



HOW I GOT TO BE PERFECT

by Bette-Jane Raphael

When I became pregnant, nearly a year and a half ago, all the women I knew who already had children took great pains to warn me about how tough it was to be a mother, what hard work it was, what a change it would make in my life—a life that had been up till then, they implied, Easy Street. Throughout my pregnancy they shook their heads: "Enjoy yourself now," they intoned, "because once the baby comes you've had it."

I began to wonder if they were right, and if I had made a terrible mistake in thinking I could become a mother at the advanced age of 39 after having spent so many years of my adult life childless and relatively unencumbered. I was used to my freedom, after all, and the more they talked, the more I began to think that motherhood resembled nothing so much as a ten-to-20 stretch in the Pen.

Well, it turned out that these women were right. Nothing *is* the same since my son came along. It's better. In fact, it's perfect—and so am I.

I wasn't always perfect, you understand. Although it amazes me to think of it now, until Jacob was born I was plagued by a host of imperfections. The problem is that you can cultivate a lot of bad habits in nearly 40 years, and I had cultivated mine so assiduously you'd have thought they were orchids. My eating habits, for example, were centered around a constant, fruitless search for the ideal diet (one that guaranteed weight loss through the regular consumption of spaghetti carbonara). I avoided physical exercise with the same scrupulousness with which I avoid dark alleys after midnight, engaging in it only in cases of extreme emergency (if there were a blackout, say, and I had to climb stairs to get to my apartment).

My work habits were even more abominable. I solved all work-related problems the same way: I went to lunch. Procrastination came as naturally to me as dancing comes to Fred Astaire. The only thing I ever did

immediately was spend my money.

Of course, I was not happy about any of this. Like everybody else in America, I wanted to be perfect. For years I looked for an easy, foolproof way to make myself happier, more productive, thinner and more in love with myself. But although I tried new diets and therapies as fast as somebody thought them up, I remained grievously imperfect. That is, until eight months ago, when I met the one person on earth with the power to break me of all my bad habits: not a world-famous guru, not a diet doctor with a book on the best-seller list, not a behavioral therapist with a foolproof technique for solving everybody's problems immediately, but my son, who, when we were first introduced, weighed less than six pounds and was toothless, to boot. Since his birth, my eating, exercise, work and spending habits have all undergone a momentous change, so that today I am as lean as a dancer, as industrious as a swarm of bees and as economical as Scrooge—in short, perfect.

My mother, who spent the best years of her life telling me not to eat between meals, will be happy to know that, finally, I don't. Neither do I overeat. Since Jacob is impatient with my meals, seeing them as annoying interruptions of his never-ending attempts at world conquest, I mostly eat while standing up and carrying all 20 pounds of him on one hip. Trying to eat while sitting down, I've found, usually necessitates getting up from one to two dozen times in as many minutes, a sort of diet-and-exercise program rolled into one. He further encourages me to bend and stretch by taking all the objects he comes across that are not nailed down and, after gumming them into submission, dropping them throughout the house.

My son has also encouraged me to make better use of my time, by the simple method of leaving me very little to call my own. He has cured me forever of the idea I have all the time in

the world, an attitude that, in any case, I have always found incompatible with achievement. Nowadays, when I have a baby-sitter, I plan my accomplishments (assuming that washing my hair can be termed an accomplishment) down to the millisecond. And when I'm on my own, I plot with the cunning of a Mafia hit man for every minute in which to do a bit of paying work. I grab the hour he takes for a nap with something approaching manic fervor. What I manage to get done in that hour, though modest by pioneer standards, perhaps (I haven't yet, for instance, spun my son's father a new suit), amazes me.

Thrifty is my middle name. Since Jacob views the telephone cord and receiver as a particularly interesting example of nouvelle cuisine, my phone conversations, and the resulting bills, are virtually nonexistent. Lunches out with friends are a thing of the past, as outdated as my clothes. I have put a moratorium on buying new ones until the day my son learns the difference between silk shirts and paper napkins.

One way and another, I've managed, with Jacob's help, to rid myself of most of my personal sins, along with the more standardized versions classified as "deadly." Sloth, Gluttony and Covetousness have been thoroughly ousted from our house. Lust has gone off to seek greener pastures (although I admit it will be welcomed back with open arms as soon as Jacob begins to sleep uninterrupted past dawn, which we hope will be sometime before he starts college). I knew Pride had taken a powder the day I returned home from an emergency visit to the pediatrician to find, when I looked in the mirror, that I had my sweater on backward. Anger I don't consider a sin, not unless it actually leads you to murder whoever it is you're angry at. And as far as Envy is concerned, well, that was easy. Because now I don't envy anyone, not one single other person in the entire world. ■