

## Eating Your Young And Other Parental Instincts

You've felt pain— had botched dental surgery, three concussions, and you may or may not have gotten into a slap fight with a DMV worker. But none of these twinges compare to the torture of nearly drowning. You were nine years old, under twenty feet of training pool water. You couldn't comprehend the buoyancy dials on the weighted scuba gear anchoring you to the bottom. You felt too much—fingers swollen, ears popping like gas station fireworks, lungs drinking water—to flail your arms in distress. Your father stood, refracted through the lens of ripples, at the edge of the pool. He clenched his gut with laughter and waved your diving certification classmates over to come get a closer look at you, as if you weren't his daughter. As if you were a thirty-second, viral video of some overweight woman dancing on, then breaking a table with her own heft. Like a video he could re-play over and over, still finding hilarity in the sight of his fourth-grader fumbling at the bottom of the pool like a drunken crawfish.

Many animals maim, and even eat, their own children. Wolf spiders and hamsters, gobies, guppies, and polar bears all masticate their offspring. You wonder, is this natural? Is it instinctive for any species to put their babies through the worst? But you wouldn't know. You know next to nothing about babies. You've only held a baby once. At a Christmas party, and you dropped him onto the hardwood while you reached to double dip your nacho at the snack table. Face it, if a child, red, screaming and new to this earth, were to materialize in your lap you would have no clue what to do with her. You'd be lost. The only thing you'd have to go by is the way your parents raised you.

However, if you decided to keep this baby, the first order of business would be naming her. Let's see. Well, there's a *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* Poster on the

wall, over there. Okay. Yeah, that's good. You'll call her Butch. It will be great. You'll take her to hole-in-the-wall bars and Pearl Jam concert after-after-parties, just like your parents did with you as an infant. In a seedy room of fifty-year old men with neck tattoos and young girlfriends, you'll hold her on your hip like an accessory and say, "Everyone, I'd like you to meet my new baby girl, Butch."

Your life raising Butch will be full of all the fun things your parents did with you: taking drum lessons with a handsy guy named Happy Jim, getting bad haircuts, and camping out in the Cracker Barrel parking lot just for the free wifi. But there will be some not so fun things. Like puberty. Parenting your child through this time can be difficult. You've known that ever since you were ten years old, in a Vegas hotel room, in the middle of a blackout. The day your mother and father told you Santa wasn't real, then gave you a razor for your first shave<sup>1</sup>. As you learned from your parents, puberty should be dealt with quickly and prematurely, like ripping a Band-Aid off a gross scab that hasn't healed yet. Remember this let's-just-get-it-over-with attitude when you carry on your mother's tradition and get Butch ready for another day of third grade—harnessing her into an archaic-looking bra. One that she is a good five years away from filling—the two points of it darting at the front her uniform shirt. Butch will look like a three-foot-tall, cone-bearing Madonna as she runs across the woodchips on the playground. Just like you did.

You'll also have to teach Butch the value of a dollar—a value that your parents made obsolete. They sent you into fast food restaurants with old Styrofoam cups and

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1. A first shave during a blackout is a bad idea.

waited, in the parking lot, for you to come out with two fizzing Diet Cokes. You were their canary and the McDonald's soda fountain was your coalmine. Take a risk and send Butch into Popeye's with an empty liter bottle. When you get a cell phone call from the manager asking you to meet him in his particleboard office behind the greased kitchen to discuss your daughter's theft, don't take Butch's side. Wag your finger at her as she sinks in the manager's swivel chair. Tell her she's a criminal, like your parents did to you, hoping you'd be stealthier the next time they sent you a mission for a five-finger discount.

As you've observed, taking trips with your child is key. Your parents always trusted the open road's instruction more than the nuns at your school, which has made you quick-witted, street-smart, and not so good at your multiplication tables. You'll have a grand time pulling Butch out of class, scooping her into the RV, and motoring across state lines like convicts on the lamb. Take her out of pre-school and drive to New Orleans for Mardi Gras. Build her a loft, on the sidewalk of Bourbon Street, out of two rickety ladders and a piece of plywood, above the crowds of drunk and bare-breasted adults, just like your parents did with you. Laugh at Butch when the plywood seat breaks under the weight of a plastic bead tsunami pouring from the parade floats. Laugh at her when she falls unto a cushion of the dirty napkins, cigarette cartons, and plastic cups covered in comic illustrations of Dionysus, just like your parents did to you. It's natural. Instinctive like the way swallows push their young from their nests. Squawk at them with mocking screeches until they learn how to stop falling on their chests, sliding across the floor of dead leaves with the momentum of each failed attempt to fly.

Take Butch to Bonnaroo, a music festival reeking of weed and too-kind strangers. Park somewhere in the rows of identical RVs, crack open a beer, and send her out into the masses of people who haven't seen a shower or sobriety in four days. In the middle of the night, after a day of concerts and warding off college students strung out on 'shrooms, she'll walk back to your campsite, scared by the hollers coming from each parked, metal cylinder she passes. In the dim light of trashcan fires and portable televisions, she'll mistake all the RVs for yours. She'll be lost. Make sure to mark your windshield with a flag, or hang a bright light on the support beam of the awning, so she can find her way back. Back to a parent who wants her to be safe. That is all she'll want. It's natural. Instinctive like the way a newborn sea turtle, at night, crawls from his nest in the dunes and toward the ocean for the first time, looking to the moon for direction. Looking for a mother that's swimming a million waves away, a mother thinking about everything else in the sea but him.