

A time for babies

CHARLES PINNING

In the house on the other side of our high fence along the side yard lives a little family. I do not know their names, but we wave and say hi when we pass each other.

They have a baby who is, at most, six months old. They moved in only a couple of months before the child was born and live in the first-floor apartment. It appears to be a happy baby. I know it is well-loved because I watch the father, skinny and with dark hair pulled back in a short ponytail, walk back and forth in the parking area clutching his child to his chest, stopping to sway gently back and forth. The mother is not very tall and looked as if she was storing a beach ball beneath her sweater when she was pregnant. Neither one of them can be 30 yet.

Today the mother is sitting on the back steps of the house. Cradling the baby straight out in front of her she throws her head down, her face on the baby's stomach and chest, eating her child alive with yum-yum-yum sounds. She does it again. And again.

There is nothing like the smell of a baby, the clean smell of a baby's head. I loved taking care of my brother, David, when he was a baby. I was eight and would push him around the neighborhood in his carriage with the other mothers. I would squeeze him and nibble on his fat little cheeks.

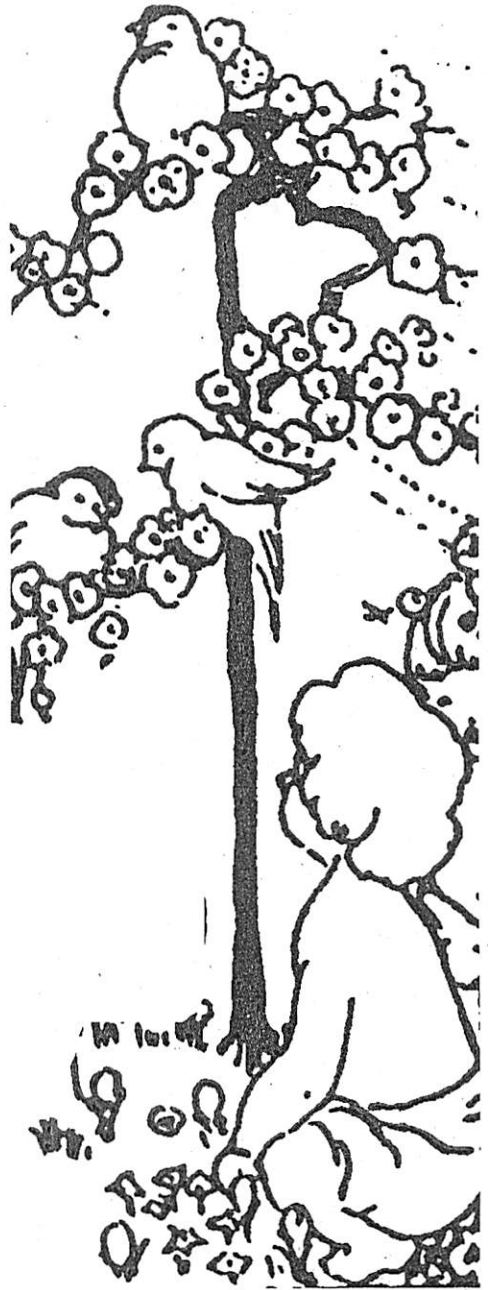
My mother always said that the best time to have a baby was in the spring. That way you weren't stuck inside all the time, but could take the baby outside. All winter, the father has had a Jeep Wrangler for sale, but no takers. The lack of snow this winter did not work in his favor in trying to sell a Jeep.

He has a gentle and attentive way about him that is very likeable. I have the feeling he is going to be a good father. I've never heard him arguing with the baby's mother. That's a good start.

Already, with the mild winter and sudden warmth, our garden in Providence shows many signs of life. The purple crocuses are up and the daffodils have pushed up. Soon the sleeping hyacinth, blue and white, will awaken. I will get low to the ground to appreciate their dense perfume. The purple tails of the buddleia will dangle and bloom and the delicate suckle-scented blossoms of the mimosa tree will emerge, their feather-fine pink and white punk babyhair floating on the lacy green leaves of the slender bobbing branches.

The stone frog is still there in the garden where we put it, and the bricks we hauled heavily from one place and another still create the snaking border. The red rhododendron will come out at the far corner as it does every year. The juniper, only three feet high when we planted it, is almost 30 feet now. And the Japanese dwarf maple in front of it is as big as a golf umbrella; its delicate jade-colored leaves turn such a startling red in the fall. And there's the white hibiscus flower whose scent can only be described as clean. It grows so slowly in this climate, adding only one new blossom each year and always a surprise when it first blooms.

The long red tongue of the *Crocosmia Lu-*



cifer still wags. And, of course, there's the border of edible violets, Rhode Island's official flower. They all come back, including the big purple lilies that smell like purple grapes.

The world, of course, is a mess with Providence (to its residents) seemingly leading the way. But a baby doesn't care about unfunded pension liabilities or towns and cities going bankrupt, or how much nonprofits should contribute in lieu of property taxes. A baby's little fingers need to feel thick grass; wide eyes need to see bees and butterflies. They need to be able to reach out to squeeze the dense fur of a friendly cat and watch a daisy waggle.

I decided, and I am sure you would think it a good idea, to put a gate in the fence separating our yard from the house next door. I have opened the gate and invited that little family to come in and enjoy the yard and garden anytime they want. Young parents should have a tranquil place where they can sit on the ground in the sunshine near flowers with their baby. It is good for them and the baby. And, selfishly, it's good for me to watch them.

Charles Pinning is a Providence-based writer.