

MOTHER



Elinor Carucci
MOTHER

Foreword by
Francine Prose

Prestel
Munich · London · New York





*For my children, Eden and Emmanuelle,
who came into my world
and made it beautiful and inspirational.*

*For my husband, Eran,
who in his quiet, generous way made this book possible,
helping me at each stage of the making.*

*For my parents,
who filled me with love to pass on.*



Francine Prose

FOREWORD

Looking at the photos in *Mother*, I find myself recalling the quote from Diane Arbus: “A photograph is a secret about a secret. The more it tells you the less you know.” Each of Elinor Carucci’s images offers to tell us a secret: a secret about motherhood, a secret about childhood, a secret about the passage of time, a secret about biology, about gender, a secret about the range of intense and even overwhelming emotions generated in the course of a normal day of ordinary family life.

There are many kinds of secrets: the deepest secrets of existence, which we will never know, and the secrets of daily existence, which we know and choose not to tell. Carucci’s photos insist on their right to extract (and reveal) something about both sorts of secrets, the transcendent and the quotidian. They resensitize us to the mystery of the fact that a child can grow inside a woman’s body, that a woman can be slowly and then suddenly transformed into a mother; how rapidly a newborn turns into a toddler, how quickly the body of a toddler is subsumed and replaced by the body of a child.

Her photographs chart the peaks and valleys of domesticity, the vertiginous speed at which our moods—and our reality—can change from the serenity of a Renaissance Madonna nursing her infant to something more like a scene from *The Exorcist*, with the possessed spirits inhabiting both the child and the

adult. The emotional range is extreme, from the ecstasy of pure childish joy to the deep wells of misery from which children believe they will never resurface. Her images compel us to consider how desperately our children depend on us for love and comfort, for maintenance and care, for instruction and information, for protection and courage, how strongly they are magnetized by the tidal pull that draws them toward us and pushes them away.

The honesty with which Carucci approaches her subject matter makes her images seem new, no matter how well we may think we know—how often we ourselves have witnessed and felt—the experiences and feelings they depict. She captures the spacey, meditative grief that a bloody nose can generate. The out-of-body surrender with which a child allows her teeth to be brushed, the suffering of a girl having her bangs trimmed or her nails clipped by her mother. We can linger over these photographs to study the power of happiness to illuminate the face, the power of rage to contort it; the force of the love and rivalry, of the playfulness and the strife that connects and divides siblings—doubled, in this case, because the brother and sister are twins; the brief (or so we hope) junctures at which stress finally pushes us over the edge of civilized, grown-up behavior, when a mother loses patience and is amazed to find herself yanking the resistant child in whatever direction they

need to go. Carucci is well aware that the image of the naked body has a complicated and fierce effect on us, and she occasionally uses that fierceness to ramp up the energy emitted by even the calmest of these (paradoxically unselfconscious and acutely self-aware) interactions between parents and children.

These images of Elinor Carucci, her twins, and (less frequently) her parents and her husband reflect her determination to go deeper, to search harder, to understand and reveal ever more about what it means to bear and raise children. Nothing, we feel, or almost nothing, is left out. Nothing is too “trivial” to be rescued from the path of oncoming time and examined for what it can tell us about the splendor and misery of caring for—and loving—children: the missing tooth, the snotty nose, the Halloween cookie, the after-school ice cream cone.

Perhaps what’s most striking is the way in which, over the years, Carucci and her family have learned to go about their routines as if the camera were an additional member of their household. As a result, she has been able to record moments that are not merely private but interior. Among my favorite photographs in the book are the ones that appear to do the impossible: that is, they portray the child who has slipped into that dreamy state of consciousness in which the lines between reality and fantasy are blurred, a separate country to which we

can only go in childhood—and perhaps glimpse some memory of, as adults, just before we fall asleep or just after we awaken.

Though the children’s grandparents and friends make rare cameo appearances, most of the photos remind us of how self-contained the family unit is, how sweetly private it feels on good days, how isolated on bad ones. Yet the people in these pictures are not alone, because we, their viewers, are looking and thinking about them, and about ourselves.

One of the presumptive purposes of the 1955 Museum of Modern Art exhibition *The Family of Man*, curated by Edward Steichen, was to examine the way in which photography can remind us of how much we human beings, as a species, share in common. Elinor Carucci’s photos do just that, but with the gauzy veil of sentimentality and propriety pulled away. Millions of parents and children, brothers and sisters have had, and are having, moments much like the ones she’s preserved with her camera. Carefully composed, artfully shot, her photographs persuade us that the most apparently personal images can be the most universal.

Elinor Carucci

INTRODUCTION

In 2004 I became a mother.

My daughter, Emmanuelle, and son, Eden, were born in August of that year. After a blissful pregnancy, my labor had to be induced; I ended up with an emergency cesarean section that left me wounded, weak, and in pain. A few days later I was sent home to my new life as a mother of twins. The days passed, some quickly and others slowly. At the same time that I was getting to know my babies, falling in love with them, I was also getting to know myself better. Motherhood revealed the best and the worst in me. I was filled with so many emotions. Joy and wonder, love and happiness coexisted with sadness, anger, exhaustion, and anxiety, as well as a sense of mourning for the body I would never have again, the woman I would never be again.

I felt and saw so much in those first months—the beauty and ugliness, the tears and laughter, the extremes you come to know when you're a new parent. I tried somehow to deal with it all through my camera, hoping to portray the complexity of motherhood as honestly as I could. It was too intense, too rich, to express only through “Madonna and child” images. It's not that I didn't have those magical, peaceful moments with my babies, and I did take that kind of photo, but there was so much more to tell and to show.

The need to photograph became even stronger when I realized how painfully apparent the passage of time is in the life of a child. The stages they go through simply fly by. Moments that will never come back have passed before my eyes, easily escaping my camera: the last time I breast-fed Emmanuelle, Eden trying cherries for the first time, their first fight. I felt compelled to preserve those moments somehow. It is a need every parent shares—whether or not we are professional photographers, we all take pictures of our families. It is as if we're consoling ourselves, counting our days in this world with our children.

Photographing my children was different than anything I'd done previously. I could not, of course, ask my kids for permission to photograph them, as I'd always asked other members of my family. Nor could I take my time. Now I had to choose between photographing and mothering, and I usually had no more than a few seconds to take a picture. Sometimes the act of taking a photo became a split second of guilt—a split second during which I neglected the children. If I thought about lighting or composition, even for only a fraction of a second, I was not available to them in that moment.

It took a few years for the photographer and the mother in me to learn to coexist. The two did not always agree; the mother in

me usually won out. But sometimes, to my surprise, my two identities empowered each other, especially when I acknowledged the positive effect my work had on the children. They took pride in the fact that they were my source of inspiration, that everything about them—the good days and the bad, their flaws and mistakes—was fascinating to me. Through my photographs I embraced all sides of our relationship, making every aspect of our life together, for myself and for them, a legitimate topic to be discussed as well as photographed. As Eden recently told me, “I used to get upset when you photographed me—especially when I was crying—but now I can see what I looked like when I was angry or happy or sad. When you photographed me, that was also time we could spend together.” Emmanuelle shared a similar perspective: “Even though it used to annoy me, when I see the pictures I feel good inside. I sometimes like the images and sometimes not at all.” I’ve explained to the kids why I often take pictures that may seem unlovely, but my daughter persists in preferring “the pretty ones.”

I have always endeavored to convey a full range of emotion in my work, to take our little stories and turn them into one epic human tale. I am both comforted and relieved to discover how universal my own story is, and I thank the many mothers I have met for their honesty and willingness to share. What they have told me has freed me to portray the complexity of the relation-

ship between mother and child, as so much of what I have experienced has been experienced by other women as well.

Photography has not just been a way to enjoy my children’s love for me and demonstrate my unconditional love for them. It has also helped me recover at times when I feel that I’ve failed them as a mother or sense their resentment of me. Taking just a frame or two has helped me understand what just happened and figure out how to deal with it. There is a certain power in a photograph’s ability to freeze a moment in time. Sometimes an image seemed to compound the past and the future: I could see the kids as they were then, and also how they might be when they are older. Sometimes it was my own guilt that I photographed. Looking at a picture reminds me of what I did wrong, but sometimes it helps me forgive myself. Like most parents, I am constantly surrendering and resisting, failing and succeeding. With my photographs I hope to give my children a caress that will stay with them even when I am not. Taking pictures of them is a desperate attempt to deal with the pain of knowing that I will not always be able to protect them. My images are a way both to keep them mine and to keep me theirs, keep me *there*.

Nothing is as inspiring to me as watching my children grow. The life of a child is so intense that everyday activities—brushing teeth, taking a shower, getting a haircut—become theatrical