

It's comforting to be taken care of, to be babied. But, fairy tales aside, the world does not reward us for remaining children.

In my mother's house, I am the baby. This, even though I have voted in several presidential elections and supported myself for well over a dozen years. Never mind. As far as my parents are concerned, I have always been, and will always be, The Baby. To this day my mother calls me—even introduces me as—her baby. And when I protest that I am no longer a child, not to mention an infant, she explains with humor and tolerance: "But you will always be *my* baby." And I am silenced. If the truth be known, I do not protest very vehemently. In a world where, as an independent woman, I am expected to be strong, provide for myself and meet my obligations, it is nice that still, to somebody, I am The Baby.

When I was a girl I got the same ambivalent message about growing up that a lot of little girls got. I was kept close to home, rewarded for doing what I was told to do, enjoined from performing acts of courage, told to ask others for what I wanted rather than to get things for myself. The message was that I should stay dependent, and get what I wanted for myself through other people rather than through direct action upon the world. Finally, it was a message that promised rewards for not growing up.

For me, being the baby of the family had attached extra weight to that message, extra dividends to the rewards for remaining a child. It was nice being cuddled and babied. It was nice that I was excused from certain duties, such as scraping the dishes after dinner, and given certain privileges, such as passing around the cookies to guests, because I was the littlest. It was nice when my daddy stroked my hair and affectionately called me "Twosy" or "Two-two," because I was his number-two daughter and somehow special for it. It was warm in that niche, and endlessly inviting.

Moreover, I found virtue in being the youngest. It seems to me that in all the fairy tales I read when I was a child, it was the youngest daughter who was the most beautiful, the most worthy, and (this was the important part) the most rewarded. Whenever I felt that being the youngest had drawbacks—such as not staying up as late as my sister (who told me that as soon as I went to bed there were circus parades in front of our house) and being kept from attending wonderful things like Broadway shows and funerals—I was consoled by thoughts such as these.

I have, however, paid a price for this attitude. For if I was loved by my parents as the baby, the result was that the idea of growing up wasn't such an all-fired, unqualifiedly attractive one. Would my parents still love me if I weren't a baby anymore?

I think that at some point in my childhood I answered that question in the negative, and started to equate being loved with being little, being accepted with being a child. And so I began putting off the process of growing up for as long as was decently possible. This required a monumental feat of procrastination, a perpetual hanging back from the acceptance of myself as an adult, and a refusal to shoulder an adult's responsibilities or to recognize their reciprocal pleasures.

In this effort I was encouraged by my parents, who had their own stake in keeping me from growing up. For parents, no matter what they might say to the contrary, often have ambivalent feelings about seeing their children grow up and away from them. That separation, as healthy, desirable and inexorable as it might be, means a loss of potency to a parent. A child's growth to maturity marks a parent's decline toward old age, a progression

(Continued)

by Bette-Jane Raphael



TOM BLOOM

BEING THE BABY OF THE FAMILY

of which nobody wants to be reminded.

This is particularly true when it comes to little girls and their daddies. I don't believe there is a father alive who feels unalloyed pleasure at the sight of his little girl growing up and becoming a woman. My own father was much more at home with an adorable and adoring little girl than he was with a burgeoning woman, and it happened that in our house I was the former when my sister, six years my senior, was the latter. So I was pulled up onto his lap for stories, while she was admonished not to walk around the house in her slip, or come in so late from a school dance. I was allowed to win at "Old Maid," while she yelled at for wearing too much lipstick. I saw how much more comfortable he was with me, how *uncomfortable* he was with my maturing sister, and I filed it away as a negative object lesson about growing up.

Now, if parents feel ambivalent about seeing their daughters move away from them and find their own place in the world, nowhere is that feeling stronger than with their last born. Because, as Philadelphia psychologist Matti Gershenfeld, Ph.D., describes it, "that child is the parents' last crack at youth. An older child is likely to be set free to grow when she is replaced as the baby and her parents find a younger object to meet their needs for a dependent child. If the child is the youngest, however, not only will she sense the importance she has to her parents

as their baby, but, unlike her older siblings, she'll never be completely freed from that parental need."

Dr. Gershenfeld points out that while parents feel good if their oldest child gets all A's, if she does well, if she's six and people say she looks like eight, there is often the sense with the youngest that there's no need to be in such a hurry or to push her to grow up. Recalling her experience with her own children, Dr. Gershenfeld remembers that when her oldest son was six, he had three little brothers and he was considered by herself and her husband to be the little man of the family. But when her *youngest* son was six, there was a feeling that he was just a little kid, only six years old.

The feeling that you are "just a little kid" can persist way into adulthood, as it has for the twenty-six-year-old baby who told me the following: "I can hardly even think about starting a family of my own. Whenever I imagine having a child, I stop and realize 'I can't have a child; I'm the child!'"

Because a youngest daughter's parents may perceive her differently, says Dr. Gershenfeld, and send her different messages about growing up, she feels more permission to be emotional, scared, worried, to cling to her parents. There is usually less tolerance for the older child's fears and childish needs.

All of which reminds me of my sister and the merry-go-round, and the story that was told and retold in our family about how funny it was that she was scared of this particular contraption when she was five years old, as

if it were something exceptional that a child of five should be scared of a merry-go-round. And yet my parents' perspective was such that they didn't find it strange when I, at the age of eleven, made my father walk up the stairs to my room every night and stay at the bottom of the staircase until I had safely turned on the light inside and made sure that James Arness wasn't waiting for me (a ritual that lasted for several months after I saw the actor play a vegetable alien in *The Thing*).

Another baby I talked to, a woman in her mid-thirties, says that she has only recently come to understand how her parents have always tried to shield her from anything unpleasant. "They always had the attitude that I couldn't handle, and shouldn't *have* to handle, any of life's difficulties. If somebody was very ill in the family, for instance, they would tell my older sister, but not me. Or, if the two of us ever did anything wrong, my sister was blamed because she was older and was supposed to know better, even though we were only two years apart in age. All this has left me with a babyish attitude. I tend to feel wronged and get pouty when I have to deal with something unpleasant, as if I shouldn't have anything go wrong in my life." Here she smiled ruefully. "I'm working on it, though."

I realized how deeply I had been affected by my own perpetual babyhood the day I called my mother to tell her that I was finally, at the age of thirty-four, buying a car. Her first reaction was one of dismay. "What do you need a car for?" she asked worriedly.



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"It's such a responsibility, such a bother. The insurance, the registration... Why don't you get a bike?" And there it was, the tempting suggestion that I opt for the less complicated existence of a child, the message that it's really much nicer to be a little girl and not have to bother with all the nasty details of living, things like insurance and interest rates and where—or what—a carburetor is (unfortunately, nobody points out that the less one knows about these things, the more insecure and powerless one feels). Did I really have to point out to my mother that one could not perform all the activities necessary to an adult life with a bike—like shop for a dinner party, go to the movies in the rain or visit a friend in another state? Why a bike, I thought. Why not a trike? Or skates?

My older sister, on the other hand, has had cars her entire adult life, and has driven the streets of New York and the freeways of Los Angeles with the best of them. I've sat next to her with my heart in my mouth as she blithely made U-turns at the entrance to the Holland Tunnel, wondering at her serenity in the face of vociferous hostility from some of the meanest truck drivers on the East Coast. But it is no mystery. My sister agrees that she did not get the same "stay safe" message from our parents that I, their baby, did.

For a moment after I talked to my mother about buying a car, I thought about scrapping the whole idea, such is the seductiveness of perpetual childhood. But I caught my breath and understood, in a rush, that I had given in to that seductiveness all my

life, and that it had not served me well. It had left me handicapped in some way indistinguishable to the naked eye, and yet profound. It had cheated me on the rewards of adulthood, chief among them self-esteem. I knew I could not crawl back into the crib again.

And so I wound up buying a 1972 Impala with 140,000 miles on it. This vehicle looked as if it had seen service in Vietnam and got the kind of gas mileage that made driving it the equivalent of taking a taxi. At the time I purchased it, I'd never driven on a highway, and I saw no reason to start so late in life. I stuck to the small back roads and side-streets as much as possible, frightened witless by the sight of meandering dogs or kids on bikes, certain that the odds were I'd mow down one or the other of them. Every time I stopped short at a light, I could feel the bones in my nose breaking.

And yet the damn car was immensely important to me. Driving through the quietest streets I could find, I felt the stirrings of something I could not readily define, the stirrings of adulthood, mixed with a heavy dose of anxiety.

I was, for the first time, taking the driver's seat in my own life. I was finally beginning to grow up. I was doing it later than a lot of other people, maybe, but I was doing it.

The car was one symbol of that process. But there were others, too, I realized, as I looked around at the various areas of my life. For one thing, I had at last begun to share that life fully with someone else. For another, I was finally doing the work I'd always

wanted to do, having found the courage to leave the comfortable work world in which I'd received a weekly paycheck to face the financial and professional anxiety of freelance work. All in all, I was beginning to take some risks, along with the responsibility for their outcome. I even began driving the nation's highways.

I was doing it all with some distress, but without totally crippling levels of anxiety. Of course, I had always *looked* like an adult—kept a checking account, maintained an apartment, held a job—but finally I was beginning to *feel* like one.

Once the process of growing up had begun, it never stopped. I must admit, however, that the lingering notion that it is really more comfortable to remain a baby still emerges at odd moments of stress. Why won't the man I love take care of me the way my daddy did? Why do I have to work and worry about my old age? Why doesn't somebody else pay my doctor bills?

But now I understand that these are the very questions we perennial babies must reject, realizing that, fairy tales aside, the world does *not* reward us for remaining children. The real rewards are for grown-up people who take grown-up responsibilities. I think I finally know that, which is why, even if I am not always comfortable in my newly commandeered driver's seat, it is still one in which, nowadays, I am firmly entrenched. ■

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