AND THESE, TOO, ARE MOTHERS: A STORY: 
BY MARIE LOUISE GOETCHIUS

She dressed herself almost painfully, bending close to her cheap mirror to bow her tired lips with red, and shadow her tired eyes with black; she poised the enormous cheap straw hat with its vertiginous flower garden, at a hard, sharp angle on her crimped hair; she drew over it a wide veil, torn in spots, with its great black dots that drooped and swayed in front of her eyes. Then she turned to the child, who, curled on the narrow bed, was nearly asleep, shook it gently, and said:

“Allons, ma petite, it is time.’’

The child protested whiningly. It looked tired, too, and very light and frail. It was dressed in a soiled white muslin, with a floppy hat, and tarnished blue streamers tied under its pointed chin. Once up, however, it went docilely enough, and followed the woman out on the streets. The sky was deep blue that night and there were many stars. They looked like a silent flock of glittering birds—those stars—sailing on with outstretched wings, in a vast migrating army to a land beyond the city. Paris shone with the unhealthy pallor of street lights; the night world rustled warmly up and down the narrow hilly pavements of Montmartre. Thin strains of music drifted out from the dance halls and restaurants. Tall, imposing men in dark livery stood at the magic entrances of these restaurants, scanning impertinently the faces which passed or paused before the doors—shrugging their shoulders and smiling knowingly, as the little women streamed and poured by them to the gay cafés inside. There were sightseers, too. These last glided around in motors, with much conscious craning of necks, and laughter at imagined life.

The woman and the child stopped at the entrance of one of the cheapest of the restaurants. The man at the door bent and tweaked the child’s attenuated chin.

“How goes it, the little one?” he inquired in his hoarse good-natured voice.

“Not badly,” answered the woman. She always came to this restaurant. She could not go to the smarter ones—she had not the clothes, and the child would perhaps not be allowed in. Here they knew her—they had known her mother before her. She managed at least to get coffee for herself and milk for the child every night.

Tonight it was crowded. The bar, with its high stools at the entrance of the garish room, was swarming with women, all dressed in shabby ostentatious imitation of their betters—the same style of hats, the same ruffles of lace at the neck—but with the difference of
cheapness. They greeted the woman and her child kindly, and the woman smiled eagerly back at them, answering their crude questions with unmingling frankness, warmed and at her ease in their presence. She looked at some of them with envy. They were better appearing than she and much younger. Still she was not conscious of her fading potentialities, although a glance in the big white mirror over the mercilessly lighted bar, showed her a face without the charm of youth and a figure grown stout and bourgeois. But the perfume and paint and drinks and music seemed to blend in a warm friendly river from which she drank gratefully, leaning far over the brink to do so. She felt the occasional tug of pointed little fingers at her skirts, but it did not occur to her that it was wrong to bring the child with her. There was indeed no alternative.

The child was perched on a high stool now, playing contentedly with a paper fan, and drinking its milk. Beyond at the tables sat men and women. They seemed restless—there was a great deal of moving about and changing places—like an enormous box of water colors being shuffled around and toppled in different positions to daub a caricaturist’s palette. The strong lights chemically sucked much of this color out. They seemed to gain their strength by preying on the wine and people. There was dancing going on between the tables—couples swung in small steps, sawing their bodies up and down to the rhythm of the red-coated music. The woman could not dance. It made her bones creak and ache, but she liked to watch the others.

As she stood near the bar, a Lady entered with two men. This lady was clearly of another class, but her presence there was not so extraordinary, as many ladies came to see this restaurant. This particular lady, however, differed vaguely from the others. She did not look contemptuous or disgusted with what she saw. She was quietly dressed in a short gray tailor suit, with a snugly fitting hat and a plain undotted veil. She had a delicate white face and thoughtful dark eyes which glanced clearly around the room, touching its glare, with a momentary shadow. The two men seemed rather self-conscious. They avoided the eyes of the women near the bar. There was a slight wait at the door while a table was being found for them. Meanwhile the Lady in Gray had caught sight of the child. A sharp little gasp of shocked amazement escaped from her lips. Before her companions realized what she was going to do, she had moved swiftly forward and was bending over it. The mother watching first with curiosity, then with surprise, followed this stranger almost defiantly and placed herself directly behind her child. Several women clustered in a silent observing group near by.
AND THESE, TOO, ARE MOTHERS

"What is this child doing here?" asked the Lady in Gray. She spoke French with a slight accent.

"It is my child, madame," answered the woman.

The Lady in Gray looked up with an expression which changed as she saw the mother. Then she asked very gently:

"Why is she here, madame?"

"Because I am here," answered the mother simply.

She was not accustomed to speaking to ladies. The Lady in Gray hesitated a moment, whispered to one of the men at her side and then spoke in a still more gentle voice:

"Won’t you and your child come and sit with us a while at our table?"

The woman stared incredulously. Such a thing had never happened to her before. She felt suddenly very pleased and excited. It was an event. She looked around to see if her friends had heard the invitation. Yes, they had—they were whispering together.

"Willingly, madame," she answered. The child slid down from its stool at a word from its mother, and they followed the Lady in Gray and the gentlemen over to a table in a corner. The child was not afraid or embarrassed, but the woman became awkward and conscious. They sat down. The Lady in Gray and the gentlemen treated her as if she were of themselves. They asked her politely what she would have to drink. She began to feel that she was in that vague society of which she had read indifferently in the papers. She sat up straighter and smiled small stiff smiles; she held her hands in her lap and every once in a while she leaned over and twitched at the bow on the child’s hat. She talked carefully, choosing the proper words. A great pride was surging through her poor worn body—the pride of being treated as an equal by her superiors. They were talking to her about many things—but the conversation always drifted back to the child. How old was it? Had it ever been to school? Wasn’t its mother proud of it? This was a new idea. She had never consciously separated the child from herself. They were a totality—a habit which had not stopped to analyze itself. No—now that she was called upon to express it—the child had not been to school, she had not even been especially proud of it. It was an existent fact, just as everything else she could see and touch or which was obliged to be in her life, was an existent fact. She had not tangled herself in realizations or questions.

"But your child," the Lady in Gray was saying. "Does she not get very tired being up so late at night?"

"Non," answered the woman with a shrug in her voice, "she does not seem to. She sleeps in the day, voilà tout!"
AND THESE, TOO, ARE MOTHERS

The Lady in Gray shuddered a little. "Then your baby never sees the sun," she remarked sadly.

But the mother looked at her uncomprehendingly. "We others, madame," she said, "we do what we can. Our children must live as we do—or without that we cannot keep them."

"And your friends?" asked the Lady in Gray, with a delicate wave of her hand. "Have they all children too?"

"Most of them, madame."

"But I do not see them."

"Mon Dieu, madame; they have fortune. Some of them can find care for their children while they go out—some leave their children the night alone. I have no one, and my child cannot stay alone."

She was enjoying herself now in almost an intoxication of self-respect. She bent forward slightly as she spoke, addressing the child in between times, "Tiens toi droite, Nini."

The child drank its milk noisily, and watched the dancing with expressionless eyes.

"Tiens," continued the woman, "if it could interest you, there are some ladies who have also children." She used the word lady slowly, with savor. It sounded well. She beckoned to three of her friends who had been staring at her from a distance. They sidled over eagerly—pressing one against the other. They were younger and better looking than she and their eyes slid smilingly to the men at the table.

"Dis donc, Rosa, how goes the little Jean?" asked the woman importantly.

"He goes well," answered Rosa, in quick response. Her face lighted up until it looked prettier than ever.

"You all have children?" asked the Lady in Gray.

"But yes, madame," they answered, staring at her.

"Sit down," she said impulsively, "and tell me about them."

"Madame has perhaps one of her own?" hazarded the woman.

The Lady in Gray shook her head sadly. "No," she said, and her eyes sought the eyes of one of the men—but the woman did not notice that. The men were making the best of the strange party and had ordered a bottle of champagne. Then they withdrew from the conversation and let the Lady in Gray talk as she would. She acted the gracious hostess in her own house. The women had never known anything like it. Little by little she drew them out. Soon they were all talking volubly about their children. Their manner had changed—they seemed absorbed—vying with one another in their descriptions of the little ones who belonged to them. The
mother whose child was beside her sat quietly listening—she had never heard her friends talk so. She almost felt ashamed. Yet unconsciously she kept fussing with her own child, touching it here and there, admonishing it, looking at it.

The life of the night flowed on unheeding past the little table. The music played, women danced together, men leered and reeled to and fro, the entrance door banged shut and open, as the painted world streamed in and out of it. The women still talked of their children. Jean was an intelligent boy; he should go to school soon. Marie appeared weakly—she cried a great deal, and did not eat much. Therese was a little devil—that child would make a dead man laugh with her cunning tricks. The absent children seemed to be standing each at its mother’s side, their small faces peering wonderingly or knowingly at the lights and wine. The simple words of their mothers brought their presences around the table. The child who was there seemed to spread and multiply and become an attentive group of children, the quick prattle of their little tongues slipping through the noise of clinking glasses—the patter of their little feet drowning the sliding scrape of the dancers. They appealed, they challenged, they lived.

At last the Lady in Gray rose to leave. It was late. As she stood up, the shades of the children seemed to scatter and disappear. There remained only the crude noise of the restaurant, and the bright blotches of the women’s dresses. The child, who was there, had fallen asleep. The Lady in Gray was whispering again to one of the men. He hesitated visibly, at an apparent request. But her eyes were not eyes to be refused. Finally he nodded and shrugged his shoulders. Then she turned impulsively to the four women.

“Do you know what would give me great pleasure?” she said. “You will forgive me perhaps if it seems a little unusual, since I have not known you for long, but I want you to bring your children to tea with me in my apartment, One Hundred and Fourteen Avenue des Champs Élysées, tomorrow at five. Promise me that you will come. I—I should like to know them.”

The women drew back instinctively. They did not know how to answer such an unheard of invitation. One of them glanced slyly toward the men, but these last were gazing impassively off into the room.

“After the little talk we have had, I feel I must see them,” continued the Lady in Gray. “You will come, won’t you?” She turned almost wistfully to the first woman.

“We will come, madame,” answered the latter with sudden warmth. And as an afterthought, she added, “thank you, madame.”
AND THESE, TOO, ARE MOTHERS

The others assented a trifle awkwardly. Then the Lady in Gray moved quietly away, with the two men on either side of her. The women left standing at the table looked at one another but exchanged no comment. It was almost as if they were afraid to admit that what had just happened was bizarre. Finally the mother gathered her child up in her arms. "I'm going home. Good night," she said. When she had left, the three others stood uneasily for a time. Suddenly one of the women spoke: "If we all went—"

The Lady in Gray sat waiting. She seemed a little impatient. Every once in a while she would glance quickly toward the door. Beside her stood a tea-table heavily laden with cakes and candy in small silver dishes. The hot water purred in its kettle—there were flowers in bowls around the room. Suddenly the door bell tinkled and the Lady in Gray half rose from her chair. Then the white door of the salon opened and four women and four children came through it awkwardly, hesitating, ill at ease—the children all about the same age, hanging back, apparently miserable in their best clothes. They were overdressed. One little girl wore a creased, shiny pink satin, cut down at the throat, and a row of hollow, thin imitation pearls. Her hat was a huge affair with magenta roses. The one little boy had evidently fought at being dressed up—a button had been wrenched from his coat, and his red tie was twisted. The child who had been at the restaurant the night before, was still in the same costume and hat. It seemed possible that she had not taken them off between times. The last child trailed far behind. She was more simply dressed in green muslin and white ribbons.

The Lady in Gray came forward swiftly and cordially. The women held themselves consciously. In a dumb sort of way they felt this different background, in which their small shifts and contrivances for a good appearance stood out pitilessly exposed. The room seemed to retire delicately in a soft pastel haze, leaving them alone, harshly displayed, vividly artificial. But this feeling passed quickly as the Lady in Gray bent over their respective children and kissed them. The children stared at her silently. The child whom she already knew did not recognize her. Then they all sat down. The children's eyes became glued to the plates of cakes—and they moved restlessly in their chairs. No one seemed to know quite how to begin. However, gradually under the influence of the Lady in Gray, they all felt more at ease. The mothers began to talk again of their children. The cakes and tea were passed. The Lady in Gray herself helped the children to the cakes and the five women sat
watching as if fascinated the little ones’ gluttonous attack upon the sweets. When everything was finished to the last flaky crumb, the Lady in Gray sighed as if quite happy over their unmannerly hunger.

“It is good to see the young find so much pleasure for so little,” she said.

The four mothers agreed. They felt content, too, just as if they had done something of which to be proud. The children, gorged with cakes, retired heavily to a corner, where they sat, playing among themselves. Then the women talked more freely. Gradually the miserable stories of their lives found expression in the excitement of conversationally being treated as an equal by this lady. Her gentle interest loosened their already emboldened tongues. They exposed their sordid tragedies almost with pride at having stories to tell. Also they showed a pitiful knowledge of human nature, good and bad. The Lady in Gray was the magnet for all their observations, unconsciously philosophical or bitter—they did not once address each other. At intervals, the children in their corner, by a shuffle or a restless flapping of their little bodies centered the attention in their direction. The Lady in Gray seemed relieved when such interruptions occurred. Although no one realized it, she managed to keep the children in the foreground. It was as if she constantly reminded the women that they were mothers, until they plumed themselves like birds over their young. But the women were growing very much at ease in the soft room. The telling of their stories seemed to have simplified the atmosphere and rendered it more breathable for them. Finally the Lady in Gray rang the bell near her chair and four dainty packages were brought in on a tray by a white-aproned maid. Then the Lady in Gray called the children over to her and gave each one a package.

“A little remembrance of me,” she said. The children opened them delightedly. There lay four shiny medallions of the Virgin Mary and four thin silver chains to hang them on. The Lady in Gray fastened them in place around the eager stretched little necks. The child who wore the imitation pearls was especially noisy in her pleasure. She liked bright glittering things. It was evidently time to go, but the women did not quite know how to take their leave. They began to look at each other meaningly—but no one seemed to wish to be the first to go. At last the Lady in Gray rose.

“I want to show you something,” she said, walking swiftly over to a small desk from which she took a picture in a silver frame. It was the picture of a child sitting in a big chair, holding a doll. The women gathered close around her peering over her shoulder.
AND THESE, TOO, ARE MOTHERS

“My child,” said the Lady in Gray softly. “She died when she was eleven years old.”

One of the women sniffled—they all felt very, very sorry and they could easily have cried at that moment.

“I envy you—you see,” went on the Lady in Gray with her quiet voice. “I lost my baby because, I suppose, I did not deserve such happiness.”

The women about her did not look at one another—they looked away. Their children were playing noisily in their corner. The little boy was fighting with the three little girls. But the mothers did not interfere.

“Yes,” continued the Lady in Gray in a far-away voice. “I did not deserve such happiness.”

Then she appeared to forget that there was anyone in the room with her, for she stared off into space and her eyes were wide and dark and clear. So the women instinctively said good-bye somehow and walked out of the door followed by their children. It was growing dark. The streets were flaming gradually with the night fever—carriages rolled by in the shadows of the chestnut trees—the moon white and sad trailed its path over the Arc de Triomphe. The women and children stood in a little knot on the wide avenue. Then they started moving slowly down toward the boulevards. The faces of the women were strangely quiet, but the same expression was on all of them—a timid thin softness shone through their paint. The cheap lace over their hearts stirred as they breathed—they held their heads higher and they did not stare at the passing men.

The shadows from the trees of the lower Champs Élysées fell upon them and painted out the tawdry colors of their costumes. They became merely a group of silhouettes detached against the dark spring green of the chestnut leaves. At last the woman who had brought it all about, spoke as if to herself:

“If one could merit it!” she said.

The others looked at her, startled. One of them answered in a purposely loud, harsh voice:

“But what takes us all?”

The first woman spoke again:

“Let it be,” she said. “The lady who envied us, she had reason. If we could merit it.”

One of the children came running back. It was the boy.

“Mere! Mere!” he cried. “Therese did lose her medallion.”

His mother caught him in her arms.

“Why should we not merit them?” she said passionately—“We, too, have suffered for them.”