

# BRAIN, CHILD

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*the magazine for thinking mothers*

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## What To Do

By [CNE](#)

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By Debi Lewis

Cry, a lot, alone in your car, at intersections, without noticing the teenagers and old people and truck drivers around you, or the people at the corner stomping their feet in the cold and blowing on their hands. With the radio murmuring about wars and genocides and snow plows and someone's book, someone's article, someone's question, you can heave your mother-strong shoulders together toward the steering wheel, clench your jaw and release it, clench and release, open it wide and howl, then when the light turns green, shudder and put your foot on the pedal and go, leaving it back there.

Or cry at your kitchen counter, silently, just a tear or two running down onto your collar, listening to your daughter laughing, and feeling fully and painfully how beautiful it is to give her the gift of not knowing. Wipe the tear from your finger on your pants, stare at the pot with oil sizzling around onions, and don't see it anymore. The pot is sucked into a hole in the world. The onion smell lingers, but you can't feed your family a smell. Come back to the world in time for a dinner across from her.

You can cry with other people watching, but not too much. Let some tears bubble out of you until they become like the flu and spread across the table, and then you must stop. Yours plus theirs are more than the sum of each set, and the table can't contain them all, the roof will blow off the building, the other people will fly away, pulled into the typhoon of tears you can't control. Pull yourself together. Get into the car. Get to an intersection.

You can always just run away, not really, but a little. There's an adult way to rock in the corner with your thumb in your mouth, and so you can do it in furious motion, anywhere you like. In the shower, raging. You can imagine the wreckage of muscle, of flesh, of reaching tendons and joints bent. You can make it so your heart is visible, naked, pounding under your skin. Look at me, it says, I might just break.

What you can't do is look at your daughter's skin, the skin of the place they'll cut. You can't look there at all, you mustn't, you'll wrap it in fleece and cashmere and angora and mink, if you have to, you'll cement bricks around it before you'll look. You are, however, allowed to touch it, with your lips, in the dark or with your eyes closed. It feels like any other skin on her, soft and young and warm, smooth and brushed with the faintest scent of you, somewhere, deep, from when she was in you. Linger there, on her skin, just the right amount of time to memorize it, not so long that she'll wonder why it's interesting.

You can look around you and plan, gently, for what to delete from your life after. You can imagine the holes: furniture, books, clothes you could never wear again, games you could never play, places you could never go. You can picture the spaces that would emerge, the new set of choices, the caverns in your day to fill with something else.

Actually, no, you can't.

You can list a thousand horrible things said to you and by you, you can fill up with bitter and sour, you can hurl your buckets of boiling oil at the telemarketer, the bus driver, the barista. You can dump trays of badly made food in the garbage, scrub ugly stains from the floor, throw the trash bag in the dumpster harder than you need to. You can weigh your fantasy of breaking dishes in an alley against your terror that waste is waste is waste is points against you, somewhere, from someone keeping score, someone you don't believe is real, but just in case.

At night, while someone is sleeping next to you, you can press your hands into your chest and feel your heart push against your little finger. You can breathe into that pushing, mouth as loose as possible. You mustn't scream, even if the dream turned out to be not a dream, but something real that's going to happen. You mustn't run to her room, mustn't wake her and take her away somewhere, mustn't steal her. She isn't yours.

You can lie there in the dark and list the things that are real about her: the baby sounds, the feel of her head under your palm, the smell of her sweat, the songs she sings, the way she pulls a blanket to her chin on the couch. You can shoot your love straight up through the floorboards to her bed, you can jam it hard through anything until it fills her while she sleeps.

The stakes are high. You may never have thought about that phrase much before, but now, you can ponder it, sipping at the edges of the words like a bitter drink you're supposed to be old enough to enjoy. You can picture the stakes, hammered in high above your head, holding your arms up as if there was a gun pointed at you, redundant because the stakes themselves might just kill you

anyway. Those high stakes trap you so you can't pry them out. Every word you say is designed to detract attention from what's left you dangling, childish—or like a puppet—high in the air.

Some days, you can wait as patient as a moon, you can watch the slow flow of days pool under and around you, you can wax and wane anxious, calm, melted, spreading, colder, frozen. Several cycles of this will reveal the pattern, and so you can start watching for the next phase, planning appointments around the coldest spots, where your face can freeze into whatever shape you set. Your books never told you about this, and you can get angry about it here and there. Someday, you might be able to crack those bindings again and see, yes, this is just a heat rash, this is a cold virus, these are growing pains. Someday, you might not. There is no someday. You are now trapped in a Mobius strip of time overlapping on itself: there is just this moment, and there are also all the moments you must plan. There are also rules for what you should or should not plan, and people who want to help and need instructions you can't possibly write. This is how it has always been, even if you didn't know it, and this is how it always will be, as time folds back on itself now and again later, simultaneously.

You can do whatever the fuck you want. Except that. And no one will tell you what that is.

In the end, your only real plan can be to stand on the edge of your love for her, staring out at the waves coming in, and look up at the sun. The waves will hit. The sun will be warm—sometimes warm enough, sometimes not. Stand right there. Your orders are clear.

*Debi Lewis is currently at work on a memoir about her family's experiences throughout her daughter's journey to health. Their story is underway at [www.swallowmysunshine.com](http://www.swallowmysunshine.com).*