

Potluck

by Elizabeth Templeman

L'auteure raconte sa vie de maman—l'histoire de toutes les mamans—celles qui ont à préparer un événement social à la fin d'une journée de travail, en juin.

This day followed a long teething night, a night in which I'd been up and back down five times in seven hours—rock, turn on belly, sips of milk, Tylenol, cuddle. Up early, I had managed a quick work-out on my stepping machine—the up-and-down, up-and-down of which became an eerie chorus recalling the night's sleep. Showering, I rehearsed what details I had of the new sitter who'd be arriving in 30 minutes. As we dressed and breakfasted, I primed the kids. "I can't get used to a name like Simone," said Andrew, lending strength to my own misgivings.

She had seemed fine to me. A Grade 10 drop-out she

appeared slow and sweet, not bright, but not pretentious either. I'd revised my three pages of notes and instructions, detailing routines, meals, and snacks, every possible calamity.

Waiting for Simone, I remembered one of the challenges of my day—a lunch meeting with some dignitary from Korea. As department chair, this was one challenge that always caused anxiety: the wooing of Important People. It requires a certain style and polish that flies in the face of teething babies and new babysitters. Attempting to rise to the occasion, I stole a quick glance at myself in the kitchen window, and rehearsed the strange syllables of the name "Chol Kim," removing the yellow Post-It from the outside of my briefcase as I practised.

Tearing away from home, I had to stop midway along the 30-minute drive to town to fling out the week's diapers at the drop-off where they get exchanged for a fresh week's supply (our home being too far from the city for delivery). I was running late for a student interview, and the gas gauge read "empty."

Waiting at work were the boxes of papers and books to be hidden from view for the campus tour for the Important People. The boxes represented my move to the office of chair—and my inability to manage the time to unpack them, and to disguise the heap and jumble that actually signified my sense of the new role. So the boxes got dragged across the hall.

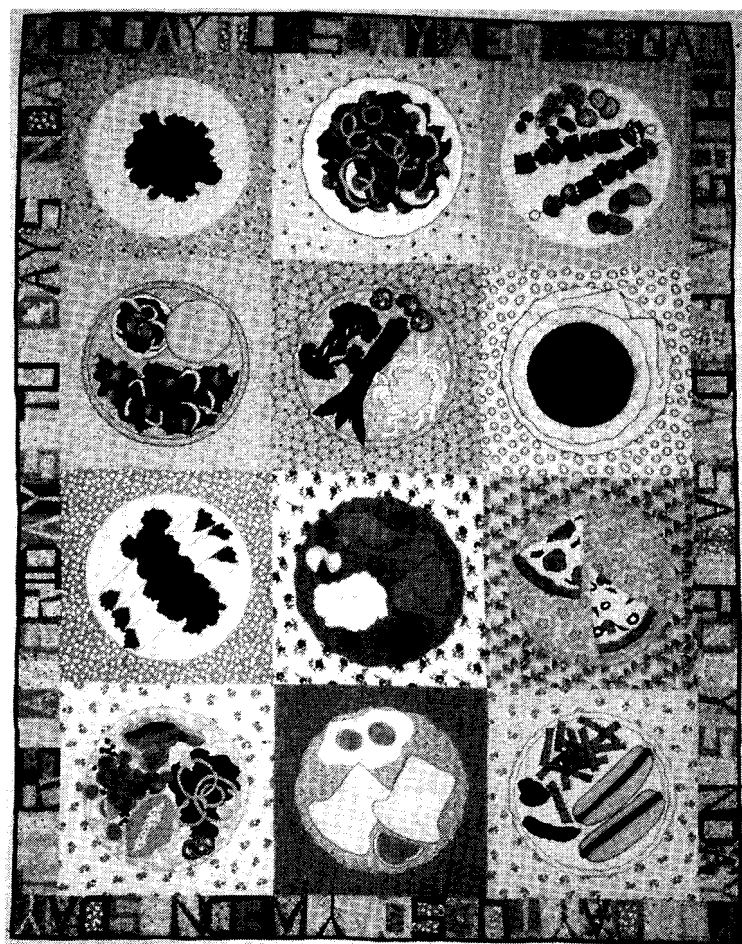
After the two student interviews came lunch. I was pelted by hailstones while running to my car, and hail filled the pockets of my jacket, melting as I drove to the restaurant, leaving me a sodden mass of dishevelled hair and damp cotton. I arrived late. Just behind the guests and shortly before the college president, I was apparently the only one to catch the momentary storm.

I shivered as I dried. But our lunch passed without further alarming incident. Mr. Kim himself seemed quite pleasant and content, talking mostly to our president. I never even had to say his name, was only required to smile and, occasionally, to nod. Lunch went late, so there was no campus tour.

Dragging all my boxes back in my office, I managed to unpack one. Then there was the panic phone call, urging me to a meeting I'd hoped to escape, but which needed me to reach quorum. Finally, there was the late afternoon coffee with my friend. I have no idea what prompted our cafe rendezvous, but she's a dear friend and a busy one, and the moments we snatch are moments to cherish.

Leaving for home a bit late, guilt-ridden but braced by coffee and companionship, I did remember the diaper pick-up.

I get home hungry and tired and start preparing for a



Wendy Lewington Coulter, "Give Us This Day," machine appliqué with commercially printed fabrics, hand embroidery, machine quilting, 56" x 76", 1996. Photo: Martin Roland

potluck dinner at a good friend's place in town. Potluck, the worst of all worlds for a working mom: a dish to prepare for the scrutiny of others, the usual array of foods to prepare for the kids, bottles and diapers to pack, the anticipation of watching three kids in an unfamiliar surrounding where they either act worse and shout louder, or—with my senses distorted by wine and companionship—they just *seem* worse and louder than usual. I have begun two new recipes, both marinated vegetable and grain concoctions. The group of us have now quite consciously taken to fat-reduced cuisine, a show of support and love for one friend, whose heart condition terrifies us.

Nicole plays with Jamie on the floor, keeping him out of the way of her irritable and overwrought Mom. Undressing him for a quick change, she discovers a woodtick on his soft little back. Horrified, I pry it out, indignant that the minuscule beast would victimize my baby, guilt-struck not to have discovered it myself.

"Momm!" cries Andrew from the bathroom, interrupting my fit of guilt. "I dropped the wash cloth in the toilet." "It's okay," I assure him. "Relax," I instruct (as though he could). With one hand I stir together salad ingredients, with another, fix a bottle of tepid milk to calm the baby. Pulling steaming couscous off the burner, I reach

around only to drop the bottle, the rubber nipple of which mysteriously pops off. Milk explodes everywhere. James cries. Andrew, now positively wailing, informs me that he has "pooped" on the cloth he had forgotten was dropped in the toilet. James has crawled into the milk, the dishwasher has ceased running, Nicole is packing the diaper bag, Andrew is in the depths of despair, and I wonder for a moment what life is like in the households of our friends.

Scooping James up, I plunk him safely out of harm's way, snug in his high chair, Cheerios to entertain him. Nicole reads to Andrew, while I salvage the wash cloth, which I'm tempted to flush down but for the threat of a plugged toilet. Glancing into the mirror, I mop off my face and brush my hair back out of my way. Compulsively, I check the diaper pail as I dry my face, only to discover that our new babysitter has only changed the baby once in nine hours. Rehearsing how I might gently instruct against such imbecility without offending, I run out to quickly gather clothes from the line. Moments of fresh air and a task with little catastrophic potential restores me. I pull in sheets and sweatpants, underwear, and t-shirts.

One very long hour after I've dropped my brief case at the door, my husband returns from his day's work. As he washes up and gathers kids into the car for the trip to town, I discover that I've prepared my two salads ass-backwards. The dressing for one is on the other, leaving me pondering where to put the carefully roasted pine nuts, the small pile of crumbled feta.

To my surprise, it's a lovely evening. James toddles from one friendly big person to another, curious, content, and charming. The big sibs play hard and long, enjoying newly-mowed grass, a novelty for a pair of rural kids. My husband sits holding a beer, engaging in animated conversation, even catching part of a ball game on TV. And yes, I drink wine, eat well, and attend, in a glassy-eyed sort of way, to a couple hours of rambling conversation among close friends in the warm June evening.

I reach into my pocket and pull out a thin, patterned napkin from the coffee shop on which I had scribbled a few notes while waiting for my friend. Up the side of the napkin, along a fold line, I had scrawled a question about the lack of coherence in my life. "Did I exist in the sum of the parts of my days, or in the gaps between the parts?" Unfolding the napkin to see how I might have answered, I find a list for the weekend. The list reads: laundry, kids' bathes, next size clothes for J and A, Sun. dinner?, garden—weed, replant, J's baby book, bills, letters, draft essay #2, new essay idea, macaroni casserole, spinach salad, lamb stew, use broccoli.

The answer to my question? I guess either I didn't know, or I just lost interest. I pour myself another glass of wine....

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Wendy Lewington Coulter, "No Wife of Mine is Gonna Work," machine appliqué with commercially printed and hand-dyed fabrics, buttons, found crochet, stamping, machine quilting, 40" x 55", 1987. Photo: Martin Roland