

erma bombeck



FAMILY

THE TIES THAT
BIND...

AND GAG!

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*The Ties That Bind...
and Gag!*

ERMA BOMBECK

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FAMILY

*The Ties That Bind...
and Gag!*

Also by Erma Bombeck

At Wit's End

"Just Wait Till You Have Children of Your Own!"

I Lost Everything in the Post-Natal Depression

The Grass Is Always Greener over the Septic Tank

If Life Is a Bowl of Cherries—What Am I Doing in the Pits?

**Aunt Erma's Cope Book: How to Get from
Monday to Friday . . . in 12 Days**

Motherhood: The Second Oldest Profession

**TO BILL BOMBECK:
WHO HAD DEFINITE IDEAS
OF THE CONCEPTION OF THESE CHARACTERS
LONG BEFORE I HAD IDEAS OF PUTTING
THEM INTO A BOOK.**

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THE FAMILY: 1936

It was the best of times.

I had my own watch, a tricycle, and a clip-on Shirley Temple hair ribbon that covered the entire right side of my head. My mother wore an apron and silk stockings and baked every day. She looked like Betty Crocker looked before her face-lift, pierced ears and junk to make her hair fat.

The family ... all four of us ... sat on the front porch in the summer and talked about the squeak in the swing. My dad always told me to get my tricycle off the sidewalk at night before someone fell over it. I never did. My mother cleaned the living room every day. We never sat in it. Once I turned on one of the lights and the cellophane around the lamp shade smelled and I got my hands slapped.

Mom cut the grass and filled the clothesline every day. Every Friday, she hosed out the garbage cans. In the spring she really got crazy ... lugging mattresses out to the backyard and setting up curtain rods to dry the lace curtains. Sometimes she put on gloves and hat with her best dress and took the streetcar into town where she went from store to store paying the utilities and making fifty-cent payments on my watch and tricycle.

My sister bossed and went to high school. She didn't do anything else. I was insanely busy going to school and being a servant to everyone ... running to the store ten

thousand times a day for my mother, and whenever the pan under the icebox filled with water from the melting ice, you-know-who always had to empty it without spilling a single drop.

One morning my father didn't get up and go to work. He went to the hospital and died the next day.

I hadn't thought that much about him before. He was just someone who left and came home and seemed glad to see everyone at night. He opened the jar of pickles when no one else could. He was the only one in the house who wasn't afraid to go into the basement by himself.

He cut himself shaving, but no one kissed it or got excited about it. It was understood when it rained, he got the car and brought it around to the door. When anyone was sick, he went out to get the prescription filled. He took lots of pictures . . . but he was never in them.

Whenever I played house, the mother doll had a lot to do. I never knew what to do with the daddy doll, so I had him say, "I'm going off to work now" and threw him under the bed.

The funeral was in our living room and a lot of people came and brought all kinds of good food and cakes. We had never had so much company before.

I went to my room and felt under the bed for the daddy doll. When I found him, I dusted him off and put him on my bed.

He never did anything. I didn't know his leaving would hurt so much.

The creditors came the day after the funeral and carted off the icebox, the car, and the contents of the living room that no one ever sat in.

Grandma came and said she was taking us all home with her so we could be a "family" again. The family got bigger and a lot weirder. There were Mother's sister and her husband and their two children, a brother who played pool all day, and another sister who roller-skated and was

about to be married. There was also my grandfather, who never made a left-hand turn and who used lard to polish the car.

Grandma wore an apron and was always busy cleaning the living room that no one ever sat in. The kitchen was the only room in the house that had heat and that was when the oven was lit. I used to stand on the chair to get warm and look down on everyone as they argued about money.

My mother got a job. No one in my entire class had a mother who went to work every morning. I didn't tell anyone but my best friend. She got mad at me and spread it all over school.

In 1938, my mother said, "We are going to be a family again" (again!) and introduced us to a stepfather. I was the only girl in North America to have a stepfather. I didn't take a chance on telling even my best friend.

My stepfather and I didn't talk to one another for awhile. I guess he was a person who didn't know how to show love. I remember when he taught me how to ride a two-wheel bicycle. I told him not to let go, but he said it was time. I fell and Mom ran to pick me up, but he waved her off. I was so mad I showed him. I got right back on that bike and rode it myself. He didn't even feel embarrassed. He just smiled.

When I went to college, he didn't hang around to talk like Mom did . . . he just lugged fifteen pieces of luggage up to the third floor and acted sorta awkward.

Whenever I called home, he acted like he wanted to talk, but he always said, "I'll get your mother."

All my life he nagged, "Where are you going? What time are you coming home? Do you have gas in the car? Who's going to be there? No, you can't go."

It was a long time before I realized that's how you love someone.

My mother selfishly pursued a career on a factory as-

sembly line making rubber door strips for General Motors cars. My stepfather dedicated his life to making me pick up towels in the bathroom and turning off lights.

I could hardly wait to get married, leave home, and have a "family" of my own with a living room that no one ever sat in.

THE FAMILY: 1987

Friday: 5 P.M.

For no reason I was like a nervous hostess, rearranging the drapery folds, pushing chairs under the table, and sliding down the coffee table on the seat of my pants to transfer the dust to a place where few people ever looked anymore.

In a few minutes the tranquility would give way to three grown children coming home for the weekend to pose for the traditional Christmas card picture.

"Are they here yet?" yelled my husband, balancing his tripod and camera.

I shook my head and walked quickly to the living room where I flipped on the light. It was as I remembered it. The white sofas facing one another, the pristine plush carpet, and the plump pillows that peaked like fresh meringue.

"What do I smell?" he asked, slipping off his shoes before he entered the room.

"Cellophane from the lamp shades. I wonder what's keeping them."

"Them" are two sons and one daughter, conceived in passion, carried with heartburn, and raised with love. We share the same genes, chromosomes, and last name. We have never eaten the same breakfast cereal, watched the same TV shows, liked the same people, or spoken the same language.

Why wouldn't they be late? In thirty years, not once have our bodies been on the same time cycle.

When I was on wash, iron, shop, cook, and run . . . they were on perma-sleep and off. When I was on sleep and exhaustion, they were on spin-around-the-crib, damp-dry, and fill. Even as they got older, when I went to bed, they were going out. When I got up for breakfast, they were coming in.

"How did you get all of them to come in the first place? You know how they hate to sit for these things."

"I told them we were reading the will."

I wondered why we bothered at all. Last year's picture had one kid sitting on the sofa in a tie and sport coat. He was not wearing shoes. Our daughter was looking straight into the camera with her eyes closed, and another son was hanging over my shoulder with a temperature of 102. The dog was licking himself in a disgusting area. All of our eyes (with the exception of our daughter and the dog) were focused on a blurred hand and knee coming into the frame which belonged to my husband. It wasn't a picture you'd want to see on a religious holiday.

Why couldn't we be like our old neighbors, the Nelsons? Every year we got a card from them with their entire family gathered in front of the fireplace in their ski sweaters and capped-teeth smiles.

"Did you talk with our son in L. A.?"

"I left a message on his machine," I said.

Actually, I had not talked with my son in person for over three years. I talked to his answering machine, he talked to my answering machine, and sometimes our answering machines talked to one another. I wouldn't admit this to many people, but his machine and I had a better relationship than we did. His machine had such fine manners. I'd call and it would say softly, "Hi, I'm not here right now but if you would leave your name and your phone number, I'll get back to you as soon as I can. At the sound of the beep, you have ten seconds. Have a good day now."

My son would never have said that.

The machine was so nice, I could never bring myself to say what I had planned to say. "You bum! I have stretch marks around my knees and you don't have five minutes to call your mother." So I'd end up by saying, "I know you're busy, dear. I was just checking to see if you're alive. I hardly hurt at all today. You have a good day too."

It would be nice to have the family together again, sitting around rekindling memories, catching up on their lives, seeing the legacy we created . . . the monument, so to speak, to our own immortality. My reverie was broken by the sound of car doors. Our older son kicked open the door. "Anyone home?" (I hated it when he looked me in the eye and said that!)

He was wearing a wrinkled jacket with sleeves pushed up to the elbow, Hawaiian shirt, and balloon pants that revealed white ankles and bare feet.

His father turned to me and said, "For God's sake, Erma, didn't you tell your son we were going to take the family picture for our Christmas card?"

"That's why I'm here," he said.

"So, why didn't you shave?"

"I did, just a few hours ago."

"Did you put a blade in?"

"Sure, it's the new stubble look like *Miami Vice*. Don't tell me you haven't seen it before."

"Of course I've seen it before . . . on winos and travelers whose luggage has been lost for three weeks."

"Dad, it's sexy. Gives you that I-just-rolled-out-of-the-sack look. You remember that. Hey, Mom, I'm going over to the coast for a couple of days to catch some rays. How about baby-sitting my pet."

"I don't need another dog. Is it messy?"

"Mom, would I leave you with anything messy? It's all here . . . food and all. No sweat, honest."

"You know how the neighbors feel about barking dogs."

"I promise you. This animal won't bark. I'll put him in the utility room. His food is in by the toaster."

At that moment, his brother kicked open the front door. "I hope you're satisfied," he announced flatly. "I have a cold."

My eyes misted and I grabbed his arm. "It's wonderful having you here. How long can you stay?"

"It depends on how long it takes to do this much laundry," he said, thrusting his suitcase at me. "Everything I own is dirty."

We said hello to our daughter.

She returned the greeting with, "My transmission sounds funny."

The moment had come. My husband began arranging and draping their bodies over the sofa before he looked into the lens.

"What does it look like?" I asked.

"It looks like a group of illegal aliens hauled in for questioning. What are you doing in a tennis dress?" he asked our daughter.

"Playing tennis," she said dryly. "I didn't know it was formal."

"This is a Christmas card, for crying out loud. Go get into something appropriate. Come on, boys! Stand up straight!"

"I am," said our son. "I just don't have shoes on."

"Then stand behind your mother. No, that won't work. The nuclear mushroom on your T-shirt is hovering just above your mother's head. My God! What is he doing in an antinuclear T-shirt anyway?"

"It was the only thing left in my closet that was clean."

"So go get one of my shirts. Now where's your sister?"

"She's washing her hair."

"Is this going to take long?"

"His feet smell."

"Where's the dog? We can't have a picture without Harry in it."

"Quit shoving."

"Creep!"

The family. We were a strange little band of characters trudging through life sharing diseases and toothpaste, coveting one another's desserts, hiding shampoo, borrowing money, locking each other out of our rooms, inflicting pain and kissing to heal it in the same instant, loving, laughing, defending, and trying to figure out the common thread that bound us all together.

Sitting there I thought about how the years have challenged families in a way no one would have thought it possible to survive. They've weathered combinations of step, foster, single, adoptive, surrogate, frozen embryo, and sperm bank. They've multiplied, divided, extended, and banded into communes. They've been assaulted by technology, battered by sexual revolutions, and confused by role reversals. But they're still here—playing to a full house.

One by one the family wandered into frame with wet hair, borrowed shirt, and shoes that didn't fit.

As I struggled to give dignity to the moment, my daughter said, "Mom, why do you have a snake in your utility room?"

The camera clicked. The annual Christmas card portrait was captured for another year. One son sat there in the same sport coat and tie he had worn last year and the same bare feet. The other one's mouth was crooked as he whispered out of the side of it how he felt like throwing up since the plane was late and he hadn't eaten. The dog was licking the same disgusting part he had licked the year before. Our daughter's eyes were following the blurred fig-