

CHAPTER 1

Battles Burps, Bottles, and Binkies

One of my friends told me she was in labor for 36 hours. I don't even want to do anything that feels good for 36 hours.

—Rita Rudner, stand-up comedian

BABY-TO-BE DELIVERS MORE THAN EXPECTED

(Scene: Inside maternity ward)

“The fetal monitor indicates that you're not in labor, Mrs. DiSandro.”

“What do you mean I'm not in labor, doc? I'm extremely uncomfortable and today is my due date you know!”

“Well, it seems we may have miscalculated,” the doctor explained. “Your baby is not due on July first, as we had previously thought.”

“So how much longer? July second? Third? A Yankee Doodle baby, maybe?”

“You might want to sit down for this, Mrs. DiSandro,” the doctor gently informed me. “You see,” he began. “It's very possible. . . . Gee, I don't quite know how to say this . . . but you may be the first woman in history to be pregnant forever.”

“Forever!”

“Yes, forever. We've run some extensive tests, and by all indications, your baby isn't . . . well, how can I say this, too thrilled about leaving the womb.”

“What?!”

“It seems your baby-to-be would like to see a few things worked out before it’s willing to enter the birth canal. He or she has given us quite a list.”

“You’ve got to be kidding!”

“It’s a new century, Mrs. DiSandro. Haven’t you heard of children’s rights?” (I suddenly had the feeling I’d been watching too many episodes of *Court TV* during my pregnancy.) “Your baby’s first concern is about you, uh, level of communication.”

“My level of communication? You can tell that kid I happen to have a college degree! Okay, it’s only from a television school, but it’s accredited—I think.”

“To put it bluntly, you shout, especially when talking to the other two little people in your family. The baby figures if the shouting is this loud from the inside, the noise must be deafening on the outside. So he or she would like to see you tone things down a bit before arriving.”

“But, but, it’s summer and my children keep slamming the back door and telling me they have nothing to do, and it’s 90 degrees, and I’m eight months, twenty-eight days, twenty-two hours, sixty minutes, and 4.3 seconds pregnant!”

“Oh, and about your eating habits,” the doctor continued. “The baby is sick of all those nutritious snacks—carrots, cucumbers, fruit, and the occasional French fry you’ve been eating. Your baby insists that you add a little variety to your diet. Some suggestions were Hostess cupcakes, potato chips, Yoo-hoo chocolate sodas, and Klondike bars.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes, and he or she has repeatedly tried to tell you its preferences on no uncertain terms.”

“I see. So you’re saying most of the swift kicking and constant rib jabbing is intentional?”

“Exactly. And, another concern, the kid-to-be doesn’t like how often you use the word “no.”

“Is that so?”

“Seems you frequently say no to snacks before meals, staying up late, new toys, and bungee jumping off bridges. So the baby would like you to practice saying ‘yes’ before it agrees to start effacing.”

“Let me get this straight. If I say ‘yes’ to more toys, sugary snacks, and risky activities, the kid will start effacing?”

“Correct.”

“And what will it take to get to three centimeters?”

“A new bike at age three and a half.”

“And ten?”

“Tickets to Disney World at age five.”

“I believe I’ve heard enough, doctor.”

“But there are at least a dozen more stipulations, Mrs. DiSandro. Now if . . .”

“Give me that fetal microphone. OKAY, LISTEN UP MY GENIUS BABY-TO-BE! I’LL GIVE YOU FIVE MINUTES TO STOP YOUR WHINING AND START EFFACING. IF YOU’RE NOT OUT OF THERE WITHIN THE NEXT FOUR HOURS, I’LL GIVE YOU SOMETHING TO COMPLAIN ABOUT! AND IF YOU HAVE ANY PROBLEMS, I’LL JUST HAVE TO COME IN THERE AND GET YOU MYSELF. HAVE I MADE MYSELF PERFECTLY CLEAR!?”

“Mrs. DiSandro, this is astonishing! Your contractions are beginning to show up on the monitor. They’re getting stronger and stronger! I believe you’re in labor.”

“It just takes a certain level of communication, doc.”

(*Note:* Although I admit that this was just one of those pregnancy dreams, Jenna DiSandro was born on June 28, a few days before her due date.)

BABY GIVES BIRTH TO SECOND SET OF PARENTS

When a slight age gap separates your first baby from your last—say, for instance, ten years—the older child often assumes a new role. Suddenly, a deep furrow appears between his brows. He mopes around sighing and shaking his head and frequently crying about the cost of college tuition. He becomes a dad.

If the age gap between the second child and the last is, say, eight years, the second child starts ordering everyone around and saying, “I’m right! I’m right!” She becomes, well, a mother.

When we brought our new baby, Jenna, home from the hospital,

we assumed we were her only parents. Until our son—new dad, Marcus (age ten)—asked, “Can we afford her?”, and our middle child—new mom, Lauren (age eight)—shrieked, “Be careful of her soft spot!”

Having recently graduated with high honors from the hospital baby class, Jenna’s two older siblings were heavily armed with information. They knew how to hold Jenna and support her head, feed her, rock her, and sing soft lullabies to soothe her newborn fears. Jenna bonded with them instantly.

For me, the other mother, it wasn’t so easy.

“Can I feed Jenna this time?” I pleaded with the doting parents.

“Are you sure you know how?” Marcus inquired.

“Here, let me check the bottle,” Lauren said, snatching it from my hands. She shook a few drops of formula onto her wrist. “Too warm.”

“It’s fine.” I assured her. “Believe it or not, I actually raised two children without your help.”

“Yeah, but that was a long, long time ago,” Marcus informed me. “You’re old now.”

“I can manage,” I assured him.

“Who showed you how to buckle Jenna’s new car seat?” he reminded me.

“Me!” Lauren piped up.

“And who showed Daddy how to assemble that Exersaucer?” Lauren asked.

“Me!” Marcus chimed in.

“Now, why don’t you go run this bottle under cold water for a few minutes,” Lauren suggested while taking Jenna from my arms. “Then we’ll talk about you feeding our baby.”

“But she’s my baby,” I pouted.

Or was she?

Like a protective mother hen, Lauren tossed aside Dr. Seuss for Dr. Spock the first time Jenna sneezed. When Jenna cried, she’d flip to chapter six and cluck, “The poor thing has gas, mom. She needs to be burped. Hand her over.”

A few months later, when Jenna learned to crawl, she’d scoot into the family room where Marcus was watching television with

his friends. He'd quickly switch from *Goosebumps* to *Sesame Street*. "It's better for babies," he explained to his disgruntled buddies. "You'll understand when you have children of your own someday."

It's Marcus who checks the grocery-store ads for sales on baby formula and Lauren who reads the baby-food jars for added salt and sugar. It's Lauren who remembered the "Rubber Ducky" song for Jenna's first bath and Marcus who patiently taught her how to play patty-cake. Then he proudly showed his baby-less friends. They just rolled their eyes and said, "Marcus, get a life, man!"

The first things Jenna sees every morning are the bright faces of her brother and sister peeking over the side of her crib. Cooing and whispering, they let down the side of the crib, gently take her out, carry her into one of their bedrooms, and close the door. Giggles and kisses and goo goos are shared all around.

When Marcus and Lauren burst through the door after school, Jenna's face lights up, and she squeals with delight. For the rest of the afternoon, I'm invisible, as she crawls into their waiting arms.

From the safety of her Exersaucer, she watches them play board games with their friends. When they laugh, she laughs. When she cries, they cry. When she goes to bed, they squeeze her as if she'll be away forever.

Not every baby is lucky enough to have two sets of parents. At least, that's what I keep telling myself when Jenna wrestles out of my arms to fall into her sister's, or when she shoves a book in her brother's direction and he scoops her up onto his lap to tell her about the adventures of Tommy Tugboat.

I'm ecstatic about it. Really! I am. Honest.

Commotion from the family room breaks through my thoughts.

"Mom, come quick!" Marcus and Lauren shout. "Jenna NEEDS you!"

SHE NEEDS ME! MY BABY NEEDS ME! I rush into the room.

"Mama," Jenna says holding up her pudgy arms.

I pull her up and hold her to my chest. "Mommy's here, sweet pea," I coo. "Your mommy's . . . ugh . . . PEEEEUUUUUU!"

“She dropped a big load,” Marcus says.

“Don’t forget to use salve so she doesn’t get a rash,” Lauren reminds me.

“I think I can handle it,” I say, holding Jenna at arm length. After all, only real parents change dirty diapers.

SANDMAN, WE HAVE A PROBLEM!

As the parent of a toddler, creating conditions perfect for my little one’s nightly trip into dreamland can be exhausting. While putting her to bed, I go through more checks and rechecks than a DC-10 preparing for takeoff. The three Bs—bath, book, and brushing—go smoothly enough, but we usually hit turbulence after depositing the passenger into her crib.

Pacifier in? Check.

“NO, Mom, not that facipier. The uver facipier!”

“This one?”

“Uh-uh,” she shook her head.

Fasten your seat belts. We’ve hit a few bumps.

“How about this purple one?”

“Uh-uh,” she pouted, shaking her head again.

“Okay, how about this gunky one with last night’s meatloaf on it?”

“Yeah, dat one! Put the uver ones over there,” Jenna says, pointing to her dresser.

“Okay. All the other facipi—uh, I mean, pacifiers are on your dresser.”

Pacifier in? Check. Reclining baby into sleeping position . . . check.

“I need my blankie!” Jenna pops up.

Delay takeoff, control tower. Repeat. Delay takeoff. Missing blankie!

“Here it is.”

Depositing blankie, ruffle side up, for easy scrunching . . . check.

“Uver blankie, too, mom.”

“Two blankies?”

“Yeah.”

“You’ll be too hot.”

“UVER BLANKIE, TOO, MOM!”

Positioning blankie number two, ruffle side up . . . check.

“Light on,” Jenna demands.

Night-light on . . . check. Backing out of the room, backing . . . backing . . . backing out as I ease the door shut, saying “goodnight” sixty-seven times and “Mommy loves you” eighty-seven times. Door is closed . . . check.

Door secure! Prepare for takeoff! Listening . . . listening . . . listening outside the door.

Silence.

Tiptoeing toward the stairs . . . listening . . . listening.

Silence.

We’re preparing for rapid eye movement. Halfway down the stairs, now . . . listening . . . listening.

Silence.

Okay, folks. I believe we are just seconds from maximum sleeping altitude! Reaching the bottom of the stairs, and . . .

“MAAAAAAAA!”

Sandman, we have a problem. Aborting takeoff. I repeat. We’re aborting takeoff. Heading back upstairs into room.

“What?”

“Um . . . mom, is Danielle sleepin’?”

Oops! Forgot romper-room check.

“Yes, Danielle’s sleepin’; your cousins Mollie and Meghan are sleepin’; Barney’s sleepin’; Big Bird’s sleepin’; everybody in the whole wide world is sleepin’, except you and me!”

Shut door . . . check.

“MAAAAA!”

“WHAT?? I mean, what is it now, darling?”

“Is it dark out?”

“Yes, it’s dark out. See, I’ll show you. Dark, dark, night, night.”

Backing . . . backing . . .

“Mom, I’m scared! Sing me a song.”

“A song, sure, a song. Let’s see. How about ‘Brahms’ lullaby?’ Go to sleep. Go to sleep, before I completely lose my mind . . . go to sleep . . .”

“No, mom, sing ‘Pump up the Jam.’”

“Pump up the *what?* I bet your big brother taught you that one.”

Getting ready to call in the copilot: dad. Nix the copilot. He'd just sleepwalk into the room, scoop up the baby as if she were a sack of potatoes, and deposit her directly in the middle of our bed, which the baby will consider her nighttime party room for the next three hours, as she jumps, hops, and kicks her way to 4 A.M.

Reinstate rocking. Rocking . . . rocking . . . humming . . . rocking . . . rocking. Yawning . . . yawning . . . soft breathing . . . getting deeper . . . deeper . . . SLEEPING!!

WHACK!

"Ouch!"

"Wake up, mommy. Wake up!"

"Okay, okay, I give up. You win, Jenna. You can sleep in my bed—just this once. Do you hear me?"

"Kay, mom."

"Just this once!"

"Kay, mom, just like last night?"

"Yup (yawn), just like last night."

A McGAGGING EXPERIENCE

You may have noticed that pint-sized diners with a penchant for blowing bubbles in their milk and sticking peas up their noses have become common place in restaurants these days. Although it may seem their sole purpose for being there is to irritate you—the lucky, childless diner—nothing could be further from the truth.

Believe me. If the hostess had asked whether we preferred to sit next to the lady from the children-should-be-seen-and-not-heard school of parenting, or the family of ten juggling the salt and pepper shakers, ketchup bottle, and skinny waiter, we would have gladly opted for the circus act. Although my husband and I thoroughly enjoyed the stares and glares from the lady—who, due to selective memory, could only recall how wonderful her now-grown, no-longer-living-at-home children were as youngsters—our kids would've been better entertained by the sight of the terrified waiter flying through the air. And had we known that the first dinner roll would launch from my son's hands like a space shuttle and deflate the lady's bouffant hairdo ("Oh my

gosh, I'm so sorry, ma'am. I swear it was an accident. He was aiming for his sister, but she's learned to duck"), we most certainly would have chosen to stay at home.

It all begins innocently enough, this naive notion to take three children to a sit-down restaurant. Just once, for old time's sake, you and your husband long to hear your server say something other than, "Pull up to the second window!" You yearn for a few more menu choices than "supersize it."

So you delude yourselves into thinking it would be a valuable experience for the kids to sit down and criticize someone else's food for a change. You convince each other that it couldn't be any more exhausting than eating at home, until you pull out of the driveway and the backseat harmonizers begins a rousing chorus of "I'm starving! I'm starving!"

Once at the restaurant, the delusion and denial continues:

"Twenty-minute wait? No problem."

"How many in your party?"

"Uh, four."

"But you have a toddler."

"That's right. We always forget about her. But she doesn't take up much room."

"Then you're not a party of four; you're a party of FIVE."

"Oh, no! Not a party of five! Now we'll never get seated!"

Two hours later, while seated at a table so small we had to keep our elbows on the table next to us, the kids began gnawing on the empty breadbasket as an appetizer. "Could we have some crackers, PLEASE?"

After the sixth basket of crackers, and after helping the older kids find the sixtieth word in the search-a-word puzzle on the children's menu, while convincing little Jenna to at least save the yellow crayon for dessert, our meals finally arrived. This is when my husband and I discovered the only thing you can count on at a sit-down restaurant: your children will most definitely not eat.

"What's that green stuff?"

"Parsley."

"What's it doing on my plate?"

“It’s a garnish.”

“Eewww! The garnish touched my burger! Gross! I can’t eat it.”

“Then eat your fries.”

“They have black spots.”

“It’s called seasoning.”

“I think I’m going to throw up.”

“Are you enjoying your food?” the server asks as he cleans up our daughter’s third cup of spilt milk.

“What food?” my husband asks.

“The food you’re eating.”

“Are we eating?” I replied. “I hadn’t noticed.”

On the way home, the chorus begins again: “I’m starving! I’m starving!”

We drive to the nearest drive-through.

“Pull up to the second window!” never sounded so sweet.

PASS THE PASSY, PLEASE!

My daughter is fast approaching her third birthday.

“You know what happens when you turn three?” I said, preparing her for the big event. “Of course, it doesn’t have to be on the exact day of your birthday,” I added, dreading the occasion myself. “The day after will be soon enough for one of the most traumatic experiences of your young life.”

“What?” Jenna asked.

“No more passy. Three-year olds don’t use pacifiers,” I reluctantly informed her.

“Oh,” she said while sucking on her passy and contentedly rubbing the threads of her ruffled blankie.

Since she has very little concept of time, the thought of giving up passy doesn’t phase her right now. But it will. Oh yes, it will, which is why she still has a passy at three when all the experts say babies should give them up by nine months, or twelve months, or certainly by the age of two. And then there are those extreme antipassysts, who believe babies should never use pacifiers.

But none of these experts were around at three in the morn-ing when my daughter wouldn’t stop wailing. I know because I tried to call them!

I don't think it's any big deal. It's not like she's addicted to it or anything. Besides, my baby only uses her passy for bedtime. Honest! Okay, long car trips, too, which include any trip past the corner. But that's it, really! That, and the occasional video. Well, of course, when she gets a boo-boo, there's no question. And I wouldn't step foot in the mall without it. Oh, and if she misses her nap, well, who could blame . . . okay! I admit it. She's a crazed sucking passy-head! There, I said it.

But withdrawal is, like, so . . . hard! I remember when my first-born, Marcus, turned three. He bravely tossed his pacifier into the garbage can and went down for his nap without a single cry of protest. I was amazed at how easy it was. Had I known, I would've done it sooner.

But then the garbage truck rumbled up the block and my son crumbled to the floor in a quivering heap. "My Binky is gone forever!"

I suppose he thought that as long as the pacifier was in the garbage, he could always retrieve it if life got too tough. But the garbage truck crushed his hopes, along with his Binky. Ten years later, he still can't look at a garbage truck without whimpering.

Of course, the longer you wait, the more attention you draw to the situation. And enforcers from the pacifier patrol are sure to comment:

"What's a cute little girl like you doing with that thing in your mouth?"

"I can't understand you when you're sucking on that piece of plastic."

"That big plug covers your whole face. But it's not your fault; it's your mommy's fault."

It used to offend me, but that was before I discovered the truth. They're just jealous. They're suffering from "passy, envy." I know because I've felt it myself.

In the midst of one of those extremely stressful days, I glance over at my daughter sucking on her passy. She looks so relaxed, content, and sublime, like a little Buddha at one with her passy, that I can't help but think, "Boy, I could sure use a passy, right now!"

And why not? Maybe the passy, is wasted on the young?

Instead, adults should have passy bars, where they could stop for a quick passy break before heading home. A passy could get you through a traffic jam, your kid's piano recital, and that moment when the doctor tells you to turn your head and cough.

For taking the edge off, a passy would be so much healthier than a drink or a smoke. Just think, this new trend could have the potential to ultimately wipe out harmful addictions as we know them!

Oh, there is that one tiny problem the experts keep bringing up. Extended passy usage could mean we'd all wind up with teeth like Austin Powers.

So it's time to give it up, babies!

TARDY TOOTH FAIRY PAYS THE PRICE

I totaled the tooth fairy. A magical childhood fantasy handed down for trillions of generations, and I wasted her faster than a roomful of know-it-all second graders. You might say I shattered the illusion tooth by tooth.

When our second child, Lauren, reached the tooth-losing age, teeth popped out quicker than the Pop-Tarts in our toaster. Lauren never waited for her teeth to get to that dangling-by-a-thread stage. As soon as one seemed the least bit wobbly, she yanked it out.

"Look, mom, another tooth!"

"Great, Lauren." I sighed. "But if you were more patient, you wouldn't need to use daddy's wrench."

Of course, I didn't entirely disapprove; she may be destined for a career in dentistry.

The nightly bedtime routine is exhausting enough, and the tooth fairy, times two kids, only prolongs the process:

"So how does the tooth fairy get here?" my daughter asks.

"Um (yawn), tooth fairy? Get here? By train." I explain.

"Train? But I thought she could fly?"

"Oh yeah, right (yawn), she can. But every other month, she gets her wings clipped and she has to come by train."

"What does she look like?"

"Oh, I never actually saw her."

“But I thought you told me she wore a glittering blue dress.”

“I did?” That’s right (yawn), a blue dress. Well, she doesn’t wear blue every day; unlike your Mommy, she has an extensive wardrobe. Now, you better get to sleep or she won’t come.”

The next morning at five sharp, Lauren stomped into the bedroom and shouted into my exposed ear. “She didn’t come!”

“Who didn’t come?”

“The tooth fairy!”

Guilt jolted me awake. “Really? Gosh, that train must’ve been delayed. Uh . . . or the tooth-fairy engineers staged a strike. Yeah, that was it.”

“MOM,” Lauren insisted, “tell me the truth.”

“Okay, okay. You see, it’s just that she had too many teeth to pick up and her assistant fairy had the night off.”

With each tooth, my husband and I became more forgetful and the concocted stories, more unbelievable.

“Uh . . . she was auditioning for a part in the new Disney movie and . . . no, wait a minute, Tinkerbell had a headache and she had to fill in at the castle this week.”

Every parent forgets once, maybe twice, but three nights in a row? Well, the kids begin to lose their faith in fairies.

My son finally created a giant billboard, which he attached to his headboard with a large arrow pointing toward his pillow saying, “TOOTH HERE!!”

And the next night, she forgot again!

Imagining the years of therapy our son would now need, the fairy finally gave him \$5 and a note of apology. He was the hit of the second grade.

“You got how much?!” His friends gasped.

“Gee, the tooth fairy never gave me more than fifty cents.”

“But was she ever late?” my son asked his awe-struck peers.

“Never.”

“Too bad,” Marcus said shaking his head. “The later the better. The interest adds up.”

Maybe I haven’t single-handedly destroyed a childhood fantasy. I’ve just increased her value. And for this, I sincerely

apologize to all the tooth fairies who managed to get it right the first night.

FORGET PQ, TRY DQ

As a regular columnist, I'm featured in the newspaper every week, but I'm certain it would be best if I didn't actually read the paper. I mean, newspapers are, like, so full of news. There's oodles of information that could lead to, dare I say it, thinking! And from there, well, you could be spurred into action, which usually results in my having to get off the couch.

Take for instance Qs. In my ignorance, Q was nothing more than the seventeenth letter in the alphabet. But after reading a few thousand newsworthy items, I've learned about the IQ (Intelligence Quotient) and EQ (Emotional Quotient) and every way in which to increase these Qs to ensure my children's maximum well-being and success.

Then, after reading a recent newspaper article, I've learned that now I should be concerned about their PQs! It seems if you really want your kid to succeed in school, you must increase their Play Quotient.

This is the latest news from Dr. Toy herself, Dr. Stevanne Auerbach, author of *Dr. Toy's Smart Play: How to Raise a Child with a High PQ*.

Sure, you're thinking, "No problem, my kids play all the time." But there's one ingredient you may have overlooked. According to Dr. Toy, PQ includes Y-O-U!

Whatever happened to the good old days when pioneer parents simply shoved a corn-cob doll into their child's hands, pushed them out the cabin door, and said, "Go play!"?

And they did. Unless, of course, they were hungry. Then they shucked the doll and ate it. I myself am an adult child of a PQ-less family. My parents never played with me. They shoved Tina Tears-N-Tinkle into my hands, pushed me out the front door, and said, "Go play!"

And I did! And look at me. Better yet, don't look at me. Look at my sister. She came out okay.

What Dr. Toy emphasizes is parental involvement. She says, "Get on the floor with them!"

My four year old drags out her pink plastic dollhouse with the plastic figures and gives me that look. Jenna pours the CQ (Cute Quotient) on thick. Dripping sugar, she asks, "You wanna play dolls with me, Mom?"

(Oh, no! Not dolls! Anything but dolls!) But now that I know about PQ, I have to say, "Shh . . . (cry), shh . . . (stamp feet), (pout) sure!"

My daughter is in her happy place. She's playing with her two best toys: dolly and Mommy. And I'm in my coma place. Somebody help me.

Jenna shoves a plastic doll into my hands. "You're Elizabeth," she says. "And I'm the mom and this is your baby sister."

We sit there in silence.

Then Jenna says, "Uh-oh, the baby's crying. She needs to eat. Would you put the baby in her highchair, Elizabeth? Elizabeth, I'm talking to you!"

Mustering some interest, I say, "Elizabeth, listen to your mother."

"You *are* Elizabeth," Jenna reminds me. I toss the baby in the highchair. After the baby eats, we take the baby for a walk in the stroller. We come home. We eat. We watch television. . . .

Help me! Please! I'm slipping deeper, deeper . . .

"Elizabeth would you make some popcorn? Elizabeth, get your big head out of the living room! You're crushing the dolls!"

"Huh?" I muster.

Jenna is imitating life. It's my life in a dollhouse and it's about as exciting as watching cheese mold. Oh, sure, we did get to fly off the roof a couple of times, but unfortunately, it didn't kill us.

"Uh, mom, I'm going to take a nap," I say.

"You can't take a nap," Jenna informs me. "You're a kid. You never say that," she laughs.

Lids closing. Mayday! Mayday!

Ring. Ring.

"It's the phone, Jenna! Isn't that great? It's probably someone important. . . . Hello? You're looking for a Dottie? No, there's no one here by that—wait a minute, did you say Dottie? Are you sure

you didn't say Deb? Deb, Dottie, they're so similar. I could probably help you out as well as Dottie could. Please don't hang up!"

I trudged back just in time to help Jenna grocery shop. We did get to take the Barbie jeep, but we had to drive the speed limit.

That's it. I can't take it any longer! PQ or no PQ, I'm utilizing my DQ, right now!

"Hey, Jenna, you want to go to Dairy Queen?"

"Yeah!"

I'm certain I'll need a double-dip cone to completely revive me.

READING UNLOCKS MANY DOORS

It was our regular reading time, that winding-down half-hour before bed, when my children and I snuggle together on the couch to listen to the sounds of letters and words, sentences and phrases strung together into song.

We eagerly anticipated another melodic story sweeping us away to foreign lands and exotic places. But tonight's tale was choppy at best. There were obvious breaks in the rhythm, as the novice stumbled over keys and halted on unfamiliar notes.

My son, Marcus, grew impatient. But for me, the reading sounded as eloquent and lyrical as a Brahms' lullaby. Not for the most skillful orator would I have turned a deaf ear to this budding newcomer. I sat on the edge of my seat in awe as the sayer of the song deciphered and attempted the strange, new sounds.

"Look h-h-er . . . h-er. Look. Look. Look. In, no, It . . . i-i-s s-omething . . . dah, dah . . . NO, it's bah, bah big. It is something BIG!"

"Bravo!" I cried. "You're READING, Lauren! You're reading all by yourself."

My daughter's smile grew wider with the realization. Consonant by consonant, street sign by store sign, cereal box by ketchup bottle, the mystery behind the locked door had creaked open.

Of all the landmarks in my children's young lives, none has astounded me more than watching them learn to read. Like learning to walk, it was a gradual process, which began with a crawl and moved to a coffee table.

Lauren would sit on the couch with an upside-down Dr. Seuss book talking animatedly to the pages. She'd scribble lines on paper and say, "What did I write, mom? Can you read it?"

"It's wonderful," I'd say, "and one day, all those lines will make letters and words."

"When, mom?" she'd ask with a longing in her voice.

"Soon," I told her. "Soon."

No expensive phonics tapes speeded or impeded the process, just mom and dad reading the rhymes of Mother Goose and Dr. Seuss. We followed the adventures of the Boxcar Children and Curious George and solved mysteries with Cam Jansen and Nate the Great. We sang the famous "ABC" song on car trips and played the "A Is for Apple; B Is for Baseball" game, with each child taking a turn at sounding out the beginning letter of the word.

Once they became familiar with the first sounds, I introduced my children to their first word. That magical first word was C-A-T. And because they were accustomed to rhyming, I simply changed the first letter, and soon, they could read R-A-T, S-A-T, H-A-T, and P-A-T.

My daughter pointed to me and said "F-A-T." So I quickly moved onto D-O-G and L-O-G and F-R-O-G and H-O-G.

With all the pieces in place, my children were still unable to nudge open the door until they possessed one more skill: an innate ability that kicks in at different ages and stages for each child, as unexplainable as the rules of reading itself. But when it's there, your child will tell you.

Now that Lauren has mastered and accepted the inconsistencies of *c* for *cat* and *k* for *kite* and the silent *e* in *make*, the *ph* in *phone* sounds like *f*, and she believes she can do just about anything.

Another grown-up mystery has been revealed. She can interpret her world and take marvelous journeys without me now. While curled up on the couch, under the shade of a swaying willow, or beneath the bed covers with a flashlight, Lauren will fly into outer space, traipse through the Amazon on a safari, and meet Tom Sawyer, Jo March, and Laura Ingalls Wilder in the big woods.

Each new adventure will expand and enrich her life. Like her brother before her, she will soon inform me of places and people I know nothing about and be shocked by my limited knowledge.

The next night, as we sit down to read, Lauren hands me the book and lays her head on my shoulder.

“Read to me, Mom,” she says.

“But why?” I ask, puzzled by her request. “You can read by yourself now.”

“Because,” she says snuggling closer, “I like the way you sound.”