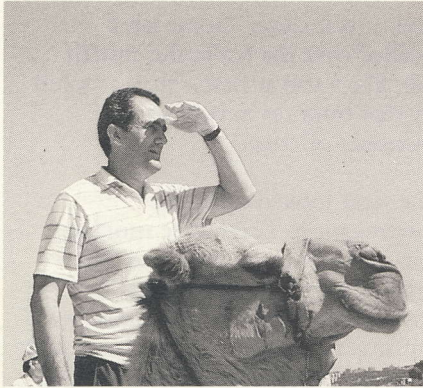

THE SOFT EDGES

The First Cry – Chris Ellis



When Claire Archer was born she did not cry. She breathed and pouted and squirmed a little. She lay in the labour bed quietly becoming pinker. We waited but she didn't greet us with the time honoured salute of the newborn – a hearty cry from the lungs. She seemed quite content with the world just as it was, so we put her to her mother's breast and she tucked in softly sucking away. During the following weeks she lay contently wrapped in her blankets. She was a first born and her young parents were not sure what the volume should be. The fact that there was no volume at all, did not bother them that much.

But she was also the first grandchild from both sides. From this direction began a fair amount of tut tutting and surreptitious chin chucking of encouragement by grandmaternal figures peering over the cot. There was some background by joving and by gollying from the one living grandfather.

Still she did not cry. She fed well. She was perfect in every respect. Except for the quietness and peace that continued throughout the day and night. A close friend of Claire's mother expressed her envy as she brought her colicky screaming baby in each week.

After a week or two the grandmothers became restless-almost colicky themselves. They visited each other in their sitting rooms and conferred over tea. All babies must cry. It is an obligation. A duty. It was always so. There must be a problem. There had to be a solution.

The baby was brought in to see me. It wasn't crying. The great grandmother had been brought along as an accessory after the fact that all babies

had cried since the time of the old testament. She was left in the waiting room to silently await the verdict. Her presence confirmed that something was seriously wrong.

I examined her carefully paying due ceremony to the occasion. She was a perfect child, now three weeks old. Perhaps a bit sleepy. She opened her eyes while I examined her then went back to sleep. It was correct; she did not cry.

"What was wrong, doctor?"

"Well, some babies don't cry much. Let's wait and see."

They returned two weeks later. The same team was represented; great grandmother, grandmother, mother and child. Four generations waiting for laryngeal awakening.

"Could there be something wrong with the vocal cords?"

Great grandmother was in a state of perturbation. She was left again next to the ferns in the corner of the waiting room picking at a magazine. The child slept peacefully through the consultation and the deliberations.

"Let us wait and see," I replied.

It came to pass that at eight weeks Claire was to be baptized. It was a winter's day of exceptional clarity on the highveld. Aunts, both maiden and unmaiden, in-laws of varying degrees of severity, peripheral uncles and distantly genetic cousins were gathered together. They had all lived in or near the village for a generation or more and were inextricably linked to the infant in question. They all knew about the silence. There was an

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air of waiting. A conspiracy. The problem had been discussed and the books consulted. It was like the first cuckoo in spring. Once heard then life could officially begin again.

The small village church began to fill up. The vicar arrived. He had also heard. Circumspectly he had counselled patience and now assumed a pretense of celestial ignorance as he welcomed the congregation. It was an Anglican church made of local cut stone.

The vicar started the service ...

"Dearly beloved you have brought this child here to be baptized ..."

The door at the back had been left open. Through it could be seen the grass on the veld. It had been burnt black by a fire break, up to the cemetery where the grave stones bore some of the names and surname to be given to the child that day.

"We yield thee hearty thanks ..."

Some late autumn leaves had blown in onto the worn carpet in the aisle.

"We beseech thee for the parents of this child and give to them wisdom and love ..."

All eyes were on Claire sleeping in her mother's arms wrapped in the shawl that great grandmother had been christened in over eighty years ago in this same church. Relatives peered over shoulders. She was gently lifted up to the font. Hymn books were held in silence as the vicar sprinkled the water from his white hassocked fingers.

"I baptize thee Claire Elizabeth Mary ..."

And then it came – some later recalled over the tea in the church hall, like a sob at first – then as a full cry that built up in volume to sentences of cries.

The vicar looked up at the congregation. Tears were running down grandmaternal cheeks. The hankies were silently wiping. The noses of the aunts were exultantly sniffing. A murmur of happiness with some nodding of heads and shaking of hands in a congratulatory I-told-you-so sort of way, could be heard.

I see her now occasionally. She is a young girl. Happy and placid and on her way in the world. I asked her mother the other day if she cried much. No, she said, not since the christening.