



Source: Michael R. Gordon, 'GIs focus on survival and nurse doubts in Iraq', *New York Times* in *International Herald Tribune* online, 04/09/06.

Tags: [child/parent](#), [disease](#), [food](#), [streets](#)

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Ghastly creatures, adolescents. I'm not denying there was cruelty when I was a girl, but how can making someone cry at the bus stop compare with slashing her around the head with a Stanley knife (as reported in *The Times*)? I suppose my own brush with them was inevitable.

'Hey, psycho? How'd ya birth that? Out yer ass?' was how one greeted me as I crossed the Marylebone High Street, her friends giggling hysterically. Never mind disrespecting the elderly, imagine if I had been shocked into taking my eye off the traffic or, worse, Lucy's pram? Thankfully I have the fortitude to rise above. The experience did, however, deaden my enthusiasm for our weekly visit to Green's Booksellers. It may sound a trifle but if you knew this superior literary respite as I do...well, you'd understand. It is even worth braving the London Underground for! And it employs a generous staff who will watch over Lucy's pram—albeit from a confused distance—while I roam the aisles.

Following yesterday's incident I opted instead for a chocolat chaud at a boulangerie a few doors down. Unfortunately, things got worse. Soon after I was seated, a petite waitress approached. 'I'm sorry,' she said, 'I don't want to be rude but we've had complaints.' At which point she looked awkwardly above my head. A little boy at the table beside mine was staring—his face smeared with Nutella as though in some sort of defecation ritual. The waitress bumbled on, quite desperately I thought. 'Would you be so kind as to feed later?' If I had wanted to stand my ground I've no doubt she would have squelched off like a harassed slug. But I do have my pride.

Banished to the WC, Lucy and I enjoyed our exile as best we could, admiring the décor and questioning the wisdom of installing only one lavatory to serve all the boulangerie's patrons. On leaving the loo I studiously ignored the puckered mouths, crossed arms and tapping toes of the women with no breasts waiting to pee. Here's hoping their own experiences with childbirth take the floor out of certain muscles! I refuse to take responsibility for their bursting bladders.

Although I do empathise with their discomfort a little. Lucy IS incredibly ugly. Still, you love them 'as best you can,' as Mummy used to say, stretching an arm out of her cot to stroke my own little girl cheek as I lay in one hospital bed or another. But that's beside the point. One should never have to acquiesce to a moral judgment passed by the eyes of a stranger simply because the onlooker can't cope with their own embarrassment. Especially when one is attempting to enjoy a croissant.

It never used to be that way. People might titter or tut or whistle or stare, but they would never be so rude as to complain.

I left the boulangerie for Baker Street and the wretched

tube journey home. On a carriage with very few occupants, one young boy asked if he could hold Lucy before throwing her to another. They played catch for a minute, always glancing curiously at me in the hope of a reaction. I did nothing, of course, and when they disembarked at Green Park they left Lucy lying on the seat opposite mine—for me to collect I suppose.

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It is the first time in 52 years I have contemplated being without a dolly. It was Mummy's idea, originally. She bought the first when I was 12 to explain the implications of my surgery and, one supposes, as a sort of replacement. I promptly named it Lucy and took her wherever I went. If Lucy lost an eye or an arm or simply up and vanished, I would get a new one—year after year, well into adulthood. Mummy and I incorporated Lucy into our routine and took her everywhere with us—to the booksellers or the cinema or on holidays, pretending it was perfectly natural for two grown women to fuss over a doll as if it were a baby.

I knew it wasn't, of course, but being taken for a fool was an acceptable consequence of the charade that had developed into a necessity. After the last surgery, everyone stopped fussing over me. I may only have been a child but I knew I would never have anything more promising in the offing: illness had left me dependent and ugly, the hysterectomy ended any promise of marriage, I'd not had proper schooling. Then Daddy's plane was shot down, assuring Mummy and I would always live together, slowly chipping away at a family wealth that would become superfluous with my death. The perfect résumé for an eccentric old bird, I suppose.

Lucy saved me from becoming a soured, miserable soul waiting out my life, bitter and invisible. For Mummy, the delusion was preferable to a future with no more children in it. It gave us our own little world and I basked in the curious gaze of strangers who hushed as I passed. I enjoyed being greeted by local traders with the warmth reserved for a community's accepted imbecile. I would leave the house for no reason other than to invite such attentions, especially after Mummy slipped away.

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Now the train is pulling into St. John's Wood. Lucy is staring at me, prostrate on the opposite side of the carriage. In a moment the train will continue on its way to Stanmore.

I release the handle of her pram, stand up, adjust my skirt, observe the gap and get off.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Jessie Lilley.*