



## STORY AND ART BY HELEN PATTI

"The first rule of intelligent tinkering is to save all the parts."

—PAUL EHRLICH

SUMMER, 1954

Anne knew she was going to give up her baby the minute she figured out what was happening. It was the only thing to do. It was 1954, after all. She wasn't married. Giving away your baby was even a fad, all the major newspapers carried advertisements for the competing "hospitals" in Kansas City, Chicago and St. Louis. These ads were piled together on the back pages and promised cleanliness, secrecy and professional assistance. Adoption was a popular experiment in the post-war years, it went hand in hand with the efficient technology that won the war for America, it was a mechanical solution to a human problem in an age when mechanization was the cornerstone of prosperity and success. All the members of the adoption drama were separate, isolated, interchangeable parts that had only to be rearranged to create a working whole. Pick up a connecting rod, a piston and a drive shaft from a corner of the wrecking yard, brush them off and install in an engine missing these same parts. Turn the ignition. Engage the motor. It should go.

The two parent model family machine was absolute and despotic in its rule as the automobile or the television. There could be no exceptions, exceptions were a threat to the integrity of the machine. America's victory in Europe had trickled down the chimneys of living rooms and through the open side windows of parked cars where heavy breathing from inside fogged them over. There was a boundless sense of hope and power in the air, a puffed up rightness, all questions were answered in the affirmative for the time being. Yes, we are a nation of good people yes, this is a sign that we are well intentioned and our fixed working parts are following a determined course of action. We should, we shall carry on and continue to raise solid nuclear families that conform exactly to the model.

Hardworking family values were at a premium and though there was an illusion of independence, of standing on your own two feet, the middle class working family unit was in reality heavily subsidized by the ghost of a war chest. There were GI Bills, government housing loans, plenty of jobs in factories fat with federal aid just gearing up to supply the god blessed families with all the trimmings of an industrial age. There wasn't much for someone looking in at all these trimmings, someone who had committed an "indiscretion" and wasn't willing or able to conform to the inescapable model just yet. There wasn't much but some ads in the back of the Kansas City Star or the St. Louis Post Dispatch.

Not to wed was unpatriotic. To keep a child outside of marriage was unthinkable. America was on a roll and she called her abundance of families to participate in the upward surge in a clearly delineated way. Mom was in her spotless kitchen, her lovely children dressed in new clothes hung on them like a shroud of mirrors. Dad was hard at work bringing home money to buy a new lawn mower or kitchen gadgets, labor saving devices so mother would have more time to keep the floor spotless. When every bit of housework was done, when the clothes were hot, clean and crisp out of the Maytag and a fruit pie was bubbling in the Admiral Flex-O-Heat, it was time to diffuse the house with the eerie blue tube-light of a Philips 26-inch swivelet tuned into the good news, the right news; good guys dressed nice, working hard, and trim women, not a hair out of place, behind a mop and bucket filled with miracle cleansers. And when Dad came home from the cash register regional office and Mom took a break from making the floors so clean her family could eat a tuna casserole off them, it was time to relax and open up the bourbon bottle and tune in to documentary shows like *Make Room for Daddy* and *I've Got A Secret*. Like Richard Nixon said in 1955: "Sincerity is the quality that comes through on television." And there were millions of families ranged around the blue glow of this sincerity like electrons around a nucleus, safe in the welded framework of a subsidized family.

Safe too from the bomb. Those Alphabet bombs: A bombs, H bombs and N bombs that Harry Truman seemed to understand and use sparingly and well like seasoning on a pork chop. A nuclear family safe from the nuclear bomb. We made it, we dropped it, and we had more hidden underground in case a threat ever came to the American order that was so clearly an edict.

The song *Love & Marriage* was recorded this year... "love and marriage go together like a horse and carriage." Campbell's Soup picked up the tune and made a jingle out of it: "Soup and Sandwich..." And if you were sitting in front of a bowl of thick sweet tomato soup on a Sunday

# FAMILY VALUES

evening with a butter sandwich split neatly like an atom and arranged on a plate on either side of your bowl then you were like one in a million photons lined up and pointing together in a unified laser ray of light that split and bent off slanted mirrors, projecting an elusive holographic image, of a typical family on Sunday evening. It was an impression you could pass your hand right through.

The members of the nuclear family of the '50s had no idea that what they were really doing was holding on to the last gasp of a way of life, white knuckled and with all the tenacity they were capable of. It was in the bottom of the bourbon glass, if anyone cared to look. The end of the picture book family. The end of specific social answers like these. Deep in their subconscious the very families sitting around the living room with their closets stuffed with Hoover vacuum cleaners and miracle fiber mop heads were actually reeling from the consequences of the splitting of the atom. The firestorms and fallout were far away, the hot sucking wind of white ash and obliteration was away across the ocean in two cities of slant-eyed foreigners. No one guessed the direct relativity of the splitting of the atom to the splitting of the model, mechanized American family. No one guessed yet how knowledge of the behavior of subatomic particles could rewrite the social history of the American family and perhaps save it from terminal fragmentation, from a self-detonating loneliness.

The 1950s family was the beginning of the last gasp of independent, isolated expression and the illusion of standing alone, of pulling the family into a circle like pioneer wagons defending themselves against the unbridled, savage forces of chaos. The '50s family revolved around each other like clockwork, law abiding planets around the sun of a static universe, like New Departure ball bearings in a lawn mower. Even Albert Einstein in uncharacteristic stubbornness tried to twist around his relativity theory to accommodate the comfortable order of a static universe. He couldn't quite believe in an unpredictable, dynamic universe although all his equations, his entire life's work, pointed exactly to chaos. His search for the cosmological constant was as impossible as the last chapter in an elementary, outdated science book about separate molecules and atoms bouncing and colliding in a self-contained, limited world, obeying specific rules handed down by Almighty God and pursuing their own self-interest.

The American family was the last expression of loyalty to the mechanical rules of a static universe. Susie sits here, Danny sits there, Mommy is at one end of the table dishing up peas and roast beef while Daddy folds his paper and picks up his fork. Never mind that is an illusion that buries secrets and ruins lives along the way. Never mind that Mommy is reeling drunk by 9 o'clock, that Daddy is lonely and molesting little Susie at 10 and that there is a mess of dirty, homeless Cubans in a New York ghetto that will never make it on the 11 o'clock news. The Cuban refugees are only local to New York City, they are over there and we are here. They are unrelated, they are under the glare of a separate electron scanning microscope. That is what we thought was the truth, back in the '50s.

And a young woman unmarried and pregnant? Her task was clear, she went away to where these parts of her were removed and reprocessed. Clean and simple. They cleaned out her womb like a clogged fuel filter, rearranged the fragmented parts, the isolated units of a dying Newtonian universe and replaced them in another machine. There was no configuration, no paradigm for multiplicity in this universe, no room for paradox or broken lives that marred the landscape like wrecked automobiles rusting in a yard, missing essential parts. There was no room for random fluctuations quite yet, for the unpredictable, chaotic leaps of disorganized lumps of energy discovered recently at the atomic level. The classical order, the measured, ordered flow of life still defined the American family. There was no acceptance yet of a God who had let the universe get away from Him and run itself randomly and with ghostly, absurd rules. There was no acceptance yet of the beauty of luck and random, senseless uncertainty and the way in which this ties us all infinitely to one other, from ghetto bums to motherless babies to CEOs.

Practice numbness Anne. Someday decades later in another age exponentially flooded with automobiles, you might by chance happen to follow one on a clogged free-way and see a bumper sticker that is assisting in the birth of a new science. It will say, "Practice Random Acts of Kindness." But for now, practice numbness Anne. When in doubt, follow the trail of the bourbon glass and hold on till all the machines break down or run out of available fossil fuels and only then will we be forced to reconsider, that we are awash in a sea of decidedly unmechanical, uncertain principles. We are enmeshed and colliding with our own and each other's possibilities, we are smeared out across time with everyone who has ever lived and died. We will see that we were never contained in a "nuclear family," neither before nor after detonation. We are Quanta Babies from the Family of the Universe. We were each of us conceived at ground zero, the instant of the Big Bang; the Creator's version of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Your illegitimate child contains the same borrowed dust from an exploded giant red star as a Cuban teenager sleeping in a cardboard box. Sir Isaac and Hitler and me and you and your baby all pissed in the same river one day and drank it down the next.

But for now, pretend to be glad for you and your unborn child, soon to be motherless, that the "problem" of the basic unit of heredity has been "solved." There is a Nobel prize ribbon pinned just in time, nine months from now in March of 1955, to the double helix model of a DNA structure, the spiraling balls and twisting ropes have been constructed out of interchangeable pieces like silver pin balls wound around plied steel elevator cables. What you can hand down to your daughter that you leave behind in the shallow bed of the maternity hospital nursery is a lovely spiral staircase with a sugar phosphate backbone twisting around hydrogen bonded base pairs. Heredity has nothing really to do with a full proud song in the blood, unscored, or a sense of self, a sense of belonging that has no coordinates. It has nothing really to do with anything but this mechanical construct that you see reproduced in the pages of Scientific American. Pretend to be glad for then you can give her up more easily, you can lose each other between the elevator shaft and the pinball machine, between the flywheel and the skyscraper.

Helen Patti lives in Manzanita. Writer, artist and dollmaker, she is also the founder, producer and director of Klootchy Theater.

## THE SELF-INDULGENT SIXTIES

BY MARY PERALTA

Someone recently told me that the revolution of the '60s was a failure, caused by self-indulgence. This is not the first time I've heard this point of view, and I wish to respond.

Define self-indulgence. Before the '60s, college for women was considered indulgent; not self-indulgent, because the woman in question was indulged by her father, husband, brother, etc. Indeed, any kind of education that did not contribute directly to securing and maintaining a career (earning "good" money) was considered indulgent. Women were expected to shave their legs and armpits and to wear "foundation" garments. If that sounds like something made of bricks, you're getting the idea. Women, especially young women, should not jiggle in an unseemly fashion. By the late '50s, women were wearing pedal-pushers and treads, but *not* to the office. Waitresses wore high heels to work. I had an aunt whose house slippers had a three inch heel because it hurt her to wear flat shoes. Working every day of her life in heels had deformed her feet. Men wore military haircuts and were, generally, clean-shaven; the exceptions were the occasional small closely trimmed mustache. In certain rare circumstances, a professor of anthropology wore a beard, again, neatly trimmed. This was not allowed by the rules, but certain people were considered exempt, the way a foreign ambassador is exempt from our traffic laws. And all men dressed alike. "Rednecks" wore Levi's, flannel shirts and boots; "business men" wore white shirts and suits, of neutral colors. Well, Texas business men wore suits, and cowboy boots.

Take the issue of "free love." The whole thing about free love was, it gave a woman permission to do what men have been doing for centuries, i.e., making love when, where and with whom she chose. The idea of decisions about a woman's sex life being made without the input of her father, doctor, priest or policeman, was damn near blasphemous before the '60s. It's really too bad the concept of safe sex had to wait for the advent of AIDS. A doctor who performed an abortion (and got caught at

it) during the '50s and early '60s went to prison. We're not all in agreement about this issue, but I treasure a woman's right to an abortion. If men carried babies, this would be a whole different thing. In ancient times, when people lived in hunter/gatherer tribes, babies born at a time when they could not be fed and cared-for were exposed or killed outright so that the adults and children already claimed by the tribe would have a better chance of survival. No one in our society makes this kind of decision; we just breed like there is no responsibility attached. I realize that the right to abortion was achieved by the woman's movement, but the "indulgence" to do so was suggested during the '60s.

Then there's the drug thing. First of all, I don't believe that intelligent well-adjusted young people, or for that matter stupid well-adjusted young people, became addicted simply because it was the thing to do. Addiction is part of a life-long process and it does not suddenly occur at age 17 because of bad company. And frankly, experimentation with marijuana, at least, is not my idea of disastrous. Nobody ever died because of overdose, or withdrawal from, marijuana. It's not as if we did not use drugs before the '60s, but our drugs had social sanction.

Smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol were so prevalent there were jokes. What are the three best things in life? A drink before and a cigarette after.

Last, but not least, I believe the '60s exposed us to certain kinds of information we preferred to keep hidden. One example of this was conspicuous consumption. Automobile advertisements bragged about how long a car was, as opposed to such qualities as ease of parking, gas mileage or how much space was required to turn around in. Another well-hidden fact that was exposed during the '60s was police brutality. My sister's minister told her that the power wielded by a policeman was God-given. Policemen, after all, are human, subject to the same foibles and blunders as the rest of us. Sassy "love children" who grew up believing "The policeman is my friend" were shot, beaten and dragged to jail for doing things like talking back and sitting down ("sitting in").

Certainly in the area of spiritual growth "indulgence" made great headway. The minister of my church never says, "Give 'till it hurts." She says, "Give 'till it feels good." Instead of teaching the idea of original sin our church teaches original divinity: you are a child of God. Christ said, "I came that you might have life and have it more abundantly." How about "Know ye not that ye are Gods?" Nobody taught this stuff when I was a kid, at least not where I ever heard it.

The whole concept of individual value and the validity of self-direction required us to make that change in our definition of "indulgence." Society's attitudes were challenged and changed, not as much as I'd like, but at least some. Nobody will ever convince me that the '60s were a failure, a waste of time, etc. It did commence the erosion of traditional family values, and all I can say is, thank God.

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