Image RT-AB-35
Year 1921
Topic Resident Teaching > Apartment Babies
Text June 5, 1921 "Here shown in the arms of his 'Mother of the Day', Elizabeth Cooper Baker, '21. Dickie came to us a little nothing baby and graduated after his ten month stay with a fine vocabulary of one word, which he used eloquently, enthusiastically and efficiently – "damn."

"damn"

Hold Me Like a Baby

By Megan Culhane Galbraith

Their names were Dicky, Dickey, Dickie, and Donny. There was Bobby, Bobby II, Bobbie III, Grace, Edna Mae, and Joan. They were also called “Apartment Babies,” or “Practice Babies,” and they shared a last name—Domecon; short for Domestic Economics.

Plucked from local orphanages, asylums, and almshouses, hundreds of these babies were chosen to help college coeds “apprentice for motherhood.”

In 1919, Cornell pioneered the first degree-granting program in the country for women called “Domestic Economics.” Its aim was to apply scientific principles to domestic tasks deemed “Mothercraft”— such as making meals, cleaning and ironing, household budgeting, and raising children. Female coeds—five or six at a time—lived together in on-campus “Homemaking Apartments” and collectively mothered the practice babies.

Ranging in age from three weeks to a few months old, babies were loaned to the college for a year. The contracts between the orphanages and Cornell stated the babies “could be returned at any time if there was dissatisfaction on the part of the college.”

Their birth names and identities were erased, and they were fatted and raised by a rotating lineup of up to six practice mothers at a time. The co-eds’ work was divided

into six parts, including the job of mother and assistant mother.

Domecon babies were highly sought-after for adoption. Adoptive parents were convinced that because the babies were being raised in ideal conditions and by scientific methods it would ensure a smooth family transition. A 1923 newspaper article titled, “Coeds at Cornell Mother Real, Live Practice Babies,” referred to the babies as ‘super children.’

The program ran through 1954. In all, 119 children were raised in this manner and adopted, and Dickie Domecon was the first. Most grew up with no knowledge of having been orphaned, or having been a Domecon baby.

All identifying records were destroyed.

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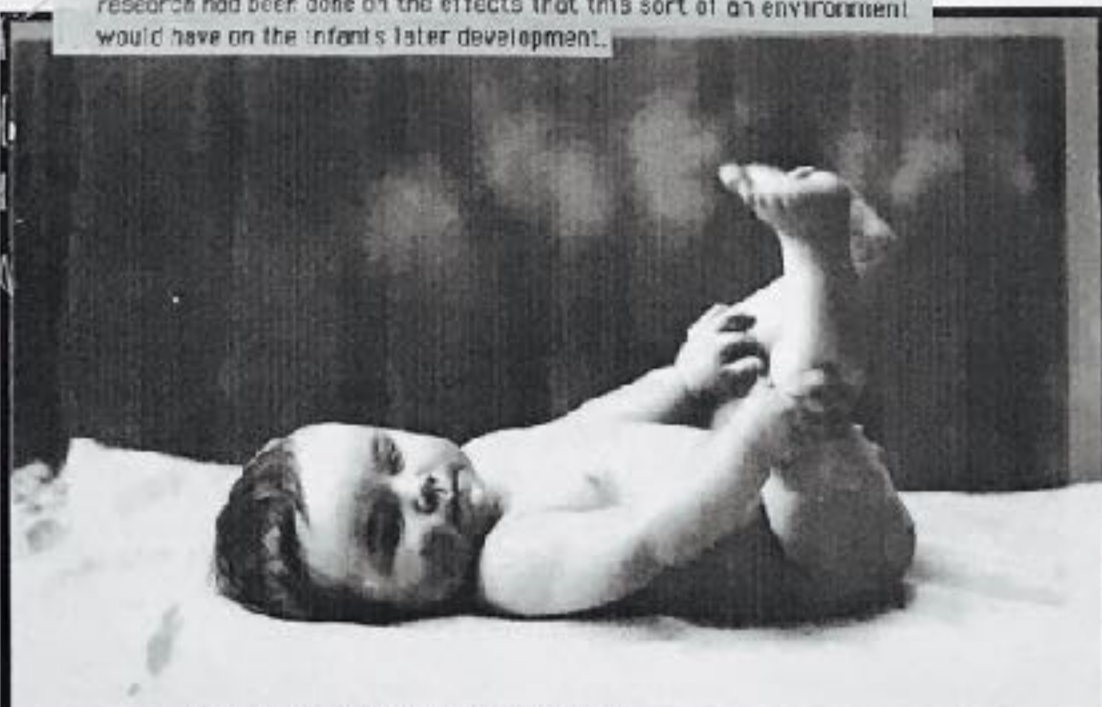
Image	RT-AB-30
Year	unknown
Topic	Resident Teaching > Apartment Babies
Text	Dicky, 1st Home Economics baby.

It does not appear as if much research had been done on the effects that this sort of an environment would have on the infant's later development.



Collection # 23-2-749, Item#RT-AB-39
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Not much research has been done on the effects.
Courtesy of the author/Courtesy of Div. of Rare & Manuscript Collections, Cornell

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Three stories underground in Cornell University's Olin library is the Carl A. Kroch Library, home to the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections. Built in 1992, the bright finishes— skylights, white paint, light oak, and a soaring atrium— are the opposite of dark or musty, as I've come to think of an archive. The surroundings seems counterintuitive to the trip back in time I am planning to take.

Gaining access to the Domecon records was easy and the process felt oddly sanitized. The librarian walked me through the computerized system and printed me a ticket, I handed it to the archivist and waited at one of ten tables in the reading room. As I waited, I wondered how many others had inquired about the program in general and the babies, specifically. As an adoptee, I know the feeling of wanting someone to come looking for me. I also know that receiving information can feel like opening Pandora's box.

I'd come to Ithaca on a month-long writing fellowship at a nearby artist's residency. It was the first time I'd had the luxury of time to spend with my art and away from the stresses of everyday life. It was a solitude I was unused to. I'd become frustrated with my work and myself. I complained to a mentor by email that the hard work of writing about traumatic subjects felt like I was "sitting in my own poopy diaper." She'd replied, "That's exactly how it's supposed to feel." An outing to the library seemed just the thing to get me out of my head. I figured I'd find some books to read, take a walk, and pull myself out of my funk. I don't remember the string of

words I plugged into the library search engine to arrive at the information about the Domecon babies, but down the rabbit hole I went.

Back at the reading room table, I watched as a staff person carried in a stack of four archival boxes. Inside were carefully labeled folders with photos, ephemera, and student papers printed on dot matrix printers, along with various pamphlets, and civic duty bulletins.

I spent days hunched over the table pawing through the material. It seemed the focus was on programmatic aspects of the then cutting-edge degree and its pioneering feminist leaders— Martha Van Rensselaer and Flora Rose—rather than on the babies, who seemed to have been treated like interchangeable laboratory specimens and less like tiny humans. All that remained of the 119 Domecon practice babies were a few dozen photographs.

The black and white photos showed college co-eds vacuuming, preparing baby bottles, diapering babies, and generally practicing at motherhood. In the photographs taken of the babies themselves some were chubby and exuberant, others emaciated and sickly. All of them were posed, propped up, and no doubt encouraged to smile. It seemed to me to be the commodification and idealization of what a “real child” should be: plump and happy: a confident blank slate.

I took iPhone photos of as many photographs as I could, and returned to my studio where I recreated the scenes in the ‘60s-era dollhouse I’d brought with me. I’d found fragile plastic baby dolls at a local junk shop and used them as stand-ins for the

practice babies. A toy company called Renwal manufactured the dolls in the ‘50s and ‘60s. I could fit four of them in the palm of my hand.

I realized later that I was conducting my own experiment. I was playing with the concepts of home and family. My baby dolls were objects of play, but the Domecon babies were real experiments: human objects. Recreating their photographs in the dollhouse made the practice of practice babies seem dystopian.

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By the time I was born in 1966 and adopted in 1967, Second Wave Feminism was in full- throated, radical, and revolutionary mode. The National Organization for Women (NOW) was founded in 1966 by Betty Friedan and twenty-eight women with the purpose to “take action to bring women into full participation in the mainstream of American society now, exercising all privileges and responsibilities thereof in true equal partnership with men.”

But the difference between the political rhetoric and what was taking place on the ground for women was vast. Activists protested for equal rights, equal pay, and equality, yet here I was in utero with my birth mother who’d been sent away in secret to have me. Homes for unwed mothers thrived through the mid 1970s. It was still considered a family burden and a shame to be unwed and pregnant. Abortion hadn’t yet been legalized in 1966 and birth control was largely mechanical. In Connecticut, where my birth mother lived, the pill was illegal.

Women like Phyllis Schafly proclaimed, “What I am defending is the

real rights of women. A woman should have the right to be in the home as a wife and mother."

It all sounded very 1919.

My birth mother had been sent away to a Catholic unwed mother's home called The Guild of the Infant Saviour. After she'd given birth to me at a charity hospital in Hell's Kitchen, Karen* told me she'd stayed in New York and worked in publishing as an assistant. She'd been fired from a job for wearing a pantsuit and had lived in what she called "the girl ghetto," an apartment she shared with other young working women, along with another apartment on the Lower East Side.

"Women have babies and men provide the support," said Schafly, "If you don't like the way we're made you can take it up with God."

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Before being adopted, I spent my first five months in a foster home, in leg braces designed to heal hip dysplasia. I likely wasn't picked up much, or comforted when I cried. I've spent years, and hours of therapy, trying to unravel the complex emotions that come from what my therapist deems "mild attachment disorder," which the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM 5) describes as, among other things "… a problematic pattern of developmentally inappropriate moods, social behaviors, and relationships due to a failure in forming normal healthy attachments with primary caregivers in early childhood."

“I always wondered about that flat spot on the back of your head,” my adopted mother said to me once as she stood at the counter preparing dinner. “I don’t think you were picked up much as a baby.”

I imagined myself as an infant; chubby thighs pinned wide with a metal rod thanks to a hip abductor brace. Had they not healed correctly, I’d have limped or had my legs permanently braced, my caseworker said. I’d have been unadoptable and likely institutionalized. Back in those days, she said, “No one wanted to adopt a baby with a deformity.”

As a child (before I knew any of this information,) I’d convinced myself that one leg was slightly shorter than the other. I’d worried I had a limp that no one was acknowledging for fear of making me feel different. I felt different deep in my bones. Sure I looked like my parents—I was white with brown hair and they were as well—but I felt othered. That I couldn’t see myself in my parents’ faces created a void. As I dug into my research with the Domecon babies and the contracts that contained the clause about babies being returned, I realized my unconscious fear of being returned as a child to the foster home. I began to understand how being adopted fostered my deep insecurity, distrust, and fear of abandonment.

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I had three mothers before I was six months old: my birthmother, my foster mother, and my adoptive mother.

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Image	RT-AB-30
Circa	1935-1936
Topic	Resident Teaching > Apartment Babies
Text	Rose Ann and Mary Alice, twin practice babies. No date given, but they were here around 1935-1936.

Rose Ann and Mary Alice
Courtesy of the author/Courtesy of Div. of Rare & Manuscript Collections, Cornell University

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The science of child rearing in the '60s— in fact, throughout history—demonized mothers for everything from making their children homosexual to being the cause of their sons growing into serial killers.

Babies, on the other hand, were considered blank slates—Tabula Rasa—ready to be imprinted by whoever held them. Karen was likely given this spiel in the unwed mothers home before she gave birth to me. Babies from unwed mothers "deserved a better home than their own mothers could provide," was the likely refrain of the nuns and caseworkers.

In the Domecon program it was said that one practice mother put a baby down for a nap and another, different mother, was there when the baby awoke. Can you imagine the baby's confusion? How could a baby attach to anyone with so many arms holding him or her?

Karen didn't get the chance to even be a practice mother, though she told me she'd tried. She'd asked to hold me before I was whisked away to the nursery, and then forever gone. The nurses let her, but they also said, "don't get attached."

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A crying baby doesn't know what is wrong; it just knows something is wrong. A baby is vulnerable, and so is its brain. It's the job of the parent, the mother many would say, to soothe their baby, to determine what is wrong and make it better. The

emerging scientific field of epigenetics—the study of biological mechanisms that turn genes on and off—is clear that a close, intimate and immediate bond with the mother lays the foundation for a calmer baby and a well-adjusted adult.

“Imagine if the hugs, lullabies and smiles from parents could inoculate babies against heartbreak, adolescent angst and even help them pass their exams decades later. Well, evidence from the new branch of science called epigenetics is reporting that this long-term emotional inoculation might be possible,” researchers from the *London Journal of Primary Care* wrote in a report titled, “The importance of early bonding on the long-term mental health and resilience of children.”

These days, researchers studying maternal attachment recommend zero separation of mother and child. The best environment for a baby is skin-to-skin with its mother.

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My grandson was born in October 2018. My eldest son and daughter-in-law praised the benefits of being skin-to-skin with him. They carved out time to be alone with him, and made boundaries for how his first days and weeks would be so they could cuddle and hold him. I’d raised a son so committed to his baby that he knew the words lanugo (the soft hairs that cover a newborn’s body) and vernix (the greasy, protective coating babies are born with). Maybe I’d broken the cycle of abandonment by raising my boys to be healthy and happy adults. Look what I’ve done, I thought. I felt overjoyed.

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I think of all the babies, toddlers, and children separated from their mothers at the border. Some, it's been reported, have forgotten their mother's faces. Even if they are reunited, they may appear as changelings—fairy children left in place of human children.

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Donald Aldinger, a Domecon practice baby who reconnected at 46 with four of his practice mothers said, "For the first time in my life I feel like everybody else who had a family."

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Image FT-AR-13
Year 1949
Topic Resident Teaching – Apartment Babies
Text Charlie, November 1949, Norma Keagle, Barbara McCann.

One wonders what effect composite mothering has upon babies themselves. If a baby misses the love of the mother one must remember that all these babies are institution babies. Also the period of shifting care is brief and one in which the ideal feeding scheldule greatly outweighs the disadvantages.

Composite Mothering
Courtesy of the author/Courtesy of Div. of Rare & Manuscript Collections, Cornell University

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I could call playing with dolls an "experiment" but my years as a science writer taught me that experiments begin with a hypothesis—a question in search of an answer; a starting point for investigation. My play began innocently until I took a step back and began asking some hard questions of myself. Why this particular dollhouse? Why these dolls? Why did I love the babies so much? I'd collected six of them within the month.

I wasn't thinking about "making art" with these dolls. I was procrastinating writing and trying to keep my hands busy. There were three visual artists in residence with me and I talked with them about their work and loved to watch them create. Together, we took trips to the local thrift stores and Goodwill because we shared a passion for using found objects in our art. I used what I had on hand: white copier paper, a black and white printer, my dolls and dollhouse, and a travel sewing kit a previous resident had left in the drawer of the bedside table. I set about using needle and thread to stitch together the paper on which I'd printed the images. I strung up what resembled a clothesline with cotton twine from the junk drawer in the kitchen. I hung the photos with a handful of doll-sized clothespins that had garnished the fancy cocktails we drank downtown.

Any time I was vexed in my writing, I sewed another set of photographs together and hung it in my studio. I stepped back one day and realized it had the effect of a doll-sized clothesline. Without realizing it, I had mimicked some of the

domestic tasks—sewing and laundry—that had been taught to the young women in Cornell's practice apartment.

When I mounted my show in an art gallery, visitors stood gaping at the photos. After reading my artist statement about the Domecon babies, I overheard them say, "That isn't real, is it? That can't be real."

I look on the Internet to see what sort of brace I might have worn to heal my hips. I find photos of baby dolls trussed up to demonstrate how to properly brace an infant's legs. There are two main types of braces for hip dysplasia, the soft Pavlik Harness, which positions the baby like a splayed chicken, or the hard Hip Abduction Bar, which looks like Tiny Tim stuck his cane horizontally between the knees. Both braces set the legs wide at the hip in a frog-like position reminiscent of Happy Baby pose in yoga.

In this contraption, I'd have been hard to hold. Besides, it was strictly advised that the braces remain in place except for bathing and diapering. Mom told me I'd had to continue sleeping in the metal brace for months after they'd adopted me.

The words used to describe what happened to my hip sockets—instability, prone to dislocation—could also have described my feelings as a child.

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How else to express the term mother who isn't one's biological mother without saying "caregiver" or "nurse?" How else to identify a human child, someone's son or daughter, as an object: a thing to practice or play with, a doll?

Since I became aware of the Domecon babies, I've wanted to seek them out, talk to them, but most importantly I wanted to hold them.

Being held tight is what I desire most. It also terrifies me.

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Unknown/Miscellaneous
Courtesy of the author/Courtesy of Div. of Rare & Manuscript Collections, Cornell University

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At the time the degree program in Domestic Economics was conceived, the scientific art of childrearing was broadly called, “Mothercraft.” These principles urged mothers not to cuddle their babies, as coddling was considered detrimental and could lead to the child being spoiled. This meant it was unacceptable to soothe a crying infant.

Let the child cry, the science of the times advised. Let the babe soothe itself.

Soothing my own crying sons made me feel I had motherly superpowers. I cooed to them, sang to them, rocked them, and let them fall asleep, skin-to-skin, on my chest.

It was when I couldn’t soothe them that I’d become near hysterical, fearful of what was wrong that I couldn’t appease. Why couldn’t I make them stop crying? Surely I’d failed as a mother. When it came time for my eldest son to cry himself to sleep, I sat outside his door and bawled silently—knees to my chin in a tight ball—until I heard his heaving sobs taper into whimpers and then into the silence of snorts and sleep. After 20 minutes, I tiptoed into his room to gaze down at his tiny face and whisper apologies. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

I later learned that this technique is called “Ferberizing,” also known as “graduated extinction.” Named after Richard Ferber, physician and the director of The Center for Pediatric Sleep Disorders at Children’s Hospital Boston, it is an infant sleep-training program that aims to deny a child access to the parents in order to get

them to soothe themselves by "crying it out." In his 1985 book, "Solve Your Child's Sleep Problems," Ferber advocates letting a baby cry for up to 45 minutes.

As a new mother, I never even thought to question the savagery of this technique.

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"How do you self-soothe?" my therapist asked.

"I suppose I compartmentalize my feelings," I said.

I have a difficult time asking for help. I rarely cry, even while my body begs for the catharsis and relief of tears. I long to ugly-cry in someone's arms, yet I'm terrified that if I cry I might be inconsolable.

I've rationalized that my cries in that foster home didn't bring my foster mother running to comfort me. Over time I've learned to keep silent, to turn my suffering upon myself and to not trust anyone to appropriately comfort me. In keeping with the child-rearing science of the times—and considering my hip and leg braces—I was likely held only when I was fed or diapered. My decades-long bout with bulimia can no doubt be traced to seeking comfort in food I thought might never come, or that was given on a strict timeline as was likely the case in my infancy and similar to the experience of the Domecon babies.

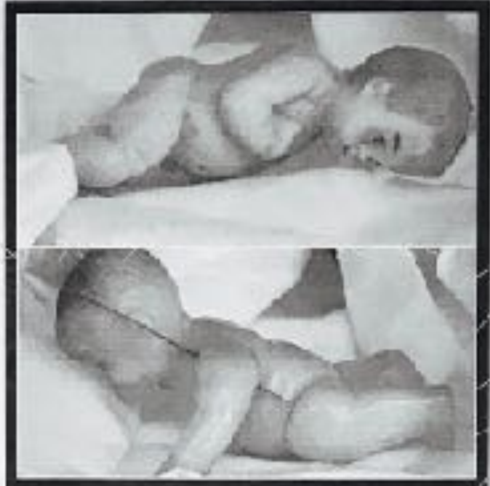
I seek out hugs from others. I give warm, tight hugs. I was a hugger for the Special Olympics. I desire to be held so closely that I melt into the person holding me and yet I also have a fear of being let go. In that 'letting go' is the implication that that

person won't return and with it comes a deep distrust that I will not be abandoned. The act of being held, therefore, translates into a fear of being left.

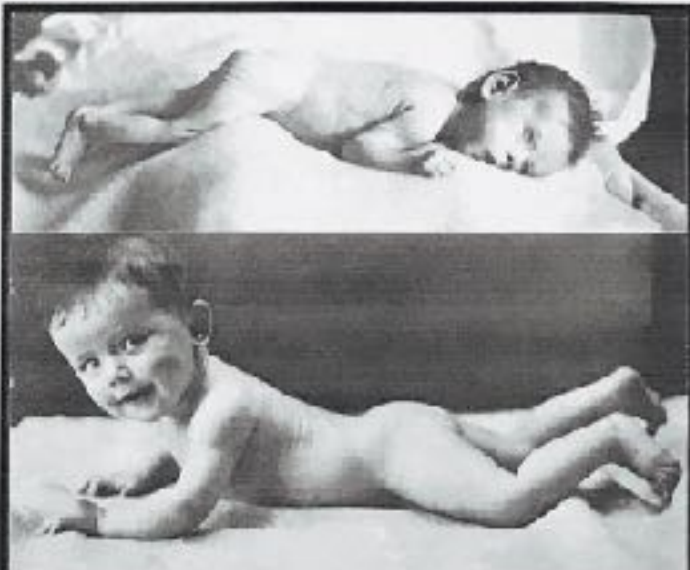
"What you fear is what you were deprived of," my therapist said. "What do you

think it is I fear?" I said.

"Maybe, that you will be unable to seek comfort," she said.



BOTH PICTURES ARE OF THE SAME BABY, FIRST WHEN HE WAS POORLY NOURISHED, AND LATER FOLLOWING A FEW MONTHS OF GOOD FEEDING.



BOTH PICTURES ARE OF THE SAME BABY, FIRST WHEN HE WAS POORLY NOURISHED, AND LATER FOLLOWING A FEW MONTHS OF GOOD FEEDING

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Sick Baby/Well Baby
Courtesy of the author/Courtesy of Div. of Rare & Manuscript Collections, Cornell University

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Courses in Cornell's Domestic Economy curriculum relied on making a science of everyday tasks like homemaking, budgeting, food preparation, and motherhood. But quantifying the act of childrearing by turning it into a science seemed oddly unnatural, and resulted in strict regimens for eating, sleeping, feeding and bathing—like this sample daily schedule.

Sample schedule for a Domestic Economy baby (16-18 months):

7:00	Chair (urination)
7:30	Cereal with milk
8:30	Orange or prune juice, and cod liver oil
9:00	Chair (urination)
10:00	Bath
10:30	Chair (urination)
	Bottle then nap
1:15	Chair (urination)
1:30	Vegetable, bacon (occasionally), egg custard or egg milk, and zwieback
2:00	Chair (bowel movement)
2-5:30	Playtime (may receive guests)
3-4:00	Wheeled out in carriage or taken for a walk
4:30	Vegetable soup or beef juice or broth
	Zweiback or graham crackers
6:30	Undress
	Cereal and bottle Chair (urination) Bed
10:00	Chair (urination)

The mimeographed schedule that was sent home with me contained notes from the placement coordinator for my soon-to-be parents. I know this because my mother saved it in my baby book. My schedule was strict with feeding, bathing and sleeping noted in hourly, sometimes 15-minute increments similar to the way it was for the Domecon babies. It also contained brief notes such as:

> COMMENTS: Baby seldom cries unless she is hungry or she has to burp. Baby sometimes skips a day to have a bowel movement but this does not bother her at all.
>
> BABY LIKES: To be with people—dangling toys—to chew on something hard such as a bread stick—to hold her blanket in her hand when she takes a bottle or goes to sleep.

By contrast, the advice I was given for raising and feeding my sons consisted of phrases like “let them nurse when they’re hungry,” “forget the housework,” and “sleep when the baby sleeps.”

In archival photos, the Domecon practice apartment was appointed to mimic everyday life, yet it was void of the actual trappings of real life. There are images of co-eds vacuuming in front of near-empty bookshelves, and the nursery was outfitted with a one-way mirror where co-eds observed a practice mother caring for a baby from another room as if they were in a living laboratory. No one lived full-time in that practice house. They may have slept there for a night or two, but mostly the co-eds appeared between classes and perhaps to make meals, or to hand off a practice baby to another mother.

They took courses titled: Foods and Nutrition, Elementary Sewing, Handicraft

and Cookery, Household Management & The Apartment Problem. There was a six-week "Charm School" that taught women cosmetics, fashion budgeting, and what to appropriately wear. There was the popular "Marriage Course," taught by Lemo Rockwood. Professor Rockwood described her course as the teaching, among other things, of "scientific information which has promoted the study of mate choice and marital adjustment; the development of affection in the individual, and the achievement of heterosexuality."

The curricular literature noted; "To most of the girls who have never been held responsible for a child, the job of mother is the most bewildering of any in the apartment."

All these teachings, to me, seemed to take the nurture right out of nature and were quite in keeping with the anti-nurture sentiment of the times. The practice baby program is so dystopian it is listed on the *Ripley's Believe it or Not!* website.

———

The antonym for nurture is neglect.

———

Mothercraft
Courtesy of Div. of Rare & Manuscript Collections, Cornell University

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I was not a violent child. In fact, I tried to be the perfect child.

Studies indicate there are two archetypes of the adopted child—one who pushes boundaries and seeks negative attention (making parents and siblings exhaustingly reinforce and demonstrate their bottomless love), and the perfectionist who tries to be the model child, who does not make waves, who rarely asks for help, and who never openly seeks attention and love. Both archetypes manifest a fear of abandonment in very different ways.

My adoptive parents weren't big on hugging. They didn't withhold affection, per se, and looking back perhaps they were likely taking cues from me. My Mom used to say I was "very independent" and could "play by myself for hours." I suppose being self-contained was my means of protection, some sort of invisibility cloak that allowed me to disappear inside my own head. I've been told I am "mysterious and complicated." I suppose this is another way of expressing my invisibility, or my unwillingness to be seen.

The real me is embodied in the fears I rarely voice. I am fearful of never truly being seen or loved for who I am. If I don't let myself be truly seen, however, was I ever really here? In other words, have I "othered" myself? Have I abandoned myself?

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As if to reinforce her projection of my wholesomeness, Mom bought me a

Holly Hobbie doll. “Start each day in a happy way,” was Holly’s tagline.

When I was sad as a child Mom used to say, “I just want everything to be perfect.” She wanted our lives to be perfect, not in a negative way; in a good way. The trouble is that repeatedly hearing the phrase had the opposite effect on me. Those words came with an unintended impact that reinforced the notion that if I wasn’t perfect, or didn’t act perfectly, there would be consequences. Maybe, like the Domecon babies, I could be returned if my parents weren’t satisfied. I see now with adult eyes that this is exactly the fear of abandonment my therapist described.

I wasn’t perfect. I had dark thoughts. I did bad things. I didn’t let my parents see those parts of me. Had they seen the heaps of vomit gathered outside my bedroom window? Had they noticed the scabs I picked at continuously that formed scars on my thighs? Had they read my diary of self-loathing? Did they know I sat, curled in the dark in my bedroom closet composing music? My first piece was titled Persephone before I understood the myth of how she was abducted by Hades to be his bride in the underworld; before I read how her mother, Demeter, moved heaven and earth to find her.

I defaced Holly Hobbie. I rimmed her eyes with black marker making them heavy with inky eyeliner and cut her dirty blonde hair so short that it stuck out 90-degrees from her head and showed swaths of pink plastic scalp. I pierced her ears with Mom’s quilting pins, stripped her naked, held her chubby plastic legs together by their flat feet and banged her head against the sharp edge of my desk. When her head

wouldn't pop off I ripped it off to see how it attached to her body.

Was I not a violent child?

Like me, Holly was flat chested and dressed in clothing straight out of the Little House on the Prairie TV series my sisters and I loved to watch. Her plastic chest had no nipples, and the area where her vulva should have been was smooth between her thighs. Holly had an enormous out-of-scale head. Had she been rendered in flesh and blood the sheer weight of her skull would have snapped her dainty neck. She had only the hint of a nose, and no mouth whatsoever.

Had she wanted to speak her mind, she wouldn't have been able to do so.

———

In 1970, a psychologist named Mary Ainsworth identified three main attachment styles: secure, anxious, and avoidant. These attachment styles resulted from early interactions with the mother.

My therapist recommended I discover what my attachment style was in order to better understand how I relate to others, particularly men.

Like many adoptees, I found I was 'anxiously attached,' which means I crave closeness and intimacy, yet am insecure about how the other person feels about me—no matter how much they tell me otherwise. My near-constant fear of abandonment can send me into a spiral of internal neediness. My attachment style is attracted and attractive to men with "avoidant attachment" style—those who fear intimacy, or who

are emotionally unavailable. As I write this now, I have been divorced for nearly three years. In trying to date I find I am a magnet for married and/or emotionally unavailable men. In other words, I am attracted and attractive to the very kind of man I fear most: one who will likely abandon me. Until I break the cycle, I'll continue to play out my fear by seeking out and attracting men who will keep me in this demented comfort zone that replicates the hardwired experience of my abandonment as a baby.

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In his 1959 experiment "Love in Infant Monkeys," Harry F. Harlow tested mother-child attachment bonds by isolating infant monkeys for up to 30 days in cages. He then created surrogate "mother" monkeys, one of bare wire and the other of wire covered with terry cloth to which the infants could cling. The infants who clung to the terry-clothed surrogate, "mother" suffered less stress when they were brought out of isolation and were able to self-soothe.

"Suffering less" is still suffering.

The infant monkeys with the bare wire-framed mother figure had nothing to cling to.

Emerging from their isolation, they threw themselves on the floor clutching their heads, screaming, and crying. Two babies starved themselves to death.

Harlow also placed his baby monkey subjects in total isolation for the first eights months of life, denying them contact with other infants or with either type of

surrogate mother. They emerged with permanent damage.

In the 1970s Harlow developed what was called “The Pit of Despair” to reproduce an animal model of clinical depression. He took baby and infant monkeys away from their mothers and isolated them in small wire cages. The monkeys soon became extremely depressed, stopped playing and interacting—some stopped eating.

These experiments were unethical, but Harlow’s work did legitimize parenthood, adopted or otherwise, over institutionalized childcare. His experiments both normalized and pathologized adoption.

There is a long history of using orphans and children in psychological experiments. In 1945, Austrian-American psychologist René Árpád Spitz studied children in orphanages and foundling hospitals in South America. Spitz followed two groups of children from infancy until they were a few years old. One group was raised in an orphanage, and another group in a prison nursery with incarcerated mothers.

In the orphanage the babies were cut off from human contact and lay isolated in their cribs. A single nurse cared for seven children. The incarcerated mothers gave their babies care and affection every day. Additionally, the babies could see each other and the prison staff throughout the day.

At a year old, the two groups differed immensely. The babies raised in orphanages lagged far behind those reared in the prison nursery on every level. They were less curious, less playful and didn’t have the same motor or intellectual skills. Of

the nearly 30 orphans, only two were walking and those two could only manage a few words.

Spitz coined the term “anaclitic depression”—partial emotional deprivation as a result of the loss of a loved object (in this case the mother.) His findings showed that a lack of love and comfort could, in fact, have grave consequences on children. Babies who were not held are stunted emotionally and physically. Some research has shown that if the situation persists, it can be deadly. The 1947 documentary *Grief: A Peril in Infancy* captured Spitz’ findings. I don’t recommend watching it.

Psychologist John Bowlby along with Spitz conducted what would be the first studies into the theory that evolved into what the DSM now calls “attachment disorder.”

A 1998 article in the *New York Times Magazine* detailed attachment theory as the ultimate experiment.

“Bowlby's early research had been with children who had undergone traumatic separations from their parents—children in foundling homes and child-guidance clinics, young evacuees from the London blitz and otherwise happy children confined to the hospital in an era when visiting hours, even for mothers and fathers, were normally restricted to once a week,” wrote reporter Margaret Talbot. “In all of these cases, Bowlby detected an initial stage of protest, followed by a kind of passive grief or dejection that could sometimes appear to be cooperative behavior to busy nurses or social workers, followed by a deeper and lasting emotional detachment—the child might be cheerful with others, but defensively reject his

mother when she appeared again."

Victor Groza is a contemporary researcher and adoption specialist at Case Western Reserve University who has conducted several studies on the emotional and behavioral development of Romanian adoptees.

"The children adopted from Romanian institutions represent an opportunity to examine the effects of deprivation on child development comparable to experimental research conducted on primates," Groza said.

"Continuity of affectionate care by one or a small number of caregivers who can give of themselves emotionally, as well as in other ways, originates the development of the child's love relationships," wrote Linda Mayes and Sally Provence, both professors of child development at Yale University. "Having repeated experiences of being comforted when distressed, for instance, is a part of developing one's own capacity for self-comfort and self-regulation, and later, the capacity to provide the same for others."

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In 1952, psychoanalyst Donald Woods (D.W.) Winnicott, whose work helped inform attachment theory, coined the term "comfort object." The object could be a doll, teddy bear, or blanket (together with what Winnicott called a "good enough mother") helps a child learn to slowly transition and separate from its mother.

"It is true that the piece of blanket (or whatever it is) is symbolical of some part-object, such as the breast," wrote Winnicott in his 1953 paper, "Transitional Objects and

Transitional Phenomena—A Study of the First Not-Me Possession," in *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis.* "Nevertheless the point of it is not its symbolic value so much as its actuality. Its not being the breast (or the mother) although real is as important as the fact that it stands for the breast (or mother).

"When symbolism is employed the infant is already clearly distinguishing between fantasy and fact, between inner objects and external objects, between primary creativity and perception. But the term transitional object, according to my suggestion, gives room for the process of becoming able to accept difference and similarity. I think there is use for a term for the root of symbolism in time, a term that describes the infant's journey from the purely subjective to objectivity; and it seems to me that the transitional object (piece of blanket, etc.) is what we see of this journey of progress towards experiencing."

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When I am anxious I sleep with my Bun-Bun, a yellow stuffed rabbit given to me by my grandmother when I was about two years old. He is bare in places where I've rubbed off his fur (I called this "fuzzying" when I was a child.) I've had to re-embroider his pink nose and black mouth.

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Experiments like these show the negative effects of separating children from mothers and parents, and the effects on a child's secure development to themselves and on future relationships. Many would argue these scientific experiments reinforced what is already known of human development—a baby will better develop if it

remains with its mother. The idea that scientific methods needed to overlay or short-circuit the instincts of mother and baby is indeed ludicrous, but perhaps only with hindsight. That this research was used to bludgeon mothers to stay in the home and to demonize them for leaving their children (in the care of others for instance) in order to enter the workplace, further underscores the demonization of women and the paradox of motherhood.

I suppose the founders of the Domecon program didn't set out to do harm, but the unintended negative consequence to those babies seems a non-starter.

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"Unfortunately babies and young children make perfect scapegoats since they manifest so nakedly all the sins that flesh is heir to: they are selfish, jealous, sexy, dirty, and given to tempers, obstinacy, and greed." — John Bowlby, *The Making and Breaking of Affectional Bonds*

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Mother of that Week
Courtesy of the author/Courtesy of Div. of Rare & Manuscript Collections, Cornell University

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Martha Van Rensselaer and Flora Rose were co-founders of Cornell's Domestic Economics program, the first full female professors at the college, and advocates for suffrage and women's rights. They were also lovers who lived together for 24 years. They were so feared and revered that they were collectively referred to as 'Miss Van Rose.'

Van Rensslear's vision engaged the leading feminists of the time: Eleanor Roosevelt, Ida Tarbell, and Susan B. Anthony. The First Lady paid a campus visit to Van Rensselaer to advocate for an expansion of the concepts of home to include community, the nation, and the world. Van Rensselaer was recognized by The League of Women Voters as one of the twelve most important women in America.

If I step back and look at the Domecon experiment in motherhood and child rearing, it boils down to women observing women. Young ladies in the practice apartments were under close observation by their teachers, by each other, by science, and by society. The kitchen looked like a laboratory with beakers, and scientific-like instruments. There was an observation room with a one-way mirror into the nursery where students and teachers monitored practice babies and practice mothers. I think about them all being in the human equivalent of a dollhouse. Theirs was a fake home set up with fake tasks and a fake baby: everyone playing at a life.

And at the same time "Miss Van Rose" were preparing young women as

“apprentice mothers,” they were also keeping babies from—and in some cases taking them away from—their birth mothers.

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Dicky Domecon, the first of all the practice babies at Cornell, was born on March 25, 1920 to a woman named Mae LaRock. He weighed 9 lb. 3 oz. and she named him Richard after Dr. Richards who helped with the birth. According to records, the birth father left Mae long before his son was born and, whether she realized it or not, Mae signed away the legal rights to her son before she left the hospital. Nowhere can I find how old Mae was when she gave birth.

By all accounts, Richard LaRock was a healthy baby. I imagine Martha Van Rensselaer happily picking him out of an infant lineup at one of the many orphanages or asylum homes with which she had agreements. He was plump and happy looking with big, round eyes like a chubby doll.

He was renamed Dicky Domecon and placed immediately into the care of his practice mothers in the practice apartment at Cornell. His six or so mothers “fell in love with him.”

Identity is a shifty thing with orphans and adoptees: perhaps even more so with the practice babies. Dicky was likely thought of as a Tabula Rasa; a blank slate ready to be imprinted by whomever came into contact with him. Imagine the trauma for an infant who had six mothers? He may not have known whom to focus on since the moment he got comfortable with one “mother,” a shift change brought him a different

face. He literally could have gone to sleep at night in the arms of one woman, and awoken to the gaze of another. Even the spelling of Dicky's name was careless: I found him referred to as Dicky, Dickey, and Dickie.

On August 24, 1920, just as the co-eds were readying to return to campus, Flora Rose received a pleading letter from Dicky's mother, Mae, who was living less than two hours away in Oswego, NY.

"May I please come to see him?" wrote Mae of her son, "I love him and am very lonesome for him. If not, will you please write to me about him? Believe me I would be very grateful."

Flora Rose passed the letter along to Mrs. Florence Grannis, Commissioner for Placing Dependent Children, and wrote she "felt sorry for the mother and hoped she would have the chance to raise Dicky herself."

As the end of the term drew near, almost one year and a couple days to the day of Dicky's birth, March 24, 1921, Flora Rose wrote, "The question of letting Dickey go has been a very burning one with us, for we have grown to love the little boy and are deeply interested in him." On March 28, Rose wrote she would like to see Dickey placed with his biological mother. Commissioner Grannis, however, seemed convinced a good adoptive home would be found, because "everyone wants the child that is so desirable after the care he received at Cornell."

There is no further correspondence that indicates where Dickey was placed,

if Mae was contacted, or if mother and son ever saw each other again.

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When my sons were born I didn't want to let them go. In the surgical room, shivering from the C-sections under a light blanket, I clocked their trajectory from my eviscerated uterus to the weigh station. I demanded the nurses wheel them into my sight line and demanded they unstrap my arms so I could hold them immediately. I was terrified when they went out of my sight at night in the hospital nursery, or off to get circumcised. Where did this terror come from? Was it that I felt I'd been reborn in my sons? Did I innately fear they'd be whisked away as I was from my birth mother with the nurse warning, "don't get attached?"

I took every opportunity to hold my boys until they wouldn't let me. I read to them every night, their heads cradled under the crook of my arm. I kissed them and let them sit on my lap to cuddle. I let them fall asleep on my chest and spooned them in their toddler beds–my ass hanging off the side–when they were sick. Their fears were my fears and I did my best to soothe them and let them know I'd always be there for them: that I loved them unconditionally and that I'd never leave.

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The behaviorist John Broadus Watson and his graduate student Rosalie Rayner conducted the Little Albert experiments in 1920. Watson was president of the American Psychological Association, a leading thinker at the time, and programs like Cornell's were based on the principles his science espoused: molding human behavior by

scientific control.

His findings on childrearing included: firm feeding, sleeping, and toileting schedules (no matter if the child was hungry or sleepy). Pacifiers, thumb sucking, and any form of affection were strictly forbidden.

“When you are tempted to pet your child remember that mother love is a dangerous instrument,” said Watson. “Never hug or kiss (your children), never let them sit on your lap."

Within the decade, Watson’s experiments were deemed unethical and he was thrown out of the American Psychological Association. He and Rayner’s extramarital affair led to a spectacular end to his marriage and an academic ethics controversy.

But the vestiges of his ideas lingered for decades in the main. Many psychologists believed that showing affection toward your child would spread disease and lead to problems in adulthood.

The Little Albert Experiment seemed an extension of the Pavlovian classical conditioning experiments with dogs. It made me wonder about my own abandonment issues. Was I scared of others abandoning me because I’d been classically conditioned to fear it? Did the fact that I wasn’t comforted when I cried make me fearful of intimacy altogether?

Of the practice of using practice babies, a 1954 article in *Time Magazine* quoted Mrs. Babette Penner, director of the Women’s Services Division of United Charities

saying, “Imagine what anxieties there are in a child who is given a bottle in twelve or more pairs of arms.”

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In searching for a way to heal what felt like the broken child inside me, I decided I wanted to volunteer in a hospital maternity ward to hold babies. I thought I’d be giving them what they needed—closeness and attachment—but really it was what I desperately needed. I needed to be held like a baby.

Turns out it’s impossible to get near a maternity ward these days. Back in the 1900s it seemed they were giving infants away. Today, I was politely redirected that I could volunteer in the gift shop, or the thrift shop, or at the Visitor Information desk. In short, there was no fucking way I was getting near any babies.

I read in the Domecon archives that one of the program’s administrators said, “You have to remember, these are institution babies:” as if they were disposable, living dolls; objects to dress up, feed, and play with. Pretty accessories for the girls to prance around with to show men how marriageable and motherly they were.

Studies of babies who have been orphaned or institutionalized have described them as exhibiting stereotyped movements like mirroring their caregiver, using self-stimulation, and having an empty look in their eyes.

“They cried vaguely or softly many times a day and seemed unhappy. Many of these children seemed depressed and unresponsive to initiatives for

interaction, as if resigned to affective deprivation."

As an adult, I remember seeing the first-ever photo of myself as a four-month old. It was given to me by my Catholic Charities caseworker. I recognized the vacant look in my infant eyes, same as the one described in all this research. Maybe I'd been classically conditioned, like Little Albert, to fear something. I had the vague notion that what I feared most was crying, both because once I started, I'd be unable to stop, but more so that no one would come to soothe me.

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Their “natural sphere.”
Courtesy of the author/Courtesy of Div. of Rare & Manuscript Collections, Cornell

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My adopted mother, in offering me advice about my two sons, told me to put them in the playpen because of how well I'd fared there. "You loved to play by yourself in your playpen," she said. "You'd sit there for hours playing with your little plastic beads."

My attempts to cage my boys, who were slightly feral, curious, and strong, failed miserably. When I put them both in the playpen outside so I could have 10 minutes to hang the laundry on the line, they crawled to one side together pulled themselves up to stand and shoved their little bodies against the sides to upend the entire playpen before crawling out.

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In the nineteenth century in New York, hospitals, homes, and almshouses began the practice of building "baby baskets" or "boxes" inside exterior doors into which a parent (usually an unwed mother) could place her infant. While not a new idea – "foundling wheels" have been around since Medieval times, when Pope Innocent III had them built in churches so women could leave unwanted children instead of drowning them in the Tiber. In nineteenth century New York, women, like Charlotte Sears, held the title of "baby finder" or "baby famer." Her job was to roam the city seeking out abandoned babes. But many babies weren't, in fact, abandoned.

Baby farmers collected infants of those single mothers who were working as domestic servants and wet nurses, breastfeeding the children of wealthy mothers,

in homes of other wealthy mother's children. Their own babies were unwelcome in those homes.

"If these working mothers were unable to keep up with the payments for their children's board, baby farmers sent them to the almshouse where they were placed with homeless women living there who may or may not have been able to breastfeed," wrote Julie Miller in her book *Abandoned: Foundlings in 19th Century New York*. "Most [babies] raised in the almshouse did not survive."

Babies in New York were abandoned in fields, on streets, and in parks. The practice was so prevalent that organizations taking in such infants began to name them by the streets, parks, and fields in which they were found. They were given names like James Secondstreet (1821) and William Bleecker (1838). Little Elizabeth Houston (1841) was found on the corner of Elizabeth and Houston); James Bowery (1860) in the Bowery, and Jane Broadway (1863) on Broadway. Babies found in City Hall Park, were given the last name Park, others took on the last name Alley for having been found abandoned in an alley.

Babies were also given names of fictional and real-life orphans – Oliver Twist, Phineas T. Barnum; or worse, by the simple fact they'd been abandoned: Henry Foundling, or William Unknown.

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Since 1999, when it was first enacted in Texas, each U.S. state now has what's called a Safe Haven Law, which allows parents to relinquish infants in a safe place,

such as a hospital, firehouse, or police station. The laws were intended to prevent what have been called “Dumpster Babies,” newborns abandoned in dumpsters by frightened people, usually women. The idea is that an infant won’t come to harm and the parent won’t suffer negative consequences.

In 2008, Nebraska expanded the law to include children up to nineteen years of age. One father, Gary Staton, abandoned nine of his 10 children who ranged in age from one to seventeen years. “He could no longer cope with the burden of raising them,” the article said.

His wife had died giving birth to their 10th child.

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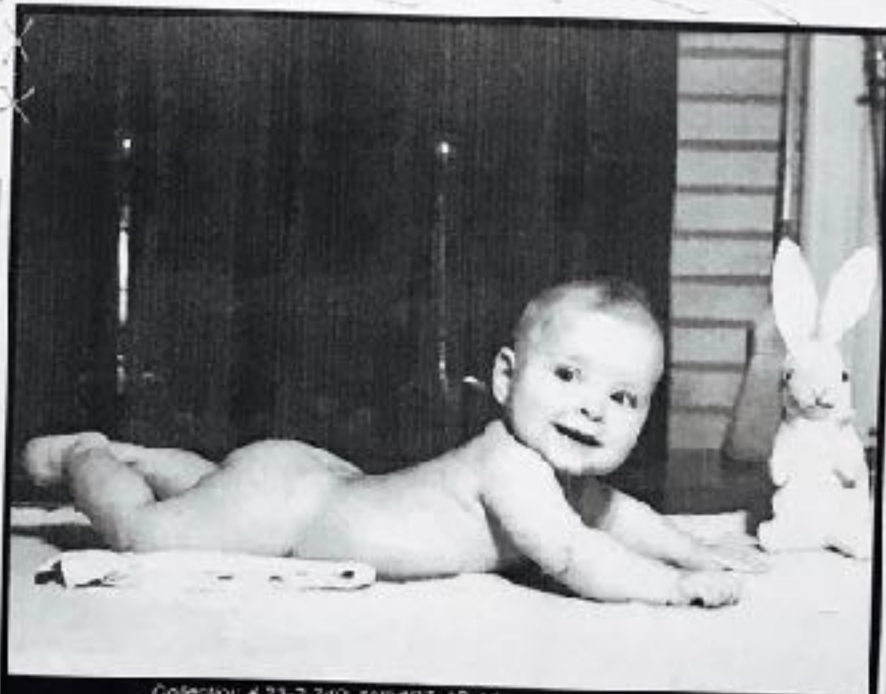
Image RT-AE-41
Year 1936
Topic Resident Teaching – Apartment Babies
Text Gladys – 7 ½ months – about May 1, 1936. Free from clothing to stretch and exercise.

LOVE



Gladys Free from Clothing
Courtesy of the author/Courtesy of Div. of Rare & Manuscript Collections, Cornell University

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When I began the search for my birth mother I had little information. I had a doctored birth certificate, the Internet was barely functional, and the path to 'finding' seemed a messy one fraught with complications. As an adoptee, I had to willingly open myself up to the idea of being abandoned again.

Abandonment seems a harsh word. Having met my birth mother I have no doubt she viewed giving me up as surrender. Surrendering a baby is, in itself, a form of surrender. I have no doubt she thought she was doing the right thing and she has admitted to likely not having been a good mother.

My birth name was Gabriella Herman. My adoptive name is Megan Gabriella Culhane. Like the Domecon Babies I was in a "home" that wasn't my home, with a "mother" who wasn't my mother. My identity was erased once and in order to possess my original birth certificate, I'd have to obtain a valid ID that showed who I was before I became who I am. My birth mother and I could literally walk into the Office of Vital Records in NYC; vouch for each other, as kin and I'd still be denied access to my original birth certificate.

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Since originally writing this essay the law in New York changed to give adoptees access to their original birth records. Children born in New York, as I was, can now request their "Pre-Adoption Birth Certificate." I filled out the forms and mailed in my $45 check to the Office of Vital Records just as the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

“Where you came from informs who you are, and every New Yorker deserves access to the same birth records—it’s a basic human right,” Governor Andrew Cuomo said. “For too many years, adoptees have been wrongly denied access to this information.”

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I was holding my grandson when he was about five months old. We were in the rocking chair at my son’s house and I held him until he fell asleep: his tiny mouth breathing hot on my neck and drooling. I hummed him the chorus of Suzanne Vega’s “Gypsy” while I rocked him. *Oh, hold me like a baby.*

It occurred to me then that he was the same age I’d been when my parents adopted me. I kissed the top of his head. I held him tighter.

I’d been looking through my baby book and had found a photo of me at that same age. I compared my photo and his. I felt I was looking at myself. I live for his smile now.

* I recently received an email from my birth mother who, although she has known for years about the book I was writing, now requested privacy. I have therefore changed her name. Her request makes me feel sad because it suggests yet another, possibly more enduring, form of erasure and abandonment.