



Baby Battle

Susan Cheever

Mixing Patterns

Susan Cheever was born July 31, 1943, in New York City. She is the daughter of John Cheever, the Pulitzer Prize-winning short story writer and novelist. Cheever graduated from Brown University and was a Guggenheim Fellow. She teaches in the Bennington College MFA program and at the New School. Her books include *My Name is Bill—Bill Wilson: His Life and the Creation of Alcoholics Anonymous* (2004); *Home Before Dark* (1999), a memoir about her father; *American Bloomsbury: Louisa May Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry David Thoreau: Their Lives, Their Loves, Their Work* (2006); and five novels, including *Looking for Work* (1981) and *Doctors and Women* (1987). Her most recent book is *Desire: Where Sex Meets Addiction* (2008). In this selection Cheever explores the phenomena of what she calls Stay-at-Home Mothers as opposed to Working Mothers and Women Without Children.

PREREADING: THINKING ABOUT THE ESSAY IN ADVANCE

Before you read, consider the title of this essay, “Baby Battle.” What does the title make you think of? What do you think the essay will be about based on the title?

Words to Watch

entitlement (par. 4) right or privilege

slalom (par. 10) zigzag

encumbered (par. 13) burdened; hindered

progeny (par. 14) children; offspring

fatuous (par. 18) silly; pointless

Lamaze (par. 18) an instructional program in birthing for mothers and fathers expecting a child

burgeoning (par. 18) growing; rapidly increasing

hapless (par. 23) unfortunate; unlucky

effusively (par. 27) overly enthusiastic and expressive in emotions

caul (par. 29) membrane, usually the membrane surrounding the amniotic fluid that protects the child in the womb

patriarchal (par. 31) characteristic of rule by men

- 1 There is a war going on in the streets of New York City.
- 2 Platoons of mothers in bicycle shoes and designer sweats wheel divisions of gleaming, clanking strollers down the sidewalks, chattering into their cell phones and blocking the passage of other pedestrians. These are the Stay-at-Home Mothers.
- 3 Their adversaries, the Working Mothers and the Women Without Children, straighten their sleek success suits and try to stay out of the way.
- 4 "It's not just the strollers," said a Working Mother friend recently as we barely escaped being mowed down by a squadron of juice-cup-wielding Stay-at-Home Mothers. "It's the stroller entitlement."
- 5 The Stay-at-Homes hang together as if they are from a different planet than the mothers who chose to go on working, or the mothers who *have* to go on working. They regroup in the playgrounds, brushing the crumbs off their strollers, Björns, and tricycles. If a toddler under a nanny's care has an accident or a tantrum, the Stay-at-Homes cluck and shake their heads knowingly. *That child needs a mother.*
- 6 Women without children are whipsawed by hostility from both camps. The Working Moms look down on the Stay-at-Home Moms: *What on earth do they do all day? How can they be so dependent?* The Stay-at-Home Moms feel sorry for the Working Moms: *Do they know what they're missing?*
- 7 Why are children such a divisive force between women?
- 8 What happened to the good old days when women used to fight with men?
- 9 Last week, a mother and her toddler were in my local supermarket in the evening, at a time when few children are there. The toddler was mounted on a tricycle with a metal handle protruding about three feet at a forty-five-degree angle from the seat. The purpose of the handle—parental control—had apparently been forgotten. As the toddler sped down the aisles, the handle brought down a paper-towel display and threatened the eggs. "Gabby! Gabby! GAB-RI-ELLE!!" the mother's voice escalated as she looked the other way and manically loaded her cart with an assortment of Lunchables, Dunkaroos, and other junk foods manufactured to temporarily pacify and ultimately enrage our country's children.
- 10 As little Gabby approached my shopping cart, she began to slalom, sending the handle zooming from side to side and

knocking loaves of freshly baked bread into the aisle. Clouds of choking flour rose around us as I dodged flying baguettes. I was about to grab little Gabby and summon her irresponsible mother.

Flashback.

Only a few years ago, I *was* that mother.

Before that, as a single woman twenty-five years ago, I fiercely protected my single rights. I had a great job and I did what I pleased. I was thrilled not to be encumbered by a family. When the people in the apartment next door bought a piano for their little girl, and her endless practices bothered me, *I hired a lawyer to limit her practice time.* Why should families have more rights than single people? I chose to be single. They chose to have children. Therefore I was as entitled to my silence and freedom as they were entitled to their family.

I looked down on women with children as fools, dupes who had fallen for a myth created for the purpose of their own oppression. Women with children were trapped, dependent on their husbands for money and for whatever else they still had the brains to need. Just the presence of a child seemed to reduce intelligent women to blithering idiots. Once at the gynecologist's office I watched as a group of chic, smart, professional women kicked off their Chanel sling-backs, left their briefcases unattended, and crawled around on the filthy floor making goo-goo faces at someone's sluglike progeny.

"Ohhh, she's so adoorable," cooed a real estate tycoon.

"And look at that face!" squawked a Citibank vice president.

I was appalled. Even if I ever had a child—and for most of my twenties and thirties it was the last thing I imagined doing—I would never, ever, behave like that.

Marriage and pregnancy at the age of thirty-eight didn't change me. I was amazed at the fatuous way people spoke about childbirth in my Lamaze class. "I want to share Cathy's pain," one of the husbands intoned. The leader nodded approvingly while I burst out laughing. Even my husband smiled. We flunked Lamaze. When strangers cooed at me and reached out for my burgeoning stomach, I wanted to bite them.

"Oh, it's such a celebration," gushed one friend with a new baby, a woman who had formerly been a brilliant journalist. She and I had once spent two hours searching for the perfect lip gloss—a pale pink called *Prrr*. She used to be *fun*. Now she appeared to

be drooling. As I watched her change her baby, exclaiming over its small green excrement, I took a vow. I would have the baby—there was no way to avoid that now—but I would never lose my mind. I planned for full-time help. I signed a contract for a new book. I rented an office.

20 Then I had my baby, my Sarah.

21 The moment I held her in my arms, I became a different person. You could say that I joined the human race. For the first time in my life, my connection with someone else sliced through the web of defenses, fear, and pride that had separated me from the world. I had been married twice, but holding Sarah was my first experience of love. My heart seemed to melt. My mind no longer interested me. This tiny baby became the center of my world. I crossed over.

22 As soon as I got home from the hospital I went out and bought the biggest, most expensive stroller I could find. I wanted my precious girl to be safe. With her tucked into the stroller, I resented anyone else on the sidewalk. Everything seemed like a threat to the only being I had ever loved. I took Sarah everywhere with me, even in places where she wasn't allowed. To me it seemed criminal that my baby wasn't supposed to be with me at all times. Why should she have to be alone with a strange babysitter instead of at the movies with me? I took her to expensive restaurants and delighted when she threw the foie gras on the floor and smeared her adorable face with *quenelles de brocket*. Other diners frowned at us; I ignored them.

23 On airplanes, where baby Sarah was particularly fussy, I demanded extra help from the staff and often threw enough of a tantrum to get an extra seat—no one wanted to be close to us anyway, not even my husband. I personally took the time to explain to hapless complainers that my child was a *child*, and that people who were not enchanted by the noise of children were uptight, intolerant puritans who had probably never had an orgasm. *Weren't you ever a child yourself?* I would hiss. If someone suggested that I might think about controlling my daughter, I would lean over them menacingly. *So you think I'm a bad mother?* These confrontations never ended well.

24 As a mother I felt like the keeper of the flame, a woman who had been entrusted with something infinitely sacred. I had done nothing to earn the gift of this child. Watching her sleep I sometimes felt enveloped in a golden cloud of unconditional grace.

I kept on working—I had signed the book contract—but I slowed way down, and my old Armani success suits are still gathering dust in the back of the closet. Suddenly, I looked with pity on people who had never had children. How sad. They had never loved. They didn't know what they were missing.

My baby daughter is twenty-two now, and although she 25 remains at the center of my life she has also developed a life of her own. My beloved son is fourteen. I've had decades of being a mother first and a writer second. I kept on working when my children were born, partly because I didn't have the luxury of having to decide whether to be a stay-at-home or a working mother. I took a professional hit and lost a lot of the sharpness and brashness that were my trademarks. I spent hours on the floor oohing and aahing over tiny hands and feet. I wrote and edited among the blocks and plastic castles in the pediatrician's waiting room and missed deadlines to attend parents' meetings. My lip gloss was whatever I could find at the bottom of a bag filled with lunch passes, old homework papers, and half-empty juice boxes.

Lately though, as my children become adults, I am noticing 26 a change. I have become dependent on getting eight hours of sleep a night. I get regular haircuts and spend more money than I should on clothes. For the first time in a long time I'm annoyed by children like little Gabby and the way their mothers defend them. I'm crossing back over. I can almost feel it. I'm changing sides again.

Why does having children, while bringing out our most lov- 27 ing, effusively maternal selves, simultaneously ignite our fears and turn us against one another? After all, women with children—whether they work or stay at home—might get together to make this world a better place for all women with children.

What's all this anger really about? 28

For one thing, we're too sleep-deprived to be tolerant or tem- 29 perate. I remember the caul of exhaustion I lived in as the mother of young children. In those days the most erotic thing a man could say to me was "Why don't you just go back to sleep." My idea of lingerie was earplugs and a sleep mask—neither of which blocked out my children clamoring for my attention.

Women do the lion's share—perhaps it should be called 30 the woman's share—of the child care and household work in this country. A recent National Labor Bureau study shows that

women who work still spend twice as much time as men on child care and housework. We live with the results of half a revolution: Women have earned the right to work as hard as men do, but men did not take over half the work at home. Every woman knows her pediatrician's telephone number; I have yet to meet a man who does.

31 What worsens our predicament is that women lack core representation in our government. Photographs of the Senate still look like "Class of 1970" men's college-reunion photos. One of the great mysteries of modern politics is that women, who comprise more than half the population, still comprise less than 20 percent of the government. More women vote than men, but we don't vote for one another. Certainly gender is not the defining reason to vote for or against anyone, but if more women voted for women, at least we would be governed by those who have walked in our flip-flops and pushed our strollers and hunched over our changing tables at 4 A.M. Have we been so indoctrinated by a patriarchal society that we secretly think men are more fit to govern? Are we so hardwired by advertising and fairy tales that we assume the best child care always comes from a mother even if she's a resentful nervous wreck?

32 Working and stay-at-home moms today are like the famous psychology experiment in which too many rats are put in a cage with too little food. The rats *have* had enough sleep, nevertheless, they kill one another. The stakes in the baby battle are high—nothing is more precious than our children and being able to provide for them and ourselves. The level of resources is low. There isn't much support for women who work—support like office child care, flexible hours, and reasonable maternity leaves. There isn't much support for women who stay home—like tax breaks, financial protection in case of divorce, subsidized medical care, or even licensed child care. Kennels are more strictly regulated than child-care agencies; veterinarians get paid more than pediatricians; men who can hire better lawyers tend to walk away with more advantageous divorce decrees than their ex-wives who have spent two decades with zeros on their income tax forms.

33 No wonder every woman who has made a different choice seems like an enemy. What if you are right? What if I am wrong? What if in working we are damaging our children by being absent and preoccupied? What if by staying home we are sacrificing our

independence and our ability to financially take care of our children and hurting them in another way?

And so we fight.

34

BUILDING VOCABULARY

Cheever uses a number of words that connote offensive action. Write definitions for each of the words. Then explain why Cheever has chosen this language for her essay. (Look again at the title of the essay as well.)

1. platoons (par. 2)
2. adversaries (par. 3)
3. squadron (par. 4)
4. whipsawed (par. 6)
5. hostility (par. 6)
6. divisive force (par. 7)
7. oppression (par. 14)
8. brashness (par. 25)
9. ignite (par. 27)
10. indoctrinated (par. 31)

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