

“THE Q GENE”

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I suppose the moment of maximum political incorrectness came last Saturday at that commercial shrine to all that is right-thinking and green, the Nature Company, when my 4-year-old son, Gabriel, strafed the baby dolphins in the computer-generated video with his toy Uzi. A woman standing behind us pulled her own children away as the frolicking Flippers ate hot lead. I imagine that this woman was probably the sort of mother who had a bumper sticker like the one I had scraped off the back of my own car when Gabriel was 18 months old: "Don't Encourage Violence. Don't Buy War Toys." I imagine that she was the sort of mother who had successfully banned all implements of destruction from her house. You know the sort of mother I mean. The mother of daughters. Or the mother of a son who obsesses about Thomas the Tank Engine rather than battle-axes, nunchuks, hand grenades and catapults.

My boy, however, came hard-wired for weaponry. His first twosyllable word, right after momma, dadma and backhoe, was scabbard. Scabbard at 18 months? Why did I ever bother resisting? Why? Because in college, in the sixties, I started Damsels in Dissent, which counseled draft candidates to eat balls of tinfoil and put laundry soap in their armpits to fool induction center doctors. Because I believed| that wars were a manifestation of testosterone run amok, much like the; purchase of bad toupees and red Miata convertibles. Because I believed| that white sugar, commercial television and guns were afflictions of a sick society and that any child could be immunized against them if only he had' the right mother to pass along her more highly evolved antibodies. Parents do not, indeed, live by bread alone. We feast daily on banquets of our own words. My child has never seen an adult touch another adult in anger; he has never been spanked; he has never even watched a Ninja Turtle cartoon—yet he is as bloodthirsty as Quentin Tarantino.

In his toy bin are half a dozen Ninja Silent Warrior Assassin Swords, two scimitars, three buccaneer blades, two six-shooters, four Laser Fazer stun guns, a Captain Hook flintlock, the aforementioned Uzi and a silo full of items he manufactures himself. This inventory is by no means complete. I have lost friends over this arsenal. They cannot allow their children to be exposed to such untrammelled barbarism. Friends? I have lost an entire self-image and my deep Jeffersonian faith in the infinite perfectibility of man.

I resisted at first, certain that if only I stayed the course I would end up with a gentle little boy who named his stuffed animals and found Beatrix Potter a bit brutish. And I was holding the line rather well, too, until he started sleeping with a shoe. Though never one to question too closely anything that encourages slumber, I did finally ask, why a shoe? He answered, clutching the tip of the shoelace, "So that when the bad things come in my dreams I can shoot them away." ". . . when the bad things come in my dreams." Zen monks could contemplate their koans for years and not come close to the transformation I experienced when my child aimed his shoelace at me. Children are small and weak. The world is big and scary. Gabriel's need to feel safe so outweighed my own need to feel morally correct that the contest ended. From that night, we began building the armory until we achieved the overwhelming first-strike capability we have today.

I know what drives this war machine. It's a discovery of my own that I call the Q gene. The Q gene is that chromosomal imperative that compels little boys to pick up sticks and hair dryers; to chew their organically grown, whole grain sandwiches into the shape of guns; to use whatever they can lay their murderous hands on, take aim and commence firing: "Kyew. Kyew. Kyew." The Q gene.

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And here is my awful confession. I passed the Q gene on to my son. As in male pattern baldness, I displayed none of the symptoms myself but carried it from both of my parents. My father an Air Force officer, my mother an Army nurse—I am the daughter of two warriors. I reflect on this heritage as my son stands beside a helicopter at nearby Camp Mabry. We have already examined the tanks and fighterjets parked on either side. Compared relative firepower. Discussed how each would fare in a battle with Tyrannosaurus rex. But my son pats the shark's grin painted on the helicopter and announces: "This is the one, Mom. This one is the best."

Watching him calls to mind a photograph of my father taken in the late fifties. He stands before a plane with a shark's smile painted on it, just beneath the inscription: 6091st Reconnaissance Squadron. My family lived in Japan then, conquerors grinning into the last minutes of a doomed colonialism. The crew with my father have their arms thrown around each other's shoulders, as heedless and glamorous as movie stars, frat boys, R.A.F. pilots, any gang of young men who know they will never grow old, never die. Thirty years were to pass before I learned what it was my father did when he left us for weeks at a time. He and his smiling buddies would fly their "birds" over Russia and wait to be chased back into American air space to test Soviet response time. That was when I understood why my mother, alone with six children, would burst into tears whenever an officer in uniform came to our front door. I watch my son stroke the shark's grin and I want to whisper to him: "It is evil. All these machines are evil. You must never think about them again." But it can never be that simple.

I hear myself sometimes, times like this one right now. I see myself the way the mother shielding her children from the sight of my son opening up on the baby dolphins must have seen me, and I feel like a shill for the N.R.A. My position is indefensible, illogical, inconsistent. But love makes intellectual pretzels of us all. It's just that I know, long before I would like, there will come a moment when I can do nothing to chase away the bad things in my son's dreams. Until then, if I can give him a shoelace's worth of security I guess I will.

O.K., so I caved in on the white sugar, the TV, the war toys. There is, however, one moral issue that I have not wavered, have not wobbled, have not waffled on. I swore before my child was born that I would never buy a certain particularly insidious toy, and I am happy to report that I have held that line. There has never been, nor will ever be, a Barbie doll in my house.