

that were the main components of his representation of his lost mother.

In this state Matt had almost no chance of relating to a potentially adoptive mother in the future, but the sand, water, candles and other materials which were available within the free but protected therapeutic space made it possible for him to explore these negative states bodily and non-verbally.

It was three years before he was able to begin to let go of this horrifying imagery, to throw away some of the burnt remnants, and at last start to create instead of destroy.

Rebuilding self-esteem

These examples show that, even at a late stage of childhood, the inner representation of the lost mother can still be merged with that of the self. When this is the case children are not able to distinguish themselves as separate entities with firm boundaries, or to develop emotionally with any degree of normality. The fantasised or 'ghost' mother dominates by her absence, and children have no sense of individual worth. Any attempt to rebuild or re-create a sense of self is crucial if there is to be a 'real' child for the adoptive parents to relate to.

Emily is Seven

A Story by Gaie Houston

What is it Desmond Morris said about baboons? They rule by a system of frowns and grimaces. Something like that. Well that's how she's ruled this household, for seven years. And I never saw how I was letting her, even encouraging her. Then one morning, no-one could say why, the fog cleared, the light shone, and I did what in a way you might say she'd been asking for all along. Or did I go too far?

I was sitting there at the table eating my breakfast. The sun was catching my tea where I'd stirred it, and a little jellyfish of light was wobbling from it, up and down the wall. I thought how I could show it to her when she came down. There was a chaffinch on the windowsill, head on one side, trying to browbeat Grandma into putting out the bacon

rinds as usual. There was a smell of toast, and soap from morning-washed faces and necks, detergent from clean clothes. John Humphries was turned quite low, telling cheerfully of blockages on the M6. Uncle was rustling a susurrus of corn flakes out of the packet into his bowl. You could not ask for a safer, a friendlier place anywhere on earth.

Then there's this crashing of feet down the stairs. You understand. Nobody has ticked her off or snubbed her, kept her out of the bathroom, done one single thing that might justify a mood. But here she comes, thump against the kitchen door, doing what she does even when she's in a good humour, trying to get the door open before she's turned the door-handle. A sort of tchah and hiss from her; a squeal

of grating metal. A louder shout from the far side, and she throws it open so it whistles back against the corner of the sideboard, and Uncle's clock drops on one side all skew whiff and starts going backwards again. My heart nearly stops. My stomach does, so I can't eat.

I mean, all I have ever wanted is her happiness. Is that true? No. What is true is that she is the most important other person in my life, as she's bound to be. She's the one I know inside out, the one who can upset me so I cry into my pillow at night, puzzling how to make her radiate the way she can at times.

But it's not just her happiness. At the heart of what I want is that little sentence out of childhood prayers at bedtime. 'Please God let everyone be happy.' Everyone. No mad old lady shouting at the lamp-post when we're out shopping. No famines making skeleton old men, with tired all-knowing faces, out of little babies, as they lean listening through their flattened breasts to the dying hearts of their mothers. The cages of their ribs will not contain their lives for many days. Please, no shooting of young men while their families are made to watch at gunpoint. No killing of civilians. No gunning down, gassing, exploding, maiming, torturing, of rebels or insurgents or militia or armed forces. Anyone. Please God. There is enough trouble in the world without all that.

While I know such things are going on somewhere in the world, there is a kind of pain inside me. I've thought about it, and it's true, it's really true, that if everyone would be kind to each other as a result, I'd let them kill me. Understand. It's not that I'm sick of it all, like some

people, like Grandma, even, and would just as soon be out of it. She can sit in her chair in a trance, and then sigh, and then say she has no idea why she sighed. Well I'm not like that. Eyes open in the morning, the world switches on in technicolour for me. That old owl in the square gives his last screech, and I'm at the window, whoosh, to see if I can see him, no more than a bulge in the fork of the plane tree for the rest of the day. Cold day? Warm day? Is the willow tree

My Mum



streaming its tentacles in the wind or are the pigeons waddling iridescent and complacent on warm mown grass? What colour clothes shall I put on? Why not my new black patent-leather shoes?

And what sort of outing can we fix up? Uncle has his faults, and Grandma says sharp things about him living here at all and not having a proper job. But it's always an excitement when he comes running downstairs and says 'Well, what shall we do today?' He knows about being happy. Except when visitors come and he stands rubbing his left foot up and down the back of his right trouser leg, and telling lies about his business ventures. He's frightened then. But just with us in the family, he knows how to make wonderful days.

There was that expanded polystyrene box the new bath taps came in. He put the hot soup-pot in it one Christmas Eve, and we all drove to Stonehenge for a winter picnic, with fresh rolls he stopped and bought on the way. That box is under the stairs now, and he's spoken of putting baked potatoes in it for another outing. With him, there's always promise, always the feeling there are so many interesting places to see and things to do that we better hurry this minute and start enjoying ourselves, or we'll miss something.

But I'd give that up. I'd give up that stream in the forest where we once all made echoes under the stone bridge. I'd give up the sunk lane he showed us, with primroses tufted gentle-scented up both banks. I'd give up all the tastes and smells of home cooking, and the warmth of my friendly bed at night. I'd even give her up, the heart and heat of my life, if in return

God would give me this certificate guaranteeing happiness for everyone.

Perhaps I should just have sat down and explained something like that to her. But who ever says things like that? They'd all joke or look blank.

And anyway, it's too late to talk of peace when Armageddon has already started. And that's what she looked like, standing in the open doorway with the draught rushing past her. Armageddon on legs.

Out of bed the wrong side. Got her liver on. Uncle has these little ways of trying to take the sting out. But suddenly I was past being understanding and forgiving. Suddenly I was angry, and like a stab I understood about original sin. That was her trouble. She has just as warm a bed as I do, and a kind family, the blue sky and a cat and the goldfish pond that Uncle dug the very afternoon she said she fancied it.

Yet here she was, eyes darting, mouth pinched, just searching for how to make trouble. Grandma was scared as usual, and jumped up and fetched her plate from the oven. She snatched it from her without a cloth, screamed, half-threw it on the table, so violently that the fried egg flew off on to the wall and stuck there for a second before dropping down, leaving a round grease-stain, and a trickle of yolk down the skirting board.

So then she screamed again. 'My hand, my hand! Ow! Ow!' She was off out of the room once more, into a big performance, taking hold of the door of the cupboard under the stairs and crashing it open and shut. We all knew it was us she would have liked to be smashing to splinters. Wham. Thump. Screech. Boo-

hoo. Just self-indulgence. She knows as well as I do that the treatment for a burned hand is to hold it under the cold tap for five minutes. So I couldn't even bring myself to suppose she was hurt.

Like the others, I just sat there for a second or two, spoon halfway to my mouth. Then silent thunder roared up inside me, and I went on autopilot. Spoon thrown down as violently as she had thrown the plate. Out of the gaping door after her, streak of lightning as she had been. Only I leapt on to the stairs, so I was behind the bannisters away from her, and high enough to look down on her the way she deserved.

'Stop it!' I yelled.

'Don't you talk to me like that!' she roared back. I could read two things in her face as she spoke. One was shock. I had never in my life shouted at her like that, snarled, with nostrils out, and hate in my eyes. And at the same time I could see a gloat, that now she could really have trouble, perhaps make a scene as bad as that time she broke the washbasin right off the wall, making two fountains from the tap-places, that brought the kitchen ceiling down.

'Listen to me,' I shouted at full pitch, enjoying my own performance, all in the midst of the blind fury of it, and wishing I had a less squeaky voice.

'I will not!'

'Listen to me,' I shouted again. The

politicians on the television always say the line again when they've been interrupted. 'I didn't ask to be born!' Now where in the world did that thought come from? I'd never had it before, but it swelled my heart with pride and indignation as I said it. 'You're a mother!' I screeched, 'You've no business to behave as if you were a baby of three!'

'How dare you!' Her face had gone purple, as if she might burst all over the hall and ruin more of the decorations. 'Get upstairs this minute and take off those new patent shoes, disobedient self-opinionated hussy!'

'No,' I said. It was the biggest no I ever said. It started in my feet and rushed up like vomit, projectile, involuntary, splatting her right in the middle of all that was contemptible about her. 'I'll change my shoes when you say you're sorry for hating me, when you say you're sorry to Grandma for spoiling your breakfast, when you say you're sorry to Uncle 'cause he'll have to put up new wallpaper. Self-opinionated hussy?'

It had been a very good idea to be on the stairs, eye to eye but out of swiping reach. She held two bannisters and shook them and bared her teeth, growling. Then suddenly she let go and started to cry. But you must never just give in to them. I folded my arms and waited without speaking.

'I'm very sorry, Emily,' she said.