- > La rencontre avec l'autre, l'amour, l'amitié
- > «The Fifth Child», by Doris Lessing

The Fifth Child Doris Lessing - 1998

Read the following pages, from the middle of the novel.

The adults, Harriet and David, Dorothy and Alice, were around the big table, the children having gone up to bed, and Harriet tried Ben with the bottle. He emptied it in a moment, while his body clenched and unclenched, his knees up in his stomach, then extended like a spring. He roared at the empty bottle.

'Give him another,' sad Dorothy, and set about preparing one.

'What an appetite,' said Alice socially, trying hard, but she looked frightened.

Ben emptied the second bottle: he was supporting it with his two fists, by himself. Harriet barely needed to touch it.

'Neanderthal baby,' said Harriet.

'Oh come on, poor little chap,' said David, uneasy.

'Oh God, David,' said Harriet, 'poor Harriet is more like it.'

'All right, all right - the genes have come up with something special this time.'

'But what, that's the point,' said Harriet. 'What is ne?'

The other three said nothing - or, rather, said by their silence that they would rather not face the implications of it.

'All right,' said Harriet, 'let's say he has a healthy

appetite, if that makes everyone happy.'

Dorothy took the fighting creature from Harriet, who collapsed exhausted back in her chair. Dorothy's face changed as she felt the clumsy weight of the child, the intransigence, and she shifted her position so that Ben's pistoning legs could not reach her.

Soon Ben was taking in twice the amount of food recommended for his age, or stage: ten or more bottles a day.

He got a milk infection, and Harriet took him to Dr Brett.

'A breast-fed baby shouldn't get infections,' he said.

'He's not breast-fed.'

'That's not like you, Harriet! How old is he?'

'Two months,' said Harriet. She opened her dress and showed her breasts, still making milk, as if they responded to Ben's never appeased appetite. They were bruised black all around the nipples.

Dr Brett looked at the poor breasts in silence, and Harriet looked at him: his decent, concerned doctor's face confronting a problem beyond him.

'Naughty baby,' he conceded, and Harriet laughed out loud in astonishment.

Dr Brett reddened, met her eyes briefly in acknowledgement of her reproach, and then looked away.

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'All I need is a prescription for diarrhoea,' said Harriet. She added deliberately, staring at him, willing him to look at her, 'After all, I don't want to kill the nasty little brute.'

He sighed, took off his glasses, and rubbed them slowly. He was frowning, but not in disapproval of her. He said, 'It is not abnormal to take a dislike to a child. I see it all the time. Unfortunately.'

Harriet said nothing, but she was smiling unpleasantly, and knew it.

'Let me have a look at him.'

Harriet took Ben out of the pram, and laid him on the table. At once he turned on to his stomach and tried to get himself on all fours. He actually succeeded for a moment before collapsing.

She looked steadily at Dr Brett, but he turned away to his desk to write a prescription.

'There's obviously nothing much wrong with him,' he said, with the same baffled, offending note that Ben did bring out of people.

'Have you ever seen a two-month baby do that?' she insisted.

'No. I must admit I haven't. Well, let me know how you get on.'

The news had flown around the family that the new baby was successfully born, and everything was all right. Meaning that Harriet was. A lot of people wrote and rang, saying they were looking forward to the summer holidays. They said, 'We are longing to see the new baby.' They said, 'Is little Paul still as delicious as he was?' They arrived bringing wine and summer produce from all over the country, and all kinds of

people stood bottling fruit and making jams and chutneys with Alice and Dorothy. A crowd of children played in the garden or were taken off to the woods for picnics. Little Paul, so cuddlesome and funny, was always on somebody's lap, and his laugh was heard everywhere: this was his real nature, overshadowed by Ben and his demands.