

You Otter Be a Mother

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When I was a mother, and the demands of the children threatened to tear my sanity into pieces, I would go sit out on the pier and watch a pair of otters splash and roll along the surface of the muddy-green river. After a short time, I came to be very good friends with Madame Otter, in particular. Her male counterpart was frequently off gallivanting in forbidden waters, looking for other forms of amusement, which always made Madame Otter quite sad.

"If only I had children," Madame Otter said to me once as she tenderly nipped at a scrap of fish flesh in one of her furry paws.

"Why don't you have children then?" Having children had always come easily enough for me, whether I had actually intended for them or not. It never occurred to me that this may be a rude question until I saw the look in Madame Otter's wet, black eyes.

"If only I could," she sighed and pensively spit out a clump of scales from between her tiny, sharp teeth. "You humans are lucky. You have all manners of doctors and medicines to fix things when a baby does not come. Otters don't have such luxuries. All we can do is speculate and blame and watch as our Misters swim away and do God-knows-what with those whore beavers upstream."

"Yes, that does sound unfortunate," I said. I didn't dare tell her that human husbands are not much more attentive and, generally, spend their time in dusty offices or at business lunches and see their children, primarily, in framed pictures on a desk or in worn-edged photographs stuffed into wallets. I did not imagine such revelations would be of much comfort to her. And then, in the midst of my epiphanies concerning otter and human husbands, in a flash of brilliance so rare to my sleep-deprived mind, a delicious idea occurred to me.

"It is really too bad that you and Mister can't seem to have children of your own," I carefully began, "and here I am with far too many for me to handle. Actually, I'm beginning to think that I should have never had any children at all. I am horribly unequipped to be a mother. I can faintly hear the baby screaming from her highchair in the house, and I still don't feel roused to save her. And there, if you look in the window, you can see my little

boy has tied his bed sheet to the ceiling fan in his room and is attempting to fling himself around the room. Even worse, my oldest daughter is likely texting on her cellphone and planning to sneak out tonight to meet her boyfriend, and I will not have the energy to stay up late enough to catch her. I really am a terrible mother. I don't possess even a quarter ounce of maternal instinct."

"I see. Surely you can't be that bad. They are alive, and they look well-fed, anyway," said Madame Otter as she strained her neck toward the deepest part of the river, "There, there. I think I just saw a fish jump." She dared not meet my eyes, and I could tell that she was desperate to escape the conversation, though she was far too polite to admit it. My honesty was clearly making her uncomfortable, and we both knew that I would see her judgment of me if we made eye contact.

"I didn't see it," I admitted, "but anyway, I have a tremendously good idea! I no longer want my children, and you want children dreadfully!"

"Yes, that is clear," clipped Madame Otter.

"Don't you see? You can have mine! It is the perfect solution! I can be free again, and my children will have the benefit of a mother that wants them with all her heart! You cannot imagine how heartbreaking it must be for them to have a mother that yearns to escape them. Oh, sure, there are good times," I realized I was in danger of talking her out of it if I explained my entrapment with too much detail, "and I am sure there would be many, many more if they had a mother that loved to fill every second with them! I am an awful mother, and my husband, frankly, I don't feel he wants them any more than I do. Whereas, your husband wants children so badly that he fills his moments with distraction! Oh, it would be so perfect for all involved! Think of how happy we all will be to have what we want!"

Madame Otter was looking at me with her mouth hanging open so that I could see the sharp points of her little teeth and her rough, pink tongue. It took her a moment to collect herself and respond, "But won't the children miss you? You are their mother, after all, and children always love their mother...no matter what kind of person she is."

"Oh, I am sure there will be an adjustment," I admitted, "But once they see how wonderful their lives are to have a mother like you, they will soon forget me. Besides, you are my dearest friend, and I would not stop visiting you for all the world! I am sure I will see them when I come out on the pier. I will be like a dear auntie to them."

Despite her protestations, Madame Otter's face was curving into a little, furry smile, and I could see various, beloved scenarios playing out

beyond her black eyes. "Why, I don't see the harm in it," she said after a moment, each word picking up speed as she spoke, "And oh, I can't imagine how happy it would make Bernard to finally have the children he's wanted for so long! It would save our marriage! Oh, goodness! I do believe this is the perfect solution for all!"

"I really must agree," I said, "I can't believe how well this is turning out for all of us. It is so rare that life falls into place with such easy solutions to our problems! We simply cannot overlook this. It would be like spitting in the face of happiness."

"Yes, it would," said Madame Otter, nodding. Suddenly, she stopped and turned her head to the side, "But—how are we going to do this? When will you give the children to me?"

I jumped to my feet with more vigor and enthusiasm than I'd felt in years, "I will get them now! Why not? They have been fed, so you need not worry about that, and you will have several hours with them before bedtime."

"But—where should they sleep?" She was as anxious as any new mother.

"Oh, don't worry about that," I said, bending to pat one of her hairy front legs, "I have seen them fall asleep in the most peculiar places! They seem to have hardly a requirement as far as that goes! You will see. You are going to be a stupendous mother." I wondered if the pile of bramble and brush that Mister and Madame Otter inhabited would be large enough for the children, but I was convinced that this could easily—and happily—be remedied with a bit of work. Mister Otter would likely be overjoyed to find a purpose for his day!

As quickly as I could muster, I wrangled the children together and placed them on the pier to become acquainted with Madame Otter while I gathered some of their personal effects. After my fifth and final trip of carrying all manner of toys and sippy cups and other various accessories to the pier, I was a bit disappointed to see that the children were distracted by a city of ants that were walking in a uniform line and carrying tiny bits of crushed candy to their den. I had accidentally stepped on a peppermint whorl in my haste to gather the children's things and had inadvertently created an uncomfortable diversion for poor Madame Otter.

"What are you looking at? Oh, ants. Isn't that interesting? Do you like to swim?" The children ignored her. Finally, Madame Otter pulled herself out of the water and promptly began to eat the ants, licking them up with her red tongue and crushing their little bodies between her teeth. "Now, this, children, is what ants are good for!"

I snuck away when the children began to scream and squeal. I felt a little guilty for leaving Madame Otter with such a predicament but, like I told myself, new mothers are almost always presented with screaming, squealing things that they don't know how to handle.

It was several weeks before I visited Madame Otter again. I assumed I was doing them a great favor to give them a period of adjustment and, I admit, I loved the quiet and free time. I knew Madame Otter would not dare approach the house. I had long ago told her that my husband was a zealous gun owner with a fear of furry, wet creatures.

Consequently, my husband did not notice the children's absence at all except to tell me, one morning, that he was feeling unusually well-rested now that the baby was apparently sleeping through the night. I dared not disappoint him at that moment by telling him the truth, as I had heard the child's faint screams from the pile of brush in the backyard all the previous night. Eventually, I did text him and tell him of the trade. I was afraid he would be cross as I didn't get an answer for an hour or more, but then, I finally got this message: "Oh. Thank God. Let's never have children again." I agreed and no more was said about it.

Three days later, I made my way to the river bank to see how Madame Otter was coming along with the children. Practically from the moment I stepped out of the back door, she came running to me from the bramble brush. She was covered in huge white patches where her hair was missing, half of her whiskers were chewed and wrinkled on one side, one of her back feet was bleeding, and her eyes were drooped and red-rimmed.

"Hello, Madame Otter, how are you and the children?"

"Oh, fantastically," said Madame Otter. She winced, as if she was pained by the act of speaking. It was probably a toothache; she didn't have dental insurance. She looked over her shoulder toward the bramble brush house, which was shaking violently. "The oldest girl is anxious to be with her friends, isn't she? She left the very first night! You know how important friends are to teenagers. And why would I object? Socialization is so important for children! Bernard has been obsessed with worry, silly otter that he is. But he is very protective of his girls, so he set out to find her several days ago. My, they must be having a grand time together! They haven't been back yet, but I don't dare stand in the way of an otter spending time with his children! And oh, the boy is so inventive. You really did not tell me just how creative and spirited he can be! Why, just this morning, he has told me that he wants to be a barber, and he was just giving me a hair cut! And oh, he has helped us make several, um, home improvements in just a short number of

days!”

“I am so glad to hear that, Madame Otter! It is just as I expected! And how is the baby?”

“Learning to swim! And what a swimmer she is sure to be with such a healthy pair of lungs! And what sharp teeth! She was testing them out just now,” she said, shaking her back paw, which was dripping with blood, “she’s sure to be the hunter of our litter! Why, motherhood is just as you described. Wonderful, simply wonderful. I can’t imagine anything better in all the world! Would you like to see the children? I am sure they miss you dreadfully!”

“I would love to, but it is probably not for the best. I am certain it would just upset them,” I said, “I was actually just coming to say goodbye to you, Madame Otter. My husband and I have sold the house. The moving men are already out front and filling the truck. We are moving to a loft apartment in the city, far away from the river. I am afraid that this is likely the last time I will see you, dear Madame Otter. But oh, it brings me such good comfort that I was able to give you and your husband such happiness. You are just the mother I thought you would be! Goodbye, Madame Otter!”

I turned and walked back to the house just as a large section of the bramble-house seemed to collapse upon itself. More home improvements, I supposed, and I wished them well. I practically skipped to the back door with happiness. As I reached the door, I heard the baby begin to scream, and I turned around. Instinct. Madame Otter was still standing where I left her, and she was looking at me such a sorrowful expression that my heart nearly exploded. I knew exactly how she felt. We were such good friends. I was really going to miss her.