

Two One-Way Tickets to the Moon or A Day in the Life of a Mother/Student

Next year I will be forty. That marks the deadline I have set for myself to complete all of the requirements for my Bachelor of Arts degree. On days like today, I doubt I will make it by the time I am fifty. Not that I am stupid. It's just that I have two boys, Anthony, 14, and Michael nearly 11. And today they are sick. Today is Monday.

Last Thursday, Michael was sick with a stomach virus, vomiting all through the night, first at every half an hour, then at precisely every hour. I was such a good mother; the slightest noise and I was up with a bowl, fresh towels, a drink of water.

Friday morning I had a lecture on the Social History of Great Britain in the 19th Century. A friend came over (I haven't heard from her since) to look after Michael while I was away. I left my lecture early to take him to the doctor. Together with a prescription, he gave me a long list of things to do, one of which entailed running to the supermarket to replace the coke I had hidden away for just such an emergency. (The cat must have drunk it since both Anthony and Michael swore they hadn't.)

By Saturday morning, Michael was feeling well enough to run around outside without a hat and gloves, even though I shouted my voice hoarse warning him to come in and put them on, or he might get sick again. Then Anthony was beginning to feel ill, so he only had the strength to watch TV for three hours, but none to empty the cat's litter box. Anthony and Michael did not feel well enough to eat what I had prepared for them, but were well enough to eat at my neighbor's house.

Saturday night I gave a birthday party for my best friend. Standing in the kitchen, chopping onions and garlic for the curry, I began to feel rotten. But my friends made me laugh so much that I soon felt better, during the party that is. By the time they left, I felt bad enough that my husband offered to clean-up in the morning. I gladly accepted.

Sunday morning came and I couldn't eat breakfast. Anthony couldn't eat breakfast, either. We also couldn't eat lunch or supper. Michael was well enough to play in the street without a hat or gloves. My husband took care of things. How glorious!

At 6:30 this morning the alarm clock went off, and my husband reminded me of his important meeting in L.A. "Do you think you can manage until to-morrow? I'll be back in the evening." I didn't really know how I felt so early in the morning, but I liked the concern in his voice. "I think I can manage," I said tentatively. Off he drove to the airport. Michael went to school. Anthony stayed home. Somehow, I pulled myself together and started thinking about working on my Victorian Literature finals, which I had intended to do since Friday. Yet unable to break my conditioning, I made the beds first, collected the dirty laundry, picked up the soil from the flower pot my husband had knocked over in his eagerness to turn off the alarm clock, took the trash out and emptied the litter box. Anthony was still too sick to do that, but not too sick to play pool downstairs. I already felt worn out.

At ten the telephone rang. It was the school nurse. Michael was feeling sick again. "Of course, I'll be right over to fetch him," I said. A grateful little face awaited me, and I felt like such a good mother. I got him home, made him some tea, made Anthony some tea, made myself some tea. I told Michael that since he was sick, he would have to go to bed. He complied willingly - for half

an hour. Just long enough for me to spread out my notes on the dining room table, and organize them according to authors: Arnold, Carlyle, Dickens, Eliot, Mill, Morris, Tennyson.

In came Anthony, fresh and sparkling from the bath, the scent of my hair-conditioner invading the room.

"What's for lunch?" he wanted to know.

"For lunch?" I couldn't believe my ears. My watch only said 11:30. "You are sick, you can't be hungry already." Michael, brought back from his sick-bed by the mention of food, called, "Can I have a roll?"

Eager to get back to my notes, I said "Why don't you both have a roll? And would one of you heat up the rest of the tomato soup for me?"

"I want some tomato soup, too" shouted the very sick Michael.

"Fine," I answered, "Just open another can." That should keep him occupied for at least another two pages, I thought.

"Do you mean the tomato puree?" he called.

"No!"

"The tomato paste?"

"All right, I'm coming!"

We all had some hot tomato soup together. We cleared the table. I spread out my notes again and started working on Thomas Carlyle. Anthony reminded me he had a French test tomorrow. Could I quickly translate those verbs for him he didn't know? I soon found out that there weren't any he did know.

Anxious to get on with my analysis of Carlyle's Past and Present, I promised them, that if they were quiet for an hour, I would let them watch TV for an hour. They were very good; they even turned off the TV without being told.

"What can we have for a snack?" Michael asked.

"You are sick. You shouldn't be eating so much."

"Wouldn't jello be all right?" Anthony asked.

"Yes," I said. "Go and make some." Anything to get my thoughts on Carlyle's tormented self down on paper, before the thoughts of my own tormented self chased them from my brain.

Unfortunately, jello comes in different flavors, and it would have been asking too much of them to agree on one right away. But eventually the squabbling over strawberry or banana, lemon or peach stopped, and even the question of who could pour the water and who could stir the jello was settled. My peace was only interrupted every five minutes by the question, "Is the jello set yet?"

I sent Anthony off to his room to learn his French verbs. I gave Michael some long division to

do. Ten problems, I thought, would keep him busy for thirty minutes. Long enough get started on Matthew Arnold and compare his lecture on Literature and Science to that of C. P. Snow on the same subject a century later. Michael returned with his page of arithmetic, and I could see the teacher was right. Michael didn't know how to do long division. We worked together for an hour and he could do them. I gave him four more problems so I could finish my comparison, and he had forgotten how to do them.

I no longer knew where I was in my work. All I knew was that the final would be on Friday. It was also supper time. I was not hungry, because I still felt sick. Anthony and Michael were hungry. I made supper. Michael wanted to help. Anthony came in the kitchen, and said that whatever Michael was doing in helping me, he wasn't doing it right. I sent Anthony out of the kitchen. Soon we had supper ready; I sat down with a glass of wine to keep them company. Michael had his mouth full of orange juice when Anthony made him laugh. I left the dining room with instructions to clean up the mess and wash the dishes. Thinking of my husband in his quiet hotel room, I took my books to the bedroom and closed the door behind me. But the quality of our walls is such that I could neither flee the disturbing noise coming from the kitchen, nor the sound of hard rock they put on after the first crescendo of clattering plates.

"Come and see, it's all clean!" Anthony called.

At first glance, it was incredibly clean. At second glance, not so clean. But then a good mother doesn't discourage her children in their noble efforts. And I want to be a good mother.

9:00 pm. I hadn't gotten half as far as I had planned. They were chasing each other around the entire house, squealing, laughing, running. All I wanted to do was to send them to the moon on a one-way ticket. Instead, I threatened to cancel their respective birthday parties, if they didn't go to bed right then, without any more noise.

10:00 pm. They really are in bed. The rain is pattering softly against the windows. My cats sleep so sweetly. I steal one of the children's chocolates, pour myself another glass of wine and sit down to write. I no longer know what impression the Chartists had made on Carlyle, whether he had been in favor or against suffrage, or who was to take over from the morally impoverished aristocracy. I don't remember why or where Matthew Arnold had held his lecture, or what his major arguments had been. I am writing this instead, as a possible explanation for my failed final and as a justification why there are some days when it is impossible to be both a mother and a student. After all, I might forget.

Michael comes and tells me that his teacher had told him that a long time ago when there were still kings, their servants were buried with them when they died. "Wasn't it terrible," he says, "to be buried alive? Couldn't someone have shot them first? They must have suffered terribly." I put my arm around him, and together we walk back to his bedroom. I tuck him in, and we talk about how things have changed, and that kings no longer demand such cruel sacrifices.

It is exactly 11 pm. I only have to wash up the saucepan encrusted with tomato soup which they left for me to do, put away the groceries I had picked up on my way from fetching Michael, read the morning's mail, because, after all, tomorrow I am really going to study. I check on my boys. Anthony isn't watching TV. He is actually reading. Michael is still awake and lovingly pulls my head down to be kissed. I tell him "put something warmer on tomorrow."

"But what if I am still sick?"

"You mean, like you were today?" I ask.