

# BREAKING OUT OF MY SHELL

By Risa C. Doherty

After my son, Alec, was born, I was lost. None of my friends had children yet and I felt very much alone, save for the small strange being I was carting around with me.

I had read all the books, which were to be my road map through these uncharted waters. After all, the parenting section in my local Barnes & Noble had served me well in my adventures in childbirth. For that endeavor, I fully digested the month-to-month and the week-to-week pregnancy guides, but my husband had stopped me from purchasing the day-to-day version, already having learned more graphic details of pregnancy than he wished. But there was no guidebook to reconstruct my social life now.

My plan was to go where I assumed one was supposed to go with a child: the park. Unfortunately, I found myself sitting there alone, watching mothers with their toddlers (old enough to actually use the playground equipment), and mothers of infants (already paired off, chatting happily among themselves). I seemed somehow destined to live through my son's infancy with him as my only companion. He resembled E.T. slightly. Ironically, I was as comfortable with him as I would have been with E.T., since neither of them really spoke English

well, and both were quite alien to me.

If I really looked around I would find a seemingly friendly enough prospect, with whom I would attempt to chat. After pouring out my life history for twenty minutes, I would pause to permit her to recount the details of her life, only to learn that her native language was not English and that her mastery of that language was limited to phrases like "how old?", "very nice", and "oh, yes". If her practical black-laced shoes and her peasant blouse did not give her away, you would think that I might have noticed the abundance of shiny dental work when she smiled.

So, my goal became to find my own new circle of friends by analyzing my husband's basketball "pick-up game" mentality. It had always fascinated me — introducing yourself (first name only) to total strangers, and in his case, even risking physical contact with them. It is a big-city phenomenon that is difficult for me to get used to. In fact, while visiting my husband's suburban hometown, I all but assumed a Power Ranger stance when a friendly, unsuspecting stranger greeted me.

As with basketball, the new prospective companions in this situation had a common bond: motherhood. That established, I



Sean Leong

would observe them for a short time before actually approaching. Initially I would notice how they were dressed, and more importantly, how they dressed their child. If the baby was sporting a leopard headband, that would be cute. But if the mother's headband matched, I was in trouble. If I

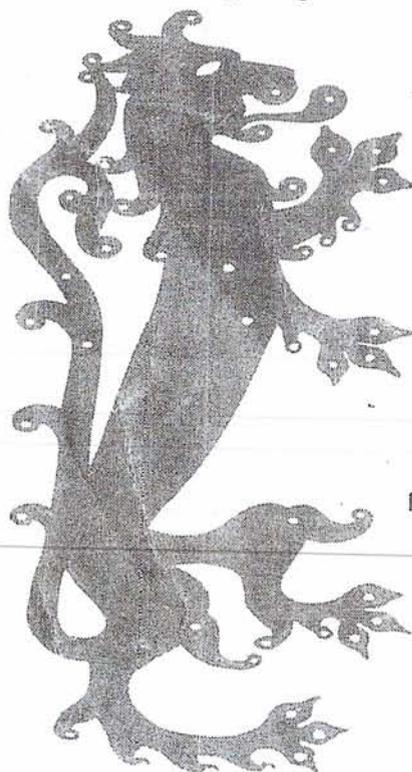
Therefore, I recommend no discussion of your child's ambulatory abilities, fulfillment through the use of sign language (as taught on Sesame Street), or propensity to recite the alphabet with or without visual aids.

Most embarrassing was my inability, 24

# gothic goodies

Learn about life in the Middle Ages  
and get into the Gothic spirit  
with BGC Family Programs!

**hear**  
medieval tales  
with a master  
storyteller and  
mask-maker



**see**  
the exhibition  
*A.W.N. Pugin:  
Master of  
Gothic Revival*

1 to 3 p.m.  
Sunday,  
February 4  
or  
Saturday,  
February 10

For more  
information call  
212-501-3011

Advance  
registration  
is required

**BGC**

The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts  
18 West 86th Street New York, NY 10024

headband matched, I was in trouble. If I would be so bold as to generalize based upon appearance, the mother would probably pretend not to notice my advances; or even worse, she may have permitted me to proceed with all pleasantries with no intention of ever building a meaningful and lasting relationship. I would have to watch out, she could even have been one of those girls who wouldn't talk to me in high school.

Then my new prospect would endure the usual battery of questions with respect to the baby's name, age, and current level of development. Of course, I knew to make no assumption about the sex of the child based upon the name, since modern moms often give a girl a name traditionally reserved for a boy, like Morgan, Taylor or Jordan. I also knew enough to beware of a navy blue carriage, which due to its gender neutrality, might require more in-depth inquiry.

Then, we would get to the relative levels of achievement, which new moms analyze, despite their avowed disgust for mothers who do just that. I learned never to assume an average level of development based on generalizations for a specific age, because you could find "baby Einstein" late at turning over. Then, after carefully removing my size nine Aerosoles from my mouth, I would find it best to move on to a different topic completely, rather than highlighting any possible attributes I could garner about the small swaddled blob. In fact, my chances of finding the one physical or mental characteristic which would win Junior an Olympic medal or Nobel Prize would be a hundred to one. Then, there was always the chance that the helpless infant excelled at nothing because he/she was capable of no more than a gurgle or burp at that point.

Most embarrassing was my inability, 24 hours later, to remember undesirable prospects, those who shunned me, were monotone, or otherwise disinterested in my potential companionship. Mothers changed their looks and dressed their children differently day to day. I therefore recommend some discreet note-taking to follow these encounters, in order to avoid approaching the same prospects twice.

The next step was the interview lunch in a public place. I couldn't very well permit a total stranger to become instrumental in restructuring my social life, without being able to retell the most intimate details of her life. If she were deemed unworthy by the group, she would be a poor reflection on me. I also needed to learn whether or not she was an "eater". After all, playgroups really maintain a hidden agenda and purpose: to sit at the kitchen or dining room table, eating as much as humanly possible, evaluating the food selection, ignoring the children, and griping about the husbands and all male creatures that roam the Earth. The ability to partake ably in these activities would be critical to becoming a desirable invitee. If one could prove herself successful, she might even become a member of more than one playgroup.

The virgin playgroup is coordinated with little or no discussion of food. Food is not supposed to be significant. Yet, as I would learn, the playgroup participants would need something to nosh. Then, as people tire of bagels, the playgroup quickly becomes an event for creative planning, and moves on to banquet status. One would get extra credit for providing particularly fattening,

*continued on page 71*

# BREAKING OUT

(continued from page 66)

exotic, or addictive foods. I was fortunate to be affiliated with groups where most of the people were not schooled at Cordon Bleu, so I did not feel pressured to provide any homemade creations. I also benefited from a neighborhood replete with gourmet food take-outs, which I would frequent, donning sunglasses and a trenchcoat.

I found it necessary to maintain the illusion that the playgroup was gathering for the benefit of the tiny tots, and remembered to serve finger foods especially for them. Cheerios and pretzels ground in to the carpet seemed to be an inevitable rite of passage. Chocolate was actually banned from one group, after it became the implement of artistic expression for two toddlers, practicing for the walls of the IRT. I had beaten the odds in my house with closely supervised toddlers enjoying chocolate pudding cups, strictly confined to my kitchen.

The next big issue was toys. The key words are "developmental" or "educational" when you are impressing other mothers. Without these toys your child's mental growth and development may be tragically stunted. Your offspring must be armed with such tools if he/she ever hopes to obtain resident status at an Ivy League institution.

When shopping for such toys, you should not start at Toys R Us. You must instead seek out an appropriate "toy boutique" and acquire a respectable number of learning toys and/or software to exhibit your attentiveness to your child's future and your skill as a concerned and educated parent.

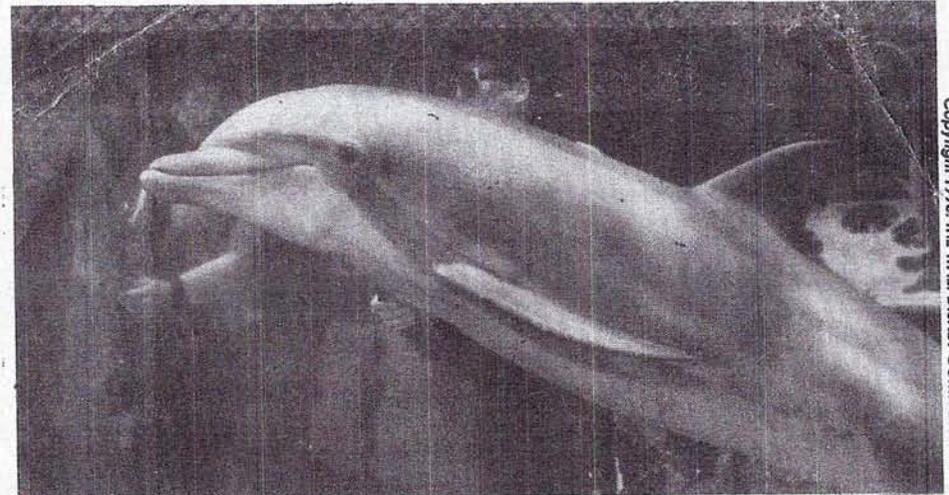
I have read many times that playgroups offer a fine opportunity for your child to enjoy other children's toys, and also to avoid your need to purchase them. That idea is

certainly practical and economical. Unfortunately, my son and I share a disparate objective: the exposure to and testing of new toys to add to our ongoing shopping list. How deprived my young, sensitive son might feel if he is forced to wait anxiously for perhaps three weeks before returning to one playmate's home to play with a particular toy.

The time usually passed quickly once the festivities got underway and we survived the two to four hours of resonant crying, grabbing, whining, and continual diaper checks. We could then approach the dreaded "clean up time". The house would, in all probability, be trashed beyond recognition. It would, nevertheless be the sole obligation of the hostess, who knows where everything goes, to restore each toy to its previous state, at the same time humming the "clean up time" melody we all learned at Mommy & Me class. One time, I found an empty plastic soda liter under my bed, even though the door to my bedroom had been closed the entire time.

Another time, I made a point not to clean up at all, for my husband's benefit. Having never experienced a playgroup as I've described, I thought the sight of the apartment in such a state would give him a small taste of the atmosphere that existed a few short hours before his arrival home. It stood as a living monument to a phenomenon which permits modern mothers to gather together to vent the frustrations of the day-to-day chore of raising children. And weren't we all too smart and educated to have ended up like this?

*RISA DOHERTY is an attorney and mother of two, who lives in Queens.*



Riding high on the seas.

COPYRIGHT 1995, THE WALT DISNEY COMPANY

## NIGHTLIFE AT EPCOT

(continued from page 35)

duction for which she had to memorize lines and say them in front of an audience of 600. She did it with flair and, to my surprise, without biting her nails.

That foray into showbiz and her campout remain the high points of a vacation that included all of Disney's most hyped attractions, including Splash Mountain and The Twilight Zone Tower of Terror. Would she (or I) recommend this overnight to other kids and their parents? The answer is yes. Though I was very hesitant about leaving her with people neither of us knew, and concerned that Caitlin would opt out at the last minute, the experience was worth the somewhat hefty price tag of \$120 (\$96 if charged on American Express). It includes, of course, the experience itself of romping

with other kids, a special viewing of EPCOT's light and laser show, sing-a-longs, and storytelling. For parents, it eliminates any childcare costs associated with a parents' night out. The kids are given an evening snack and a morning Disney Character Breakfast (which on their own would cost about \$20), a Disney sleeping bag, neon necklace, nightshirt and hat (greatly reducing the need to purchase any souvenirs!)

The overnights have been a part of the schedule since June and usually include 15 to 30 boys and girls. Kids are between 7 and 11 years old, though 6- to 12-year-old siblings are welcome, too. It runs every Friday, beginning at 7:30 pm and concluding Saturday at 9:30 am. For more information, call (407) WDW-TOUR.

— Marge Kennedy

now kids can workout  
at elliot's gym...  
right at home!

HOT PINK by Anne Gibbons

Copyright © 1996 Risa C. Doherty