



Source: Christopher Bodeen, AP, 'Time waits for no man's family in Iraq's morgues', *The Age online*, 14/11/06.

Tags: [child/parent](#), [home](#), [husband/wife](#), [corporeality](#)

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It's 10.30pm, and you lie with your little girl, in her bed, her tiny pink bed covered in love hearts, and you are exhausted. Your little girl will not sleep, will not, and you lie here and shush, and she will not sleep.

Bed time is 8 o'clock. And you have bribed and cajoled, and shouted and threatened, but she will not sleep.

You didn't get to eat your dinner. You didn't get to read your book. You didn't because she will not.

She is three, and losing the soft curves of her body, as they evolve into the sharp curves of skinny girlhood. But still, as though she is still a baby, she wants you here, wants you to hold her. She loves your breasts, and she cups them in each hand as she tries to still her mind. In her near-sleep, so close, she tweaks your nipples, rolling them between her forefinger and thumb, as an insensitive lover may have once, and it hurts, but you do not cry out, for then the two of you would have to start again.

She would suck on your breasts, suck until sleep came, but recently you have put some limits on your body, weak and watery though those limits may be. You cannot let her feed from your body, because you fought so hard to take it back. You have given yourself over to carrying two children in your womb, carrying them later in your arms, feeding them, holding them. You struggle always for your breasts to be given back by your youngest, and so you are willing to put up with the tantrums and tears that accompany your denials of her love.br>

She has named your breasts, Dan-Dan and Tinkerbelle, and you tell friends at parties and you laugh at this sweetness, although you are a little scared by the intensity it carries.

You pat her bottom, an ancient ritual that parents begin when their babies are first born. The rhythmic patting feels to a baby just like a heart beat in the womb. They seem to take this memory long into their lives.

There is a moment, lying with a child, trying to force sleep over the room, of panic. A moment where you wonder if this child will ever sleep. Will you be stuck here for all time, swinging your arm like a pendulum, lying uncomfortably on an inch of bed? Will her eyes ever fully close? Will she ever make it to sleep? You cannot hope of sleeping with her, you still have much to do, some tidying, some organising, the making of a lunch for your older child. You need to get things done, so you cannot give yourself over to sleep until she does.

She closes her eyes, and you know that she is asleep, at last. You untangle yourself from her grip, gently, ever so gently. She wails, but she is only going through the motions, and she lets you go.

You make lunch for tomorrow, cutting through the flesh of a mango, because it is the only fruit your eldest will eat.

You spread the bread with Vegemite, then remember that it's Promite this one prefers, so you start again. Your husband tells you that you should come to bed, that all of it can wait until morning, but you need some time to walk the house, uncoil from the tightness of your child's bed.

You slip into your bed, and your husband is breathing. You try to remind yourself that it is just breathing, light and rhythmic, but with all this stuff in your head, with the smell of Promite and Mango on your fingers, with the thoughts of work and your best friend's divorce and what you'll wear to that party you've been invited to, and trying to find babysitters and the meeting with your eldest's teacher next week and your tax return, it is too much that you must listen to someone else breathe.

So you slip back out of bed. You kiss him on the head before you go to remind yourself how much you love him, which you do, despite the breathing. You lie downstairs on the couch, which tonight feels more uncomfortable than it usually does and you wonder why it's so difficult to sleep. You begin to resent the sleeping man and the sleeping children upstairs. You begin to feel that you lie, tethered to them, and you try to remember all the wonderful things they do, particularly your lovely husband, who cooks dinner and does the dishes and pours you a drink at the end of the day. But still, you are tired and you are restless and it seems that there is little that is left of you in all the holding and soothing and being there.

It is 4am. You have fallen asleep and you are dreaming of a coma, which is a dream you have often. You can smell in your dream the flowers people bring as they visit you in hospital and you listen to them talking at you, trying to wake you. But there is nothing you have to do but lie there—even a machine breathes for you. It is your best dream.

Your youngest wakes; cries out Mama. You hear her father go to her, but she screams at him that it is Mama that she wants. Poor man, you think, such a good man and so easily hurt. So you walk up the stairs, scoop her up, and you both go back into bed with him, and you start your shushing all over again.

'Mama, I love you.'

'Shhh. I love you too.'

She is always telling you that she loves you. She has none of the cool reserve your eldest has. This one holds you tight, clings to you. It is wonderful, the fierce love she has. But it feels that sometimes you have disappeared.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Sophie Townsend.*