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## The Motherhood Club: Catty New York Gals Purr Over Big Bellies

BY PAMELA RYCKMAN | MAY 22, 2005 | TAGS: MEDIA CARNEGIE HILL MANHATTAN STAMFORD WALL STREET

Recently, four couples I know convened for lunch in Carnegie Hill with their toddlers and newborns. One friend is newly pregnant with her second child, while another gave birth to No. 2 three months ago. My son is 18 months old, and I just went off the pill again in the hopes of another little miracle.

Though we haven't known each other long, conversation among the mothers turned immediately toward the personal, not to mention the physical. Our WASP-y husbands shifted uncomfortably in their chairs. "Ladies, there are children present," they pleaded-but we plowed on, undaunted.

Between bites of chicken fingers and animal crackers, Anna said she used to love her breasts; for a large set, they had always been perky and firm. Now she feels more like a subject in National Geographic. Lamenting the effects of motherhood on a smaller bust, I reached my hands inside my shirt to illustrate a deflated balloon. (I swore I'd get a boob lift once childbearing is over, but reiterated my friend Holly's warning: "Never let a doctor from a culture that subjugates women work on your tits. You need a nice Latin man to do the job-a guy who worships a woman's body.")

I want another baby, so I'll willingly turn my body into a science project again. I'll welcome the inflated mammaries, the swollen, veiny legs, the purple stretch marks. And while I'm not usually a sucker for sympathy, I cannot wait for the women of New York to kill me with kindness.

Let me explain: When I became visibly pregnant, people here were nicer to me, but it wasn't the people I expected. On my daily commute to Wall Street, men would pretend to be engrossed in their Wall Street Journals rather than relinquish a seat on the subway. A man my father's age once darted up the block to steal the taxi I had hailed.

But suddenly it felt like I'd become a member of a secret girls' club. A world of kind, supportive women became available to me. The same single women who would have previously given me the once-over before stealing my bar stool eagerly gave up their chairs. They let me cut in line at the restroom. The same skinny girls who sneered and vied for prime mat positions in Pilates class were now cheering me on at the gym.

Other pregnant women and seasoned mothers asked how I was feeling, when I was due,

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whether I knew my baby's sex, at which hospital I planned to deliver. They thought nothing of sharing the intimate details of their labors and deliveries. Women I'd never met talked about how long it took their nether regions to heal and the amount of time required before they felt comfortable having sex with their husbands again. For one new friend, it was six weeks; for another, it was six months, three weeks and four days. (Her husband was counting.)

One woman felt guilty for breastfeeding only four weeks, while another couldn't get her 14-month-old daughter to wean. One pined for her corporate-career days, while another felt deficient because she "just" wanted to stay home with her son. Yet another was convinced that her son would be shut out of the Ivy League because she placed him in front of the television while she took her morning shower. All bemoaned the sheer exhaustion of those first sleepless months.

A pal of mine who defected to Stamford, Conn. agreed that this unique condition-either one's own or proximity to another's-brings out the best in New York women. When she was pregnant, she said, men were often quick to comment on her size, but women avoided discussing weight and were generally more compassionate. Similarly, an Upper West Side mother-to-be of my acquaintance cited the knowing glances she receives from women on the subway or in meetings when she winces. They understand that a jab to her ribs is a welcome fleeting pain, as it ultimately means that her baby is healthy and active. Women who have been pregnant understand that each kick builds the connection between mother and child.

Despite my friends' cuddly commentary, I have another, more cynical explanation for strangers' sudden sweetness: FAT. When a woman is fat, even as a result of pregnancy, she becomes unthreatening to other women. She's promptly out of the running; she's no longer competition. Even though she's a symbol of fertility-some even say an über-woman fulfilling her biological role by continuing the species-she's not a sexual being by society's standards.

Aside from a few fetishists, men aren't inclined to think that a pregnant woman is "hot"-and, regardless, their first assumption is that she's taken. One evening when I was five months along, I was out for dinner at Le Bilboquet with a friend when a man at a neighboring table glanced playfully my way-first toward my eyes, then blatantly at my rack. I was wearing my "sexy mommy dress," a sleeveless, body-skimming little black number with a dangerously low V. I knew I didn't look pregnant, seated behind my table at a banquette. Yet, mid-meal, nature called, and I labored to shimmy my ever-expanding butt past an apologetic couple. Mr. Flirt turned away, embarrassed and ashamed. He blushed, his friends began to laugh and I just beamed.

"No matter how gorgeous you are when pregnant, it's a visible sign that most likely you're in a relationship and you're about to have a lot of responsibility on your hands," said my friend Christy. As a result, many pregnant women simply stop seeing themselves as appealing, much less as potential sex symbols. An Upper East Sider who's expecting her second child told me that she felt more at ease being pregnant when she and her husband applied to become members of an elite country club. "We interviewed with mostly men, and I was glad to have that issue off the table," she said. "There was no way I could have been attractive at that point!"

Sadly, the special treatment ended once I squeezed back into my "skinny jeans." Manhattan ladies are once again rude. They'll rarely make way for my stroller on the sidewalk. They'll cluck and scold if, God forbid, my toddler throws a tantrum in a store. I'm just another chick on the treadmill, just another bitch elbowing her way to the bar-when I actually manage to make it out, that is. But every time I see a pregnant woman, I jump to attention. I offer her my seat, I help her with doors, I carry her packages. Most of all, I ask her to tell her story. I eagerly spill my own. I welcome her to the club.

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