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Mother and Child: The Erotic Bond

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No one is prepared for becoming a mother even though the world is full of discourse on the subject. I became a mother at thirty-eight and by then I thought I knew a few things. I knew for a fact that I would never be adequately prepared, for instance, and that I would just do it the way every other woman probably had, the best way I could. Right from the beginning of the pregnancy I felt myself initiated into the realm of the best-kept secrets. No one had ever mentioned, for instance, the tingly little cramps just over the pubic bone that set in almost immediately with a first pregnancy and raise the fear that just when you'll need those very muscles to be strong they seem to be giving out. Many months after the birth of my son, a mother of three told me they're called round ligament pains. Nor did anyone ever mention the invisible belt of hivelike itching that often occurs in the second through fourth months of pregnancy. And although I had heard plenty of warnings about menstrual spotting in the first four months, no one ever told me about the incontinence that might accompany the entire pregnancy and beyond. "Incontinence?" my friend Katherine laughed when I mentioned it a few years later. "Oh, yeah, forget about running, jumping, or sneezing!"

The best-kept secrets pile up around the subject of childbirth, postpartum "depression," and the first twelve months. My son was born prematurely and so I encountered a whole other set of secrets no one thinks she'll need to know until she does. I remember, though, being determined, as I had heard other women say they had been, to not forget a thing, to document every private discovery, every hidden event. But denial, displacement, and cultural mandates for self-effacing motherhood aside, there are compelling logistical reasons why new

mothers keep the secrets. They are too exhausted, disoriented, and busy for the most part to be recording them all, and by the time they aren't (do I really believe such a time arrives?) the vagaries of memory commit those secrets yet again to the farthest outposts, the silent margins that delimit the discourses of mothering. And so I have failed, like so many other mothers, to resist the inevitable. Most of the best-kept secrets of pregnancy and early motherhood lie buried safely within me shimmering just out of reach in some vast and timeless collective.

But that is not that. Other secrets replace them, take up the present moment, carry thornier implications. A secret that compels me now, that has increasingly gained complexity in the last two years, has to do with the erotic bond between my son and me. That the bond is an erotic one is not in itself a secret. This is the secret upon which Freud founded psychoanalysis as we know it—that the child has drives that are sexual and that the first objects of those drives are its parents, most initially its mother('s body). But what we do with that bit of psychoanalytic insight is what we seem so bent on keeping hidden.

Alexander likes to say he is "four-and-three-quarters." I got plenty of warning about this age, about the intensity of the little boy's attachment to the mother and his Oedipal struggle to possess her entirely for himself. Numbers of women friends with boys assured me that their preschool age sons really do propose marriage to them, intercept their affectionate gestures intended for spouses or lovers, and lavish them with tender phrases and caresses. How dear, I thought. And how poignant the necessity of redirecting these most passionate expressions of desire. Nevertheless, that is exactly what our culture requires, however mediated by our various ethnicities and classes, in order that the boy child identify finally with the other, the father, the law, to take up his place in culture as a man. And while I am ceaselessly rewriting culture's script for men, I recognize my limited power in this arena. I have one son whom I would wish to become an unusual man, a man who resists his gender identity enough to grapple always with the rigors of self-reflection and the complexities of social construction. But seeing no other alternative (how many androgynes do I actually know?), I would wish him still to identify as a man. So it was with a sense of forewarning and purposefulness that I imagined myself meeting Alexander's first dramatic displays of Oedipal conflict. This sense was nurtured by not only the content but the tone of all those conversations I had had with mothers, the books I had read, the films I had seen. My position always seemed clear. I was the figure who must nurture and assist my son through this difficult attachment/detachment maneuver to/from myself.

But no one had really ever told me, in a way I could hear at least, what it might feel like to be the mother in the Oedipal conflict. Indeed of the three key characters in the Greek myth of Oedipus, Jocasta's experience is least described. Upon discovering that she has had four children with her son Oedipus, we are told, she hangs herself. That, of course, is the best way to keep a secret forever. Still, it seems mothers do something equally silencing in the day-to-day way we

do not speak of our erotic feelings toward those most desirable of objects, our children. We say our kids are cute, of course, or beautiful or remarkable, and we endlessly detail their behaviors and idiosyncrasies, but rarely do we acknowledge the erotic component of our own feelings in these observations of them. I say "rarely" because just today, when I was trying to explain the topic of this essay to a friend with a six-month-old daughter, she said simply, "It's the most erotic thing *I've* ever felt. You know it's no joke about pretending to eat her right up. I really do want to. It's just uncontainable, this desire. But what can I do? I can't have sex with her. Although nursing takes care of that." That's right, I thought. The physical intimacy of early infancy does mediate those drives in the parent, does "take care of" the uncontainable desire in a way that can't occur at the Oedipal stage. Now that my son is nearly five, I do not have access to his body in the same ways I did when he was younger, nor does he have the same access to mine. I have to ask permission now to clean out his ears, help blow his nose, or make one last wipe after he gets off the toilet (could I ever have imagined such a thing in the midst of all those diaper changes?). And he knows better now than to try and "pinch" my breasts—"fondle" is, of course, much more like it, but language allows him the same diversionary tactics I use.

In fact, language is the very intervention in our children's developmental process that requires us to come to terms with the erotic energy that infuses our love for them (the developmental process I am referring to is here marked by the Oedipal stage—a crucial step in attaining gender identity that boy and girl children experience quite differently but whose name suggests its emphasis on the boy child's experience). But it is also language that foils our expression of that eroticism. When my son wraps his arms around my legs, sighs, and says, "Mommy, I want to have a baby with you," a number of things inevitably occur in me. The impossible tenderness of the moment is followed by the need to say something. "You do?" I say, stalling for the right response (and noting that last year he wanted to *be* me). I could extend the fantasy toward the realm of the practical and avoid the more problematic implications by asking what he'd do with a baby. Would he like to dress it and feed it and change diapers, etc. But I know that has nothing to do with what he wants. I could redirect the fantasy to include his father, and suggest that what he might like is a sister or brother, but that, I am sure, is not what he is talking about in this moment. I could "reality adjust" him in the service of heterosexuality by assuring him that one day he will marry someone he loves and have a baby with her. But now, far from being a comfort, this assurance will not alleviate the anxiety he must be feeling. After all it was just a short time ago that, lying next to me one morning, staring blankly at the ceiling, he sang a wandering little song that went, "Oh, mommy, I love you so much I don't know what to do" *Good grief, Charlie Brown*, I thought to myself in a voice I use when we're playing sometimes, *I feel the same way about you*. The truth is just that simple and just that complex, too.

I remember a specific moment, a "where-it-all-began" moment when I

glimpsed the enormity of language's intervention in the continuum of desire that contained us both. We were in the kitchen and he was two. He had been saying lots of words for a long time, so I had passed beyond the wonder of yet another new one but was enjoying tremendously his pleasure in stringing them all together, his various forays into meaning. "Mommy!" he said, "you want a cookie." And as if my brain were wired through his, I indeed felt hunger for a cookie, as if he had only "read my mind." In the time it took to hand him the cookie, a lot happened. I realized that we had been operating like this for a long time, that the boundarylessness between mothers and preverbal children did not simply shore up with the onset of language but rather found ways to persist inside it. This was the first time I had ever noticed in nearly a year of his acquiring language that he had never used the word *I*. I had been hearing *I* for all those *yous*, and not just by mentally exchanging pronouns but actually registering his desire in my body (what power in a pronoun!), feeling it come up against my often different desire, and finally assigning the conflicting desire to him. Not surprisingly, it was around this time that I noticed other people in the family helping him to make the distinction between *I* and *you*, something that is actually very difficult to explain due to the nature of pronouns themselves, i.e. "Oh, you mean *I* when you say *you*. No, I know you don't mean me, you mean you, but you need to say *I* when you mean you," etc. I left it to the others. I was in no hurry to give up what might be the last vestiges of some of the most compelling commingling I have ever felt.

But the leaving it to others felt like a secret I ought to keep. No one likes the idea that a mother enjoys the boundarylessness of relation with her child. That pleasure suggests too intimately her own regressive, infantile underpinnings. More than anything, we need a mother to be an adult. We want to believe that all her own early polymorphous pleasure has now been securely organized around her genitals and directed toward her adult sexual partner. We like to think of a mother's delight in the softness of her child's skin, the firmness of its body, the familiarity of its smell, the singularity of its voice, the sweetness of its breathing as something quite separate from a woman's delight in the body of her lover. We like to make a clear distinction between motherly affection and female passion. If there were not a clear distinction, what would stop mothers from engulfing their children forever in their own hedonistic designs? What hope would culture have?

But what if one of the best-kept secrets is that there is no distinction, really, between motherly affection and female passion? Or rather, that we practice this same love, this erotic energy continuous with our early attachment to our own mother's (or her substitute's) body, in tirelessly deliberate and mediated ways. And we do this exactly because of the lack of boundary between ourselves and our children, exactly because our children are never entirely other. This is the positive side of the narcissistic attachment to children for which mothers are so often criticized. Never is it more clear than with our own children that what we do unto them, we do unto ourselves. If we support their independence and self-

reliance, we inevitably gain more freedom and time for ourselves. If we honor their individual expression and spirit, we usually get respected in return. And if we burden them with guilt and shame, we can count on being plagued with those same feelings about ourselves and our parenting. Since the feedback loop is almost immediate, we learn early how to mediate the merging of desire (ours, theirs, and whatever overlaps), how to negotiate the tangle of erotic drives that constitutes the bond between a mother and a child. The other thing we learn is not to talk about it.

Alexander likes to cuddle a lot. A *lot*. I remember hoping before he was born that he would be an affectionate child because I like to cuddle, too. An astrologer friend assured me in the hospital that his early birth in the sign of Cancer would predispose him to strong emotions and an affectionate nature. For the first year, of course, there's no telling. Five months of colic, followed by teething and developmental anxieties, made it almost impossible to discern what sort of little person he would become. I only know I seemed always to be holding him and always on the lookout for another pair of willing arms. By the second year, though, the astrological prediction seemed to be bearing itself out. And what really confirmed it was the language that began to accompany his affectionate gestures. I can rarely turn down invitations like "I need to cuddle with my soft sweet mommy."

By now Alexander's cuddling is a highly developed art. It begins early in the morning when he appears in my room holding Orker the seal, slips into bed beside me, and coaxes one of my sleepy arms around his middle. This is complicated. On the one hand, I resist. I am never ready to be awake. On the other, I am endlessly grateful that here he is whole in body and spirit, in all his morning good cheer, and almost calm enough to let me pretend to myself that I am resting a little while longer. It's a count-my-blessings kind of moment, and then some. "Mommy," he says, after about ten or fifteen minutes, "let's be animals." This has been going on for as long as I can remember (perhaps this is what replaced nursing so long ago). He is the baby elephant, bird, snake, fish, seal, horse, dog, or kitty, and I am the mommy of the same species. We go looking for food, we have adventures, we don't get caught, we return home where we cuddle, of course. Sometimes he just collapses against me, his face pressing down on mine, and I breathe him in, breathe him out. Sometimes in these moments he says how much he loves me, but most of the time he is talking to himself, or singing, or just staring off. If his dad tries to enter in, Alexander always pushes him away, even though at other times he is quite loving with him. Then suddenly he will disappear under the covers all the way to the foot of the bed. After a lot of tossing and giggling he reappears, naked, having left his pajamas somewhere down at my feet. He presents himself with noisy fanfare, giddy with his own power. He is delighted by his nakedness and, I sense, by something like defying an assumed prohibition. For although nudity is commonplace in our family, he seems to sense that he's on some kind of an edge. He turns his skinny backside to my front and we lie like spoons, half-

moaning half-humming an exaggerated "Yummmmmm." The sensuality of this moment that we have constructed almost takes my breath away. For the short time that we snuggle like this, I feel as close to perfectly happy as I imagine possible.

Most of the time I'm the one to say we've got to get up, to eat, to dress, to go to school, etc. But when I can't marshal the forces, or when I am lulled into overtime by the pleasure of our play, I sometimes begin to feel uncomfortable. "OK, I'll be the mommy bird and you be the baby and you cry and I'll feed you. Here, nurse the mommy," he says, pointing to his tummy. And although I'm tempted to kiss that spot as a way of playing along (I can't even imagine pretending to nurse him—here a taboo is in full force), I often hear myself responding with things like, "No, I'm sleeping now," or "Yikes, I fell in the river." Nevertheless I let the game go on. I am, of course, partly curious to see how he plays out being the mommy (she's always good at finding food and fighting off hunters). Now suddenly he's the baby and wants to nurse. I laugh him away, but he insists and pretends to grab for my breast. "Cut it out!" I say partly laughing because he's laughing, but partly serious, too, and in this moment thinking quite concertedly about where the boundaries ought to be. "OK, OK," he says, seems to stop, and then dives towards my chest, kissing me on the clavicle. That he kisses me takes me aback. I see that he does the same thing I do -- that he doesn't really pretend to nurse either, that he opts for that more adult vestigial gesture of nursing, the kiss. And, like someone who suddenly realizes she is witnessing an historical event in the making, I think IT IS HAPPENING RIGHT NOW. In this moment, unlike any other that I have known, I am actually the mother and the woman, the original object and its displacement. This is the impossible conjoining that patriarchal and heterosexual culture so labors to veil, to mystify, to interdict, which I can hardly hang on to long enough to mark before it passes imperceptively like water into air.

What, I wonder in moments like these, would I do if he were a girl (or if I had a second child and no time for this sort of play)? Would a daughter his age and I even be playing these games? Or would our games be more informed by the kinds of power struggles that ordinarily accompany a girl child's efforts to separate out who is who in the selfsameness of mother-daughter gender? But just say that we did play mother-and-baby games as part of our morning ritual, would I feel the same ambivalence at the same turns? Would I wonder for a moment about our nakedness together? Or about the appropriateness of the game? My sister-in-law has been saying tactfully for a long time now that "most mothers curtail access to their body to their boy children at this age." She is a psychotherapist and a sensible woman/mother, so I take her advice to heart. But she is also, I always tell her, a white, middle-class American. Many people of other cultures and classes don't operate with these same taboos, and anyway I don't want my body to become distant, mysterious, and only, therefore, an object of frustrated desire. I want a woman's body to be a real thing to him,

with its various characterizing features and quirks, cycles and stages. She reminds me, though, and I acknowledge also, that Alexander is growing up in this culture in a predominantly white, middle-class family. But, I ask her obliquely, what woman in her right mind wouldn't want to resist that institution and remold its membership? And how better to do it than with our bodies, the most split-off and thereby suppressed/oppressed instruments culture has at its disposal? And that brings me back to erotic love and its power in the mother-child relationship, because all those normative steps to desexualizing the child's attachment to his/her mother's body are predicated on a split between mother and woman that is culturally required but personally mutilating for both mothers and children, a category that finally includes everyone.

I see that what I am holding out for, in these borderline experiments in erotic love with my son (the wording is so sensitive here, and nothing that I can think to say is quite what I mean), is a rewriting of sexuality as I know it. It is not a free-for-all kind of sexuality that powered the imagination of the "sexual revolution" of the '60s and '70s but left us, men and women, just as split in ourselves as ever. It is an inclusive kind of sexuality that recognizes itself basically everywhere. It is not so scary in its infantility because it's just as much a part of adulthood, too. And if we were to recognize that kind of sexuality much more intimately in ourselves all the time (since it's operating there all the time anyway), we would have to pay it close attention, to be careful and caring with it. I imagine our having to add lots of new words to our language to describe it in its multiple manifestations in any interaction, fantasy, work of art, etc., in much the same way we have thought Inuit peoples to have so many words for snow. But I recognize that as innocently as I try to cast it, it's a sexuality that would not support life on the planet as we know it, that is, would not support social hierarchies, multinational corporations, a free market economy, racism, colonization, or any other of the problematic realities that depend on our ability to split off what's safe and good (mother) from what's desirable (woman).

Last year Valorie (a dear friend and second mother-figure to Alexander) and I took him to the Women's Music Festival. It is an all-women's event, four days of music and sun, hikes and swimming, workshops and food. Boy children ten years of age and under are also allowed. When we got inside the festival grounds, I was amused by the first truckload of women passing by laughing and waving, their bare breasts jouncing to the bumps in the road. They were acting out, I thought, taking every opportunity to do what is everywhere else forbidden. But I didn't blame them. By the next day I didn't blame myself either. In the afternoons the large swimming pool filled up with bodies of every imaginable size, shape, and texture. Mothers, children, lovers, friends towel-to-towel along the steamy concrete deck, dipping in and out of the brisk water. All those naked bodies so happily commingling in the security of our shared gender. Was it erotic to be there? Of course it was. It was magnificently, luxuriously, ubiquitously so. And yet we were as orderly as any other crowd, waited in long

lines for dinner and almost as long ones for showers, had regular conversations, and helped each other out in small, immediate ways. I don't remember ever seeing any overtly genital sex acts between women there, although the atmosphere was clearly sexually charged. In fact I felt more comfortable and secure in this crowd than in any other I'd been in.

No surprise, much of that comfort had to do with Alexander, that he was in as safe a place as he could possibly be, all those women/mothers with an eye and an arm out, just in case. I wasn't surprised either that the other children there seemed less competitive, more trusting, and, interestingly, more independent than many kids I've had occasion to know. But I was surprised at my sense of relief when, dropping Alexander off at the festival daycare center, I felt unambivalent pleasure at his fingers tracing my cheekbone and his "Goodbye, my dearest mommy lover." How often I have marked those kinds of goodbyes at his regular preschool with a vague anxiety about their possibly problematic implications. How often I have listened furtively to the way other children say goodbye to their mothers hoping to hear equally "excessive" endearments. And how often has the sensible mother within had to remind me that what really should be noted is how happily he says goodbye and lets me go. But what would it mean to never feel one moment of that ambivalence, to trust that this love I feel for my son is as good as it ever gets? What would it mean if I could openly and directly model all my other loves on this, my finest? When it was time to leave the festival, none of us wanted to go home. Alexander made us promise we would bring him back next year. Both Valorie and I got ready for reentry trauma, and we didn't have to wait long. Just twenty minutes down the highway we stopped for gas, minded our business, and, predictably, got harrassed by two drunk men until the tank was filled up.

"How would you feel if Alexander grew up to be gay?" a lesbian friend doesn't quite ask as we speak recently of things erotic and motherly. Or, I think to myself, sexually ambivalent or a cross-dresser or a fetishist, or—? These questions have crossed my mind before. I would be kidding myself to say it wouldn't matter, that whatever his sexuality I would accept it without reservation, remorse, guilt, or judgment. "It would be hard," his father says when I ask him the same questions. And I agree. Life is hard enough, and being "different" is that much harder. I'm already feeling sorry that he's having to deal with being left-handed. (I was left-handed, too, but the kindergarten teacher would have none of that.) On the other hand (the right one), to consciously guide him into the heterosexual model of masculinity feels abusive. Yet again, to *not* deliberately guide him in that direction seems at times equally injurious. Example: Alexander at his gymnastics lesson begs me for a leotard like the other kids have (the girls, that is). Here's one of those moments where I watch my conditioning vie with my resistance to it. I think "No," plain and simple, but I try out "Yes" for a fleeting second just to really test myself. After all, I might have been able to say yes just a year ago, but kids say things now to each other about haircuts and clothes and so I know a leotard is sure to bring him

immediate censure, probably even from his teacher. Nevertheless, as I am feeling the absurdity of my own explanation to him, that boys and girls usually wear different kinds of uniforms for most kinds of sports (though I am hard pressed to answer his outraged "Why?"), I grind to a halt between what I know and what I want. "If you really want a leotard, you can have one" I tell him, "but you just have to know that someone might make fun of you because you will be different." "Never mind," he says. A week later after co-opting at Alexander's preschool, his dad reports that in the fantasy room Alexander got himself dressed up as a cowboy and then with equal enthusiasm donned an elaborate bride's costume and went through a double wedding ceremony with his friend Evin and another "couple." "How was that?" I ask his dad. "He made a beautiful bride," he says. And we both laugh and remember the evening before when Alexander had said to me at the dinner table, "OK, I'm the bride and you're the broom." "Groom," his dad said, "the man is the groom." "Oh," Alexander says, a little abashed, and then, "No, I want you to be the broom." "OK," I agree. A bride and broom seem likely enough in a domestic sort of way, but then again, if the broom can fly....

On my desk sits a small photo of myself *circa* four "and-three-quarters." I retrieved it from my stepfather after my mother died thirteen years ago. It had been taken in Iowa where I lived with a foster parent who must have sent it on to my mother in California. I have often wondered at the self-possessed expression on that child's face, her legs crossed and her hands clasped squarely in her lap. It is one of the few photos I have of my childhood and it has become, by now, one of my most familiar images of myself. Recently, though, while late-night working on some translation at my desk, I saw that photo/myself anew. Who knows what triggered it. Perhaps it was *La Amortajada*, the text I was so feverishly unravelling, about a dead woman's dialogue with her split-off selves, or perhaps it was the residue of a drawn-out, difficult "good night" with Alexander, who that evening thought his bedroom too lonely to fall asleep in. Perhaps it was everything and nothing I could point to, but in any case it happened. I looked at the little girl in the photo and I felt such a surge of desire I must have stopped breathing. I wanted her entirely, to embrace her until she melted into me, to infuse her with all of myself, to enjoy the delicious intimacy of her little body as a day-to-day, minute-to-minute commonplace—her skin, her hair, her smell, her sound. I could almost reproduce her right then and there, a tangible, palpable child.

In a trying-to-make-sense-of-this effort I reminded myself that these were actually feelings I have for Alexander. And it did make sense that on account of family resemblance and age correspondence I had, at that moment, mapped the feelings I have for my actual child onto the photographic image that represents for me my internalized child. But the unmediated desire I felt for that small girl in the photo made me at least suspect that it might be the other way around. What I mean to say is what if, for a reason I can't presume to know, for a split second some of my psycho-social infrastructure slipped just enough to reveal

another of the best-kept secrets: that all love whether it be for our children, our lovers, our work, our ideas, is fundamentally the same love, is first and last, coming and going, not even erotic but autoerotic? For isn't erotic love just a further development, a successful splitting off, redirecting, and renaming of that first continuous unbounded connection/pleasure we feel with our mother's body?

Of course, autoeroticism is not such a secret since we can find it strategically positioned, just as I'm suggesting now, in psychoanalytic discourse. The real secret, though, is how "ardorously" culture struggles to forget what eroticism actually is, where it comes from, and why it is absolutely everywhere all the time, especially and necessarily in a mother's love for her child. When we successfully forget that fact, as we require ourselves to do in the name of becoming adults, we severely limit the ways we can experience the connection/pleasure which originally nurtured us into life and which sustains our desire for life forever after. It seems evident that one of the reasons, for instance, that Western culture has so little regard, by and large, for what's left of natural life—for plants and animals and earth and atmosphere—is its successful endeavor to see itself as separate from all that life, to forget the connection/pleasure that informs our very being here.

So what *is* a mother to do? If I had never had a child, my task would be the same. I would still have that little girl internalized and her picture on my desk. I would still need to be parenting her, the child she is, the woman I am, the best way I know how. It's just that having Alexander confronts me more urgently to uncover the secret of what that best way is.

"Do you love me so much that you just have to close your eyes?" he asked me the other day when we were hugging. "Yes!" I said, surprised at his accuracy. "Me, too" he said matter-of-factly and patted my hand. But for whatever permission I am learning to give myself in honoring the erotic bond between us, I wonder still if it makes any difference. One morning recently he sits at the table eating cereal and crooning a love song to mother. Something about how wonderful and sweet I am and how much much much he loves loves loves me. "Goodbye," I interrupt him on my way out the door. "Can I have a hug?" The goodbye hug is a ritual. But this morning he doesn't even hear me. His eyes are so far off in his song that I hesitate to ask again, though I suppose that later on he'll think I didn't say goodbye. So I try once more. But it's no use. "I just love her so much my mommy," I hear as I leave the house. Tossing his car pillow into the backseat to make room next to me for my books and papers, I marvel at that other "mommy" that symbolic creature who, seemingly overnight, has exceeded and displaced me, and who, this morning, has him in thrall. I only hope, for all our sakes, she loves him as undividedly as she can.