



FAMILY VALUES

WORDS & ART BY HELEN HILL

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

—PAUL ERLICH

SUMMER, 1954

Anne knew she was going to give up her baby the minute she figured 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 were 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 except some ads in the back of the *Kansas City Star St.* or the *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 Philco 26-inch swiveler 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 made more hidden underground in case a threat ever came to the American order that was 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 & Sandwich"... And if you were sitting in front of a bowl of thick sweet tomato soup on a Sunday 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 slanteyed 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 newspaper 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 City ghetto that will never make it on the 11 o'clock TV 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 another, 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 freeway 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 until 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 or 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 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 Hill was the chief petitioner and major sponsor of Measure 58, the 'Oregon Adoptee Rights Bill' that was passed by voters in 1998 and has been held up in state courts ever since. The new law, if upheld by the State Supreme Court, allows any Oregon born adult adoptee to obtain his or her birth certificate, the first such law in the USA.

"Why do we even vote," she says about the law's delay. In response to abolishing half a century of adoption confidentiality, she says "As we grow older, we have vital questions to ask about our parentage because we have children who need to know about future health problems we and they might have inherited." She says that full disclosure is the best way to move beyond the shame that shrouded adoptions in the 1950s and 1960s.

She lives in Manzanita. Writer, artist, musician, dollmaker and art teacher she is also the founder, producer and director of Klootch Theater. Her daughter Raine is 21 January 26.



THE CLAWS & THE HORNS

BY ARTHUR HONEYMAN

Not just another love story

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