

# SECOND THOUGHTS

The logo for September Publishing, consisting of a dark grey square with the word "september" split into four lines: "sept", "em", "b", and "er".

sept  
em  
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Sample chapters from  
September Publishing



# SECOND THOUGHTS

*On Having and Being  
a Second Child*

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*Translated by Anna Asbury*



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Love set you going like a fat gold watch.  
The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry  
Took its place among the elements.

– Sylvia Plath, '*Morning Song*' (1961)



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# Expecting

## *Prologue*

Ask a person why they want to have a child, and the answer will probably involve a nebulous tangle of deep longing, curiosity, and something to do with ‘nature’.

Ask why they want another, and the response tends to be rather more straightforward. ‘You have your first child all for yourself,’ I was told when big and round and heavily pregnant, ‘but you have the second one for the first.’

We were sitting on the edge of the sandpit then. It was summer, and my daughter was busy with buckets and spades. I cannot remember any more who it was exactly who told me so. My own mother, perhaps? What I do remember is the effect those words had on me: my head spun with questions great and small, and I began to feel a little queasy.

Eight months previously, we'd been sitting in the bathroom, me on the toilet, my partner and daughter on the cold tiled floor. It was five days to her second birthday. I'd placed the test by the basin, the window face down for extra suspense. A minute's wait.

When I turned the stick over, it told me what I really already knew, what my body had already realised.

My partner smiled, sheepishly, as did I. I think we were both looking for the appropriate response, one that would do justice to the enormity of the revelation – but my daughter was growing impatient. She wanted to go outside, or at least move on to the next thing. To stretch the moment out a little, I took a quick snapshot, hasty and somewhat blurred. In it, my partner is holding the test up in one hand while his other arm lies protectively around our daughter's waist. She's frowning into the camera, one pudgy little arm cast dramatically against her forehead.

The test, of course, meant nothing to her. But projection has always come easily to me, and when I look at that photo now I can still detect something more ominous in her expression than a toddler's waning interest. Irritation, perhaps, at what we'd done, or anxiety at what was about to happen.

\*

What was about to happen, to us, was far from exceptional. Where the average Dutch woman had four children around 1860, a hundred years later that was down to three. And after 1970 the number dropped below two.

Since then, for a number of reasons including female emancipation, birth control and the state of the economy, women have continued to postpone motherhood by small increments and the number of large families has continued to shrink. Nevertheless, one thing has remained constant for the last half-century: two is the norm. Of the Dutch people who actually have children, the majority desire and achieve a ‘standard family’ with two children.<sup>1</sup> As in lots of other European countries, as well as in the US for the moment, a two-child family is both an ideal and, for many, a reality.<sup>2</sup>

After all, as a friend of mine once irreverently summed up the going consensus, ‘An only child is a lonely child.’

We, too, were on the brink of becoming a standard family. The countdown had begun, the countdown to the norm. (And the norm, I realised, was a privilege. Even if a family unit with two parents and two healthy children was the most ordinary thing in the world, it certainly wasn’t to be taken for granted.)

\*

My second pregnancy was planned and very much desired. Like many parents, I wanted my daughter to

have a brother or sister, a playmate and an ally. I had more selfish motives too. I wanted to experience the adventure anew: the transformation of my body, a freak show with myself in the lead role, along with everything that would follow. Holding a newborn baby, the wonder at their unfolding, getting to know that new creature.

Like the first time, the discovery, or confirmation really, that I was pregnant left me elated and excited. I recognised the nervous tingling you get when you've said yes to something big, whose consequences you can't fully fathom – along with the thrill of possessing knowledge that, to the rest of the world, is still a secret.

In contrast to the first time, however, the excitement pretty soon made way for thoughts and feelings I hadn't anticipated.

While somewhere deep within me my son was starting out on his stunning evolution from tiny clump of cells to prehistoric creature to foetus, I began to wonder what his impending arrival would mean precisely.

What did it mean, for my partner and me, to have a child *for the second time*? Why did we want a second child at all? Our first had been nothing less than a miracle, an event without precedent, but what did that make our second? A repetition? A perpetuation? A trip down memory lane?

What did it mean for our firstborn, that soon she would no longer be the sole recipient of our time and attention, no longer the only object of our affection?

And what did it mean for my son, to be born into a family that already existed, that had already found its *modus operandi*, and therefore couldn't or wouldn't revolve around him alone?

My son's movements first became perceptible at winter's end. They began as vague vibrations from deep within, faint like the underground signals emanating from an earthquake hundreds of miles away. Soon they turned into caresses, and those caresses became the unmistakable somersaults of a miniature human being.

Don't worry, those somersaults seemed to say: I'm moving, I'm alive, I'm on my way.

I had been looking forward to this quickening, but the sensation wasn't purely reassuring. I noticed that I spent less time observing his stirrings than I had done with his sister. The reason, of course, was that self-same sister: she distracted me, consumed my time as well as my thoughts, and in all her childish innocence utterly exhausted my energy reserves, substantially diminished as they were by pregnancy.

My son hadn't even been born yet, and already I was giving him less attention than I would have liked.

*You have your second child for your first.* By the time I heard that phrase, in the summer by the sandpit, I had no trouble identifying the unease it engendered. In fact, wasn't the big question what the firstborn would

get out of it, exactly? As for what the expansion of our family would do to our actual family life, again I had no idea. And the precise effect on the second child was similarly uncertain.

Only long after I'd embarked on my maternity leave, and it had grown so hot outside that staying indoors seemed the only option, did it occur to me that certain assumptions lay at the foundation of my thoughts and feelings about my second pregnancy.

The assumption, for instance, that a child is better off with a brother or sister than without. But also that with the arrival of the second, we were not just *giving* our first child something; we were taking something away as well. And there was the assumption that our second, who would never experience the exclusivity of which we were about to deprive the first, would start out with a 1-0 disadvantage.

Second place, consolation prize, runner-up.

Those beliefs had to come from somewhere. It seemed to me that it must be possible to find out where they had originated, and to what extent they were justified.

I couldn't understand how I'd failed to consider these assumptions before. But isn't it always the way? You think you know what you're doing, only to be surprised by the discrepancy between concept and execution, between idea and reality? And isn't experience, often, a prerequisite for reflection, so perhaps you only wonder

what things mean when you're slap bang in the middle of it all – when there's no way back?

\*

There are entire shelves filled with books on parenthood – from fairy tales, novels and memoirs to polemics and collections of essays. I have a pretty good line-up in my own bookcase. But while I was expecting our second child, I realised that we have surprisingly few words for this particular new experience. Most reflections on parenthood are about the wonder and inundation occasioned by the birth of a first child – on the transition to parenthood. What happens when another comes along is hardly ever the focus of contemplation.

It's as if we prefer to talk about the revolution rather than the restoration; innovation and surprise rather than the same old song. The literature on the subject says a great deal about the excitement of the first time, but falls silent when it comes to the joy of repetition.

And surely all that is fair enough: never is the impact so great, the shock so severe, as when you have a child for the first time. You've stumbled into the world of parenthood from one moment to the next, and once there you can never return.

But if two is the norm, isn't it time to ask, what about the second time? What does it mean to have a second child, and what does it mean to *be* one? Isn't it time to

bestow words on the issue of how things continue when you bed down deeper into this new reality, the reality of family life?

\*

In looking for answers to my questions about second children, I delved into the work of psychologists, biologists, neuroscientists and demographers. The empty spaces in my bookcase began to fill up, and continued to do so even long after my son had arrived. And the more I read, the more people I spoke to, the more I understood that I also needed to look much closer to home. Literally so – because experience sometimes becomes its own answer.

*Second Thoughts* is the result of a quest that took place in the scientific literature as well as in my own home. This book came into being because of something to do with nature, curiosity and, above all, desire: the burning desire to better understand the second time, the second child.



## ‘There’s going to be a baby’

### *A brief history of jealousy*

**D**uring the spring in which I’m pregnant with my son, my father presents my daughter with a picture book. *There’s Going To Be A Baby*, it’s called, by John Burningham and Helen Oxenbury. The story begins when the main character, a little boy, is told by his mother that she has a baby in her tummy. The pages that follow depict the fantasies spun in his mind, fantasies about what will happen once the second child is there.

In one of these fantasies, the baby is a chef, turning the kitchen into a complete mess; in another the baby appears as a banker, literally throwing money around. When the baby features as a zookeeper, chaos ensues.

‘Can’t you tell the baby to go away?’ the little boy wants to know. ‘We don’t really need him, do we?’

Night after night, I read the book to my daughter. I try to gauge whether her feelings are as mixed as those of the protagonist, but she's not giving much away. Her interest is drawn to the mother's patterned dress, the large ice-cream sundae served to the little boy at a café, and the various names of the animals at the zoo. As far as I can tell, the main message has passed her by; it's just the details that have hit home.

I wonder about the intended readership for this book. Who, exactly, needs preparing – and what for?

\*

It might be one of my earliest memories: my little sister, suddenly there. I had just turned three at the time, and was utterly convinced that my parents were wrong about her name.

Thinking back to her arrival, it's that apprehension that has most remained with me, the certainty that she was really called something else, and that it wasn't in my power to correct the mistake.

In the years that followed, my sister and I mostly argued – constantly, relentlessly, to the point of physical violence, tooth and nail.

'Your characters clashed,' is the way my mother puts it now.

'You found me irritating,' my sister says.

Or maybe I was just jealous.

\*

The first biblical murder – that of Abel, by Cain – is the result of sibling rivalry. Many of Shakespeare's plots revolve around envious brothers and sisters. And in the big book of Grimm's fairy tales, from which I regularly read to my daughter, jealousy between children of the same family is a recurrent theme.

It's an astonishing paradox: while we believe growing up with a brother or sister to be a good thing for a child, for centuries we've also been telling each other stories about the ways siblings can make one another's lives miserable.

'For a long time I regarded my little sister as an intruder,' wrote American author Helen Keller in 1903. 'I knew that I had ceased to be my mother's only darling, and the thought filled me with jealousy.' In her autobiography, Keller describes the time when, in a fit of rage, she overturned the cradle, little sister and all: 'The baby might have been killed had my mother not caught her as she fell.'<sup>3</sup>

'A fat, monstrous creature had suddenly acquired the main role,' wrote director Ingmar Bergman as he recalled the birth of his younger sister. Little Ingmar failed in his attempt to strangle the baby – his autobiography throws up a vivid image of the time he climbed onto a chair to get at her cradle, but slipped and fell to the floor.<sup>4</sup>

A friend who, like me, is the eldest in her family, tells me about an old video recording in which her younger sister, just learning to walk, proudly clambers up off the kitchen floor and wobbles towards the camera – only to be brutally thumped on the head with my friend’s clenched fist.

*Can’t you tell the baby to go away? We don’t really need him, do we?*

Prior to my second pregnancy, it seemed to me that the expansion of our family only held advantages for my daughter. I kept thinking of my sister and myself: of how no one has such an intimate understanding of where I come from as she does, how there’s no one with whom it’s so easy to compare notes on my parents as with her, and how lovely it is to be known, and to know someone, in that way.

I wanted my daughter to have the same thing: an ally. But now, with spring coming to an end and that ally about to emerge, my thoughts begin to reach further back. Specifically, to our childhood. And it’s there that the image becomes much less appealing, because our childhood fighting only came to an end when I left home for college, the ravages of a decade and a half of sibling warfare smouldering in my wake.

What made me think a second child was such an unequivocally good idea?

In the evenings, my daughter asleep, I click my way

through a pastel-tinted online parenting forum, followed by similarly pastel-tinted parenting websites and mothering blogs. It's easy to get lost here, in this Wonderland, where the tone switches with astonishing ease from reassuring to alarmist and back. 'You will feel worse than you did the first time around,' I read, for example, in a list of 'Ten Things No One Tells You About Having a Second Baby', and, 'The same things that sucked before will suck again.' Yet I'm also told not to panic, because, 'You will be 110 per cent more chill about everything.'<sup>5</sup>

My son gently kicks me from inside. I stroke the bump as I read on.

Online, I soon notice, second children are often presented as a potential problem: they put even more pressure on their already tired parents, throw the family routine into profound disarray, and above all they provoke a series of reactions, some desirable, some less so, in their elder sibling.

I'm reading all this because I want to know more about my second child. But what there is to read is mainly concerned with my *first* child: with what I can expect of her when the second one arrives. The outlook varies from a profound lack of interest to extreme anxiety, and from bed-wetting to outright jealousy, Keller- and Bergman-style.

Obediently, I bookmark the many recommendations on how to deal with the imminent disaster. Hounded

by adverts, I then order various parenting books to be sent from the other side of the ocean.

*Siblings Without Rivalry.*

*The Second Baby Survival Guide.*

*Peaceful Parent, Happy Siblings: How to Stop the Fighting and Raise Friends for Life.*

Such telling titles! It's as if rivalry and fighting are the norm, and deviation possible only with great effort. As if there's a good chance the second baby will stifle our family, as if it's going to be a struggle for survival when he arrives.

My partner, who's more level-headed than me, and who remembers a predominantly peaceful childhood with not one but two sisters, raises his eyebrows when the books arrive. How much *more*, he wonders, is all that extra literature supposed to teach us? I tell him I find it calming, the same information, formulated slightly differently each time. Apocalyptic, but clearly presented, and full of practical tips.

I like to think, I tell him, that a universal guide to the arrival of a second child exists somewhere, a primordial instruction manual for the months ahead.

There's advice, for instance, on preparing our daughter in good time for what's coming. We can do this by talking about the baby like a 'real person', and by reading to her from books like *There's Going To Be A Baby*.

We have to make it clear to her, I repeat to my partner, that the arrival of a second child doesn't mean

she's loved any less, and above all we have to let her know that nothing is being taken away from her.

We can start by showing her photos of when she herself was a newborn, so she knows that she, too, drank milk out of a breast once; that she, too, used to bathe in a tiny tub, supported by big hands.

My partner nods, benevolently.

Presents are always a good idea, I read somewhere. Because I wouldn't want to make things too easy on myself, one sweltering late-spring afternoon I visit a frenzied toyshop on a bustling street. I navigate towards the pink section, in search of a baby doll we can give my daughter on behalf of her little brother, a gift to break the ice when he gets here.

The one I go for is small, with innocent eyes and a soft little hat on its head.

A cheeky little peace offering.

Standing at the counter I suddenly become aware of myself, pregnant and perspiring, attempting to extinguish a conflict that hasn't even presented itself yet.

Later, much later, I'll find the doll, naked and missing its hat, abandoned lifeless at the bottom of a toy basket. I'll remember that it barely interested my daughter in the first place, that she found her little brother far more exciting. It will become clear to me that the gift said a lot about me and my expectations, and very little about my children.

I'll ask myself how justified it was, my fear of jealousy.

But all that has yet to come to pass. Right now, summer is fast approaching. We need a new crib, there are hand-me-down romper suits to wash, a cot to assemble. And in between all those activities, I continue to read up on jealousy.

\*

Immediately after William Darwin was born, his father began to make notes. It was 1839, and, besides being a brand-new father, Charles Darwin was also a scientist, with an inordinate interest in the expression of emotions.

In the first week Darwin noted that 'various reflex actions, namely sneezing, hickuping, yawning, stretching, and of course sucking and screaming' were 'well performed' by baby William. On the seventh day he conducted a new experiment: he touched William's foot with a piece of paper. The baby pulled his leg up and curled his tiny toes – 'like a much older child when tickled'.

After six weeks, Darwin detected a proper laugh from his son for the first time. At four months, it was clear that William could experience rage. His entire head would turn bright red when he was displeased. The baby was six months and eleven days old when his nurse pretended to cry. William promptly pulled a



'melancholy face, with the corners of his mouth well depressed' – an unmistakable sign of empathy, in his father's view. And when William was fifteen months old, and his little sister Annie was born, Charles discovered, while weighing his second child in front of his first, that his son could also be jealous: 'Jealousy,' he noted, 'was plainly exhibited.' (He omitted to record precisely how it looked, this exhibition of envy.)

Many years later, when Darwin published his notes in the journal *Mind*, he added that William's expression of jealousy at fifteen months came relatively late. 'When tried in a sufficient manner,' he suggested, infant jealousy could probably be elicited much earlier.<sup>6</sup>

Darwin was right, I learn when studying a weighty academic tome helpfully titled the *Handbook of Jealousy*. Scientists have yet to agree upon what, exactly, jealousy is – emotion or cognition, or rather a state encompassing several emotions at the same time, including rage, fear and sadness.<sup>7</sup> What *is* known is that jealousy flares up when we're afraid of losing something or someone to another person.

In that sense it's useful, evolutionary psychologists say: jealousy spurs us on to combat the threat of unfaithfulness, or to put a stop to it once it has started.<sup>8</sup> That's handy if you want to keep your lover to yourself, but also for babies and small children who want to hold

on to their parents' attention when a sibling arrives. Early this century, psychologists performed a study in which they arranged for babies of just six months to watch while their mothers held lifelike baby dolls: the babies sulked, frowned and cried. If the mothers held a book instead of a doll, then the little participants reacted with considerably less agitation.<sup>9</sup>

None of this is surprising, I suppose. As far back as the third century AD, Augustine described a baby who couldn't yet talk, but who was clearly 'livid as it watched another infant at the breast' of its mother. 'Who,' Augustine added rhetorically, 'is ignorant of this?'<sup>10</sup>

What *is* new, the *Handbook of Jealousy* tells me, is the bad rap jealousy is subjected to these days. In the Middle Ages jealousy was associated with the defence of one's honour, and in that sense was positively regarded. It was also long seen as a natural expression of love and devotion. Darwin, for one, classified little William's jealousy as a sign of affection.

This remained the case for a long time. Until the nineteenth century, I read in a chapter by historian Peter Stearns, who consulted old handbooks, letters and magazines, jealousy between siblings simply was not something parents worried about.

It hadn't occurred to me that fear of jealousy might be a historical phenomenon, something that didn't arise until a certain time, a certain place. The advice I incant

to my partner and myself relates to a threat that, 150 years ago, was not even recognised as such.

The turning point, Stearns writes, came at the end of the nineteenth century. That's when jealousy lost its positive connotations, when it no longer fitted into an ideal vision of the civilised adult, always able to repress his or her impulses.

And because self-control could not be instilled early enough, jealousy between young siblings transformed suddenly from something parents shrugged their shoulders at, into a serious problem.<sup>11</sup>

Take Sigmund Freud. He didn't waste a great many words on sibling relations, as he was primarily interested in the bond between parents and children. But what little he did say on the subject was devastating enough: in his reference work *The Interpretation of Dreams*, published in 1899, for example, Freud noted that 'hostile feelings towards brothers and sisters' must take up a substantial proportion of childhood dreams.<sup>12</sup>

He later observed that a child 'put into second place by the birth of a brother or sister . . . does not easily forgive . . . this loss of place': he or she becomes 'embittered', an emotion that forms 'the basis of a permanent estrangement'.<sup>13</sup>

Freud's Austrian disciple (and later dissenter) Alfred Adler believed the arrival of a sibling to be a traumatic event for a child. The first was 'dethroned' by the second

and siblings would compete for their parents' attention and approval throughout their childhood.<sup>14</sup>

In the early-twentieth-century United States, rivalry had grown to be such an important topic in child-raising books and magazines, historian Peter Stearns reports, that one could in fact speak of a widespread 'sibling rivalry scare'. Parents were advised to nip it in the bud as far as possible if they didn't want their children to harm one another – or, at least as bad, grow up to be unstable adults.<sup>15</sup>

Even the generally mild-mannered Dr Spock, the bestselling child-rearing expert, cautioned, in the mid-twentieth century, that sibling jealousy should be promptly dealt with. Jealousy, he felt, was incompatible with real love, and could even get in the way of 'normal' social relations. Clearly then, there was every reason to eliminate the malignant condition in childhood.

\*

So here's the irony: just as jealousy between children from the same family was becoming a phenomenon to be feared, those very families actually began to shrink. In many industrialised countries, the end of the nineteenth century saw the 'demographic transition' take hold: child mortality rates declined and, not long afterwards, so did the average number of children per family.

Evolutionary biologists have no trouble explaining this transition. If your children have a better chance of surviving and reproducing, you don't need to have as many to ensure that your genes get passed on to the next generation. Moreover, the fewer children you have, the more time and resources you will be able to 'invest' in each of them.<sup>16</sup>

It may be, as Peter Stearns speculates in the *Handbook of Jealousy*, that children had a greater need for parental attention, *precisely because* they had fewer brothers and sisters to play with, and that this automatically increased rivalry between them. (In the Dutch magazine *De Vrouw*, a parenting advice columnist named Nelleke remarked as early as 1899 that 'bickering' was probably most fierce 'in families with only two children, because the children are constantly forced to endure one another's company'. A 'third element', she observed, might serve as a lightning rod.<sup>17</sup>)

But above all, the growing attention for, and fear of, jealousy between siblings was part of a new understanding of parenting – one that had arisen in the wake of the demographic transition. Now that illness and premature death no longer formed the main source of parental worry, children's psychological development and wellbeing became paramount. From then on, the reference book *Five Centuries of Raising Children in the Netherlands* informs me, parents wanted 'to be able to give care and attention to each child individually'.

This, too, was one of the reasons for the shrinking family: ample care and attention ‘are more easily given when there are only a small number’ of children.<sup>18</sup>

Parents thus suddenly found themselves responsible for the *inner* lives of their offspring. And for advice on the matter, they went for the first time not only to granny or grandad or the neighbours, but also to a relatively new figure in the child-rearing world: the independent expert. A new group of professionals – paediatricians, child psychologists and developmental psychologists – possessed knowledge that parents lacked, or thought they lacked.

On the ways in which parents were to combat jealousy, these experts were unanimous. Their methods don’t differ all that much from the advice I am offered today by parenting websites, forums and guidebooks – this collection of incantations that I can now reproduce without effort.

Acknowledge that the first child doesn’t have to be outright enthusiastic about the impending upheaval.

Tell grannies, grandads and other visitors soon after the birth that they should pay particular attention to the eldest.

And if the first child still exhibits jealousy when the second child is born, don’t punish them for it – extinguish the emotion with all the love and understanding you can muster.<sup>19</sup>

Of course, the fact that in the twentieth century child-rearing experts appeared on the stage to hand out advice doesn't mean that parents have actually taken that advice to heart. Even so, it seems to me that if anything, all this hand-wringing about rivalry and jealousy has left parents feeling more disempowered than self-assured. In fact, the underlying message, that we're *inflicting* something on our children when we reproduce for the second time, is enough to make us feel guilty and slightly at fault.

Fortunately, a later generation of researchers would set out to put the doom scenarios of Freud, Adler and others peddling an outsized fear of jealousy into perspective. I'd like to figure out precisely how they did this, if only to assuage my own nagging sense of guilt – but it's the end of August, and I've almost reached my due date.