

## Giraffe Mothers and Problems of Parenthood

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It was forty minutes into the hour.

“I’m—excuse my French—fucking through with him,” the woman said. “Look at him.” The boy’s mother waved an arm in a sweeping gesture of dismissal at her son. Unperturbed, the stoned sixteen year old remained transfixed on a large, framed print hanging over the counselor’s desk: a mother giraffe bending down to kiss its newborn on the top of the head. Giraffes of course don’t kiss. It was a lick, a simple housekeeping chore, caught at just the right moment—and a moneymaker for the photographer by the deception. Nothing wrong with that, the counselor figured when he bought the print.

The counselor, for his part, was taking note of the mother’s bottle-blond, Shirley Temple-like ringlets—well enough crafted, he decided, but wondered what may have been behind the motivation.

“You know what this little bastard asked me on the way over?” The counselor said no, and wished she hadn’t used that language. “This little bastard asked me to buy him a car. No, let me rephrase that, he *demand*ed I buy him a car. And you know what else? He calls me a fucking whore. Can you imagine?...I’m his *mother*.” The counselor asked when, when did he call her that. The mother said, but the counselor was trying to remember if she and her son were living together...or did the boy live with his grandparents, the mother’s parents. Had she mentioned the father?

“I know what’s going on here,” the mother continued, “it’s payback time. He’s trying to punish me.” Punish you? the counselor asked. Now the boy was looking at the counselor’s face with the same intensity he’d lavished on the print. The counselor wondered what this scene must seem like from inside the boy’s head.

The counselor saw that the mother was about to cry. Over the years he had become sensitized to the slightest change, the most nuanced alteration in the whites of peoples’ eyes when they were on the verge of tears—even men’s eyes, although men rarely came to family counseling sessions, and those who did rarely cried. Nonetheless, it was the same with men.

The advent of crying, the counselor had decided, was something of a two stage process. First, the eyes will take on a light sheen—glisten, as it were. In many instances this will be so subtle that it might take a moment for him to notice. But the counselor could not remember a time when he thought it was occurring and it turned out he was wrong. Next comes a welling of the eyes, that moment just before the surface tension ruptures from the pressure of the underling liquid. At that critical juncture the eyes will

appear slightly magnified. When the tears finally do break through, women are especially deft at managing themselves. Men—him included—generally appear awkward and uncomfortable. It occurred to him that crying is an acquired skill, and women were so good because they put in the time.

But now the counselor was wondering if the mother might not fit the mold. It looked as though she was *not* going to be managing herself well at all as her cry elevated from socially respectable to, well, something more akin to what one does in private. The counselor watched as the woman's breathing grew heavier, and deeper. He worried that she might hyperventilate—and then what? In another circumstance, another setting—a hospital emergency room for example—someone sitting close by might touch her, to comfort her, lay a gentle hand on her...even a stranger—a female of course—might lean forward and gently touch her knee. And the mother might acknowledge the gesture by patting the back of the stranger's hand. The counselor of course could do none of this. There were rules. So he leaned forward, at least that.

The boy appeared unmoved—curious at best. The counselor was thinking maybe he needed the mother out of the room, so he could have a few minutes with the boy, stoned or no stoned. He glanced at the clock he kept next to his computer monitor, on the side away from clients, so they would not notice him checking the time. Looking at a clock or a watch is a risky business during a counseling session. If a client were to notice, it could make a sham of the whole business. This counselor, however, had a system. He would fix his eyes on the client's eyes, for he'd noticed early on that people will alternate between looking at the person they are speaking to and looking away as they express their concerns. Back and forth, back and forth. As the client looks away, the counselor can count on two, three, maybe four or five seconds before he or she looks back. Such a small window of time presents risks of course, for if the counselor were to hesitate even a second or two the opportunity might have shrunk significantly—he could never be sure. Hesitation over anything in life is a two edged sword—one never knows until after the fact. So his rule was: commit—blindly, unhesitatingly, with complete faith that he could bring it off.

It worked. The counselor saw they had another ten minutes before the end of the session. But the mother was still in no condition to leave, so he decided it would be better for her to stay and the boy to go into the waiting room. He could watch cartoons.

With her son out of the room the mother began to regain some composure. She reiterated she was through, through with all of them (she also had two teenage daughters). No more mothering. Fucking bullshit, she said, and wiped her nose with a Kleenex. The father, she complained, was somewhere, and sent no money. He had a girlfriend, something. Her own mother had her own boyfriend—a new one—

and the mother didn't want her daughters around him. There were other details, but the counselor was drifting again.

The counselor felt that anything he could say at this point would be perfunctory. All he could do was be there. But truth be told, he didn't want to be there. To his dismay, he was bored, again. The mother's monologue was like from a book he'd already read—and not a very good one. This woman, he knew, would not be going on Oprah. Her story was too common, and the end too predictable. Oprah's producers required that light at the end of the tunnel quality—an absolute prerequisite for a phone call from The Great One. Oprah once said, You have to try harder. You have to believe in yourself. You have to...what was it...rise above yourself.

So that's what the counselor said. He said—in so many words—that this too shall pass, that things will right themselves, that the boy was experiencing 'stage of life' difficulties, that parenting was hard, that life was hard—sometimes unfair—that we learn from adversity, that children can be surprisingly resilient, even under the worst of circumstances, that to struggle is noble—at which point an image of Christ on the Cross popped into his head.

As the counselor spoke he leaned forward, reaching out his hand, letting it hover over the mother's knee. And something must have been happening at that point, for the woman started to smile, and she began to dry her eyes. She put the wet Kleenex into her purse, set up a little straighter, said, Thank you so much, you're such an inspiration. I know this isn't supposed to be for me, but for him. And we have to keep on trying, right? And the counselor said, Right.

So he stood, and helped the woman to her feet. And they both noticed, silently, separately, that the sun was flooding into the room. They heard the air conditioner kick on, and felt God's own cool air cascade down around them. And as the woman's breathing returned to normal, it was: When should we come back? and, How about in two weeks? and, That would be great. And as they left the room, the counselor, ever so lightly, ever so gently, ever so softly, placed a guiding hand on the woman's back and ushered her through the door.