

Published in Australian Mother and Baby Magazine, 2002

*The Right to Eat*

*by*

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"You've got to eat," said the Child Welfare nurse at my local clinic. Whew! Thank goodness we got permission to do that.

It was a workshop for new mums and we were all shellshocked at the time it took looking after our tiny creatures. But we at least had the energy to agree that, yes, it *was* nice to eat occasionally. If only there was a window of opportunity to toss down the odd morsel.

I'd heard about time warps and read about concepts of time -- even seen all the *Back To The Future* movies -- but had never before really appreciated the delirious value of five precious minutes. Until I was denied those minutes.

Forget free will. Being a new mum means the end of that. God might've given it to Adam and Eve, but that was before they went forth and multiplied. Young Cain would've made sure Mum's idle chit-chats with a smooth talking snake were a luxury of the past. Even the devil would have to wait.

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This was glaringly obvious one morning when my lecturer partner announced he was going to mark papers then do some research. My reply? "I'd like to get dressed at some stage." Yes, my life had come to the point where getting out of pyjamas was the prime goal of the day.

That's what motherhood does to you. Little rituals once merely executed on the way to starting your real day now assume the same difficulty in attaining as making your first million by the time you're thirty.

Eat bowl of cereal, wash face, brush teeth, apply moisturiser, brush hair, throw on something unironed . . . If a baby's screaming, it's surreal how long these seem to take. It's like you're in some interstellar vortex where the only thing not creaking in slow motion is the baby's hysterical cries.

So, what do you do? Well, the baby just has to wait sometimes. And that's the hardest thing to bear, especially when you're trying to digest a couple of the basic food groups. "But I've been given official permission from a healthcare nurse to eat," you protest as the little cyclone rages. "I've got every right to that damn bowl of cereal, damn it! And I'm damn well going to eat it!"

One other mother shared her coping mechanisms. "If the baby's screaming, I know she's not dead". Well, you can't fight that logic. But it offered little comfort as I yet again frantically gobbled down a bowl of cereal, each mouthful taking an eternity to chew.

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We new mums also had permission from the nurse to do other things. Apart from eating nutritious food (which we'd supposedly prepared earlier, ha!), we could also do light housework (double ha!), have the occasional shower, do sensible postnatal exercises, and drink plenty of fluids. Should we wipe out Third World debt while we're at it?

*Oops! (pause for five minutes to rescue the baby's sweet potato that's boiled dry and burnt the saucepan, turn off the taps of the washing machine that's started mysteriously overflowing, and check the baby is still napping.)* Okay, where was I?

"There are lots of good books to read that cover most of the problems," said the nurse. Oh great. The few hours a day I'm not actually breastfeeding from my cracked nipples I'll try to find the time to look up the problem.

But day after day the books were close enough to almost touch and yet remained on the "Must do that" list. Eventually, I feebly asked my partner to read *Medieval Nipple Torture For Beginners* to me. If only I'd had the time to listen to him.

I remember when experienced parents would say, "You won't know what you used to do with your time." "Don't newborns sleep most of the time?" I'd ask with pitiful naiveté.

"And anyway, as long as I can sit down with my cups of tea I'll be alright."

Cups of tea? Those little totalitarian dictators in the bassinet are no respectors of such rituals. Why, it's their hobby to time a bloodcurdling outburst for the exact moment you plant your behind on a loungechair, cuppa in one hand, sinfully fattening substance in the other.

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Gulping down dinner in three minutes and twenty-five seconds flat (that took an hour to prepare) leaves you feeling somewhat unsatisfied too. But the alternative is a stomach knot that tightens with every "Wah!" from your precious bundle's lungs.

But in the end, you have to be philosophical. What's a bit of indigestion? And so what if you throw Tim Tams down so quickly you don't even have time to moan in ecstasy? All that nervous tension's actually a good way to lose your pregnancy tummy.

Yes, of course I'd like more time to do all those "other things" I did before my daughter came along, but fortunately they *can* all wait. In the greater scheme of things, her babyhood will last only a nanosecond.

I just have to remember this hourly mantra: "I have the right to eat. I have the right to eat."

approx. 850 words

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