon so she'll be warm. From here on I'll have to be chasing after that little piece of myself. A piece of myself, I smile, hovering between sleep and dream. A little piece of myself had taken a life of its own. A will of its own, apart from mine. Something of mine, gone, taken away. Perhaps, perhaps I will never be whole again. Thus, I succumb to sleep.



Another time. The familiar pains arrive early at night just after dinner. He takes me to the hospital and leaves me there.

We've done this before anyway, he tells me before he goes. It's just a matter of getting it over with. Besides, he reasons, there's not much I can do to help. I've to work tomorrow. Some calls to make, a quota to meet.

No, I do not need his help, I tell myself. Yes, I can do this all by myself. In fact this is all mine to do. Go on, I tell him. But a voice in my mind wants to say: Please stay with me, at least wait with me. But he'll only tell me back: Such a waste of time. My performance rating, remember? They're always at my back for that.

So he goes.

I'm alone in my room. Not to worry, the nursing staff tells me. Just ring if you need anything. All night the pains come regularly, but without progress. At dawn the pains come in closer intervals. They time the pains and walk me to the labor room. Once there the pains space out again. So they walk me back to my room to wait some more.

Why does he have to work today? Well, you're having the baby, not he, stupid, I remind myself. I pace up and down my room hoping to hasten the pace of this slow birth.

Why is this taking so long, I ask the nurse as the hours progress to noontime. Dr. Ramiro arrives after lunch. He pokes me with his stethoscope. It's not ready yet, he tells me. More patience. He goes to his clinic to see more patients.

The pains come faster at past two in the afternoon. They wheel me at last to delivery. They strap me to the table, everyone in attendance. Push, push, the midwife assisting tells me each time the contractions come. But at the peak of one tremendous spasm, the doctor says, Hold it, hold it. The cord is coiled round its neck, he tells me. Three times. I've to hook my finger on it, or else he'll strangle. There, there. Now go, he urges me as a wave of pain engulfs me and the warm soft wet mass slides out of my womb. *Maldito*, Dr. Ramiro says, pleased with his accomplishment. You have a son, he tells me proudly, sounding almost as if he'd had a hand in its making.

It must be nearly four in the afternoon. The nurse tells me: The father's outside.

That's why it took so long, I think to myself, this child's waiting for his father. But I'm too tired to put it into words. Too tired. No time to think. I drift off to sleep.



Tita Meding comes to visit the next day and tells me, Maldito, repeating what the doctor said, and adds: They also tend to be sickly.

Medical fact? I ask her.

No, she says, just an old belief.

So what do I do to stop it?

Sumpaa na 'day, she tells me. Only a Bisaya would understand what this means. Tita Meding explains. Someone must buy him from you. It's a way of tricking the Invisibles ruling our life. Perhaps they envy you this child. They'd like to have him for their own. If somebody buys him from you, it means he isn't yours any more, maybe they'll let him be.

How much should I sell him for? Who will buy? She laughs. Even she does not believe her own story.

But this second child does get everything in the books: colds, fevers, bronchitis, asthma, measles, diarrhea, whooping cough, mumps, as though all these had been prescheduled for him, all, in his first two years of his life. Or if not, he falls from the bed, slips on wet floors, stumbles quite often while learning to walk, scrapes his knees, breaks his forehead open on the corner of a table, asphyxiates on a bean he has stuffed into his nostril. Maldito. He's not a weakling; he's active and vigorous. He's just a natural magnet for disaster.

In his eighth month, I ask Tita Meding: Buy him, will you please?

Okay, all right, she says. I'll give you three pieces of coconut, and he's mine. So she gives me three coconuts from the trees in her yard.

He's yours now, I tell her.

But the symbolic purchase avails nothing. He still gets into scrapes. He escapes none of the ailments of infancy, or any chance to get hurt.

That's the way it is—every child is a piece of one's flesh wrenched away to have a life of its own. Once it's apart, it goes off to fulfill the promises of its own life. You could buy him from the devil if you please, but the purchase avails nothing. Not all the wealth, not all the hope, not even all the love in the world could ever restore him to the womb's safety.



This is the end of May, or maybe the first of June '75. I come home from the hospital with my third child. A non-event as births go.

Sirens awaken us about dawn. The marketplace, three blocks away from the house, is burning, and the fire has crossed the street to our block and is

now spreading to the nearby houses. We load the household essentials into the van, but we do not drive away. We wait for the right moment to abandon everything to the hungry flames. But the fire spends itself and stops just three houses down the road. As daylight comes, laden with the smell of smoke and heat from the burned area, we unload the household stuff and return them to their places in the house, and try to resettle ourselves.

As soon as the big things are in place, he announces: I've to work. Fire or no fire, I've collection calls to do in Jagna.

There's something monumentally important about his work that brooks no argument. So off he goes to his out-of-town beat. He turns his back on an unsettled city, reeling from the calamity of the fire. The streets are lined with folk huddling around the few goods they have been able to save, waiting until suitable arrangements for temporary shelter can be found. Stories are rife, of those who escaped the fire with only the clothes on their back. He turns his back on his own disheveled household, the clothes still in bundles, the pots and pans strewn on the floor. The refrigerator is plugged in, but there's no electricity. Two testy children lacking sleep and excited by all the to-do, and a four-day-old infant.

Well, it's not his business to restore order here. He has a job to do, and he must not shirk it for any reason. I have two young girls, Linda and Angie, to help me out, at least, and to keep me company. I am still bleeding and can't be moving around too much. I sit on the sofa cradling the baby while the girls get busy putting things back in place.

We improvise a kerosene lamp with a jelly jar and some aluminum tinfoil wrapped around a wick made of a torn cast-off cotton t-shirt. It will take some time before electricity is restored. Martial Law is in force and the ten o'clock curfew drives everyone home early, including tricycles, main transport service in the streets of Tagbilaran. The streets begin emptying at nine. The older children are asleep, and the newborn lies quiet in its crib. Past curfew I begin to bleed profusely. I lie still, hoping it will pass. Fifteen minutes and the rush continues, the least movement, even a little cough, makes the blood surge, like a fully-opened faucet. My back is wet now, I can feel it, but I dare not get up.

I call the girls in the eerie dark. I'm bleeding, I tell them. I need to go to the hospital.

The girls have a name for it. *Bughat na, Manang*, Linda tells me. I feel no pain, just blood passing out like an unhampered spring, soaking into the mattress.

Bughat gyud na, Angie agrees. They are peasant girls. This is not unusual to women in the places where they come from. It's the stress, they tell me, the fire, it was too much for you.

They rush out to look for a ride. Two policemen in plain clothes, on patrol duty in a motorized tricycle, hail them for curfew violation. The girls tell them the problem, and they volunteer to take me to the hospital. They sit me in a chair and haul me, chair and all, down the stairs to the tricycle. Linda stays to take care of the two older children. Angie goes with me to the hospital, carrying the newborn.

At the hospital they pack me up with gauze to staunch the bleeding. Dr. Ramiro tells me to stop breastfeeding so as to quiet the womb. The infant, used by now to the breast, refuses the bottle. My breasts are painful, swollen with milk. The hungry infant cries in his crib beside my bed.

Don't worry about it, when he gets hungry enough, he'll feed, the nurse tells me.

I'm not dying, am I? I ask her. For I am seized with a sudden terror of death. I can't die yet, not while I have these young children to care for. You'll be fine, she assures me.

It's two days before the bleeding stops. One morning I wake up hungry. My breasts are still painful, full of milk. I ask to put the baby to the breast. The infant can hardly swallow fast enough as milk rushes to fill his mouth. My breasts begin to feel lighter, less painful.

I am alive, I tell myself. I will live.

He comes to take us home. We pass the market place, now only charcoal and ashes on the ground. The vendors are back, plying their trade on makeshift tables beside the charred remains of the old buildings.

I examine the bed when I get home. My side of the mattress is stained, a huge dark map of blood which is dry now. I turn over the mattress so I won't have to see the blood when the sheets are changed.



They're wondering how they came to be with us. Did we choose them, instead of those other children running around in the neighborhood? There are now four of them. They've seen the fourth one grow in my belly. During the pregnancy I would let them feel the fourth one kicking inside me. Now they're wondering how they came to be with us and not with Nang Miling and Noy Ed who live next door with their own brood of six.

Well, would you prefer to be there? he asks. Maybe they can take on another one. Or maybe you can exchange places with Romy. We'll take him in, and you take his place.

Yes, yes, send him away. I hate him. He won't give me a chance to use the bike. If he goes away, I'll have the bike to myself, says the eldest.

You're a girl. Girls don't play with bikes. You just ride up in the back, and I drive.

I'm older. I should drive. But you won't let me.

I'm a boy. I can drive faster than you.

You go too fast and hit all the furniture in the *sala* and make Mama mad.

That's settled then. I'll go talk to Pareng Ed and Mareng Miling. Which of you want to go? The question stops the quarrel.

The older one says: You go. You're the troublesome one.

You go, I stay, the younger boy says. You're always ratting on me. You're a rat girl. Rat, rat, rat, rat girl.

You decide now. I'll talk to Pareng Ed. Romy is bigger, stronger, he could help Mama in the house. So which of you goes? He stands up as if he really means to go off and make the deal.

The youngest is too young to realize what's going on, but the third one, listening in on the argument, is round-eyed and speechless. He digs into his pockets and comes up with a handful of marbles. He holds it out to the baby who grabs them and throws them on the floor, chortling with glee.

The quarreling pair dive to the floor to pick up the marbles, argument temporarily suspended. The third one digs out more marbles from his pocket and hands it to the baby who grabs them and promptly strews them on the floor. There's much laughing and shouting as they run after the marbles rolling all over the floor and under the chairs.

The question is forgotten in the scramble to find all the marbles. Years later it comes up again, but by this time, they are a little older. Then I do not have to frame the answers. They have found, each by his or her own lights, an explanation to satisfy their need. For most things, time has the answer, if we stay on with it, that is, or if we survive long enough till life comes along with the answer.



Each time a new child arrives, there's always a bit of jostling and shoving and shifting among the siblings to fit the new one in. The fifth—and last—child has finally arrived.

The territory of constant dispute is the place next to me, right, left, front, and the territory of privilege, my lap. My lap is always acknowledged to belong to the smallest and the youngest. The newborn displaces the older child who then regards it as a usurper. The usurper, to her mind, must be disposed of as quickly and as neatly as possible, say, by giving her away to the junkman who passes by the house every day in his dilapidated bike to which a sidecart had been attached, into which he loads all kinds of broken stuff for recycling. She has prepared an old plastic laundry hamper in case we finally make up our mind to get rid of the undeserving newcomer.

We've all agreed that this is probably the best way to deal with the problem. I tell her: We'll do it tomorrow. We'll talk to the junkman today so he can ask his wife. We have to make sure she's willing to take her in, you know.

She nods seriously. I tell her: He can't just surprise her, you know. She has to know first, it's best that way. Not like the way we were surprised when you came.

Her eyes grow large. The older kids gather close, the better to hear this interesting bit of history.

One morning, when we woke up, there you were in a basket at the doorstep, fast asleep. We picked you up and took you in. You were quite a beautiful baby. There was a little note, it said, "Please take care of her for me. Fairy." A fairy gave you to us. We were very happy to have you. We can't be sure if the junkman and his wife would take in this little one though. We have to ask them first. I keep watching her face as I tell this tale.

Oi, oi, oi, anak sa fairy, anak sa fairy, anak sa fairy, the boys start chanting, dancing around her.

She is very quiet for a while, not even reacting to the boys' teasing chant. Then her face crumbles and she breaks into sobs, deep heart-rending sobbing, I feel that no one could reach in to give her comfort. The older children stop chanting, amazed at this strange event and stare at her, as she huddles in a corner. They are uncomfortable in the face of such deep and sudden sorrow. Could they be asking: If she's a fairy's child, what about us? Where did we come from? Did you also have to take us in?

I put the baby in her crib and take the sobbing child in my arms. "It's all right. Don't cry. You're my very own sweet child. Stop crying now."

It's a long time before she is quiet in my arms. I rock her gently, and she falls asleep. It's late afternoon when she wakes up. We don't mention anything about the fairy or the junkman all through supper and bedtime, not even

to make a joke. The next morning right on schedule, just as we are sitting down to breakfast, we hear the junkman call out, “*Booootilya, puthaw, plastic, diyaryo,*” in his inimitable singsong. Every one turns to me as the junkman’s call gets nearer. She too turns her head to the voice outside the gate and looks at me.

“We’re not giving anyone away,” I assure her. Everyone breathes easily.

“Oh yes,” he says, “we’re keeping everyone. Unless, maybe, one of you wants to go ...”

Everyone smiles and shakes his head. The fairy girl smiles and bites into her bread. When the baby cries in the other room, she runs off to check on her.

“Don’t cry. We’re not giving you away,” I hear her telling the little one. “We’re keeping you too.”

So we keep all of them, for as long as it takes. They grow up, jostling and shoving and pushing each other to make a better fit, for themselves and for one another, taking up or yielding spaces, making room or crowding out one another in a house that’s quickly becoming too small for their growing bodies, staking his or her own claims on the family that’s already turning out to be too small and dull and tame for their expanding wits and burgeoning powers.

Soon even the littlest one outgrows my lap and has to be let off to her own adventures.



It’s all mostly about letting go, one discovers in a lifetime of living. One grieves for the tiny pieces of self, torn in an agony of blood and pain from one’s body at birth. I have no right to say what men feel as they wait for the little miracle. My own experience cannot be a gauge, my own observations, this sense that since this little event takes place outside men’s bodies, they are not really involved in it, they are only lookers on, waiting. These are my own private thoughts, forced by my own experiences. They explain, to me at least, why, while the birthing goes through its stages, men can do many other things that have nothing to do with it—like talk politics, fight wars, sell warehouses of detergent bars, or talk to a client over coffee in a coffee shop where the temperature, the light, the music are carefully combined and modulated for optimum comfort and civility. Men wait out the birth process, discovering for themselves various strategies of indifference, for any reason, but mostly, perhaps, to escape the unavoidable anxieties and guilt.

Birth, whether it takes place in the aseptic environment of a hospital or a lying-in clinic, attended by a host of health care givers, or in a farmer's dark shanty, lighted by a kerosene lamp with only a palter in assistance and an assortment of women relatives to provide comfort and help, is essentially a woman's job to do alone. It is a primitive, starkly animal process, in which for the rarest time in her life, she does nothing but focus on the most basic life processes, breathing, listening to the rhythms of her body, the pulsing of her muscles, attending to every signal it gives, until that one ultimate uterine spasm rises, demanding her fullest, most total involvement, an intense screaming moment when the beast in her blood takes over, propelled into being by the purest pain, so completely beyond her will, beyond memory, the wildest, deepest, most intense, most magnificent orgasm of all.

Still, when it's done, there's no glory in it, despite what they tell you in most religious tracts about birth and motherhood. When the milk begins to flow and one's breasts engorge in the eager flood of animal blood, and your nipples grow sore from the endless suckling as the infant begins to feed seriously, it is just one cycle of ache and pain and soreness. It'll be better soon, everyone tells you, the old palter, your own mother, your neighbor who has a passel of children running around in the streets. Everyone urges you, "It's going to be fine soon, that's just in the beginning." So I wait for when things will indeed be better, but they never do, going from day to day trying to redefine a new center of gravity with an emptied womb and overfull breasts, smelling of milk and sweat, grabbing sleep whenever I can, as I become, in this new state of being, an absolute slave to an animal I had helped bring into the world, and to whom I am obligated for as long as it takes, until it's able to find its own place in the sun.

No, there's no glory in it, I will tell any woman who believes motherhood is her ultimate destiny and who thinks that if she fails to become one, her life will not be meaningful enough. Part of me becomes a distanced uninvolved observer, watching that other part that's going through all the motions of mother care, her day absorbed by the routines of feeding, cleansing, diaper change, putting the infant to sleep, worrying about mosquitoes, witches, and such, who might catch this helpless infant unguarded and inoculate it with all kinds of diseases and unnameable evils which she (I) am helpless to ward off—doing all these in absolute surrender of all else I might be, or want to do, an impeccable dam to her whelp, if I might say so myself.

Except for that watchful half of me with its own tab of reminders. Hey, this is no way to live; your brain will turn into putty if you go on this way;

you can't be doing this all your life; how long can you put up with this ... ad nauseam, ad infinitum. The watching half of me complains and scolds, angry and resentful for the time and space it has lost to this selfish demanding little beast that all infants are, jealous and envious of all the attention it takes for granted as its inviolable right. At the same time, I feel guilty over the grudge I keep well out of sight, out of the face I show to the world, out of my touch, out of my voice when I talk to this helpless, needy little tyrant, asking to be fed or changed, or warmed, for whom I believe I am ready to die, should it ever be necessary to do so for its life, despite.

So it goes on. I go through this process five times in my life, all within a ten-year period. There is no reason for it, except that it just happened. And still, things do not become better, birth after birth, child after child. Sometimes it is simply enough to be without of pain, or to have a night of uninterrupted sleep. Or to have a little time to be alone to think my own thoughts, without anyone of them showing up with a scraped knee, a smudged face, a running nose. The self has fractured into as many parts as there are living children torn out of my flesh, the unitary solidity of my life has fragmented into each child, each fragment holding on to a piece of my heart with the cunning and insatiable greed of children. It has become entirely impossible to be apart and whole within the mere bounds of my own skin. They are very cagey, they are quick to know I'm there, or not there, eagerly grabbing me back every time I make the slightest move, always intent to keep me within the reach of their little hands, their little arms, their call. Despite the ironical other half of me that's holding back from being completely absorbed, they become a habit I can't beat, a habit I pick up from everyone of them, sustained, my ironical self tells you, by a mere illusion, the illusion of their need.

They're good at sustaining that illusion too. One day, the three-year old youngest tells me: When I grow up, I'll travel all over the world.

That's great!

You'll be coming along, wherever I go, she announces with conviction.

I'd like that very much. But I'm afraid I'll be too old by then. I may not even be able to walk.

We'll get you a wheelchair. Where does she get this wisdom of hers, all three feet of her and only four years old.

Around the world in a wheelchair? Wow! I don't pit my wisdom against hers.

I'll push you. I'll be big by then.

Sure, honey.

Her illusion that she will need me by her side forever—despite my straining, stressful, uncomfortable, uneasy, ungracious, guilt-ridden motherhood—I have wished for this to be true. But of course she won't need me that long, none of them will, the observer part of me says with emphatic irony. Children never do, she tells me relentlessly, it's one of the ground rules; you had better note that, let go when the time comes. Look out for that, when they'll be on their own. You must practice when, and how. You owe it to them. And you owe it to yourself. In the long run, you see, what it's all about is letting go. Yes, yes, yes.



“Do they quarrel like this all the time?” She grew up as an only child. I don't blame her. She's my houseguest, forced to share a room with four young kids. She's been listening to the kids arguing all morning, and she must be quite tired of it.

“With tooth and nail,” I assure her. “They shout and scream and kick each other from room to room. Impossible to stop them once they're started.”

“And what do you do?” She's genuinely worried, turning to the rambunctious argument going on.

“Just listen. And try to keep out of it.”

“What if—”

“One's right and the other is wrong?”

“Yeah. Or one's bigger and stronger and bullies the smaller one?”

“You got to teach the small one to stand up for herself, so you try not to take sides. And about being right or wrong, you can't rule about that all the time, you know. Sometimes they're both right, and both wrong, both all at the same time. They'll try outshouting each other. You just plug your ears so the noise won't get to you.”

“Like now?”

“Like now.”

“You don't stop them?”

“They'll stop themselves after a while. When one gives in. Or the other gets tired, or gets his way. Or something else distracts them. They get to settle their own issues if you leave them alone.”

“There must be some ground rules.”

“There's a ground rule, yes. Don't get physical, that's all. Once they start clawing at each other, separate them and let them cool off in different parts of the house.”

“So they do become physical sometimes?”

“Even babes go physical, they throw things, they hit you in the eyes with their little fists, they bang their own head on the wall to get attention, things like that. But it’s still a good ground rule, sure. You just see to it that it’s obeyed. You sort of grow eyes all over your head so you can see behind your back without actually turning your head. You become a wireless receiver to detect everything that’s going on while they’re playing in the other room, or when they’re suddenly very quiet. You’re watchful but not actually watching, that sort of thing.”

“How d’you know your ground rule works?”

“Oh, I don’t know. It must work, or else they could have killed each other already. At least as you can see, they’re still alive, no one is blind, no one has lost a limb, and they’re quarreling almost every hour of the day. Oh, I have other ground rules, but they’re more for me than for them.”

“Ground rules for you?”

“Yeah. For instance, don’t lie to the children. Don’t play tricks to get your way. If the medicine is evil-tasting, tell them so. If an injection is going to hurt, don’t deceive them by saying it won’t. Because if it does, you’re teaching them it’s okay to put one over someone else to get your way. It won’t be long before they’ll be putting one over you to get their own way. If they can’t go where you’re going, go out of the front door, don’t steal out of the back, just so they won’t cry when you leave. Of course you’ve to tell them why they can’t come. If they cry and protest, just let them, they’ll stop soon enough. It’s okay to let them cry. If you punish them and they cry, that’s okay. If they cry because you’re going somewhere without them, that’s okay. At least they know what’s going on. You can even tell them, You can cry if you want, but you’re still not going. Then they can’t use crying as a tool to get their way.”

“That simple?”

“No, no, not that simple. It’s simpler to lie to them, you get an easy way out. By telling them what’s what, you have to deal with the crying, you know, the sulking, the tantrums. So inconvenient, so messy. Like when a kid wants you to buy him a toy but you won’t, so he screams and jumps about and rolls on the sidewalk, crying fit to bring the sky down on your head. Just stand by till he gets over it. He’ll get over it. Of course people will stare, and that’s what forces some moms and dads to give in—the embarrassment of an intractable child cutting up a tantrum on the sidewalk. It’s okay, you’re not beating him up or anything like that. He’s just letting off steam. When it’s all out of him, he’ll stop screaming. You could brush him off a bit when he’s done and then

you can go on your way. No need to scold. A cone of ice cream at this point wouldn't be a bad idea, and you can tell him why he can't have the toy. They get over this stage, you know, and you'll both survive it. You will, he will, I assure you."

"What if you tell him, '*Hala*, see that policeman over there? He'll get angry and put you in jail. You better stop crying now, or else ...'"

"Keep the policeman out. The issue's between you and him. He's badgering you to do something you don't want to do. It's a minor blackmail—'Buy me my toy or else I'll do something embarrassing ...' And the policeman, who might be a father himself, will probably advise you to buy the thingamajig, for heaven's sake, to keep the peace. That would weaken your moral position."

"You make them sound like little devils. Kids can't be like that." She tries to smile.

"Oh yes, they are. Little devils, barbarians, villains, blackmailers, thieves, bullies, manipulators—name it, they're all these things. It's their second nature. They're born to think the world revolves around them. It's their natural survival equipment. We adults pander to them because we're predisposed to think of them too as helpless, innocent, sinless little angels. It's in our nature to think of them this way, or else, how can we stand them. Well, I suppose they are that, up to a point. Soon enough they find out that if they cry, food comes, or a change of nappies, or someone picks them up to amuse them. So they'll be crying more often to get attention. That's the end of the angelic stage. Weaning involves more than taking away the breast or the bottle. It also involves letting them realize you won't be dancing attendance to them all the time. Understanding human rights begins in the cradle, I'd say. And it's bloody tough getting kids to realize this."

She's getting uncomfortable. She comes out with the handiest weapon she can find. "You don't like kids much, do you?" she accuses me.

End of conversation.

Maybe she's right. I don't like kids much. I never did, not even my own. I don't go around now proclaiming enthusiasm for other people's children, or for children in general, no matter how cute they are. Children are not picture postcards to be admired for their cuteness. On the other hand, children don't seem to like me much either. That's fine.

But I respect kids a lot. I've tremendous sympathy for their state of being. It's awful to be a kid and to have to learn all those life lessons at the time when all you want to do is gorge on junk food, play with your Game Boy,

watch television all hours of the day, sleep when you want, go out slumming, go anywhere you want and go home anytime, get as dirty as you could be and not have to be forced to take a bath. Or to have the biggest appetite in the world and to be hungry because one's parents are too poor, or too unfortunate, or too lazy to provide for one's needs and there is nothing you can do about it because you're just a kid.

Civilization is a tough thing to assimilate in the all too brief years of childhood—cleanliness, good manners, good speech, respect for others, respect for one self, earning one's keep, industry, diligence and perseverance, responsibility for one's actions, humility, honor, confidence. Civilization—a big word, even for us adults. Raising children is initiating them into human civilization. Anyway, that's where this long complicated process begins, that's what I think. The thieves in high office, the ones that bring this country to shame time and again and suck the lifeblood of this nation are children who haven't learned what civilization's all about. Somewhere in the background must be some mothers who loved their children so well, they can only think to indulge every wish of the stomach, every little whim, stoking without their knowing it, the insatiable natural greed that knows no limits and is beyond satisfaction. Thus they might leave kindergarten and become grown men and women, but remain infantile as far as their humanity is concerned.

What about fathers, you might ask? Why blame only the mothers? Because in this country the mothers or their surrogates are the constant presence in almost every child's life and hence, are the prime suspects for the kind of character that children develop over the years. Fathers on the other hand are either absent or do not participate in the rearing process. They're spared from blame by default. On the other hand, perhaps this too, is part of the problem. But this is something for fathers to think about.

All I can say is I've done my best for my own kids. Whether I've done well by them or not, I don't know. Times I think I could have done more, or better. If I had more money, if I had more time, if I had more patience, more kindness, more generosity, more energy than I could muster—these thoughts nag my conscience the whole time I am raising them. The ifs continue to grate in my conscience even now. But all the five are grown up now. As far as I know, none of them seems to hold any major grudges for their upbringing.

If they can forgive me my mistakes, I tell myself, why shouldn't I forgive myself?



I've nothing great to say about it, as anyone can see. Much of what remains, as far as I'm concerned, are memories. Not many of these memories are happy ones. No one really wants to listen to these memories, not even the child about whom they are, mainly because the child is grown now, and is apt to say: How tacky it is for Mom to talk about what's over and done with. All those things are "natural" with children and mothers, they tell me; they are to be expected, it happens to everyone. How correct they are, how silly, indeed, it is to be raking up these useless memories.

But it's also true that as one grows older, one loses the right even to one's memories, as other imperatives overtake us. You have it all wrong, someone's bound to tell you. Come on, it couldn't have been that bad, one of them might chide me. Or another one would say: Well, it's done with. It's over and you did a great job, dismissively. What's the point in hauling up the past over and over till one sounds like a broken vinyl record? There's more than enough in the present to keep us occupied. Or, devastatingly: Enough of that drama. You can't dwell on that forever.

I keep hearing these things until I too lose my own particular perspective. I am ashamed to consider that indeed I may be remembering the wrong things, or have the wrong view about them; or I'm not cool enough; I keep dredging these messy things up when I should just let them pass as they deserve. Why should I even indulge in remembering anything at all? they ask me, hey, can't you just leave all that behind? Aren't things better now? For you, for us ...

Afterall, I've no great thoughts about this business called motherhood. I have only my memories, sticky, smelling of blood, sweat and milk, awkward, throbbing with the spasms of birth, sore breasts, the inevitable wound in one's center, the room, the sheets, the pillows smelling of pee, no matter how much you air the beddings or dry them in the sun. What about sleepless nights walking a sick child?

Oh, surely there are good things to remember too, they tell me, why do you remember only the bad? They're not bad, I should tell them. I should let them know they're what bind us to each other, or at least, they're what bind me to each one of them, all of you, I should say, right here in my heart, in my mind.

But their memories are different from mine. They can't follow me into my own labyrinth.

Yes, yes, yes, I agree with them. Flesh torn from my body they might be, but this I know at every moment of birth, the very second they start breathing

on their own, and helpless as they are, already brawling and squalling for what they need—food, warmth, arms to hold them and give them comfort—they've won from me and from the universe their freedom to be. I know what they're asking from me now—the last gesture, the final act. To let go now, if I can, even of the memories. Let go, or else, how will they get on with living? Yes, yes, yes.