

Bad Mother

A Chronicle of Maternal Crimes, Minor Calamities,
and Occasional Moments of Grace

Ayelet Waldman





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Introduction: Or, Life in Eighteen Pieces

The morning after my wedding, my husband, Michael, and I were lying on a vast expanse of white linen in the bridal suite of Berkeley's oldest hotel, engaging in a romantic tradition of newlyweds the world over: counting our loot. Sifting through the checks, I said, "What's with the multiples of eighteen? Fifty-four dollars, ninety. Wow, here's one for one eighty."

"Life," my new husband said.

"Life?"

"You know, *chai*. Didn't your grandmothers always give you checks in multiples of eighteen for your birthday?"

One of my grandmothers, I recalled, always sent a crisp five-dollar bill tucked into a birthday card. The other had presented me for most of the previous twenty-seven years with one of a series of Jewish-themed necklaces that, after the thirteenth or so, would go right into my underwear drawer, never to emerge again.

He explained, "It's *gematria*. The ancient Jewish system of numerical symbolism. Each Hebrew letter has a number value. You spell the Hebrew word for life, *chai*, with the letter *chet*, which equals eight, and the letter *yud*, which equals ten. *Chet*, *yud*, eight and ten. Eighteen stands for life."

Among the constellation of Stars of David twinkling in my underwear drawer lay tangled a number of gold and silver *chais*, neck-

laces bearing that two-letter word. One, with letters close to two inches high, had adorned the yoke of my forest green acrylic cowl-necked sweater in my eighth-grade yearbook picture; the silver was the precise shade of my braces. While I'd always known that *chai*, life, was a symbol of good luck, I had never been taught the significance of the number eighteen.

Since that morning fifteen years ago, I have received more checks in multiples of eighteen, as have my children on the occasions of their births and birthdays. Symbolic representations of life and luck, even if luck is understood to mean readily transferable into Spider-Man Legos, Polly Pockets, and handfuls of candy.

Once you have children, eighteen becomes a number with a certain magical weight. Eighteen is the age of majority. It's the age when they can vote (although not drink), when they graduate from high school and go off to college. Eighteen-year-olds are legally adults, I remember reminding my own mother when I was that age; you can't tell them what to do. And after your children turn eighteen, you are no longer responsible for them in the eyes of the law.

Except, of course, the law of the land is irrelevant; it's the law of your heart that matters. The law might think differently, but your children are yours forever, your responsibility until, at last, you are theirs.

This book is about the perils and joys of trying to be a decent mother in a world intent on making you feel like a bad one. Because it is about me, and my experience of motherhood, it is necessarily about the luckiest things that have ever happened to me—my four children and my husband—and thus it seems only fitting that I tell the story in eighteen chapters. It also seems fitting that I hesitate a moment before telling my story—our story—

to consider the question of whether it is appropriate to write about my children at all. Would a Good Mother keep her own counsel, button her lip? Does writing about my children make me a Bad Mother?

My children have given me their permission to write this book. I always share what I'm writing with them; I check in to make sure they're not uncomfortable and don't feel exposed. And there have been many times when I have decided, because of their trepidation or my own concern, not to tell a story or dwell on a topic. I am confident that I have not betrayed my children anywhere in these eighteen chapters. Still, they are under eighteen, and one of them can't even read. Their permission alone cannot justify the project.

The justification lies in the fact that the very writing of this book embodies my approach to motherhood, even, dare I say it, my philosophy. I believe that mothers should tell the truth, even—no, *especially*—when the truth is difficult. It's always easier, and in the short term can even feel right, to pretend everything is okay, and to encourage your children to do the same. But concealment leads to shame, and of all hurts shame is the most painful. Only if you name a problem, confront it head-on, drag it into the light, does it become surmountable. I always tell my kids that as soon as you have a secret, something about you that you are ashamed to have others find out, you have given other people the power to hurt you by exposing you.

One of the darkest, deepest shames so many of us mothers feel nowadays is our fear that we are Bad Mothers, that we are failing our children and falling far short of our own ideals. In these eighteen chapters I explore that fear. I turn over those rocks and expose the spidery places beneath. By presenting a faithful and

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honest record of my experience as a mother, I hope to show both my readers and my children how truth can redeem even what you fear might be the gravest of sins.

As I write this, Sophie is thirteen years old, Zeke just turned eleven, Rosie is seven, and Abraham, whom we most often call Abie, is just five. Thirty-six altogether. A multiple of eighteen.

My luck, my loves, my *chai*.

1. Bad Mother

I busted my first Bad Mother in the spring of 1994, on a Muni train in San Francisco. She was sitting on the edge of her seat, her young daughter standing between her knees. She had two barrettes clamped between her lips and a hair elastic stretched around the fingers of one hand. With her other hand she was brushing the little girl's long dark hair, trying to gather the slippery strands into a neat ponytail. It was not going well. She would smooth one side and then lose her grip on the other, or gather up the hair in the front only to watch the hairs at the nape of the girl's neck slide free. The ride was rough, the Muni car bucking and jerking along, causing the little girl periodically to lose her footing. When the driver took a turn too sharply, the little girl stumbled forward, her sudden motion causing her mother once again to lose hold of the ponytail. With a frustrated click of her tongue, the mother yanked a handful of the girl's hair, hard, and hissed, "Stand still!"

That's when, indignant, confident that someday, when it was my turn to brush my own daughter's hair, I would never be so abusive, I leaned forward in my seat, caught the woman's eye, and said, in a voice loud enough for everyone in the train car to hear, "Lady, we're all watching you."

We are always watching: the Bad Mother police force, in a perpetual state of alert-level orange. Sometimes the avatars of maternal evil that come to obsess us are grave and terrible, like Andrea

Yates, who was found not guilty by reason of insanity for drowning her five children in the bathtub. Sometimes our fixation on a particular Bad Mother has to do with our own racism, as in the national obsession in the 1980s with the mythical welfare queen, described by Ronald Reagan as a woman with “80 names, 30 addresses, [and] 12 Social Security cards,” or the current hysteria about undocumented women giving birth to “anchor” babies in order to immunize themselves from deportation. Sometimes the crime is so lunatic that it approaches a kind of horrible grandeur, like that of Wendy Cook, a prostitute in Saratoga Springs who snorted cocaine off her baby’s stomach while she was breast-feeding. (And here I’ve always been proud of being able to nurse and read at the same time!)

As soon as one Bad Mother fades from view, another quickly takes her place in the dock of the court of public opinion. Not long ago, the dingbat pop starlet Britney Spears was hoisted up as the latest agent of villainy. Her Bad Mother rap sheet is long and varied. It includes being committed to a psychiatric facility, losing visitation rights after failing to submit to court-mandated drug testing, driving with her infant son on her lap, and running in her car over the feet of photographers and sheriff’s deputies. And apart from her legal troubles, there are her miscellaneous crimes of lifestyle. Her constant partying, her spendthrift ways (\$737,000 every month!), and, most notoriously perhaps, her inexplicable refusal to wear undergarments. We can all agree, can’t we, that Britney Spears is at best an incompetent mother and at worst a neglectful one. She’s far worse than my first collar, the Medea of Muni, who pulled her daughter’s hair on the J Church line. So why, then, do I find myself feeling like she’s gotten a bit of a rough deal?

Perhaps because in a smaller way, at the periphery of the pub-

lic eye, I was myself made to do the Bad Mother perp walk. For a Warholian fifteen I became fodder for the morning talk shows and gossip blogs, held up to scorn and ridicule as an example of maternal perfidy. My crime? Confessing in the pages of the *New York Times* style section to loving my husband more than my children.

In that essay I wondered about why so many of the women I knew were not having sex with their husbands, while I still was, and I concluded that it might be because they, unlike me, had re-focused their passion from their husbands or partners onto their children. I wrote, “Libido, as she once knew it, is gone, and in its place is all-consuming maternal desire.” And then I spent some time worrying about what was wrong with me: Why hadn’t I successfully “made the erotic transition a good mother is supposed to make”? I said that if a Good Mother was one who loved her children more than anyone in the world, more even than her husband, then I was a Bad Mother, because I loved my husband more than my children.

The Bad Mother police were swiftly on the scene. They speculated publicly, down in the toxic mud of the comment sections on blog pages, that I was crazy, evil, a menace, that my children should be taken away from me. They cross-examined me on the set of *Oprah*. And New York City’s elite Bad Mother SWAT team, the warrior shrews of UrbanBaby.com, sank their pointy little incisors into my metaphorical ankles.

I feel enough of Spears’s pain to find myself wondering at the genesis of our current obsession with these varied archetypical manifestations of maternal evil. To a certain extent, of course, we’ve always been both terrified and titillated by the Bad Mother. Think Euripides’ Medea and Agave, think Jocasta, think Joan Crawford. But I can’t help but feel—and perhaps only because I’ve

been tried and convicted of the crime—that there is something especially sharpened and hysterical about contemporary Bad Mother vitriol. The frequency with which a new Bad Mother is unmasked, and the extent of our interest in each one, are, I believe, more than merely symptoms of the contemporary general degeneration of civility. While, granted, the human dum-dum bullets of message boards like UrbanBaby hardly exemplify the attitudes of the civil and decent core of American society, they do seem to distill to a vile essence what is a widespread societal preoccupation with Bad Mothers.

There is an appealing sociopolitical rationale for our preoccupation with Bad Mothers, one articulated to me by the feminist scholar and advocate Lynn Paltrow, founder and executive director of National Advocates for Pregnant Women. Getting us to focus on Bad Mothers, she says, is part of a larger political agenda to keep our attention off the truth—that it is not our mothers but our government that has failed us. The patriarchy and its political, media, and profit-making machines encourage us to scapegoat and vilify one bogeymama after another, because worrying about egregious freak-show moms like Wendy Cook and Britney Spears distracts us from the fact that, for example, President George W. Bush cheerfully vetoed a law that would have provided health insurance to four million uninsured children.

As persuasive as I find Paltrow's argument, something in me rebels at the notion that we can attribute our communal obsession primarily to the patriarchy. I agree with her that we are just at the very beginning of accepting the notion of gender equality (it's only been, as she says, "a microsecond in the course of history"). Still, the blare of condemnation that drowns out so much of civil discourse on the subject of mothering and child rearing originates not from some patriarchal grand inquisitor's office but, in large

part, from individual women. And while women have always, historically, been the enforcers of acceptable social conduct, even when it was to their detriment (remember Abigail Williams, the lead accuser in the Salem witch trials?), an hour or two surfing the myriad of mommy blogs provides compelling support for the notion that, in this area at least, we women are the primary authors of our own subjugation. The Bad Mother cops with the most aggressive arrest records are women.

And why? Because the Andrea Yateses and Susan Smiths, the “crack hos” and the welfare moms, provide us with a profound personal service. By defining for us the kinds of mothers we’re not, they make it easier for us to stomach what we are.

When I polled an unscientific sampling of my friends and family, they had no trouble defining what it meant to be a Good Father. A Good Father is characterized quite simply by his presence. He shows up. In the delivery room, at dinnertime (when he can), to school recitals and ball games (whenever it’s reasonably possible). He’s a good provider who is not above changing a diaper or wearing a Baby Björn. He’s a strong shoulder to cry on and, at the same time, a constant example of how to roll with the punches. This definition seems to accommodate, without contradiction, both an older, sentimentalized *Father Knows Best* version of a dad and our post-*Free to Be You and Me* assumptions.

However, my polling sample had a difficult time describing a Good Mother without resorting to hyperbole, beneath which it’s possible to discern a hint of angry self-flagellation.

“Mary Poppins, but biologically related to you and she doesn’t leave at the end of the movie.”

“She lives only in the present and entirely for her kids.”

“She has infinite patience.”

“She remembers to serve fruit at breakfast, is always cheerful

and never yells, manages not to project her own neuroses and inadequacies onto her children, is an active and beloved community volunteer; she remembers to make playdates, her children's clothes fit, and she does art projects with them and enjoys all their games. And she is never too tired for sex."

"She's everything that I'm not."

These responses might be colored by the fact that my polling sample, despite containing a moderate amount of racial, religious, and socioeconomic diversity, was composed of women of approximately the same age (mid-thirties to early forties) and the same level of education (which can be described, succinctly, as "more than they use"). Nonetheless, the common elements in the responses make a compelling statement both about the pervasive power of the antiquated June Cleaver vision of motherhood and about how badly we fall short.

The single defining characteristic of iconic Good Motherhood is self-abnegation. Her children's needs come first; their health and happiness are her primary concern. They occupy all her thoughts, her day is constructed around them, and anything and everything she does is for their sakes. Her own needs, ambitions, and desires are relevant only in relation to theirs. If a Good Mother takes care of herself, it is only to the extent that she doesn't hurt her children. As one of my polling samples put it, "She is able to figure out how to carve out time for herself without detriment to her children's feelings of self-worth." If a Good Mother works, she does so only if it doesn't harm her children, or if her failing to earn an income would make them worse off. More important, even the act of considering her own needs and desires is engaged in primarily to make her children into better people. As one woman told me, "A Good Mother is in shape and works outside of the home so she can be a good role model."

Being a Good Father is a reasonable, attainable goal; you need only be present and supportive. Being a Good Mother, as defined by mothers themselves, is impossible. When asked for an example of a Good Mother, the women I polled came up with June Cleaver and Marmee, from *Little Women*. Both of whom are by necessity, not coincidence, fictional characters. The Good Mother does not exist, and she has never existed, not even in those halcyon bygone days to which the arbiters of maternal conduct never tire of harking back. If the producers of *Leave It to Beaver* had really wanted to give us an accurate depiction of late-1950s and early-1960s motherhood, June would have had a lipstick-stained cigarette clamped between her teeth, a gin and tonic in her hand, and a copy of *Peyton Place* on her nightstand. But still, this creature of fantasy is whom the mothers in my sample measured themselves against, and their failure to live up to her made them feel like Bad Mothers.

It's as if the swimmer Tracy Caulkins, winner of three Olympic gold medals, setter of five world records, were to beat herself up for being slower than the Little Mermaid.

Without exception, the mothers I know feel like they have failed to measure up. As Judith Warner so eloquently wrote in her book *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety*, "This widespread, choking cocktail of guilt and anxiety and resentment and regret . . . is poisoning motherhood."

I have been pondering the reasons for this maternal anxiety ever since I first found myself suffering from it, sitting in a playground, my briefcase traded in for a diaper bag, my focus narrowed to my baby and myself, my ambition curdling into something I thought was anger but I now realize was closer to despair. I had always been hard-driving and ambitious, myopically fixated on my career. But I was working long hours, and after a day taking care of

desperately needy people who looked to me to keep them from spending years, decades, or even the rest of their lives in jail, I had nothing left for my baby. I was jealous of Michael, a work-at-home writer who got to spend long, languid hours with our daughter, dressing her up in her new outfits and shuttling her from Mommy & Me to the library. One day I simply packed up my desk, tossed my framed diplomas into the attic, and became a stay-at-home mom.

It was everything that I thought it would be. Mommy & Me, story time at the library, Gymboree, long stroller walks with my stay-at-home-mommy friends. And then the next day it was Mommy & Me, story time at the library, Gymboree, and long stroller walks with my stay-at-home-mommy friends. And the day after that, and the day after that, and the day after that.

Within a week I had gone mad.

I took a certain satisfaction in the fact that I was now the most important person in the day-to-day life of my child, but I was also bored and miserable. And the fact that I was bored and miserable terrified me. A Good Mother is never bored, is she? She is never miserable. A Good Mother doesn't resent looking up from her novel to examine a child's drawing. She doesn't stare at the clock in music class, willing it along with all the power of a fourth grader waiting for recess. She doesn't hide the finger paints because she can't stand the mess. A Good Mother not only puts her children's needs and interests above her own but enjoys doing it. If I wasn't enjoying myself, then I wasn't a Good Mother. On the contrary, I was a bad one.

The intense Bad Mother anxiety felt by me and by so many of the women I know has everything to do with what the journalist Peggy Orenstein, author of *Flux: Women on Sex, Work, Love, Kids*,

and Life in a Half-Changed World, calls “making pre–Betty Friedan choices in a post–Betty Friedan universe.” When we were little girls—we daughters of the late 1960s and the 1970s—none of us said we wanted to be wives and mothers when we grew up. None of us said we wanted to run the nursery school committee or frost perfect cupcakes or spend our days ferrying children back and forth from hockey games to music classes. We all had ambitions that went beyond the confines of our own houses. We wanted to work, to have careers, to have professions. But for so many of us, the realities of the workplace and of family life have either defeated or drastically changed these expectations. When career advancement demands a sixty- or seventy-hour workweek, when the child-care bill approaches or exceeds your paycheck, or when simple survival requires a second job, juggling home and family suddenly shifts from the challenging to the impossible. Someone usually ends up sacrificing his or her career to some extent, and in a world where a woman still earns roughly seventy cents to a man’s dollar, and where a man’s identity is still almost exclusively defined by what he does, that someone is almost always the mother.

So here we are, either staying home or making serious professional compromises in order to be more available to our children or feeling like terrible mothers for having failed to make those sacrifices. I imagine there are some mothers who have without regret channeled all of their ambition and energy into making homemade Play-Doh, organizing the nursery school capital campaign, and directing the fifth-grade social committee, but I have never met one. Most of the women I know feel an underlying and corrosive sense of disappointment and anxiety. The women I know are, on some level, unfulfilled. And the women I know spend a lot of time trying to avoid wondering whether the sacrifice was worth it.

It's that very wondering, it's the being unfulfilled, that makes us feel the worst. That's what triggers our most intense anxiety. Feeling dissatisfied, bored, and unhappy is unpleasant, yes, but what really scares us is the very *fact* of our dissatisfaction, boredom, and unhappiness. Because a mother who isn't satisfied with being a mother, a mother who wants to do more than spend her days with her children, a mother who can imagine more, is selfish. And just as the Good Mother is defined by her self-abnegation, the single most important, defining characteristic of the Bad Mother is her selfishness.

Even if we sympathize with Andrea Yates's postpartum depression, even if we've suffered from it ourselves, even if we are ready to acknowledge that homeschooling five children in a converted school bus would probably on its own be enough to drive us to homicide, we condemn Yates for having succumbed to her despair. She valued her own misery more than her children's lives. We condemn the Bad Mother even when she is the primary victim of her own tragedy, like, for example, Carol Anne Gotbaum, the Upper West Side mother of three who, while on her way to an alcohol rehabilitation facility, died in police custody after an altercation in the Phoenix airport. "Yes, I'm sure she was mother of the year," snapped an UrbanBaby mom-squad assassin, after someone wrote a sympathetic post about Gotbaum, "what with her severe alcoholism, suicide attempts, and tendency towards verbal abuse." Another deemed the entire incident an example of "self-indulgent nonsense."

When Susan Smith drove her two children into a lake, one of the most compelling facts about the case, one reported in the press over and over again, was that she had allegedly done so because the man she was dating didn't like kids. Here was this woman who

was clearly insane, but the media narrative about her was that she valued the satisfaction she got from her lover, she valued his wealth and attention, more than she valued her children's lives. Instead of getting a real analysis of the psychology of her crime, we were told that Susan Smith killed her children in order to be loved, and to be rich. Selfish bitch.

Even the maternal crimes of idiot starlets like Britney Spears amount essentially to selfishness. She'd rather go out to clubs than take care of her kids. She'd rather sleep in than report for her drug tests. She's spoiled rotten, and a rotten mother because she's so spoiled.

Not long ago I reread *Anna Karenina*, in Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky's magnificent new translation. In the novel there is an achingly sad scene where Anna, who has abandoned her husband and beloved son to be with her lover, excoriates herself with the worst insult she can imagine—she's an unnatural mother. A natural mother, one who understood the relative insignificance of her own happiness, would never have indulged it. Most of us are, obviously, not about to fling ourselves beneath the wheels of a locomotive, but the fear of being an unnatural mother, a Bad Mother, is all too familiar to us. We are supposed not only to sacrifice ourselves for our children but to do so willingly, cheerfully, and without ever feeling any seething resentment, and when we fail, as we must, we feel guilty and ashamed.

The question becomes: How does one find consolation in the face of all this failure and guilt? One way is by reveling in the dark exploits of mothers who are worse, far worse, than we are. We obsess about these famous bogeymamas; we judge ourselves for a little while not against the impossible standard of the Good Mother but against the heinous Bad Mother. The more rigid the prescrip-

tion of the Good Mother is, and the more complete our failure in emulating her, the more extreme the Bad Mother needs to be. Terrified of our own selfishness and failures, we look for models further on the spectrum from ourselves than we are from the Good Mother. We may be discontented and irritable, we may snap after the sixty-seventh knock-knock joke, our kids may watch three hours of television a day because we're too afraid, after checking our local map of sexual offenders, to send them outside to play, we may have just celebrated the second anniversary of the last time we had sex with our husbands, we may have forgotten to bring a snack to the playground, or, God forbid, brought a snack replete with partially hydrogenated vegetable oils, we may be divorced from our children's fathers, our children may not have fathers, our kids may sleep in our beds, our kids may not sleep in our beds, we may bottle-feed, or we may breast-feed for too long, our kids may score in the twelfth percentile on the verbal-reasoning section of the Iowa Tests, we may feed our kids peanut butter or strawberries too early and give them allergies, we may be so vigilant about not feeding them anything allergenic that they refuse to eat anything that's not white, we may yank on our daughters' ponytails while we are combing their hair, we may feel like the world notices and keeps track of each and every one of our maternal failures, but at least we're not Andrea Yates or Susan Smith. We're not Wendy Cook or Britney Spears. Hell, we're not even Ayelet Waldman.

That is, *you're* not.

Another strategy some of us have come up with to deal with our sense of failure and guilt is to rebel, to embrace the very identity we are afraid of, to loudly proclaim ourselves bad moms. We bad moms proudly wear our ambivalence on our sleeves. We vociferously resist and resent the glorification of the self-abnegating mother. We snarl at the mention of Dora the Explorer or Raffi. We

shrug at the orange Cheetos dust smeared across our children's mouths. We swap stories of our big-box travails ("Your kid ran away from you at Target? That's nothing. I yelled at mine in the parking lot of Ikea and someone called the cops!"). We commiserate about how much we loathe the wannabe Good Mothers with their aggressive school volunteering, their Bugaboo strollers, and their Petunia Pickle Bottom diaper bags. We even confess that on rare occasions, and only under duress, we spank our children.

We bad moms are happy to confess our sins because we're confident that those who come closest, and with the most sanctimony, to emulating the self-effacing, self-sacrificing, soft-spoken, cheerful, infinitely patient Good Mother are the *real* Bad Mothers. After all, what is a child like whose mother has sacrificed herself on the altar of his paramount importance? What is a child like whose mother has selflessly devoted herself to his every need and desire? Is he thoughtful and kind, empathetic and liable to put others' needs before his own? Or is he so packed full of self-esteem, so conscious of his own sense of entitlement, that he is impossible to be around? Our children may wear unmatched socks, we trumpet, but they're better people than yours are.

The vogue for honesty, for exposing and embracing the ugly side of motherhood, is not a new thing. As far back as Erma Bombeck's weekly columns or Peg Bracken's *I Hate to Cook Book*, women have been attempting to derive comfort from the act of ruefully confessing their maternal failures. One seminal text of the bad-mom movement, for example, Anne Lamott's *Operating Instructions*, published in 1993, describes a mother who clings to sleep so fiercely that she doesn't even notice when her baby falls into the crack between her bed and the wall. Salon's Mothers Who Think page debuted in 1997 as a forum for this kind of resistance, although it sometimes functioned as its opposite. The literary an-

thology *The Bitch in the House* is a Bad Mother's manifesto, as are the stacks of volumes with cutely sour titles like *Confessions of a Slacker Mom* and *Mommies Who Drink*. I began my career as a writer by publishing a series of murder mysteries—the Mommy-Track mysteries—about a mother so bored with staying home with her small children that she turns to solving crime just to keep herself from losing her mind. As an antidote to the Web sites UrbanBaby and Babble, the Bad Mother movement offers up the delightfully bilious Crabmommy and Heather Armstrong's Dooce, who writes that “most days with a toddler are the emotional equivalent of running over your skull with a car.”

We bad moms defy the world to come up with an accusation we have not already leveled against ourselves. Beating our critics to the punch is certainly effective as a way of short-circuiting attacks. How much do they think it hurts me to be accused of being a Bad Mother when that is the name of my book? But in our conscious rebellion, we bitches and slacker moms are as focused on the Bad Mother archetype as any of the vigilantes of the Bad Mother goon squad. If we truly didn't care, we wouldn't be writing all these articles, memoirs, and books. We wouldn't be blogging. We don't insist that we're Good Mothers despite our failings. On the contrary, we seem to be saying only, okay, yeah, we're bad. So what?

Despite the effectiveness of this technique, despite its power to inoculate you against attack, it allows you to define yourself only in negative terms. We don't call the entire project of identifying Bad Mothers into question; we simply embrace the role. And in the end, there is something hollow in that. There is no inherent nutritional value in the antidote to poison.

Moreover, if examined too closely, all this defiance starts to

ring false. I may be defiant about my failures and my selfishness, but I still feel guilty. I still feel bad. As happy as I am to crown myself Queen of the Maternal Damned, part of me still believes that my children would be better off with June Cleaver.

Is there really no other way to be a mother in contemporary American society than to be locked into the cultural zero-sum game of “I’m Okay, You Suck”?

Despite the Internet, the enabling technology that makes it ever easier for us both to judge others and to internalize our own self-judgment, couldn’t we at least attempt to forge a positive and humane attitude toward mothers, one that takes into account their welfare as well as that of their children? Or is that an impossibly naive idea, the very consideration of which dooms me to be bitch-slapped by the meta-hypocrites of Gawker under the headline “Ayelet Whines: Can’t We All Just Get Along?”

It shouldn’t be that hard. We possess, after all, a perfectly adequate model, one that operates smoothly, almost imperceptibly, without engendering vitriol or causing much pain: the Good Father. There are no “daddy wars,” and while Alec Baldwin and Michael Jackson have both served their time in the Bad Father stocks, it is rare for a father to feel that his own identity is implicated in or validated by their offenses. Self-flagellation is not the crux of the paternal experience.

I’m not calling for a national lowering of maternal standards to the rather minimal level considered acceptable by society for fathers. In fact, if more were expected of fathers, mothers might not end up shouldering such an undue burden of perfection. But it’s hard enough to minister to the needs of children without trying to live up to an impossible standard at the same time. It’s hard enough to achieve a decent balance between work and home

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without feeling like our inevitable mistakes are causing our children permanent damage. It's hard enough to braid a kid's hair on a moving train without worrying about an audience of censorious commuters.

Can't we just *try* to give ourselves and each other a break?