

Children Don't Get Headaches

by Rebecca Emmons

How will I ever get through today? She didn't know. She'd had these migraines far too often of late. The doctors couldn't find anything physically wrong, nothing on the CT scan, nothing wrong with her eyes. The most that could be determined was stress.

Stress. But she couldn't very well get rid of her stressors. The babbling toddler behind her in the car. The fussing infant next to him. Eighteen months apart and on rather different schedules. She was lucky to get a nap during the day, since her boys did not always sleep at the same times. Fortunately Richard was able to get in and out of his "big boy" bed easily. She'd begun slipping graham or animal crackers under the door to bribe him to be quiet when he woke up. *These are the things they never talk about in the parenting books and magazines.* Those were filled with images that said, "This is what *good* parents do," but she'd long since concluded that parenting publications assumed parents had only one child, or barring that, paid help around the house.

The engine light flicked on, an orange glow that sent a stab of anxiety through her chest. *Come on, car, keep running.* She knew a second car was a luxury, something that helped her get out of the house with the kids while her husband was at school. She knew several families that made do with only car, but she didn't want to be one of those. Every time she got in the Buick of late, it did not want to start, or keep running, or shift gears. She worried the car would stall in city traffic and not start again, and she'd somehow have to find a ride home. The car had died once already this semester, but fortunately within a mile of home and with only one kid in the car. Ever since they'd gotten the car back from the shop, she'd kept the double stroller in the trunk. Much less room for groceries, but she wanted to be prepared for the worst.

Steven was crying. It was past his naptime, but she'd promised Richard a trip to the park, and Richard got out of the house little enough since his baby brother was born. "Is okay, Steemben. Go payground," she heard Richard say. "Steenben seepy," she heard him tell her. "Yes, Steven is sleepy," she repeated back. "We'll go home after we play at the park." No one ever told her that keeping her word to one child would sometimes require inconvenience to another child. It seemed there was no way to please both her kids at the same time. *But that will help them learn patience*, she reminded herself. *But I am near thirty and still learning patience. Why must it take so long??*

She pulled into the parking lot with relief. The car hadn't died. She took her migraine medicine before getting out. The driver's side door handle had broken off months ago, so she crawled across the passenger seat to get out. She recalled her husband's old van which had died a month after the wedding. When she first saw it, she'd wondered if she really wanted to marry a man who drove such a rust bucket, though she'd instantly banished the thought. The van lacked two exterior door handles, the air conditioning was broken, the front passenger window wouldn't roll down, and the radiator leaked. Donald's repair philosophy involved duct tape and epoxy. To be fair, *her* repair philosophy was to scrap the whole thing and buy new. Donald's approach was moderately less expensive.

She wouldn't be as concerned about the Buick dropping in the harness if they hadn't had so many adventures with that van. As the radiator grew ever leakier, it required constant replenishment on the road. Donald was not fazed by opening a hot radiator and pouring cold water into it, but whenever she'd tried this trick, the water bubbled and sprayed and tried to assault her. Once she drove the van home from the rural hospital where he'd worked, only to lose much of her store of water to the instant boiling. If another motorist hadn't shared his water

with her or driven miles out of his way to make sure she'd arrived safely at a service station, she would never have gotten home. She was terrified of something similar happening while her two kids were with her. Yet she also couldn't stand being cooped up at home every day, so she cajoled her car into working and dared it to break down.

She put Steven in the umbrella stroller, then let Richard out of his car seat and locked the car. They walked to the playground, where some other young kids were playing. Richard ran off to play while Steven crawled in the dirt and ate leaves. She used to worry other parents would think her neglectful or uninvolved because she didn't follow her toddler around uttering inanities, or devise clever games to play with her infant. *But really, what need for clever games when they'd rather throw dirt and eat leaves?* So she wandered around the playground, offering correction when necessary, but otherwise just making sure Richard didn't hurt himself or anyone else. Richard loved the slide, and she was glad he could go down by himself. Last year, when he was younger and she was still pregnant, she'd ridden down the slide with him on her lap. *The things mothers do to make their kids happy!* She was grateful the cold weather had overlapped with her third trimester and she'd had an excuse to not take him to the playground.

It was nice to be outside, feeling the bright sun and gentle breeze. *A shame every day can't be like this*, she thought. *It would be so much easier to leave the house.* Of course, the malls had play places, and Richard was just as happy playing there, but fresh air and sunlight were much better than fluorescent lighting. *Except in July*, she amended. Why Oklahoma summers had to be so hot and humid.... She blamed the Army Corps of Engineers. All those man-made lakes.

She listened to other mothers' conversations. "Oh, cow's milk is so *bad* for you. Of course, the dairy industry doesn't want you to know that." "We get raw milk from an organic

dairy and churn our own butter.” She remembered what she’d learned about Louis Pasteur and tuberculosis in cows, and held her tongue. “I can’t understand those unnatural parents who put their kids in a separate room to sleep.” She remembered the sleep deprivation she’d suffered because of her two kids and the modicum of personal space the nursery preserved for her, and held her tongue. “Our children don’t eat sugar. So *bad* for them.” She thought of the Pop Tarts she’d fed her toddler the previous night for dinner, and held her tongue. *Why are mothers so judgmental?* she wondered. *I’m feeling a bit judgmental myself right now. And defensive.*

“MAMA!!” Twenty-six pounds of boy slammed into her legs. *Well, my kids are happy and healthy*, she thought, *so what does it matter what other people think?* She wondered if the other mothers at the playground were merely showcasing their knowledge of “proper” parenting, overstating their own virtues because they likewise feared coming up short in the public eye. It reminded her of the games she had played with her friends in college, arranging the remains of lunch into sculptures and then applying postmodernist and political interpretations to the “art,” just to show they knew how to play the game.

She still thought the inventors of attachment parenting should be shot. This impossible ideal of family togetherness and healthy child development, which meant mothers must *completely* devote themselves to their children for their early years, an even greater self-abnegation than what Betty Friedan had railed against. *The pull of the ideal is seductive, though. The hope that my children won’t have problems, because of how I raised them. ...Or even that they won’t get old and sick and die as I will.*

Her first thought of mortality had been while holding her sleeping Richard, a few weeks after his birth. It had been a difficult birth, an urgent C-section three weeks before the due date. Only afterwards had she learned how close she’d been to death. But holding her first baby in the

quiet of the sunlit nursery, she'd realized, *He will never know me as I am now, a young woman filled with life, ambition and beauty. He will think I was born middle-aged, a mother with graying hair and a pear shape.* And then, she knew he would also grow up, have children, grow old and die. And she would be gone.

She looked at her watch. Richard had run around for almost half an hour, and Steven was bobbing tiredly where he sat. "Richard! Time to go back to the car!" She picked up Steven as Richard ran to the swings. He'd never shown much liking for swings before, so he was likely stalling going home. *Well, I like to swing,* she declared to no one in particular and gave Richard a gentle push before settling in a neighboring swing with Steven. Steven grinned broadly and squealed in delight as she gently swung back and forth. She grinned back. Steven's smile could light up a room. She and Donald agreed it was a good thing they hadn't smothered him as an infant.

Steven had been born exactly on time, a repeat C-section. He started screaming before he was fully out of the womb. "Like something out of *Alien*," Donald observed. This should have warned them. While Donald had spent a full week in the hospital with her after Richard's birth, he could only take one day away from medical school for Steven. She'd stayed alone in the hospital for two more days, hoping for rest but not getting any with nurses entering about once an hour for routine activities. *Maybe they do that on purpose so you want to go home.* Steven fell asleep on her during feedings but would scream constantly when apart from her, which aggravated the nurses, "who have other babies to take care of, you know." She'd been exhausted in the hospital but understood their frustration a bit better when she returned home with the new baby. He screamed all night, at frequencies unimaginable, frightening like a banshee. She and Donald had been ready to kill the baby and each other for some quiet and some sleep, but they

didn't – if only because they knew murder was wrong and they didn't want to end up on the evening news.

She walked the kids back to the car and buckled them in, tickling Richard before he sat down. The medicine was kicking in and her headache was easing somewhat. As she started the car and drove home, she chuckled to remember the sight that greeted them that first morning home from the hospital. She'd entered the nursery to find 18-month-old Richard's diaper had exploded all over the crib. Puffs of fluff clung to the wall, the balusters, the mattress, and to Richard himself. *I still have no idea how that happened*, she mused. The family joke was that Steven's screams could cause diapers to explode. He'd spent four months screaming, and then, like flipping a switch, it was over, and he'd become cheerful and playful and engaging. *Yes, we're glad now we didn't smother him*, she thought as she listened to him babble and squeal.

Once home, she corralled Richard into the house and set him up with yogurt and crackers while Steven screamed. Then she sat down to nurse Steven, and started the cartoons for Richard, to keep him in his seat. "Wise Li'l Hen!" Richard exclaimed. "Free Li'l Pigs! Big Bad Voolf! Gasshopper!" He listed the cartoons in order and danced in his seat while dripping yogurt down his shirt. *At least he's not pouring water on the table so he can splash in it*. Amazing how standards of cleanliness skidded downhill once the second child came along. While both boys were eating, she sent a text message to her husband.

"Where is sexy?"

"Look in the mirror," came the reply. Then, *"How is your day going?"*

"Migraine. I'm laying the kids down for a nap. I'll let you know if I need you to come home."

She hated to pull him away from his studies. During the summer she'd taken a two-week course at the local university and he had watched the kids. *Of course everyone would get the summer flu during my two-week course*, she'd thought at the time. One hundred pages of reading a day, two exams, and a ten-page paper due at the end of it all, and everyone comes down with a virus. She had gotten through it, just. But it had been a valuable episode. She'd experienced the strong conflict between academic demands and family needs that her husband faced for months on end. He'd experienced the challenge of exclusive responsibility for two young, sick children while being sick himself, and while the other parent was busy with school. She knew they were each better for it, with Donald more ready to help when asked, and she more determined not to ask unless absolutely necessary.

Richard was smearing yogurt on the table, so she said her goodbyes to Donald and set Steven on the floor, where he cried while she cleaned up his older brother. *I just need to keep going until I lay them down*, she repeated, almost like a mantra, while she wiped Richard's hands and face. She stopped the cartoons and changed two diapers, then took the boys to the nursery. They'd moved Steven into the nursery crib when he was five months old and sleeping through the night. She'd worried his midnight waking would disturb Richard, but he seemed to have become a remarkably deep sleeper since Steven had come home. *The merest toilet flush used to wake him, and now he falls asleep to the Sounds of Screaming.*

In the nursery, she put Steven down to play, and he chewed on an unplugged electric cord while she read stories to Richard. She tended to find reasons to shorten the bedtime ritual, but she did enjoy holding her "Little Man" and resting her cheek on his head. She loved that he loved to read as much as she did. Richard loved library trips: tossing books into the return bin, running to the picture book section and pulling random books off the shelves, zipping back to the

self-checkout with his selection, and all bracketed by drinks at the water fountain. While she missed browsing the shelves for herself as she had before children, she enjoyed picking out interesting books to read to her sons. *At any rate, I have far too much reading for school right now to really indulge in personal reading.* That was another reason for the migraines: her two college courses. Perhaps trying to save money by not printing the online articles was a mistake. Perhaps instead she should buy a screen filter for her computer? *Anything to make these headaches go away!* she thought as she finished “The Three Little Bears.” *Perhaps going to bed earlier would also help,* she added sheepishly as she began “Millions of Cats.”

She finished reading to Richard, sang to him, and hugged him. She pulled Steven out from under the bed and told Richard, “You can get up when the clock says ‘one-one-five,’” giving her at least an hour of quiet. “I love you, Richard. Sleep well. I’ll see you when you wake up.” She clicked the door shut, and carried Steven into the office where the playpen was. While the two shared the nursery overnight, they slept apart during the day to facilitate their different nap schedules. She sang to Steven, who couldn’t decide between slumping on her shoulder and grabbing the office chair back. She laid him down in the playpen. “I love you, Steven. Sleep well. I’ll see you when you wake up.” She wasn’t sure he heard her over his protest cries, but she knew he’d stop fussing within a few minutes and hopefully sleep for an hour. *Please God, it will be two hours,* she prayed.

With the relief of a parched animal nearing a watering hole, she pattered about for perhaps ten minutes, that pattering that all mothers do before allowing themselves to rest. Then she went to the bedroom, undressed, and burrowed under the covers. She loved her bed, though she hated the process of *going to bed*. She listened to the tinkling notes of the music box playing in the nursery and the fading whimpers of her infant in the office, and finally allowed herself to

relax. *The day is half-done*, she thought. *I will make it today*. She closed her eyes and willed herself to sleep.