

Growing Into The Mantle Of Motherhood

By SIGRID BATHEN
Bee Staff Writer

Chico — It's just past 10 on a Wednesday morning, the clouds are low and a fine drizzle is smearing the windshield. My small brown-eyed friend is tugging on my sleeve, gurgling her enchantment at the movement of the wipers.

She is enchanted by windshield wipers, by rain, by the big black and white Tom Cat who has finally stopped sulking and resigned himself to the knowledge that we aren't going to take her back where we got her.

She is enchanted by just about anything new these days. And when you've been around for only six months, there isn't much that's old.

It wasn't always thus. Time was, not so many months ago, when she mostly yelled. Slept an hour, yelled, ate some, yelled some more, consumed endless quantities of diapers.

I remember when we brought her home from the hospital and confronted her first homestyle diaper change. Her father had once known how, but forgot. I had never learned.

She lay there on the bed, naked but for her tiny undershirt with the building-block design that spelled B-A-B-Y on the front, yelling, while we wrestled this deceptively simple cloth square around this tiny, twisting bottom.

And the pins. God, those pins. I'd wake up having nightmares about the pins. When I wasn't having nightmares about her choking in her crib, or suffocating or any of a myriad of new-parent horrors.

Her godmother, who has nurtured three splendid girl-babies into adolescence, says everybody who has a new baby is sure it's going to die.

"The first time they fall on the floor," she once said encouragingly, "you're sure they're dead."

My doctor, a dear friend, told me I read too many baby books. Now, six months later, I know he's right.

Baby books can drive you mad. One will tell you ominously that your baby is doomed to lifelong obesity if she weighs more than 17 pounds at six months. Another will tell you the child is sure to be allergic to everything if you feed her certain foods before she's 4 months old.

My brown-eyed pal, tugging on my sleeve as we swoop down Highway 99, is 6 months old and weighs a few ounces more than 21 pounds. She's been eating an increasing variety of foods since she was a month old. She is not obese, and so far as I know she is not allergic to anything.

"A four-star baby," the doctor said as she wrestled him for the stethoscope at her six-month checkup. "Top of the line."

Of course.

It's six months later, and the only thing I've punctured with those pins is my thumb.

Diapers don't intimidate me anymore, and I'm a whiz at getting Carter's baby T-shirts over flailing little limbs. I don't gag at the smell of dirty diapers, and I don't get mad when she blows her Gerber's strained peaches all over my glasses or smears her zwieback on the front of my clean white sweater just before I have to leave for work.

My brown-eyed pal was 10 weeks old when I returned to writing full time for this newspaper. Altogether, I took three months off.

I remember, six weeks into the three months, when she was 14 days old. Her grandmother had gone home, and her father had returned to work. That left me — alone — with this tiny, cranky baby.

My husband knows something about babies. My mother knows legions. While they were home with me those first two weeks, I was insulated from the

knowledge that this small person would be totally dependent on me for hours every day.

The night before my mother went home, she and I were up with the babe. It was a particularly cranky night, and we'd been up every hour on the hour all night long.

"Mom," said I, near tears, "I just don't know if I can handle this."

My mother is a supremely gentle, calm lady. She is rarely angered. She has tolerated, largely without comment, all variety of intolerable behavior by me over the 31 years of our association. She picks up pieces, makes things better, gives inordinately of herself.

I didn't want her to leave. She surprised me, and did.

"Well," she said that night, turning to pin me with gray-green eyes, uncharacteristically stern. "You'll just have to handle it."

This time, there was no dumping my marbles — and certainly not my baby — on Mom.

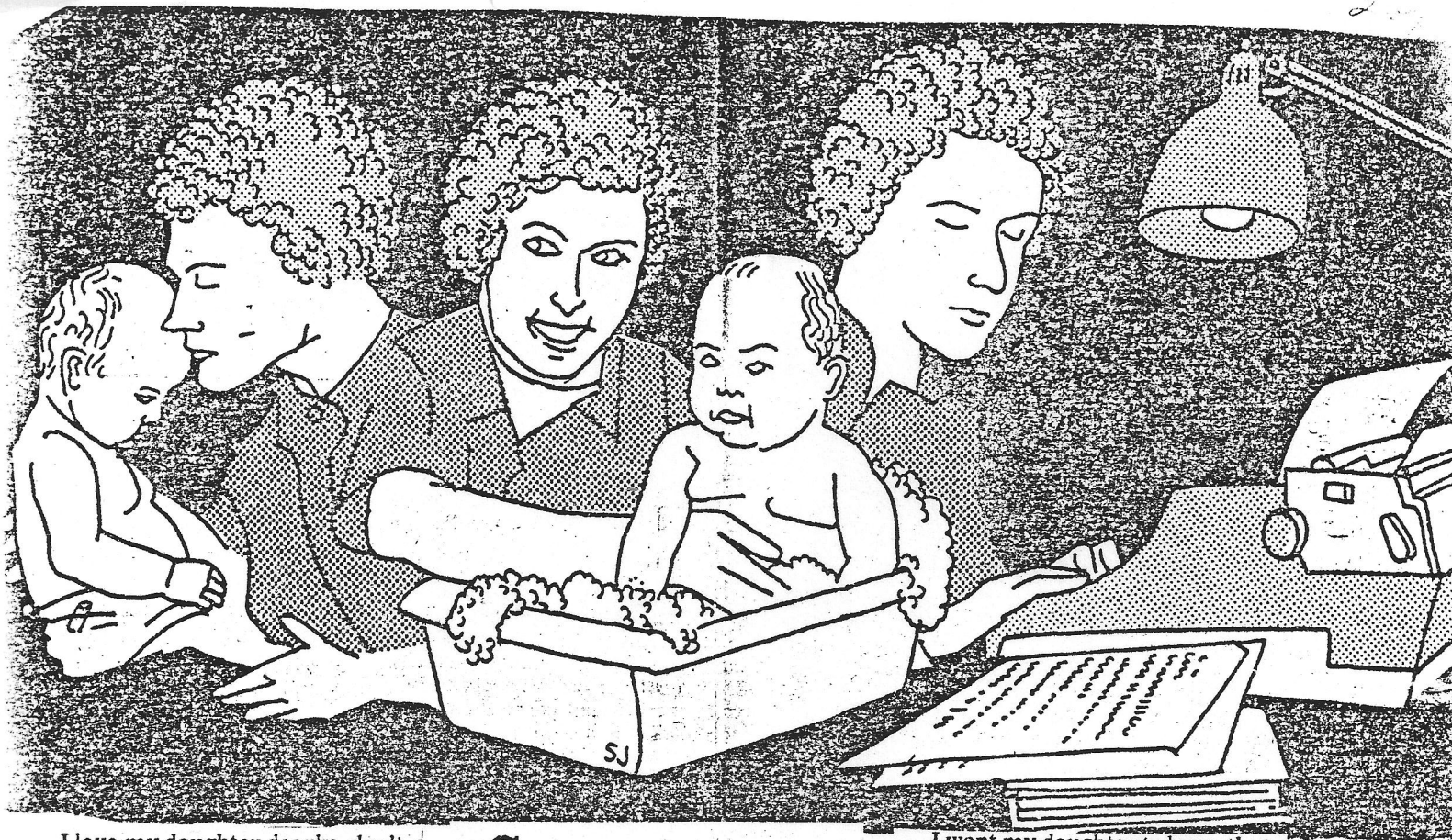
"Someday," she used to tell me in a rare show of pique, years ago, "you're going to have one just like you."

God forbid.

I'm thinking about all that now, as my brown-eyed friend and I cruise alongside the tops of the trees lining the freeway into Chico, singing with the radio in our loaded-up wagon ("Me, drive a station wagon!" I raged at my husband when, six months into the pregnancy, he brought it home for inspection. "Not on your life!").

We survived those first few weeks, after all. I had then an urgent desire to return to work, to return to something I did with confidence.

3/13/78



I love my daughter dearly, don't get me wrong. But I decided in those first few, scary weeks, that I was a hopelessly inept mother. Maybe later, I reasoned, when she can talk, read ("Just be sure to keep her away from a typewriter," the editor said), go to the bathroom, I'll do better. But now, I thought, now she takes so much time. And even with all that time, she still yelled.

In six months, she has grown so much, changing daily, enchanting us with new tricks, new accomplishments, that splendid smile. I think her mother has grown too. She had to.

And how I miss her — at night, sometimes, too many times, when I have to work late and I'm hunched over a typewriter as the sun goes down and the moon comes up and I long to be home.

Last week, it was, I worked 18-hour days and raced home when they were over. Her father, exhausted himself, had fixed dinner, bathed, dressed, entertained our brown-eyed pal, put her down to sleep. I'd go in her room, just to look at her, smell the baby smells, ache with missing her.

Sometimes, the weeks don't mesh at all. Her father and I both have to work late, relying heavily on an amazing woman who calls our baby "Ladybug," and takes wonderful care of her when we aren't there.

Sometimes, at my worst, I fear the ladybug will know this woman better than me, and that chills me to the bone.

"Be sure you don't lose this time with her," the editor, who years back may have lost some of his, told me months ago. "You can never get it back."

He was right, of course, though I remember a twinge of resentment when he said it then.

And that's why we're driving through the mist, off to visit this place where I lived so many years, to the big airy house with the tall trees that 21 years ago were saplings, to the warm, peaceful kitchen where Mom used to prop my little sister on the counter to watch her make chocolate chip cookies.

It was a different time, then. Lifestyles change. My mother was always there, often in that warm kitchen with the fire going. I can hardly remember her not being there.

I want my daughter to know that life. She will, of course, but probably more from my mother than from me. I figure she'll learn other things from me, hopefully just as important. This is pretty much uncharted territory we're going through these days.

I'll try not to have many weeks like the last one. "Stories like this," an editor said, "don't come along every day." We'll try to strike a balance, my brown-eyed pal and me, between whatever is meant by mothering and whatever I need to do with my life as a writer of stories.

And when the stories get to be too much, we'll climb in our wagon and load it up with diapers and Gerber's and the crazy big bear with the paisley ears that her godmother gave her before she was born. And we'll head north to this warm kitchen, where she can sit on the counter and learn how to make cookies.

Which is at least as important, I've learned, as writing stories.