

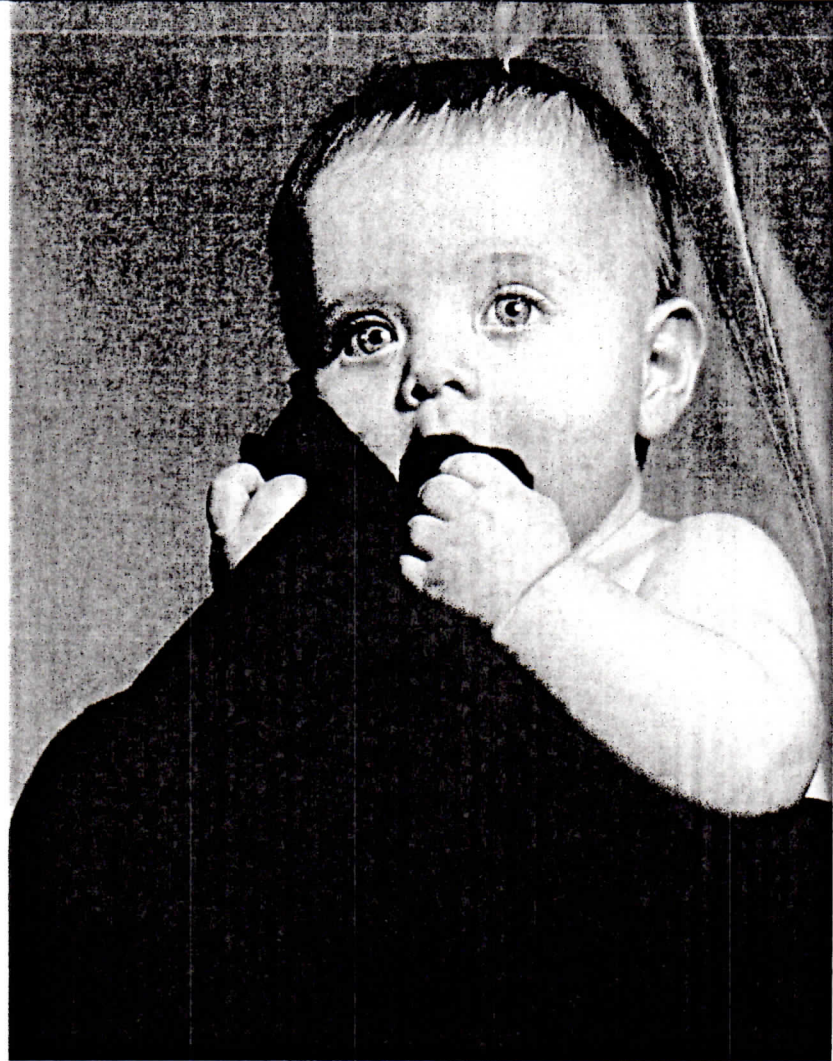
IT IS A WEDNESDAY EVENING, JUST PAST DARK, and I am walking the streets of our neighborhood. Through a lighted kitchen window, I see a middle-aged couple putting the finishing touches on dinner—standing companionably side by side—and I'm moved somehow. I also hear ducks settling in for the night down by the river, and my favorite white owl screeches as he flies overhead.

I'm well into my second pregnancy and I walk these Folsom hills religiously, like an Olympic athlete training for the big event. In my case, I will not be hurling a javelin or jumping over some impossibly high bar in front of crowded stands, but instead will be huffing and puffing in a room full of people clad in green. No medal, of course—but a new baby to bring home to the old chair where I rocked my daughter to sleep nearly three years ago.

We know already that this new baby is a boy, a fact that caused some dismay for his older sister. "But he won't be like me," she said, and I think she pictured him—at birth—as the rough-and-tumble, grass-stained, Power Ranger 5-year-old she plays with from across the street. "He'll be tiny and soft and warm," I tell her as we pick through boxes of her baby clothes for things that aren't pink. "You can still teach him to do somersaults; you can still teach him to fly down the slides at the park." After a few weeks, her disappointment subsides: she begins to tell playmates "our new baby is coming in the summer"; she takes her toy hammer upstairs to fix his cradle.

My husband—who has three grown sons from his first marriage—initially had some preference for another girl as well. At the ultrasound during my first pregnancy—when we both fully expected a boy, given his history—my obstetrician nonchalantly said, "Well, it's a girl—there are the ovaries." My husband's face took on a glowing, shocked expression—much like you look when 20 friends shout "Surprise!" in your darkened living room—that lasted all day. And he has dearly loved the girl world—the pony tails and tea parties and summer dresses that twirl. Together they dance in the moonlight, make wishes on stars, weave elaborate fantasies that somehow involve Cinderella, the Prince and Batman, her superhero of the moment.

On the other hand, as she neared her third birthday and began bursting into tears if her favorite pink nightie was in the wash or dramatically flouncing out of the room at a less-than-sensitive comment, my husband found himself looking forward to a male presence. "We can hike at the beach



New Baby

A Folsom writer, mother of a cherished 3-year-old girl, prepares for the birth of a son next month. *by thea marie rood*

while you two sit in the car and read," he says. It's true—we have her on video at two during her first trip to Bodega Bay, where she arrived in a swimsuit and orange floaty, fully expecting a heated hotel pool. When the wind and the first wave hit her, she headed for the beach steps and the van, where we later filmed her ensconced in her carseat behind a Madeline book. "Why didn't you like the beach?" he asks her off camera. An angry pink face appears. "Cause why? 'Cause it was too darn cold." This echoed many of our trips to the coast, when I would give up trying to read the *Chronicle* in gale-force winds and retreat to the car.

As for me, I am completely charmed by my daughter and remember—in the months after her birth—feeling sorry for people who didn't have a girl. Now, I love taking her out to lunch—she will happily eat Caesar salad at the Tower Cafe or clam chowder at La Bou—and she is by far my favorite shopping companion, refusing to allow me to purchase comfortable (but unattractive) shoes, for example. We spend hours punching out paper dolls, planning parties, playing with my old Barbie dolls. I'm also glad that despite her father's accusations of faint-heartedness, she is actually quite hardy and can kick a ball, hang from monkey bars, carry enormous grocery bags and climb kitchen stools admirably. But there are days, even before I was pregnant with this child, when

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I longed for a sturdy male child who doesn't care what he's wearing, whose moods are not quite so pronounced, who will happily put on a jacket and just *go*.

In fact, I hoped for a son since the moment the second line appeared on the pregnancy test. Partly, I guess, if I'm doing this again, I want it to be an entirely different experience; partly it offsets the imposition to my first child: she will always be our only daughter. Somehow too it seems amazing that as a female, I can create a member of the opposite sex, that enigmatic breed that chased me home during elementary school, called (or didn't call) during high school and—in the form of tamed suburban husbands—occasionally mystifies my girlfriends and me even today.

**It is all there in front
of us: the sicknesses
and fights and
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are life in a family.**

All of which is not to say that I'm not—at times—flabbergasted that I have committed to having another baby. As an only child myself, I am terrified of sibling rivalry: of driving home with a trunkload of groceries while someone cries and someone else yells, "Tell her to stop looking at me." And there are days now—say, when my daughter is screaming for an Elmo sprinkler in the aisles of Costco or still awake at 11 p.m.—when I can't imagine doubling this workload, going through these annoying developmental stages again. It is all there in front of us: the sicknesses and fights and bad report cards that are life in a family.

But as I walk in the evenings, in the quiet space away from deadlines and chattering toddlers and unwashed dinner dishes, I think about him. A recurring vision is a boy of about 12, a lock of light brown hair falling into one eye, one foot on a skateboard. "See you later, Mom," he says with a grin, and then he is off, flying like the wind. I also have the sense that where his sister is ambitious and sharp—and will probably go into some brave field like medicine at an impossibly young age—he is a free spirit, the type who will enter surfing contests instead of taking finals, who will backpack around Europe or work a freighter to South America. Mostly, I picture him as he looked on the ultrasound screen during my amniocentesis: head down, about to perform a somersault without the benefit of his sister's lessons.

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