



LEARNING TO LIVE WITH **HIS** CHILD

It was six o'clock on a Friday evening in early spring, and I was drying my face at the bathroom sink when I heard the key turn in the front door of the apartment. A moment later, a seven-year-old voice called out my name with some urgency. "Bette, Bette, where are you?" I shouted that I was in the bathroom, but could receive visitors. The owner of the voice, all forty-five pounds of him, burst into the room, trailing parka and mittens behind him. "I lost my tooth, I lost my tooth," he said, pointing to what was most certainly a space in the lower front of his mouth. I then heard where and how the tooth had come out, what the Tooth Fairy had left and the various other details of this momentous event.

As I sat listening, I felt my own sense of wonder, a sense I have felt many times in the past eighteen months. He cares what I think, I marveled. It's an important moment for him, and he wants to share it with me. How spectacular!

For seven-year-old Adam is not my child, not even a relative. He is the son of the divorced man with whom I've spent most of my time for the last year and a half, and he has brought unexpected feelings and experiences into my—until now—very unfamiliar life. That I have earned his trust and his caring is an achievement in which I take great pride. Like all worthwhile achievements, though, it has not been attained without moments of inner stress.

My lover is a devoted father, so Adam is with us almost every weekend, and though there have been times when I might have preferred to have my guy to myself, I am glad he wants his son to be with him. Would I love a man who felt less for his child? I doubt it. And Adam is, thank goodness, a sweet-tempered, bright child. (His easy adjustment to the shifting circumstances of his life is a tribute to his father—and to his mother as well. It makes me curious about this woman whom circumstances prevent me from knowing, and yet to whom, by virtue of the share I have in her son's life, I am oddly related.) While at first he appeared to be a trifle threatened by the obvious attachment between his father and me—by putting gum in my hair and other small acts of hostility—he seemed to realize rather quickly that what his father told him was indeed true: Love for me did not lessen love for *him*. After that, Adam accepted me. Sometimes there have even been signs that he would like to share a little of what Daddy has: "You go and shower, Daddy, and Bette and I will stay in bed together." My lover and I find this delightfully healthy. Would things have been more difficult if Adam were a girl who felt I was taking her daddy away? I don't know, and I don't want to know. Life is complicated enough—I'm not looking for trouble.

For some reason, I had never dated a man with a child before. Men were certainly an important part of my life, but they came into it and went out of it on their own, without the patter of little feet fading away behind them. Suddenly I found myself responsible not only to an adult male who could very well take care of himself in the clinches, but also to a small one with sticky fingers, an impressionable mind and a vulnerable psyche. It was a little scary. The only remotely maternal activities I had ever engaged in up to that point (Continued)

by *Bette-Jane Raphael*

had been camp counseling as a teenager and intermittent duties as an aunt through the years. And while I have always gotten on famously with my two nieces and one nephew, I didn't see much of them when they were really young, and our times together have been numbered in hours rather than days. We're friends more than anything else, and I've never felt responsible for their psychic or emotional development. But with Adam, there appeared in my life a young creature over whom I would have a certain amount of influence for good or ill. The enormity of that responsibility, that trust, I found terrifying.

Happily, my lover has helped me get over a large part of that feeling—he has, after all, been a parent for seven years. No, he told me, it would not necessarily cripple Adam for life if I got angry with him for some bad behavior, if I did not show the patience of Job at all hours of the day and night, if I did not *always* feel like playing "The Muppets Game." And my lover went further than mere talk. He backed me up when, early on, my timid attempts at authority needed reinforcement. He let me know in a hundred ways that he trusted me to be a good influence on his son. He gave me the sense that we three were a unit, however long- or short-lived, however unorthodox. I love him for that.

There are still times when I feel like an outsider, but this feeling, I recognize, is more in my head than anybody else's. It is especially strong when my lover and I are having a difficulty of some sort, and I feel as though Adam is receiving the love and attention that I, at the moment, am denied. At such times I am, frankly, jealous. Like seven-year-old Adam, grown-up Bette-Jane has had to learn the lesson that with his daddy, my lover, it is not a question of either/or; he does have love enough for us both.

I have learned other lessons as well over the past year and a half, lessons about myself that have surprised and delighted me. While his daddy is obviously the more important authority figure in our weekend ménage, Adam comes to me for other things. I am the one who is sought out on a rainy afternoon in December to help devise a puppet theater. I am the one who comes up with the idea of turning the game into a puppet magic show, who helps think up the characters and tricks for that show, who cons the A&P out of a prime carton for a stage, and who, feeling happily like a minor-league Olivia Walton, actually helps sew up the puppets and color the scenery. All this, it somewhat astonishingly turns out, I am pretty good at. I can improvise games and the tools for them at an impressive rate. I have, it seems, the kind of imagination a child can share, enjoy and learn from. I also have, it appears, more patience than I suspected, and more warmth. These are nice things to know.

All this has started me to think of myself as rather good mother material, a thought both pleasing and disruptive. The desire for a child of my own, fostered by my relationship with Adam, is pro-

hibited by the lack of formal commitment between his father and me. It is a Catch 22 situation, one that has more than once made me resentful and set me wondering whether I should seek an alternative relationship in which bearing children would be viable.

There is also the problem of what happens when Adam's needs and mine conflict, when he wants companionship, a playmate, but I want privacy, or when both of us want his father's attention at the same time. I am frankly still not used to having a child knock on the bedroom door as I lie in my lover's arms savoring a lazy Sunday morning chat, nor to sitting intimately over a candlelight dinner for three. I wondered at the beginning whether this were indeed my cup of tea, and I learned very early that it would have to be my decision alone, that it was one complexity I would have to work out. For this was his beloved child, and there was no way the man could accommodate me at the boy's expense. I had to decide whether the package deal was one I could handle, or I had to get out. I decided I could handle it, and I was right. I don't suggest that this would be the correct decision for every woman, but for me it was.

This does not mean that there are not difficult times. But handling those difficulties has given me confidence in my ability to love and to cope. And the situation as a whole has given me a clearer knowledge of the man in my life, has enabled me to see him in a role most women can only imagine their men in. Much of what I have learned has made me very happy. I have seen how devoted and patient and loving and fair he can be with a child. I have seen him grapple with complex parental decisions and do well with them. This has given him a dimension unshared by the previous men in my life, and it has sharpened our relationship in a way that doesn't happen when two people are lovers only.

My lover and I do not always see eye to eye on how a situation involving Adam should be handled. But I can say with pleasure that he has always listened openly to my evaluation of the situation and my assessment about how it, and Adam, should be handled. This is another expression of his trust and another quality for which I am grateful. It has enabled us to share and learn from each other. So I have learned how to joke Adam out of his disappointment at missing a promised fishing expedition, and my lover has learned to explore the reasons behind an afternoon's explosion of seemingly childish anger.

In this and other ways, Adam is a bond between us. To a large extent we share the experience of him. We laugh at his terrible second-grader's jokes, at his circuitous reasoning when it comes to explaining why he should be allowed to do something to which we are opposed. We feel with him the pain of his occasional pouts and the pride of his successes.

And I have found that a child can provide unique moments of pure plea-

sure. Drying a freshly-bathed seven-year-old body, for instance, can be sweet in-deed. And hearing a little boy say spon-taneously as we leave for a party, "Oh, Bette, you look beautiful," can mean a surprising amount, especially when the big boy in your life is inclined to take such niceties for granted.

But as I worried about coming into Adam's life, so I worry about possibly leaving it. There are no guarantees on relationships, and the one I share with Adam's father is far from settled or sanguine. How much influence can I allow myself to exert on a child whose life I may drop out of as quickly as I dropped into? What will be the effect on Adam if I disappear tomorrow? Will he learn a cynical lesson about trust and the ephemeral nature of love? I am part of his life now, I occupy pages in his photograph album, my presents mingle with his other toys, my values with those of his parents. If I am suddenly gone, will he be telling a psychiatrist twenty-five years from now how he was warped by that woman his father brought into his life when he was six? (I'm good at guilt—majored in it at college—and it's easy for me to project it a quarter of a century into the future.)

These are questions that have no immediate answers, but I am comforted by the fact that the whole nature of my relationship with Adam seems to be a lot less problematic for him than it does for me. I got happy proof of this only a few weeks ago. We were leaving his father's apartment building together, just the two of us, when one of the doormen made a bantering remark in which he referred to me as Adam's mother. I stood there frozen, unable to think of anything to say that would not seem awkward and strained. But Adam piped up immediately, completely unabashed if mildly annoyed at the doorman's ignorance: "She's not my mother," he said, "she's my friend."

So be it.

Editor's note: Bette-Jane Raphael is a free-lance writer.

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COMMON
SEXUAL PROBLEMS
WOMEN HAVE—
FIND OUT
HOW TO HANDLE THEM
DON'T MISS
OCTOBER GLAMOUR
ON SALE
AT NEWSSTANDS
SEPTEMBER 19**
