

MEETING MY FUTURES

by Blake Hurst

Conservatives like free markets. I know I do. Mostly. But in all my time spent with Adam Smith, Milton Friedman, and Joseph Schumpeter, nobody mentioned how hard free markets can be on a marriage.

My Southern Baptist upbringing and the social constraints that come from being related to at least half of the people I see in a month's time have always protected me from most of the temptations that contribute to today's divorce rate. But then came my decision to take a "short" position in corn futures (betting that the price would go down) during the most explosive bull market in a generation. That could strain even the strongest union.

I exaggerate somewhat. My wife of 20 years never once questioned my marketing plan, and she showed almost saintly patience as the margin calls asking for money (as corn prices went up) came each and every day. The only open signs of spousal displeasure have been the rather pointed comments about the rattles in our car, which has 148,786 miles on the odometer. I'm sure that someone who spent last year on the *right* side of the corn market is driving my new Chevy Suburban, and I wish him a series of transmission and engine failures.

My plan was sound. The price of corn, the primary crop on our farm, was twice what it had been the summer before. So I sold not only this year's crop on the Board of Trade, but next year's crop as well. Unfortunately, I wasn't the only person who had figured out that corn was liable to be cheaper in the years to

come, and when it came time to "roll my hedges," I had already been rolled.

I didn't go down alone. Article after article in the farm press recommended plans just like mine, and trading losses across the farm belt have totaled as much as \$1 billion. At least one farmer committed suicide, and the *Wall Street Journal* carried an article about the devastating effect these losses have had on small communities across Iowa.

It has been no consolation that my overall bet on the direction of the market was correct. Corn dropped from \$5.50 in the summer of 1996 to \$2.50 today. I simply placed my hedges too early and didn't have the fortitude to hold them long enough.

There is a cautionary tale here. I have been a cheerleader for the end of farm subsidies. And I'm still convinced that, in the long run, agriculture is better off on her own. But now that farmers can no longer share their risks with the taxpayer, the trip down the learning curve is likely to be a bumpy ride. Think-tank

farmers find it easy to recommend the use of the commodity markets, which are nothing more than a mechanism for transferring risk, to replace the security blanket that was the government program. But from a combine seat here in Westboro, it is more difficult than it seems from a word processor along the Potomac.

This story does have a happy ending. When I closed out the last of my hedges, I priced around half of my 1996 crop with a local elevator. The price today is more than a dollar lower than it was the day I made that sale. So, although I'm not in the market for a new

Suburban, I may be able to swing a slightly used one, and save my marriage. And, although the normal reaction of farmers in trouble is a call for government assistance, those caught in this year's futures debacle have shown remarkable forbearance. Instead of returning to the bad old days by asking Uncle Sam to socialize the risk involved in farming, they're acting like any other American capitalist.

They're suing everybody in sight.

Blake Hurst writes regularly from Missouri.

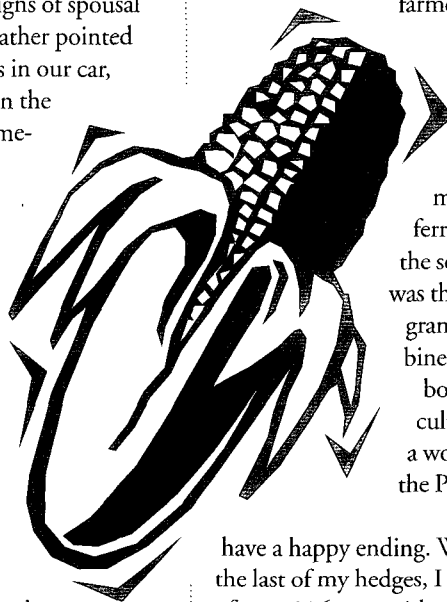
IT TAKES A BODYGUARD

by Mary Eberstadt

Why is it that one enduring stereotype of the stay-at-home mother is that of a frantic, frustrated, bug-eyed halfwit? I know why. Let me introduce my three-year-old daughter Isabel.

Isabel is of course adorable—lovely and bright, healthy and sunny, a third child and therefore, at least in theory, a beneficiary of parental experience. She is also, let us understate at the outset, somewhat active. This is not just my own opinion, but one shared by her father, her brother and sister, her babysitter, the attendants in at least two local emergency rooms, and anyone who has ever seen her on a playground. Some time ago, as the realization began to dawn that our charming elf had metamorphosed into a human hurricane, I kept a partial log of her doings in a single month. I report that record now as an ironic counterpoint to the earnest national debate over who is responsible for rearing "our" children.

The month of June opened with Isabel running headlong into a swing occupied by an older child in full throttle; she was knocked out cold. The next day (fully recovered) she saw steam rising up from a pot of



stew, jumped for it, and burned her cheek. The day after that we had a barbecue, during which Isabel, in less than one minute, squirted a full bottle of dishwashing liquid all over the kitchen floor, poured the remains of someone's beer on top of that, and mopped up the mess with my favorite hat.

Somewhere during those same weeks, she also: took off all her clothes at the local playground and acted on the call of nature. Did the same at a family picnic. Chewed two lipsticks and tried to eat face cream. Flushed a diaper down the toilet late one night and caused a flood on the second floor. Jammed a six-inch plastic spider with retractable legs up into the same appliance, a feat we only ascertained one plumber and \$72 later. Have I mentioned that she also likes glass? Tally for the last week of June alone: one broken crystal goblet and one broken bowl. Of course she breaks eyeglasses too: two pairs of mine, two of her father's, and one of our babysitter's. But that record, to be fair, covers six months.

I recite all this not to explain why life with Isabel has produced more than the usual share of unreturned phone calls, unwritten reviews, or bad housekeeping, but to illustrate the plain truth that there is nothing more hazardous to peace of mind than being the parent of a young child. Look again at the adventures of Isabel and see how easily the outcome of any one of them could have been catastrophic. Vigilance over a creature like this must be non-stop. Even when physical safety is guaranteed, the business of civilizing the savage beast is a dawn-to-dusk conflagration of the wills.

Lots of us, especially those of us who are parents, would just as soon avoid these uncomfortable facts. This desire, natural in itself, has come to be writ large among affluent, self-conscious well-educated parents in particular. As a result, we are in the grip of a kind of a cultural denial about what children really are and how much they really require from their parents.

What forms does this cultural denial take? One is the idea that the kids are better off without us. Almost every public and private school in our vicinity now has extended care hours. For extra money, you can leave your child at many schools be-

tween 7 A.M. and 6:30 P.M.—in other words, for almost all his waking hours during the week. In addition, we hear frequent calls from educators to lengthen and curtail the summer vacation. Then there is the continuing pressure to sweep more and more children into "socialization" at ever-younger ages. A few months ago, the Carnegie Corporation advocated universal preschool for children beginning at age three—a call echoed by Hillary Clinton, who writes approvingly in her book *It Takes A Village* that "even before they reach the age of three, many [French children] are in full-day programs."

This same message also resounds through the expert literature on childrearing, where a preoccupation with adult freedom and convenience throbs just beneath the surface. Every time a study raises questions about the effects of day care on the very young, experts leap to argue day care's benefits, including the bonus that it is better for mothers not to be "stuck" at home. So day care is good, and full-time preschool even better. The long structured hours this forces on very young children are said to be enriching and useful in equipping them for everything from college to global competitiveness.

Enter Hillary Clinton's village. Are you worrying over whether to take that full-time job and leave the baby for much of the day? Take heart; it is "the village," rather than the torn individual, that "has a long way to go to accommodate diverse and changing roles both in the working world and at home," she writes. Are you considering divorce, and concerned about what it will do to the kids? Don't be frightened; "It is incumbent on the village—friends, teachers, mediators, counselors, and ministers, among others—to advocate for children during and after divorce."

There are critics who argue that the appeal of this message springs from parental selfishness and out-of-control materialism. It is an argument with some

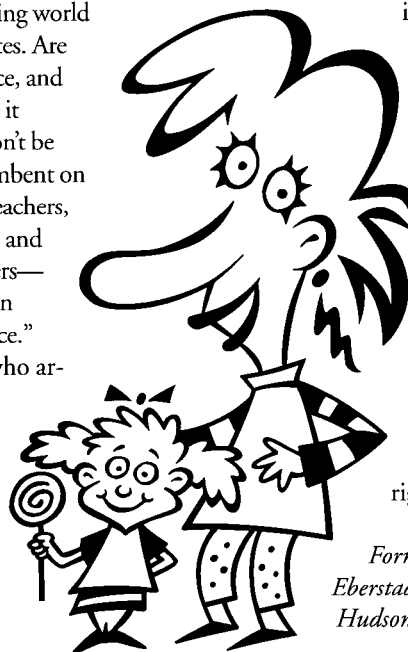
truth on its side. Certainly, it resonates with many who look around affluent neighborhoods today and see children who have just about everything, yet hardly ever see their parents at all.

But there is another reason we mortal parents wish to believe in the sufficiency of those other caregivers, those village people. For we mothers and fathers often wish to escape the terrifying job of being responsible for someone else day in, day out, for 18 or so years. We would like to believe that babies and toddlers are not abjectly helpless and demanding creatures. We hope that sensitivity training and "community service" can somehow compensate for our own failures of moral example. We desperately want to believe that nothing terrible will happen if we take our eyes off that four-year-old in the tree, or that 16-year-old during his first driving lesson. We have to think that if bad things do happen, there will always be someone else, somewhere else, who can fix, or at least be held responsible for, the result.

But resist it though we may, most of us there on the front lines know the rotten truth. Nobody else is going to walk the floors with your screaming baby at 2 A.M. Not a single one of those "friends, teachers, mediators, counselors, and ministers" that Hillary Clinton commends to you will be sitting awake in your bed the first night your teenager goes to a party. All our strenuous attempts to believe that there is such a thing as childrearing "expertise" are in the end just so much wishful thinking.

The tired old fact of the matter is that sometimes childrearing doesn't even take a brain. Much of the time, maybe even most of the time, it takes nothing more than a warm body in the right place at the right time—so long as it happens to be the right body. Or, depending on your child, the right bodyguard.

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EYEWITNESS TO CHEMICAL WAR IN THE GULF

by Brooks Tucker

The title of the article in the Sunday paper caught my eye: "Pentagon Says Troops Were Exposed to Chemicals in Gulf War." I smiled. The Defense Department was confirming what thousands of us Gulf War veterans have surmised for some time. As I read the article, I recalled a moment from February 1991 that is still very vivid in my mind.

Six months earlier, we Marines of the Sixth Regiment's First Battalion had been helicoptered into Saudi Arabia. Since then, we'd moved gradually north, on foot or in armored personnel carriers. During the day, we lived in a barren desert landscape under skies darkened by oily clouds of smoke. At night, our sentries watched over a horizon glowing from hundreds of petroleum fires. We trained for battle throughout the scorching summer days when the mercury reached 125 degrees, and we continued to drill in winter's frosty nights. It was late February now, two months since we'd enjoyed our last shower or tasted a cooked meal.

Tomorrow, we would rise at 3 A.M. from our shallow holes in the coarse Arabian sand and clamber aboard our assault vehicles. Then, platoon by platoon, we would grind our way across the final kilometers of open desert towards the Iraqi minefields. We expected they would shell us with chemical artillery once we were in the "no man's land" between the first and second belt of mines; so we wriggled into our thick, charcoal-lined chemical protective suits. My platoon milled about in the dark, whispering nervously. A few stood silent around a tiny radio, straining to hear the BBC World Service report that the last-ditch peace talks had failed.

I roused my squad leaders and climbed into the commander's hatch of our assault vehicle. The men crammed into the troop compartment behind me. The rear ramp whined as it closed shut, sealing them in a claustrophobic metal coffin bathed in pale red light. A cold rain had begun to fall, and it tapped on my Kevlar helmet. In my earphones the company commanders reported they were "Oscar Mike"—on the move. Along the

western horizon, white streaks of flame whooshed upward from rocket launchers, and flashes of fire signaled the opening barrages of artillery. Hundreds of yards ahead, the combat engineers were positioning themselves at the edge of the first mine belt. They were preparing the explosive charges that would breach 12-foot-wide lanes through which we could pass. In a series of deafening explosions, they sent geysers of smoke and sand spewing into the air, and our vehicles began to creep forward.

Then I noticed the ground erupt in thin plumes of smoke a few hundred meters away. "Snowstorm, snowstorm!" said an emphatic voice over the battalion frequency. Incoming enemy artillery. More shells hit the soft sand to our front and flanks. I heard the distinctive sound of a round passing overhead, as if it were ripping the air apart like a cloth. The ground shook and our vehicle trembled. I felt my lungs deflate as the over-pressure sucked out oxygen. Another call over the radio, this one more urgent. It was from a company commander.

"Lightning, this is Nightstalker. Our lead vehicle hit a chemical mine and is disabled. Lane Red One is blocked. We are dismounting and moving the company forward on foot." Then, seconds later, another message, this one from our Fox chemical detection vehicle. "FLASH-FLASH-FLASH! Fox vehicle has detected possible nerve and blister agent in vicinity of Lane Red One."

The men in my troop compartment reflexively donned their gas masks in a matter of seconds. My stomach tightened as I listened to the frantic and distorted voices on the radio. The battalion commander calmly passed his guidance on to the commander who was now moving his company forward on foot.

I yelled to the men to relax and unmask. The threat was not yet imminent. There was no need to worry them any more than necessary. Our vehicle rocked forward slightly as another shell exploded a few meters behind us. The lane ahead was jammed with vehicles. I leaned out of the hatch to alert my driver and pointed to an anti-tank mine protruding from the edge of the lane, just a few inches from the vehicle's steel tread.

THE MEN IN MY TROOP COMPARTMENT DONNED THEIR GAS MASKS IN A MATTER OF SECONDS.

By now, the engineers had cleared lanes through the second belt of mines. Our traffic jam subsided and we began to make some headway. Overhead, a pair of Cobra attack helicopters circled a nearby bunker complex like hawks searching for prey. Their chain guns whined like buzz saws as they spewed bullets into the subterranean fortifications. Disheveled men waving dirty rags emerged from bunker after bunker, knelt in the soft sand, and raised their hands in surrender.

The following morning, the chemical alert posture was downgraded, and we were ordered to bury our chemical suits before pressing further north toward Kuwait City. I learned later from a fellow officer who was in the company that went in on foot that the chemical detection and monitor team had taken samples from the contaminated area and verified that the chemical was a nerve agent. The battalion and regimental combat logs contain records of the minefield incident and mention two other incidents when chemical alarms were sounded on the battlefield that day in February.

I suppose the reason the Defense Department and the Central Intelligence Agency continue to deny that Iraqis used chemicals directly against U.S. forces is because any evidence to the contrary would compromise our longstanding national strategy of deterrence: We had threatened the Iraqis with nuclear retaliation if they used chemical weapons. But there is no doubt in my mind that our battalion encountered low levels of chemical agents during our three-day race to the outskirts of Kuwait City. And the government's persistent inability to disclose the details of these incidents leaves a bitter taste in my mouth.

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