

Anja

I was born in 1958 in the house of my grandmother in The Hague, where my parents stayed since their marriage. I was the first child. When I was two years old my oldest brother was born and when I was four we moved into our own place. There my youngest brother was born when I was almost seven. At that moment I had just finished my first year at the primary school. At the age of twelve I went to secondary school. I had no idea to which school I wanted to go so I chose the school a friend of mine went to, a college founded by Jesuit priests. I had to bicycle 45 minutes to reach the school. After six years I passed the exams and left for Amsterdam. I studied French for a year at the Vrije Universiteit and then changed to the University of Amsterdam where I started my study in non-Western sociology. This proved to be the same as cultural anthropology. In 1984 I completed my master's thesis about a medical anthropological fieldwork I had conducted in Surinam in 1983. From 1984 until 1986 I worked as student assistant in the anthropological department. At the beginning of 1986 I also completed my study formally. In 1987 I left for Dominica to do anthropological fieldwork about mother and child health care.

Until that moment I had never seriously considered to have a child. The idea to have children of my own had gradually become less repulsive, but to me they were something for the distant future. They had not fitted into my plans so far and it was unlikely that they would in the near future. They would only obstruct my plans.

At my arrival at the Dominican airport I met Joey, who worked at the airport. He had just finished his shift and he offered me a ride into town. I asked him whether he knew a furnished apartment for rent. He promised he would ask around and left me at the guesthouse. I had just unpacked and was preparing to take a shower when Joey called. He had heard about three vacant apartments and he would pick me up in about half an hour so I could have a look. The next day I moved. Joey helped me. That night we went for a drink and Joey told me he was 'interested'. I was not, but thanked him for the help. He did not insist. He just said 'When you are ready, any time....' During the next few weeks he dropped by now and then to see if everything still was OK. Usually he brought me some food. He also found an old but reliable car for me for a reasonable price. He never insisted. He always behaved nicely and after about ten months, in a moment of weakness.... Anyway soon afterwards I suddenly felt sick when I saw the poster of a hamburger

company. I had to run to find a toilet. Yet, I could not imagine I would be pregnant. That was, given the precautions I had taken, impossible, I thought. Or had I, like the many women I met, been a little too careless? Motherhood seemed so natural and almost all women I knew had children. It did not seem to interfere with their jobs and careers.

Under those circumstances it was difficult to remember why in Holland motherhood had looked so problematic. Maybe that was why I had taken risks I would never have taken in Holland? Anyway, I hardly had a chance to seriously consider to break off the pregnancy. After the first shock I started to look forward to the baby and only morning sickness and the anticipation of Joey's reaction were troubling me. He had left for a visit to the USA at that time.

Most people in Holland were surprisingly positive, not even shocked. My parents decided immediately that they would come to Dominica around the time of the delivery, whereas my mother would stay for a few weeks after to help me to get used to being a mother. I did not want to tell anybody in Dominica before I had informed the father, but I was found out long before he returned. When I visited one of 'my project mothers' she asked with a grin on her face 'Anja can I ask you something personal?'. 'You are right,' I said, 'but how do you know?' She answered that it showed in my face, I had a happy expression (although I felt miserable because of morning sickness) and my waist was growing wider. I told her I was about three months pregnant and she was very enthusiastic.

A woman from the second research village told me she had dreamed about me and that there had been fish in the same dream. This is a sign of pregnancy and she had decided to ask me straight away. She was very happy for me, because a woman without children is like a tree that bears no fruit, useless. I was after all almost in my thirties and I should be relieved to know that I could have children after all. But it did take Dominican 'strength'. Her own daughter had got pregnant at the age of nineteen without a chance to marry the father. Still she had not been vexed with her because becoming a mother is more important than anything, even more important than the shame you feel when your child is christened at the special day for illegitimate children.

All of these responses made me feel prouder and prouder about my pregnancy. I really got the feeling that I had achieved something fantastic and that I should crown it by delivering a healthy child.

After all these positive experiences Joey's reaction came as a cold shower. He said to doubt that he was the father and insinuated that there might be other candidates. He told me it was all my decision and that he did not want to have anything to do with it. This did not surprise me, but it did hurt me. After a few weeks his attitude changed and he began to boast about it when he went to play Domino with his friends. However, during my whole pregnancy he kept hurting my feelings with his insinuations when he had one of his gloomy moods. He phoned frequently and he dropped by at all moments of the day but I never could

predict whether he was going to be nice and caring or rude and cruel. Sometimes he brought a friend and would start to tell him how 'bad' and troublesome I was. I started to feel nervous whenever the phone rang or when I saw his car stop in front of my house. Sometimes he brought a crate of fruit or a pound of milk powder, because that would be good for the baby in my stomach. He never offered money or things for the baby.

According to Dominican custom the women in my village got interested in Joey. He came from a distant part of the country and they hardly knew anything about him. One of the things they finally found out via a friend of a relative who lived in the village Joey originally came from, was that the woman he had introduced to me as his maid, was in reality a girl-friend. Joey and this woman had been living together before, they told me, but she went to live on her own because he treated her bad. She still came to clean and cook for him and nobody knew whether they were still 'involved'. She was angry about my pregnancy and my friends warned me for complications during the delivery. One of them advised me to buy a medallion with the image of a saint and to have this blessed by a priest. As soon as the child had been born I would have to pin the medal inside its vest. Evil would no longer have a chance.

Later several other methods were advised to ward off evil intentions of women who still believed me to be a competitor. It did not seem to matter that I had no longer was 'involved' with Joey, not as long as he kept paying me visits. During earlier interviews concerning this topic, most informants had claimed not to believe in witchcraft. They usually told me that they were not involved in this kind of thing and nobody could possibly have a reason to harm them. Now it became clear that everybody had experienced cases of witchcraft from close by and that they knew numerous ways to fight this evil.

When I discussed Joey's attitude with some of my friends I also got a lot more information than before. I felt a fool and I was ashamed that I had allowed myself to be treated that way. I was also angry for having to 'compete' with other women for nothing. My friends' response was rather easy-going. 'that's how men are,' they said; 'Women are made to suffer from that.' All of a sudden I learned that many of these women had had similar experiences, some of which were terrible. I got the impression that there was not one honest, reliable man in the whole of Dominica. When I told a friend about this impression she said that there were a few, but that it was hard to find them because they were working hard and at nights they usually stayed with their wife and children. She for one had never met any. When I mentioned a man in the village who always seemed to work hard and who always stayed with his wife and children at nights and in the week-ends, she said that he was probably just cleverer than the others. Fortunately later I met a few men who forced me to revise my pessimistic views, but I am still doubtful about Dominican men.

'Put it out of your mind', 'Don't worry about it, because that can harm you and the baby', 'Keep it cool and don't cause a fight', 'Eat well', 'Take enough rest and exercise' and 'Concentrate on the baby only.' 'If you are not relaxed the child will feel unwelcome and it may become restless and troublesome or even insecure and shy'. Advice like this I got regularly and most of my friends seemed to agree. There were a lot of differences of opinion about my attitude towards the baby's father, however. The question was whether I had to insist on child support or not. I myself was against this and some of the women agreed on the grounds that it was indeed better to avoid this kind of excitement and attention. I had my job and did not depend on his help. Others found it a matter of principle. According to them men always tried to escape their responsibilities. Women were to blame for this as well because they made it too easy for them. My friends often accused me of being 'soft'.

That a lot of women do not follow their own advice became clear to me when one of my friends found out, a few days before her own baby was due, that another woman was pregnant for her boy-friend as well. She went to her boy-friend's office and started to hit him with an umbrella. At home she took all his clothes, cut them into pieces and spread them around the yard of the other woman. When her boy-friend came to her home to complain about her behaviour she threw a flask with boiling water at his head. She just missed him. She told me that since that episode she was having nightmares. She dreamed that her child would turn out to be a girl. This made her very unhappy because she feared that the girl would have to go through the same hardship. Afterwards she was glad she had missed her boy-friend, because of him she could have ended up in jail. She realised she should have remained cool. She called their engagement off, but a few weeks after I had left the country they were married in the Roman Catholic church in town. She had tried to finish with him a dozen of times in the last ten years. Once she said to me 'Anja, I don't know why love is doing this to us, he always can make me make up with him again.'

Another friend once came down to my house in the middle of the night. She was desperate because somebody had told her that her husband was seeing a woman in town. When she questioned her husband about this he got furious. He did not so much deny the fact as accuse her of being too troublesome. 'A woman is supposed to respect her husband' he opined. If she did not like his ways, she should try to find someone else. He left the house and went to live with his mother. I tried to calm her down and advised her, according to Dominican tradition, not to worry about it and just to concentrate on her child. 'Yes', she replied 'that is what my mother says as well, but my mind keeps spinning. How am I going to support my son?'. She came from another village and she had no family nearby. For the same reason she did not have access to family land to grow a few vegetables.

In spite of all the excitement, from the fifth month of pregnancy my life became somewhat quieter. I succeeded in putting Joey out of my mind and since a few weeks my morning sickness had disappeared. I began to feel strong and energetic and I was optimistic about the future.

My stomach did not grow very fast, but the Dominican obstetrician was satisfied with my progress. My friends were not. They felt I should eat better. One of my friends accused me of not eating enough green vegetables. She sent a whole bag of vegetables. Another one advised me to go for a walk in the nights the moon was growing. The moon would help the baby grow as well, she claimed. Another woman who was present at this conversation warned me, however, to be careful not to take a fall. A common joke about my small stomach was 'You are not making a rat there, are you?'

The shape of my stomach also led to discussions. Virtually everybody was convinced I was going to have a girl. There were several grounds for this prediction. Usually it was the shape of my stomach. It was round. The navel did not stick out. I was told that this means there is a girl inside. In case of a boy the stomach would be long and pointed. The husband of one of my friends predicted a girl as well. He had seen that in a dream. Another reason most people in my environment expected a girl was my race. In the past most white women had relied on black housekeepers, cooks and nannies. And the impression that white women are helpless and weak had remained. I might be educated, having a good job, but I probably did not know much about real life, they seemed to think. I even had to come all the way to Dominica to get pregnant (a joke which returned regularly and which was not all that wrong). Making a boy would probably be beyond my competence as well. Although women did not seem to have a distinct preference for either gender during later pregnancies (boys are cheaper, but girls can help in the household whereas they look after you better when you are old), they did prefer the firstborn to be a boy. 'Your womb is blessed' one says if the firstborn is a boy. However, I was not expected to make a boy.

There were only two who predicted a boy; the obstetrician, because of a scan, and one friend who remembered my morning sickness. Boys are more troublesome than girls, even during pregnancy this friend said. Morning sickness is worse with a boy, they move around in your stomach more frequently and the delivery is tougher. When I told one of the mothers the child was going to be a boy according to the doctor's scan, she had to laugh. 'Doctors don't know everything!' During her last pregnancy the doctor had made a scan as well. She already had three daughters and she was glad to hear that she was going to have a boy this time. The father started to feel uneasy. However, the fourth child was another daughter.

Joey apparently did trust the doctor's scan. He made a bet with his friends who, seeing my round stomach, were sure the child was a girl. When I told the doctor that nobody believed in his prognosis, and that I had heard of a lot of cases

were the scan had been mistaken, he had to laugh. He did point out though, that he was always very cautious with his predictions. He would never say 'the child is a boy or a girl', but 'it looks like a' The first thing this doctor said when my son was born was: 'You see, it is a boy after all!' and then: 'and he has your hair.' Strange enough I was secretly proud to have shown that I could make a boy, but each time I was complimented with my son I replied that a girl would have been just as nice.

The urge to prove myself remained throughout my stay. When I was hospitalised with the first signs of toxæmia, my friends considered this to be another proof that I was ignorant with respect to practical things. Probably not enough rest, too much of these modern foods, too much excitement, and so on, they explained. I could not convince them that I had tried to follow their advice conscientiously. Besides, I asked them, weren't there a lot of Dominican women hospitalised for the same complaints? 'Probably just as stubborn' was the reply.

I did not know any of the other women on the ward. They were just as doubtful about my capabilities, but they did not try to mother me yet. They were curious about how I would fare during the delivery. 'Are you going to scream?' they asked at several occasions. 'I don't know,' I replied, 'but does it matter if I do?' Apparently it did. The delivery room was only separated from the ward by two thin doors. On the ward we could hear everything that was going on there. One night a young woman screamed so loud that nobody could sleep any more. The next morning she was scolded by the others. 'A scandal to behave like that,' they criticised her. The urge to prove myself in front of my room mates was added to all my fears and misgivings about the delivery. During the actual delivery I was constantly aware of the fact that they were listening to every sound. I am proud I did not scream. I did curse badly, however. In Dutch, so that did not matter.

The delivery, which had to be induced, was difficult. Towards the end the midwife decided to call the obstetrician, because she feared for the baby's life. It took a while before the obstetrician arrived, and in the meantime another, more experienced midwife was called to my bed. I was totally flabbergasted when she turned out to be Joey's 'maid'. She had known I was there, and she had made sure she was not the one to deliver me, but the circumstances brought us together. She was not very friendly, but she did the best she could until the obstetrician arrived. Two hours after the delivery she came to my bed. 'The boy's father was here,' she said, 'but I did not let him in, that is our policy.' At that moment I could have strangled Joey.

Except for the hospitalisation and the shock at the end, my pregnancy had passed without any complications, but one experience gave me reason to worry. I had learned that extreme emotions, fright, fear, anger, etc. are bad for the child. They can cause deformation among other things. One day, when I was just leaving for the airport to pick up a friend, a dog entered my house. Apparently it had just been hit by a car. It could not use its hind-legs and it bled heavily. Within a few

moments my house was covered with blood. It was even on the ceiling. I could not leave the dog, but the animal was so upset and scared that it tried to bite me whenever I tried to come close. A neighbour had to come to pull it outside with a rope. Afterwards I thought of the stories about deformed children. I reassured myself that I did not believe those stories, but they kept coming to my mind. When I told Francisca about the dog she got frightened as well. She advised me to put it out of my mind straight away. Worrying about it would not do me any good she said. Later when I first saw my little son, I thanked god that his skin was smooth and his limbs were straight. He was a healthy boy with the loudest voice on earth. I named him Jan, after my mother's father whom I had never known. This was an act of rebellion, for Joey had wanted to name his son himself.

If I had hoped that by giving birth to a son (without screaming), I had proven to my Dominican friends that I too was a real woman, I was terribly mistaken. First of all, I had had a difficult delivery, which had left me with a lot of stitches. To my friends this in itself was a sign of the vulnerability of white women, but when I still preferred to sit on an inflatable pillow four days after the delivery, the nurse who came to check on Jan and me daily, remarked that black women were much tougher: 'They would not bother as much about a few little stitches.'

Whether the Dominican women are really much tougher, or whether they just suffer in silence, I don't know, but everybody expects them to just return to their normal business immediately after delivery. They are not supposed to complain. After having been in the final stage of labour for over one and a half hours I was expected to get up from the delivery bench and to walk to my bed all by myself. I had to take care of the baby right away too. I was actually very proud that I managed all that, but I soon learned that was really only the beginning. Two days after he was born, Jan felt a little hot. When the nurse checked his temperature he appeared to have a fever. She sent me back to the hospital to consult the paediatrician. At the hospital they kept me waiting for two hours before the doctor came to see us. All the while I had sit on this narrow wooden bench. Stitches and all. When the doctor finally arrived he took some blood samples from Jan and told me to wait for the results. Back to the bench for three more hours. Fortunately I could go back home after the results came back from the lab.

The third day after the delivery my blood pressure went up again. The nurse reproached me for not taking enough rest, and for worrying too much. At that time I really wondered whether the Dominican women would ever trust my skills as mother. How could I ever prove that I could do it? I did not bother to tell this nurse how much it hurt to breast-feed Jan!

Fortunately this pain soon disappeared, and within two days I had enough milk to feed him properly. After a week he had put on a few ounces and after six weeks his weight had almost doubled. At eight weeks my friends gave him the nickname 'Champion' and they asked me whether it was Elephant's milk I had there.

When Jan was five days old his father came to visit him for the first time. He took Jan outside into the daylight to see if he could detect any flaws. To me Jan looked perfectly alright, but his father found that he looked yellowish. He accused me of not eating the proper things and ordered me to get rid of Jan's yellow complexion. It did not make a difference that the friend he had brought told him that Jan looked perfectly healthy to him. He had one of his dark moods again.

During the first week Jan behaved quite well. He slept a lot and seemed satisfied just to sleep and drink. After ten days the umbilical cord dropped, and from that day on Jan changed his habits. He appeared to be a very bad tempered little boy. He never slept longer than three hours in a row, usually from seven till ten pm, and when he was awake he almost continuously screamed. He was only quiet while he was being carried around or while he was drinking. Soon I looked like a ghost, but none of my friends seemed to feel sorry. They either reacted to Jan's temper with a grin, telling me approvingly that Jan was a real Dominican man: 'He has blood man!' or by shrugging, saying something about that being the way things were: 'At first they have to get used to normal life, then, when the navel drops they feel their body, they feel they are alive and the want to prove it!' Some, however, blamed me for spoiling him. One day I found myself caught in the middle of a dispute about Jan's behaviour. One neighbour advised me to ignore him, while another believed it was risky to let a little boy cry. Boys could easily get a hernia when crying, she remarked. Once I tried to let him cry, but when he still cried after almost two hours I picked him up.

The first five months of his life Jan lived up to his reputation of being a 'bad' boy. Although nobody ever seemed alarmed, his crying was continuously discussed. I was given a lot of tips on how to get him to sleep, and how to treat the gripes that troubled him. One of my friends tried to console me. She told me that small babies often suffered from gripes. After about five to seven months he would outgrow them, she told me.

My worries about day care for Jan had been solved during the first week of my pregnancy. Mrs Ford, the mother of one of my friends had wondered in the presence of my friend whether I would trust her with the baby's care. Co-incidentally I had already decided to ask her, because my intuition had told me she was the right person. From his sixth week she looked after my little boy. I brought him in the morning and fetched him at nights until the day I had to leave for Holland. I don't think either of us ever regretted this arrangement.

Because of Jan's crying I felt at first embarrassed to bring Jan to Mrs Ford, especially since during a first visit he had done nothing but scream. Mrs Ford however, assured me she could handle it; she had looked after more troublesome children during her lifetime! She lived up to her promise and, during the first eighteen months of his life she became Jan's second mother. She never complained about his temper, although I often found Jan with his clothes inside out.

At first I thought her eyes were getting bad, for she was already nearing her seventies, but later I realised that he had his clothes inside out on days that he had been particularly troublesome. Mrs Ford's pride always forbade her to admit that Jan had given her trouble, but to reach her house to pick up Jan, I always had to pass a neighbour. The neighbour was usually busy in her front yard making baskets for the market. Each day she commented on Jan's behaviour: 'Today he was bad, bad,' she would say, or she would just shake her head with a big grin on her face. So, when I realized Jan's clothes were turned inside out mostly on his 'bad' days, I asked about it. Mrs Ford laughed. 'You young people like to laugh about the old people, but babies often cry because they can feel evil powers passing by. To keep the evil at a distance it helps to turn your clothes inside out.' This remark led to an extensive discussion of evil powers, witchcraft and methods to keep evil at bay.

In spite of his temper, Jan was growing fast. He became Mrs Ford's pride, for she felt it proved how good she was at taking care of children. Each Monday she asked Jan 'What did your mother do you this week-end?' and each Friday afternoon she told me how to take care of 'her boy' during the two days she would not see him.

She usually disagreed with me about the amount of food Jan was to get. The nurses usually advise mothers who bring their children to a nanny during the day to prepare the bottles in the morning and to bring these along with the child. This way the nurses pointed out, one would be sure the bottles were properly sterilised, and contained the right proportions of formula and water. Grateful as I was for my patient stand-in, I wanted to keep things as easy as possible for her and I decided to follow the nurses advice. The first days I followed the directions on the tin. I prepared four bottles, the number of bottles indicated for a baby Jan's age. When I came to fetch him, Mrs Ford appeared quite annoyed. I was starving the boy she told me. After a few days I decided to prepare an extra bottle, but Mrs Ford still complained. She told me that Jan was probably crying so much because he was hungry. He was much bigger than the average baby she pointed out, and needed more food. From then on I prepared two extra bottles. Mrs Ford did not exactly agree with this policy, but she stopped arguing. Significantly, on Monday mornings she would feel his stomach to check whether it was empty.

At the following check-up the nurse commented on how fast Jan was growing. She asked me what I fed him, and warned me not to give more than the six bottles. A child that gets too fat as a baby, she pointed out, would be prone to become obese as an adult. For the next couple of months I was to stick to the six bottles.

Mrs Ford shrugged when I explained to her what the nurse had said. 'If you two want to starve the child, that's up to you. As long as you do not blame me when it cries for food,' was her comment. 'Nurses and doctors don't know everything you know,' she added.

Jan went on growing fast and Mrs Ford liked to tell me how people had complimented her with her 'champion'. I was glad the disagreement about the amount of bottles had come to an end. Several months later, however, when I told her how satisfied the nurse had been during Jan's last check-up, Mrs Ford appeared to have a confession to make. She had bought her own formula as well as some Toulomain. She had given these to Jan in addition to the bottles I had brought for him. She had also started to feed him potatoes, pumpkin, meat and fish since he was six months. Normally, she said, babies would get these foods at seven months, or later, but Jan was so much bigger than ordinary babies, that she had decided to try if he could take it. Jan enjoyed it, and she had just continued to feed him real food. She knew how I, an inexperienced woman, trusted the nurse rather than an 'silly old woman', but for Jan's sake she had ignored our advice and had acted as her experience and common sense as a woman had told her. Furthermore, she remarked, she felt ashamed in front of the neighbours. They would think she could not take care of a little baby. My report on Jan's visit to the nurse, had caused her to point out how right she had been. As a result of her success, at the same occasion she also confessed that she bathed Jan under the cold tap each morning (although I always bathed him before I brought him). 'At first he screamed his head off,' she grinned, 'But later he got used to it. It makes them strong, so when they get wet with rain, they will not catch a cold that fast.' Since the nurse had complimented me on Jan's amazing progress I could hardly complain about Mrs Ford's initiatives. Jan would soon get too big for bottles anyway, and from then on I left it entirely to Mrs Ford to feed Jan as she pleased. And I followed most of her advice from then on.

In spite of our little disagreement about Jan's food, and despite (or probably because) of Mrs Ford's constant referral to my inexperience as a mother, we were both very proud of our baby. One day I was waiting at the bus stop with Jan, when an old man passed. He looked at Jan and said to me 'You breed good seeds man!' I felt very proud that I had accomplished that.

Not even Jan's father could find anything to complain about and, except for a few minor quarrels, seven months passed without serious incidents. Each day, when I came to fetch Jan, I had long talks with Mrs Ford. She soon knew all about me, my work and my problems with Joey's scary moods and just as often she confided in me as well. Sometimes she asked my opinion on certain matters, on other occasions I would consult her. She never liked Jan's father though, because she found it improper that he never once offered money, clothes or food for Jan. She had grown very fond of Jan and she presumed that the only chance for Jan and me to settle down in Dominica would be if I found a reliable Dominican partner. Consequently, she tried to find me one. To this end she gave two nice dresses and a pair of high heels. She had never appreciated the 'plain' clothes I had brought from Holland, and she felt that I would never find a partner if I did not learn how to present myself. That I had already found

a partner in my own country did not count. He was too far to be of any use, she stated.

The only dissonant during those months were some minor fights with Jan's father, who tried to forbid me to leave my house with Jan unless it had to do with my work, and a persistent nappy rash. After two visits to a doctor and after having tried several bush-teas, I finally found a remedy that worked. It was recommended to me by the PHC nurse and I bought it at the dispensary.

One night, when Jan was about eight months old, he suddenly had a very high fever. I gave him some paracetamol, but the fever stayed. Several women advised me to go to 'casualties' at the Princess Margaret Hospital. I did and the doctor diagnosed a cold. She prescribed me erythromycin, but I decided to wait and see. The next day the fever was much lower and I brought medicine back to the health centre. Since that day Jan suffered from sudden attacks of high fever, and I had to take him to 'casualties' at three occasions. These sudden fevers soon became an important topic among my friends. One of them asked me if Jan had made a fall or had knocked himself. If he had an abscess could have formed inside his body. The abscess, which could not be seen from the outside, could poison the blood and cause an internal inflammation. She advised me to consult a woman in the village who was known for curing this type of ailments. The family I had lived with before Jan's birth had a different theory. They believed that I, being unexperienced as I was, had not known how to take care of a simple head cold. The head cold had first developed into a chest cold and had eventually caused bronchitis. They believed so because in addition to the fever Jan breathed very loudly.

Each time the fever returned, Mrs Ford became more worried. At first she had agreed with the doctor's diagnoses (colds, at most occasions), but after the third episode she started to look for other explanations. One Monday she asked me whether Jan's father and I had reconciled. During the week-end the three-year-old daughter of her older daughter had been bending down to look at her from between her legs. This, Mrs Ford said, was a sign that somebody in the family was expecting another child. 'When children do that, they are looking for a brother or a sister'. I was still breast-feeding Jan at nights, and, Mrs Ford pointed out, the milk of a pregnant woman can sometimes harm a nursing child. I told her that there was no way that I could be pregnant, but she remained suspicious. 'That's what the other two are telling me as well, but one of you must be pregnant!' she insisted. When several weeks later her younger daughter admitted that she was expecting her fifth child, she abandoned her theory about the milk poisoning Jan and she asked me whether I was sure I had never dropped Jan. When I told her, that, as far as I knew, he never fell, she disbelieved me once more.

Two months later she asked if I had ever allowed Jan to accept food from strangers. I understood that she was considering witchcraft as a cause of Jan's problems. Her fears were aggravated I figured because at ten months Jan still did

not walk more than a few steps. Mrs Ford and many others did what they could to get him to walk, but Jan seemed not interested. Each time I met one of my friends, the first thing they would ask was 'What does Jan do for you now?', to be very disappointed when I did not answer that he walked 'for me'. I turned out that there were many theories about children that did not start walking in time and there were numerous remedies to stimulate the process. However the combination of Jan's lack of interest in walking and his fevers frightened Mrs Ford, and one day she decided to visit a woman 'who knows about these things'. She did not tell me, but at eleven months Jan suddenly walked, while the periods between the fevers became longer.

When Jan was sixteen months old, I told Mrs Ford that Jan seemed to do quite well lately. She then admitted that she had visited that woman. She had not wanted to tell me because her daughters would laugh at the mere suggestion, and she believed I would not have approved either. Anyway, the woman had confirmed her theory about witchcraft. She had learned that one of Jan's father's girl-friends was angry about Jan's birth. She had asked a friend to 'fix Jan up' for her. The friend was a colleague of Jan's father, and when Jan's father had showed Jan to him he had knocked Jan softly on his back. Witchcraft can turn such soft knocks into serious blows if you take a potion prepared with rum, a certain type of caterpillar and few different herbs. The witchcraft was in this case too strong for the sacred medallion to protect Jan. The blows had caused internal inflammation, of a type that could not be cured the ordinary way. The woman had given Mrs Ford a few herbs to neutralise the witchcraft. She had also asked Mrs Ford to bring one of Jan's vests, but she never told her what she needed it for. After three consults during which she massaged Jan's tummy, she told Mrs Ford that the power of the evil would diminish and that the fevers would eventually stay away entirely.

Slowly but gradually the women forgot about my being inexperienced and impractical. They discussed their problems with me just as I did with them. Joey kept paying Jan visits, and during most he was spiteful and bitter. Once he called in the middle of the night. He had brought a friend with him to show him 'this worthless woman who tries to kill his wonderful son.' He took Jan, who was sleeping soundly, out of bed to see 'what I had done to him this time.' Of course Jan started to cry. His father shook him angrily and accused me of making his son turn against him. As my friends had advised me I did not answer him, I just ignored him. I did not even tell him to stay away because my friends had made clear that, as the father he was always entitled to visit his child.

However, one day I could not control myself, and in front of one of his daughters and one of his girl-friends I reproached him for the way he treated me. I really embarrassed him, I guess, and we got into a bad fight, which left me with a bruised face. I called one of my friends and she took me to a doctor who advised me to prosecute him. 'If women don't take action,' she said, 'men will never learn

how to behave.' I hesitated because I did not know how people would react to this. I had once overheard the Dutch consul complaining about these 'white women getting themselves into trouble with Dominican men', and I had remembered that ever since. The doctor, a Dominican herself, said that no one would agree with him in this case. Since my friend agreed with her, I decided to go to the police. On my way there I met Jan's godfather and he agreed that I should go to the police. He immediately offered to contact a lawyer, a friend of his, for me, but first he brought me to Mrs Ford's house and advised me not to go out on my own. It was good to stay at her house at the time. She gave me bush to calm me down and pampered me as if I was a little child. We talked about the fight all night, and Mrs Ford too, agreed that I should stick to my decision, although she had always pointed at the advantages of just accepting life's hardships, without making trouble. She once told me for instance that when she had been married for five months, she found out that another woman in the village was expecting her husband's baby within three months. Although she had felt hurt very badly she 'never said anything. Because I knew how my husband hates nagging and because I was pregnant myself. I did not want to harm the baby, you know.' When she saw that the woman did not have anything for the child and that her husband was too embarrassed to give her clothes and nappies, she had sent some clothes for the woman herself. When the little boy was two years old his mother died and Mrs Ford had taken care of him. She never told her husband she knew the child was his. She had taken for granted that people held her responsible for the woman's death.

Anyhow, in this case she agreed with me about reporting the incident to the police. When I asked whether this contradicted her other views she just smiled. 'Sometimes a woman cannot follow her own advice.' She admitted that she had once gone too far in her anger as well. Her husband had spent their last money in the rum shop, and she had been so angry that she had gone to the shop to get her husband. She had had to use force, but since she was much bigger than her husband she had succeeded in dragging him home. At home her husband took a club to beat her, but she had taken a small wooden bench and invited her husband to try to beat her. He did not dare, but he had been angry with her for months. 'You see, Anja, we all know that it is better to keep our calm, but sometimes we get too hot tempered to remember that. Our behaviour may provoke our husbands to beat us, but Joey had no business to beat you like this, him being so much bigger and stronger.'

The next morning I visited another friend, an older woman whom I always consulted whenever I was unsure about how to act. She was even more insistent than the doctor had been. I had to prosecute Joey! When I told her I had not received my salary yet (it was sent once in three months) and that I could not really afford a lawyer at that moment, she contacted my other friends and among them they raised enough money for me to pay a lawyer. Fortunately soon

afterward my salary arrived and I did not have to use this loan. However the support really cheered me up and I never felt I should return to Holland as some of the people there suggested.

In spite of the tremendous support, I kept doubting the wisdom of prosecuting Joey. I felt ashamed because I felt that I had failed as an anthropologist. I should not have provoked Joey like that. I should have known that Joey could feel entitled to react like that. The remark of this consul kept nagging at my mind as well. After the fight I had been upset and angry. After that I had felt elated because of the women's support. It made me feel loved and appreciated. Then my doubts became stronger and stronger until I could no longer bear them. Finally I went back to my friend and told her about my doubts. I told her that I believed that I had provoked Joey's anger by making a fool out of him in front of his daughter and girl-friend. My friend who did not agree with me, took my feelings serious nevertheless and went with me to a Dominican priest. He listened carefully and tried to put my mind at ease. This talk really helped me to deal with the problem. When he called me the week after to tell me that Joey, being consumed with guilt, had approached the priests of eight different churches to say mass on his behalf, I felt I could get on with my work. Joey had told one of the priests that he did not understand what had gotten into him and that he felt very much ashamed. I dropped the case against him because of his prior conviction and because I wanted to forget all about it. In spite of their support when I had still wanted to prosecute, my friends seemed relieved. 'You were right to prosecute', Mrs Ford told me, 'but it is always risky to attract so much attention, especially not when you don't need anything from him.'

Anyhow, my friends warned me not to allow Joey to come to my home while I was alone. He still had the right to see his son they felt, but only under certain conditions. Unfortunately I could not avoid meeting him in town. Even then his moods stayed unpredictable and sometimes, in the absence of others, he referred to the fight in a vicious way.

Although the fight itself was a frightening experience, many positive things resulted from it. First of all it felt good to experience the moral and practical support. Afterwards my relation with the women I worked with became much more intimate. It also taught me a lot about male-female relations and about the precarious balance between certain behavioral rules and individual emotions. I learned that, like me, many Dominican women had also broken their silent acceptance of mental and physical abuse, and had ended up with similar feelings of guilt. Some decided to prosecute, most did not. In the end they hesitated to openly fight their partners. Many went back to live with the same partner, deep down believing that he had had the right, or at least a reason, to beat them up.

Moreover, the very fact that my friends insisted that I had not 'deserved' Joey's beating, indicated that in some cases women did 'deserve' a good beating. Indeed one of my friends told me that one night her partner had beaten her so

badly that she had fled to a neighbour next door. The neighbour had refused to let her in because, as she pointed out, her boy-friend probably had a good reason to.

Whether it was because of the fight or just because of Jan's birth, in the end my friends no longer treated me as an ignorant outsider. One of them fell seriously ill, knowing she would soon die. One day she spoke about her worries of leaving her children and husband behind without any one to take care of them. Then she told me that I would make a good successor, except for the fact that her husband would not be able to give me my 'exercise'. It was a compliment I will never forget.

PART II

Mother-and-child health An ethnographic account