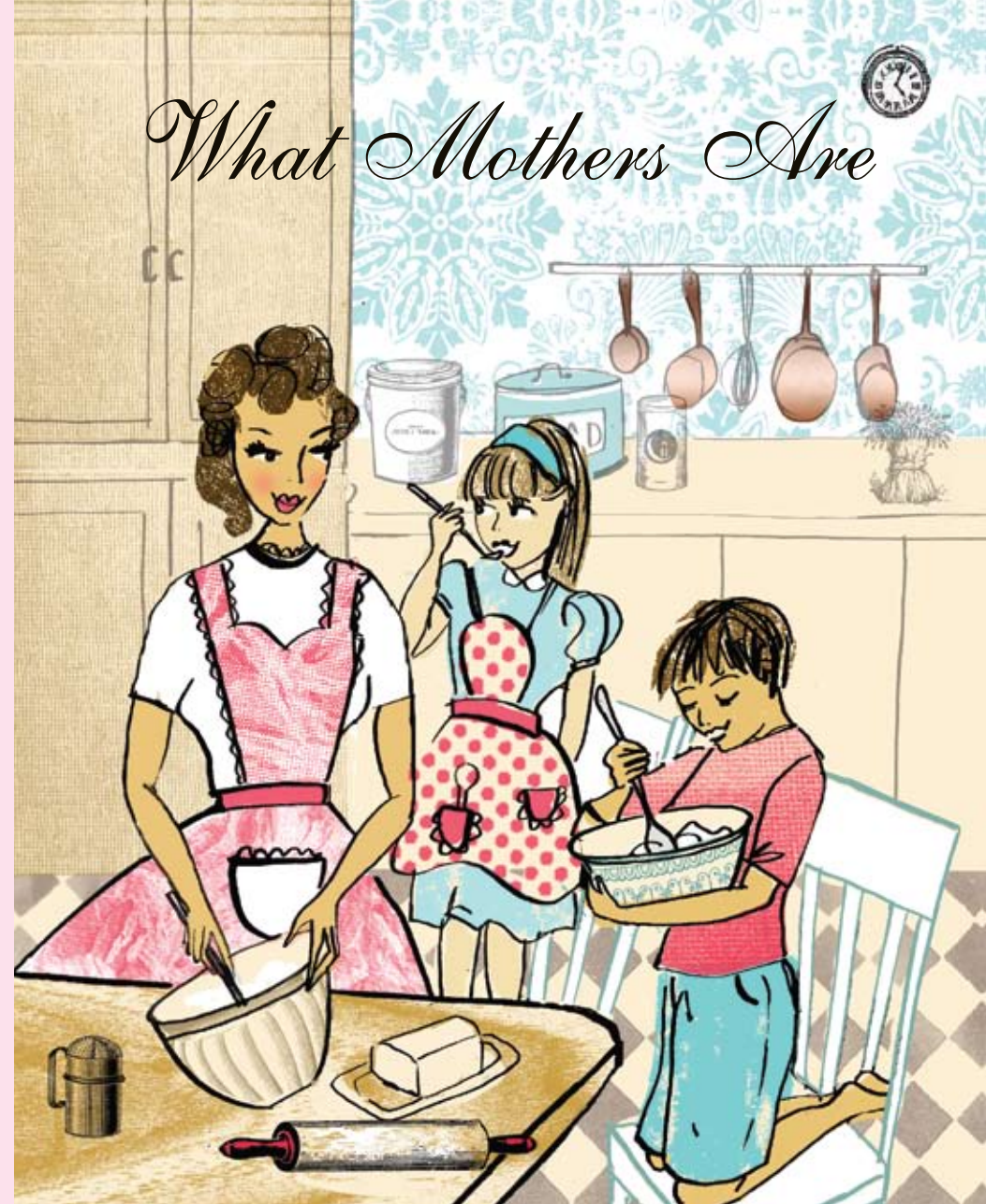


What Mothers Are



A Portuguese Fable

Once upon a time there lived a remarkable woman who was known as Mae.

She was so remarkable that everyone she worked for expected her to do everything they asked without the slightest hesitation or complaint. And she did.

She lived with a family. The father would call: 'Mae, more butter on my bread please.'

The little boy of the family would shout: 'Mae, Mae, I can't find my socks.' And she would rush to get him what he wanted.

The big sister would call: 'Mae, there's a button missing from my coat. Come and sew it on for me please or I'll be late for school.' And she would.

Without a complaint or a frown, Mae would do everything asked of her, whether it was helping the father to take tools to the field, cleaning the house, making the beds, dusting, mending or cooking.

However hard Mae worked, when the children came home from school she greeted them with a smile, prepared dinner and helped them with their homework.

Now, it may seem that everybody in this house expected a great deal from Mae, and even took advantage of her. And you would be right,

But it also happens that they all loved her very much.

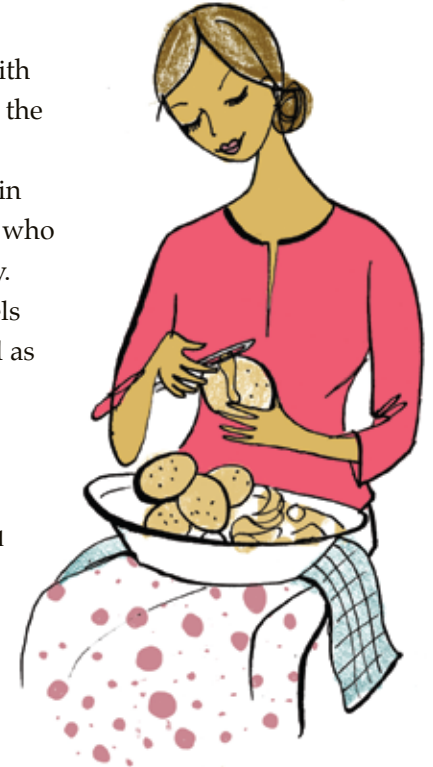
In fact, the family she lived with thought there was no one else in the world as wonderful as her.

But then almost every family in Portugal has a Mae of their own who looks after them in the same way.

And each of these families feels there is nobody else in the world as wonderful as their own Mae.

That's because Mae is the Portuguese word for 'Mother'.

Adapted from The Remarkable Woman, a folk tale from Portugal



The Walk of a Mother

I went for a walk with Alex, who was carrying her three-month-old girl Kirsten, well wrapped up against her bosom in a Snuggli. It was an icy day, and there were large patches of blue-white ice on the streets. Kirsten lay nestled against Alice, sleeping.

As we walked, Alex put forward a booted foot and suddenly started to slide. I watched helplessly as she pitched forward – the baby could have been crushed. Then I saw something that seemed to me to be a marvel at the time: of course now, as a mother, it is as obvious to me as breathing.

I understood then how the body really works when in danger, and the reflexes that kick in. I saw Alex somehow twist to pitch herself, with lightning speed, forward, face and hands down, on to the sheer face of the ice, throwing the most vulnerable parts of herself without hesitation full force against that rock-hard surface – in order to protect her child. And she landed hard, on face, knees and open palms, hurt but thankful the baby was safe.

The baby kept sleeping.

I was amazed at what Alex had done. She had not wasted

an instant trying to go down one micrometre more easily. There, on the ice, I saw a physical manifestation of faith. What amazed me even more, as she got shakily up again, was that she thought nothing of it.

That, I thought, was it: that was a mother. That was what it meant to be a mother, a true parent. To defy self-interest, to the level of your very bones, your very reflexes.

Naomi Wolf, *Misconceptions*

The True Test of a Mother's Love

One day two women came before King Solomon.

They were arguing over a baby, which they placed on the floor, at the foot of Solomon's throne.

'My Lord,' said the first woman, 'five days ago I gave birth to a child.

'This woman and I live in the same house, and three days later she also gave birth, but that same night she fell asleep and woke up to find she had smothered her baby.

'When she discovered this, she got up. Then while I was

sleeping, she put my child by her breast and put her dead son to my breast.

'When I woke up in the morning I thought at first that my son was dead, until I realized that he was not my child.'

'No,' interrupted the second woman. 'She is lying. The living child is mine and the dead one is hers!'

King Solomon raised his hand for silence.

'There is an easy way to resolve the matter,' he said. 'Bring me a sword. Cut the child in two, and give half to one mother, and half to the other.'

The first woman turned pale and fell on her knees in front of the king. 'My Lord,' she said in a faltering voice. 'Please, give her the child. I beg you, do not kill it! Please give it to her instead!'

But the other woman's face remained hard and unmoved.

'Let it be neither one nor the other's,' she said. 'Cut it in two as the king has ordained.'

Solomon stood up, and pointed to the first woman.

'Take your baby,' he said, smiling as he laid the infant in her arms. 'The child belongs to you. You are its mother.'

Word of the king's judgement spread throughout Israel, and the people marvelled at his wisdom.

Retold from the Old Testament

Blissfully Happy... and She Was Too

I was an only child, and overprotected. I never had a cat because a little neighbour had her eye put out by hers. I never was allowed a pair of roller skates because one of my mother's cousins fractured his skull on the edge of a pavement in Arles in 1911. But I had canaries and goldfish. When they died the fact would be hidden from me, and they would be replaced the same night by live ones, which were not always the same size or colour.

One summer in Le Pouliguen, on the Atlantic Coast, we became shrimp saviours. I had caught three shrimps and a little crab. That evening we put a pailful of sea water on the bedroom mantel in our *pension de famille*; and my mother settled down in bed with a book. She was not one of these ladies who put their children to bed and then go out