

plenty of room for that station wagon in the garage. Boy, America's moms truly have it all – a carefree life far from the stress and crowds of the big city.

(Sound: Harp glissando – as often used in cheesy '50s television jingles.)

(ERMA dances along as she sings this advertising jingle.)

ERMA.

WHAT A DREAM OF A KITCHEN FOR YOU
WHAT A DREAM OF EASY LIVING THAT'S NEW.
AND WHAT MAKES IT GREATER,
IT'S ALL WARDINATOR, SO MODERN, SO USEFUL, SO YOU.

(Sound: Harp glissando.)

(ERMA holds her last dance pose as the harp glissando plays.)

ERMA. *(Ironically.)* This was me in my house, all the time.

(ERMA vacuums, teetering on her heels.)

(Sound: Crunching of Army men being vacuumed up.)

(ERMA drops the vacuum, gets on her hands and knees and picks up an Army man. She takes a magazine, Better Housekeeping, circa 1964, from the easy chair. The cover features a model housewife wearing an apron and a frozen smile. ERMA shows the audience the cover and the Army man...)

(In model housewife's voice.)

(Patronizing.) It often works best if you pick up the Army men first.

Whatever doesn't kill you now, comes back a few days later and tries again.

(ERMA continue vacuuming and then suddenly stops in horror.)

Oops! I almost sucked up one of the hamsters. He must be trying to escape the boys' room to cleaner air. *(Pause.)* There he goes!

(To audience.) I bet she never passes varicose veins off as textured stockings. Or thaws pork chops by putting one under each armpit? She spends her time lecturing us with fashion do's and don'ts, rules for entertaining and beauty hints written like they are a matter of life and death.

Add them all up and you've got dozens of ways to be considered a failure.

(ERMA sits on the bed and changes from the high heels to her lower shoes.)

In my house, I didn't worry about perfection. For Halloween, I'd put the cat on my son's head and send him out as Davy Crockett.

There are very few women like that, but you wouldn't know it from reading magazines, watching television or going to the movies.

There was one in our neighborhood. When her kids played at our house, they wrote thank you notes for a drink out of the garden hose.

But on the other hand, "Mrs. Perfection" and her kids didn't communicate. I speak fluent child:

If you don't stop crossing your eyes, they are going to freeze that way.

Put your sweater on. Don't you think I know when you're cold?

When that lawn mower cuts off your toes, don't come running to me.

(ERMA points to the cover with the model housewife.)

These magazines never answer the real questions, such as: Is it better to put your groceries away after each visit

You see, women in the 1960s were not admitting certain things to themselves. Your life was to serve your husband and your kids and you better not forget it. Point out the flaws, you got branded as a substandard wife and mother. Like most of us, I was willing to conform.

I had been hiding my hopes and dreams in the back of my mind. It was the only safe place in the house.

From time to time, I got them out and played with them. Reveal them to others? No, they were too fragile.

When my youngest started kindergarten, I was thirty-seven years old and my excuse for everything had just gotten on the school bus.

I began to dream about a column that told the truth about my life.

I was too old for a paper route, too young for Social Security and too tired for an affair. Writing a column was what I could do.

Besides, Bill and I couldn't support three children with two overbites on one high school teacher's salary. Several of my girlfriends also decided to get paying jobs. A few did it for the money. Most because they needed the rest.

I took my idea to our local weekly. Guess what? The editor bought it. Three dollars a column, don't spend it all in one place. My beat started at the crabgrass in the front yard and ended at the back porch.

(ERMA puts the iron away.)

I had no particular words of wisdom, just common sense advice like: "Never trust a doctor whose office plants have died."

Mostly, my column asked questions. Why is motherhood called the most important job in the world, if no one wants to know how it's done? I also wondered why

there was a rectal thermometer in the cookie jar, but I tried to stay focused on bigger things.

I got myself an office, also known as our bedroom.

(ERMA locates a portable typewriter under the bed.)

(She puts the typewriter on the ironing board.)

A room of one's own.

It's a miracle I became a writer at all. By the time I was in my teens, I had a new step-dad, and he and Mom decided college wasn't for me.

(ERMA throws the carriage return.)

(Sound: Ding!)

Such a beautiful sound.

(ERMA types.)

(Sound: Children bounding up stairs, yelling and laughing. All talk at once. Children's voices sound like a cacophony with a rare single line heard.)

(ERMA hears children and types even more quickly, trying to finish.)

They're back.

(Reads.) "If the Virgin Mary had lived on our block, we would have said 'Of course *she* has time to go to the dentist. *She* only has one kid.'"

(ERMA listens with her head cocked.)

CHILDREN. *(Voiceover.)* Mom!

ERMA. *(To the door.)* One at a time, please!

(To the audience.)

The hamster accidentally FELL in the toilet? And he can't swim? Don't –

(Sound: Flushing toilet.)

CHILDREN. *(Voiceover.)* Mom!

companion. And it reminded my husband many times at parties that it was time to go home.

I could never explain how our marriage worked. Neither could most of our friends. We took vacations together and we took them separately. It all came down to trust. I couldn't light the water heater and he needed me to send out the Christmas cards, so we were pretty secure.

When I last checked, we were members in good standing of your average screwed-up family. And I was happy to own up to it.

I wasn't one of those women who pretend that being a wife and mother is simple if you only try hard enough. It wasn't easy. Any parent who has been on a trip with a child who kicks the seat for fifty miles and throws his shoes out the window has definitely considered abandoning him at the next Shell station.

Not all readers liked my honesty. I started getting a few angry letters. "Why did you have children?" ... "You're a terrible mother!" ... "I feel sorry for your family!"

I assure you there was love in every line I wrote.

There is something I want to share with you. It's a letter I received from a mother in prison.

(ERMA looks in the headboard and finds an oft-folded letter.)

(Reads.) "Dear Erma Bombeck: You may not want to hear from the likes of me. I am serving a life sentence for killing my own child. I have read all of your columns in our library, several times. Had I known mothers could laugh at these things, I probably wouldn't be where I am today."

(ERMA returns the letter.)

I keep this letter to remind me that there is a thin line that separates laughter and pain.

I kept plugging away at the column, trying not to whitewash motherhood. God knows women didn't need any more guilt. If there is a bent fork mutilated by the disposal, we take it. If we fry an egg and the yolk breaks, we know it's ours. We give the lean ham to our husbands, the front seat to our mothers, the last piece of pizza to our children.

It is a small wonder our offspring became the "me" generation. They were stigmatized by a martyred mother who cut her own hair but paid \$60 an hour for her daughter to learn how to throw a baton and break every lamp in the house.

There is going to be a time that your kids say to you – "You don't love me!" When your kids are old enough to understand the logic that motivates a parent, you need to tell them this:

I love you enough to insist you buy a bike with your own money, even though we can afford it.

I love you enough to stand over you for two hours while you clean your bedroom, a job that would have taken me 15 minutes.

I love you enough to accept you for what you are, not what I want you to be.

But most of all, I love you enough to say no when you hate me for it.

You can't shield your kids from tough times. And, really, when tough times hit, kids can be pretty remarkable.

I was asked to write an inspirational book about children fighting cancer. I wondered if an optimistic book on cancer was possible.

I had always thought there are some subjects you just don't poke fun at. I was wrong. These kids had contests to see who could go the longest without upchucking after chemo. And one four-year-old confided in me,