

SWEET DREAMS

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L.A. MAY BE THE CITY of dreams, but for us parents, Boston is the city of sleep. All of the greatest pediatric sleep doctors practice there. You can feel the pulse of their giant brain-veins as you drive down Longwood Ave. and Storrow Drive, past the medical Walk of Fame: Boston Children's, Beth Israel, Mass General, Dana-Farber. Homes to the greatest baby doctors on earth. So great, you know them by one name, like Bono, or Angelina, or God. To us, they are superstars: Sears, Brazelton, and, of course, the great Ferber. The man who made "cry it out" a household phrase. A man so famous that he has his own verb: Ferberize. As in "We can't go out tonight, we're Ferberizing little Max."

Ferberizing is the Ironman of competitive parenting: You

train your baby to sleep on his own by letting him scream his little lungs out all alone wondering where the hell you went. It's not for the weak or the lazy.

But if you have the stony heart to do it, it's worth it. Because, as every overachieving parent knows, it's all about the sleep: how soon your child does it through the night, how long, and how deeply. It's the single biggest mark of success or failure in the first three months of parenthood. The faster you reach it, the sooner little Max can get on with tracking a raisin with his eyes and packing his bags for Harvard.

So, naturally, if you live in Boston and you want your child to have an edge, you try to get a piece of the sleep doctors. Anxious and overeducated, we'll line up, like Oscar Day gawkers, to catch a glimpse of the great ones—to hear them speak, or to rub elbows with them at your husband's boss's college roommate who went to med school with one of them's cocktail party.

Some parents might even have the balls to seek an appointment. Fat chance. Someone has to actually die before a space opens up, and even then there are parents who've been waiting years ahead of you. Get in line, groupie. You can't sleep your way to the sleep doctors in this town.

You need to know all this so you can appreciate what it is I'm about to tell you. I'm not a lucky person. I don't win preschool raffles or baby-shower games or Blue's Clues Bingo. But one day—one frigid New England Monday—my luck changed. I got the golden ticket of competitive parenting.

My daughter hadn't slept through the night in four and a half years. In other words, never. For a while we were able to make excuses for her: "Oh, she needs to eat every few hours"; or "We just moved, so she's in a transition period"; or "It's Daylight Savings. Again." Every few months we'd buy another sleep

book, read it, and try the latest method out on her for a week or so, but none of them ever took. Then we'd get too tired, or lose the book, and things would just keep on keeping on.

We never volunteered any of this information, but inevitably we would get asked the Question: "Is she sleeping through the night?" Now, this is a land mine of a question. It seems harmless, but what the person really wants to know is, "Are you a lazy slacker?" or, if they're newish parents, "Are you worse at this than I am?" The few times we fell into the trap of telling people the truth, they'd start in about setting limits and consistency. Usually this would be followed by a lecture on their personal sleep guru's philosophy and how, with the right commitment, it worked for them.

The point is, no one feels sorry for you when your kid is the "Bad Sleeper." They just look at you like you represent everything that's wrong with the world: negligence, sloth, incompetence. Like I can't be bothered with sleep training because I'm too busy surfing the Internet for cheap deals on recalled car seats. To make things worse, every time we turned around there'd be another study out about how sleep deprivation makes you stupid and fat. Great. Now we weren't just lame. We were dumb, fat, *and* lame.

One day, determined to seize control, we locked our daughter in her room and let her scream from three thirty to six o'clock in the morning. Just like the book said. When she finally stopped, our stony hearts leapt for joy. We cracked open the door, expecting to find her little body in a heap on the floor, surrendered to sleep. Instead, there she stood, staring at us with a twinkle in her eye—baby shit everywhere. If I hadn't been so completely freaked out, I might have admired her for her ingenuity. After all, she figured out what the biggest weapon

in her toddler arsenal was, and she wasn't afraid to use it. But as I pulled on my rubber gloves and started scrubbing the walls with every ounce of disinfectant I could find in the house, all I could hear was the snide voice of Failure whispering in my ear: *It's over. She's broken you. You just don't have what it takes.*

We started lying to friends and relatives after that. We figured if we couldn't wipe out Failure, we could hide it like a fifth of scotch in the flour bin.

But then our son was born, and I stopped being able to keep up whatever facade of control I'd managed to cobble together. The interrupted sleep combined with a newborn was finally just too much. I started doing things like leaving the house with my Brest Friend still on. A Brest Friend, if you haven't seen one, is a big foam doughnut that Velcros around your waist so you can rest the baby on it, breast-feed, and keep your hands free for things like eating and crying. It even has little pockets in it for the remote and your cell phone in case you want to watch people on TV eating and crying; or want to talk to a friend and cry, or talk to her about what you're eating.

I don't know if it was the hormones or the sense of our utter failure finally hitting me that drove me to chance the unthinkable. Anyway, one day, Brest Friend strapped to my waist, boobs flapping around like a crazed harpy's, I fished out my phone and called the office of the Great Dr. Ferber himself.

There must have been something in my voice—some sound-wave frequency that vibrated in just the right way off the receptionist's inner ear. Kind of like a dying whale sending out a distress call. Maybe someone had just that second died and, before the receptionist had had time to pick up the phone to call the next family in line, my call had gone through. All I

know is that she had an appointment for me. Six months away in July, but still, an appointment. And not with one of his lackeys, or his protégés. With Him.

I carried that appointment around with me like a sweet secret. Every time I would have to endure the smug advice of another parent toting her sleep-glutted wunderkind, I would think, *I have tried everything possible to fix this problem. If Dr. Ferber can't fix it, then it's unfixable.*

In a weird way, I think this was the outcome I was hoping for. I imagined Ferber working intensely on our daughter, canceling all of his appointments and speaking engagements to direct all of his brilliance toward her. He would let her scream for days in a padded room that he would spray down with Lysol every few hours, but she would persevere. She would be his greatest challenge. A medical anomaly. Never in his thirty years of practice (he would say) had he seen such a child. She must be a genius. How lucky she was to have such patient and insightful parents who had the guts to make that call. But there's nothing to be done. Nothing. (A pause: He removes his glasses and rubs his giant brain-vein.) "I have exhausted all of my expertise, all of my tricks. If I can't make this child sleep through the night, then no one can."

Then he would send us home, vindicated. When people would hear about our vampire child and ask in that patronizing tone, "Well, have you tried Ferberizing her?" we would finally have the iron-clad response: "Why, yes. Yes, we have." Then I'd reach into my impeccably organized diaper bag and pull out the laminated article from the *New England Journal of Medicine* featuring my little genius. Judgment would turn to awe.

Don't get me wrong. There was a part of me that was hoping

it would work, but I liked this story a lot and kept adding to it as the months went by. It kept me warm and safe through that frigid winter.

Then things, as they always do, started to change: Winter turned to spring; I didn't need my Brest Friend anymore; my baby son inexplicably, accidentally really, started sleeping through the night. Even my daughter started waking up just once instead of twice or three times. Sometimes.

In June, I got a call from Dr. Ferber's receptionist to confirm my appointment. And you know what? I didn't think twice before telling her I didn't need it anymore. When I hung up the phone, it took me a few moments to realize the hugeness of what had just happened: I had actually broken up with the man of my dreams.

My daughter's eight now. She's a great kid, but she still usually wakes up at least once a night and calls out for a snuggle or a blanket, or just because she can. We have, according to the books, utterly failed. But when I walked away from my Ferber fantasy, I also walked away from what those books represent: the idea that every child can and must be shaped into the same perfect being, and our need to get the gold star for doing it perfectly and by the book.

Now, instead of lying about how well my family sleeps, I tell people that I canceled on Dr. Ferber. I feel kind of proud about it. Because when I did it, I owned what every parent knows but few of us publicly admit: that this is a sloppy job, and no amount of Lysol can wipe out all the messy, petrifying imperfections it brings out.

Even if the real reason was that I was just too tired to go.