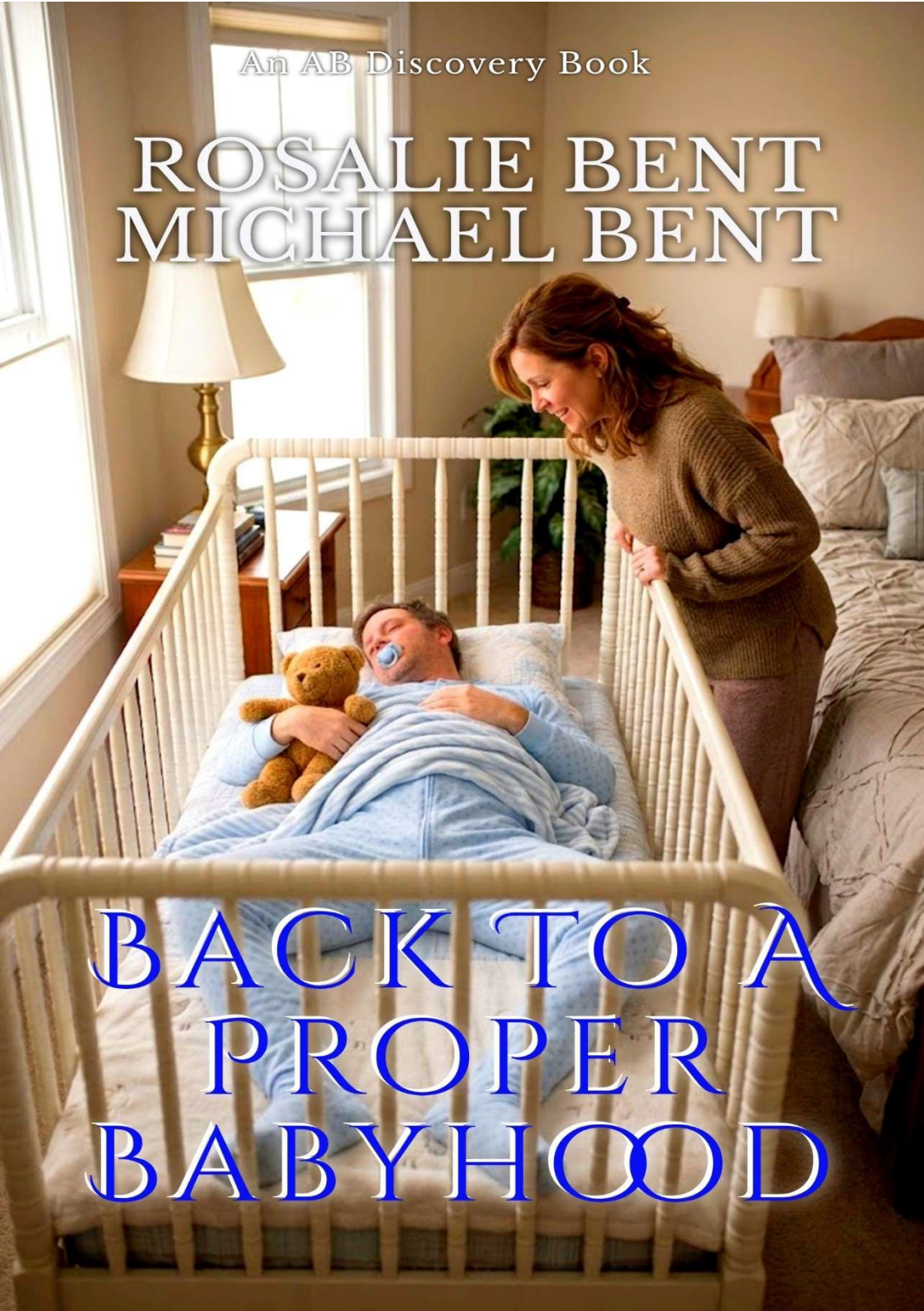


An AB Discovery Book

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A photograph of a man lying in a white wooden crib, covered with a blue blanket. He is holding a brown teddy bear and has a blue pacifier in his mouth. A woman with long brown hair, wearing a brown sweater and purple pants, is leaning over the crib, looking down at the man with a smile. The room has a window on the left with a lamp on a wooden table. A bed with a grey and white patterned blanket is visible on the right.

BACK TO A
PROPER
BABYHOOD

Melinda and Ben: mother and baby

Back to a Proper Babyhood

by

Rosalie Bent

Michael Bent

First Published 2026

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Title: Back to a Proper Babyhood

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Publisher: AB Discovery

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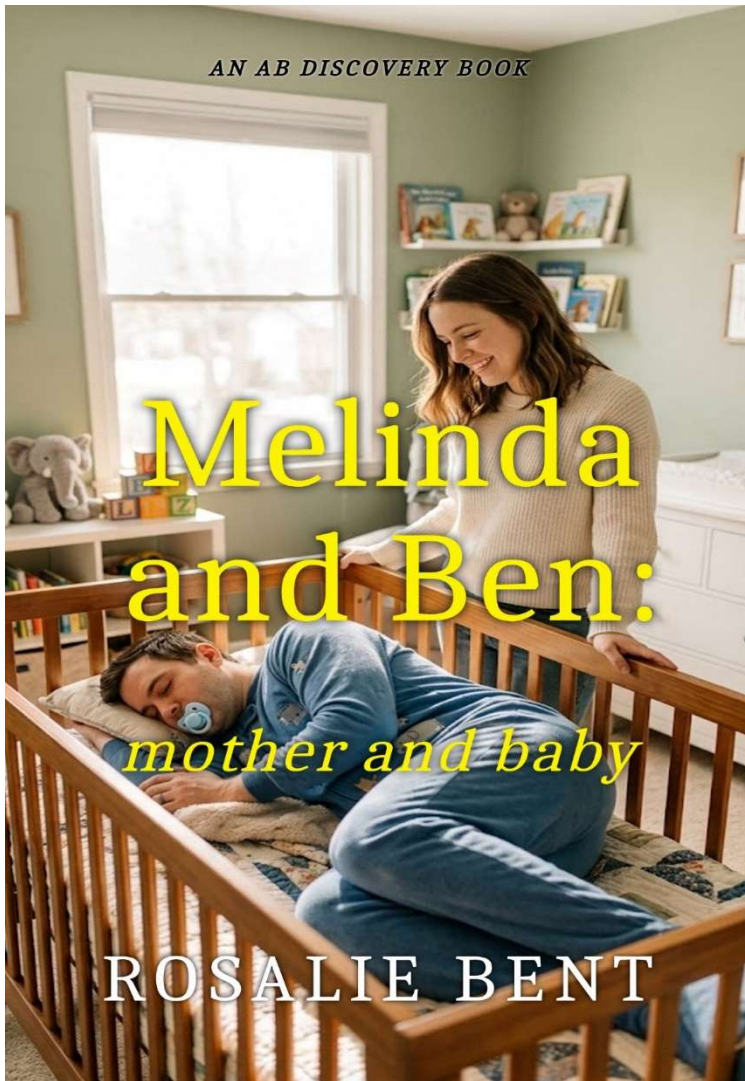
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Melinda and Ben: mother and baby



Melinda and Ben: mother and baby

by
Rosalie Bent

Chapter 1

It had taken just three months, in the beginning, for Ben to disappear into the baby he was, and three months for Melinda to stop being surprised by any of the ways he had stayed there. What had started as an experiment, a long, indulgent break from work, a decision to let the role-play they'd both enjoyed for years run further than it ever had before, just to see how it went, had simply never found its way back. She could still, if she tried, locate the exact week it had tipped from game into fact. The week his bladder gave out entirely. The week the baby food stopped being a joke between them and became the only thing he'd reliably keep down. The week he crawled the length of the hallway rather than walked it, and neither of them thought to comment on it, because by then commenting on it would have meant acknowledging what was actually happening, and neither of them had been ready for that yet.

By the end of the three months there had been nothing left to acknowledge that hadn't already announced itself. Ben, thirty-one years old, an actuary with nine years at a respected firm, had become, in every functional sense, a twelve-month-old infant, and the strange, undeniable truth underneath the strangeness of it was that they had both been happier for it than had they been in years of adult life. Ben quit his job within the month. There had been no real decision to make. In the end, only a resignation letter Melinda had typed for him because his hands could no longer manage a keyboard, and a manager on the other end of the phone who assumed, kindly, that it was some sort of breakdown, and wished him well. Not a breakdown as normally described, but Ben had reverted to a baby again in every way but physical size.

The adult crib went into the main bedroom that same month. It was, Melinda had thought at the time, arranging his soft toys along the headboard, the single strangest piece of furniture assembly of her life, and also, somehow, the one that had felt most like coming

Melinda and Ben: mother and baby

home. It made perfect sense and, oddly, looked completely appropriate for a woman with a young infant.

The alarm went off at six, and Melinda lay still for a moment before she reached over and silenced it. Beside the bed, in the crib that had replaced the armchair and the reading lamp and eighteen years' worth of a marriage's furniture logic, Ben was already awake. She could hear the particular rustle of him shifting inside his nappy, the creak of the crib rail as he pulled himself up to standing and looked at her over the bars.

"Mama," he said. It came out soft and thick, more breath than consonant.

"Morning, baby." She sat up, pushed her hair back, and went to him before she did anything else. Before coffee, before her phone, before the version of herself that in three hours would be sitting in a glass-walled office reviewing quarterly projections. For now, there was only this - Ben's arms lifting toward her, the weight of him as she hoisted him onto her hip the way she'd learned to, knees bent, back straight, because he was not a small child and never would be, not in the ways that mattered for lifting. He was a smallish adult, but was a large baby.

He nuzzled into her neck. His nappy was heavy, sodden through the night the way it always was now, and she could smell it, the mild ammonia tang she no longer flinched from.

"Let's get you changed and fed, and then Mummy has to go to a place for a little while." She said it lightly, the way you'd tell a baby something a baby couldn't really understand, because in every way that counted, he couldn't. But some older thing in him, some remnant, seemed to catch the inference of the sentence, and his face folded toward tears before she'd finished it.

"No go. Mama no go."

"I have to, sweetheart. Just for today." She carried him to the changing table by the window. It was real oak, from a speciality

Melinda and Ben: mother and baby

maker who built adult-sized nursery furniture and asked no questions: upholstered pad, raised sides, the mobile of soft felt stars turning overhead because he liked to watch it while she worked. She laid him down. He was compliant in the way he always was for this, legs lifting automatically when her hand touched the backs of his knees, a reflex worn smooth by three years of repetition in their roleplay. But now it was real, and the nappy was soiled because he was a very real baby now.

She peeled back the tapes. The nappy beneath was heavy with wet and, this morning, with the softer weight of a bowel movement too, and she cleaned him without comment, wipe after wipe, powder, the fresh nappy pulled up snug between his legs and taped at the hips. He watched her face the whole time, the way he always did, his thumb finding its way to his mouth until she gently drew it out and gave him his dummy instead, because his teeth were an adult's teeth and thumb-sucking wore grooves into his gums that made the dentist's assistant, one of only two people outside the house who knew the truth of him, purse her lips.

"There," she said. "All clean."

He gurgled around the dummy, pleased, and reached up to pat her cheek, a gesture that had once, three years ago, been a joke between them, something they did in bed on a Sunday morning for an hour at a time before getting up and going back to being Ben and Melinda, colleagues' dinner parties, a mortgage, a life. Now it was simply Tuesday.

She fed him in the highchair in the kitchen, a jar of pureed vegetable and a bottle of formula to follow, because solids alone unsettled his stomach these days, his body having narrowed its own tolerances the way a child's does, the way his had, over just three months, come to resemble a child's in every particular that could be measured. He ate eagerly, opening his mouth for the spoon the second it came near, making the small, pleased sounds he made for

Melinda and Ben: mother and baby

food he liked, and fussing, turning his head, when she tried the carrot instead of the sweet potato.

"I know," she said. "I know, carrot's not your favourite. Two more bites."

By seven-fifteen he was fed, changed again after the vegetables went through him faster than either of them expected, dressed in a soft blue onesie with snaps at the crotch, and settled on the playmat in the lounge room with the toys that had, over time, become genuinely his. Soft blocks, a stacking ring, a plush rabbit worn thin at one ear from three years of teeth and hands, most of it as roleplay but now, as part of a real infant's life. He would be fine for an hour, she told herself. He had always been fine for an hour, in the old days, when this had still been something they did on weekends for fun, before weekends became weeks, and then became... this.

She dressed for work in the bathroom with the door shut, because some fracture in her still needed that separation, the ritual of putting on the blouse and the blazer without an audience, without Ben's eyes following the transformation of his mother into a stranger in business wear. She looked at herself in the mirror for a moment. Thirty-eight years old. A senior analyst with fourteen years at the firm and a promotion under review. A mother, in every way but the biological one, to a fully grown man who could no longer feed or clean or dress himself.

She had not expected, three months ago, to be either of these women at once. She had expected, at most, an adult baby who wore nappies on weekends and called her Mummy in bed, often as prelude to enthusiastic intercourse. She had not expected the whole architecture of him to give way the way it had, floor by floor, until there was nothing underneath but the baby, entire and irreversible.

She came out of the bathroom, and Ben, from the playmat, made a high sound of distress at the sight of her in her work clothes. Some old wiring in him still recognised the costume of departure and

Melinda and Ben: mother and baby

began to cry in earnest, the plush rabbit forgotten, arms lifting toward her.

“Oh, baby. Oh, sweetheart, don't.” She crouched down to him, careful of her skirt, and gathered him against her chest, and he cried into her collarbone the unrestrained, whole-body crying of an infant who has no other language for *don't leave*. She held him until the crying slowed to hiccupping breaths, and then she looked at her watch and felt the cold drop of knowing she was already going to be late.

“I have to go,” she said, and heard how thin her own voice was. “You're going to be a good boy for a few hours. I'll be back before you know it.”

She left him on the playmat with the rabbit and the stacking ring and the muted television tuned to the channel with the puppets, and she let herself out, and she did not let herself cry in the car until she was two streets away.

Chapter 2.

The first day back at work after their long three-month break, she called during her lunch break. The phone rang eleven times before she gave up.

She told herself it meant nothing. That he was napping, that the ringer was too far from the playmat, that a hundred ordinary explanations existed for an unanswered phone in a house with a baby in it. But driving home she found her foot heavier on the accelerator than the speed limit liked, and by the time she pulled into the driveway her hands were unsteady on the wheel.

The house was quiet in the particular way that frightened her. It was not the quiet of sleep but the flat, exhausted quiet of a crying that had gone on so long it had worn itself out. She found him on the lounge room floor, not on the playmat but a foot from it, as though he had tried to crawl toward the door and given up. His face was blotched red and dry-streaked with old tears. His nappy, when she knelt and touched it, was cold and impossibly heavy, hours overdue for changing, and the smell that came up from it told her everything about how long he had been sitting in his own mess with no one to help him out of it.

“Oh, Ben. Oh, my poor baby.” She scooped him up despite the state of him, despite the fact that it would mean changing her blouse too, and he collapsed against her with a sound that was not quite crying anymore, past crying, into some flatter register of relief.

His bottle, the single bottle she had left him, six ounces of formula in the fridge, needing only to be warmed, a task she had shown him a hundred times how *not* to manage himself because his hands, however willing, no longer had the fine coordination for the microwave dial or the child-proof cap on the formula tin, sat empty on the side table. Empty and dry, licked clean, she realised, looking closer, the teat gnawed at with the blunt insistence of a baby denied a second helping. He had drained it hours ago and then had nothing.

Melinda and Ben: mother and baby

She carried him to the changing table and stripped away the ruined nappy, and cleaned him with a tenderness that had an edge of fury in it, though the fury was not for him. It was for herself, for the plan that had seemed so reasonable at eleven o'clock the night before.

He'll be fine. He naps most of the day anyway. I'll only be gone eight hours.

It had turned out, in the unforgiving arithmetic of an infant's needs, to be no plan at all.

"I'm so sorry," she told him, taping the fresh nappy at his hip. "I'm so sorry, baby, Mummy didn't think it through."

He looked up at her with the swollen, uncomprehending eyes of a child who has only recently stopped crying, and said nothing, because there was nothing in his vocabulary anymore for the horror of what had happened to him that day, only the raw fact of it, hunger and wetness and abandonment, eight hours long.

That night she made three more bottles and left them in the fridge with careful labels, and set an alarm on her phone to remind her to call at ten, at twelve, at two, and told herself tomorrow would be different.

It was not different. It was, if anything, worse, because on the second day he had learned something from the first, some infant logic that said *if I make enough noise, someone will come*, and by the time she got home he had cried himself hoarse, his voice reduced to a thin, broken rasp that frightened her more than the soiled nappy had. He had managed, this time, to drag himself to the bottle in the fridge door. She found the fridge open, cold air pouring uselessly into the kitchen, the second bottle knocked to the floor and unopened because the cap had defeated him. He had simply given up, the way a much younger child gives up, curling into himself on the kitchen tiles rather than the lounge room floor, as though proximity to the food he couldn't reach were its own kind of comfort.

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She sat on the kitchen floor with him in her lap and rocked him, his big frame folded into hers, his knees drawn up, his thumb working uselessly at the outside of his dummy because in his distress he'd lost his grip on it and it had rolled somewhere under the cabinet, and she thought, with a clarity that felt almost like relief after two days of denial.

He cannot be alone. Not for an hour. Not ever again.

"You need someone with you," she said into his hair, more to herself than to him. "A real someone. Not just bottles in a fridge."

He made a small sound of agreement, or perhaps only of comfort at the vibration of her voice against his skull, and she held him there on the cold tiles until her legs went numb, working out, in her head, what kind of woman she would need to find.

At work the next morning she sat through a budget meeting with her phone face-down on the table and her attention entirely elsewhere, nodding at intervals to things she did not hear. Her manager caught her afterwards in the corridor. "Everything alright? You seem distracted this week."

"Family thing," Melinda said, which was true in every sense that mattered and revealed nothing at all. "Sorting out some care arrangements. Should be settled soon."

"Take whatever time you need," he said, and meant it kindly, and she thanked him and went back to her desk and spent the next hour, between spreadsheets, scrolling through care-agency websites with the particular, focused dread of someone drafting a job advertisement she did not know how to word honestly. Every phrase she tried sounded either clinical or absurd.

Carer needed for adult with regressive developmental condition. Nanny required, infant is 34 years old.

She deleted three drafts before she found language that felt survivable, and even that one she read over a dozen times before she let herself post it, as if the words themselves might give Ben away to someone who hadn't yet earned the right to know him.

Melinda and Ben: mother and baby

She left work early that afternoon, unable to sit through the last hour without checking on him, and found him, mercifully, this time, only fretful, not desperate, his second bottle half-drunk and abandoned on the playmat where he'd lost interest or lost the strength to keep working the teat. She finished feeding him herself, sitting on the floor with him cradled against her arm the way she had a hundred times before, and resolved that whatever agency woman she hired, however much it cost, the fortnight of solo days was over.

Chapter 3

She placed the advertisement carefully, wording it the way she had once worded a resignation letter, weighing every phrase for what it revealed and what it concealed.

Full-time carer required for adult dependent with special needs. Experience with infant care essential. Excellent pay. Discretion required.

She did not say more than that, because more than that could not survive being read cold, by a stranger, before that stranger had met Ben and understood, in the meeting, what the words actually meant.

The first woman who answered was named Dianne, fifty-something, brisk, with two decades of aged-care experience and a folder of references thick enough to sit on. Melinda liked her on the phone, liked the competence in her voice, the lack of drama, and invited her over on a Thursday afternoon while Ben napped in the crib, thinking it best to explain first and show second.

She did not manage it. Dianne arrived early, and Ben was awake, and Melinda, flustered, brought her straight through to the lounge room where Ben sat on the playmat in his nappy and onesie, absorbed in stacking his rings, dummy bobbing gently in his mouth.

Dianne stopped in the doorway. Her face did something complicated. A fast sequence of confusion, recalibration, and then, unmistakably, distaste, quickly smoothed over but not quickly enough.

"This is Ben," Melinda said, too brightly. "He's... he lives as an infant. Full-time. He needs the same care you'd give a twelve-month-old. Feeding, nappy changes, naps, that sort of..."

"He's a grown man," Dianne said. It was not a question.

"Yes."

"And he... chooses this."

"It's not really a choice anymore. It's just what he is now."

Melinda and Ben: mother and baby

Dianne looked at Ben for a long moment, and Ben, feeling the scrutiny, looked back at her with the open, unselfconscious gaze of a baby assessing a stranger, and then returned his attention to his collection of toys, uninterested, the way a real infant would be uninterested in an adult who held no immediate promise of food or play.

"I'm sorry," Dianne said, "I don't think this is something I can do. I do real care work. This is..." She stopped herself, but the word she hadn't said sat in the room anyway. *Ridiculous*. "It's not that the money isn't good," she added, with a kindness that felt worse than bluntness would have, "it's just not something I can take seriously as a job."

She left within five minutes of arriving, and Melinda stood in the hallway afterwards, one hand pressed flat against the wall, and did not let Ben see her face until she had arranged it into something calmer. She was both angry and disappointed. She was also shaken by the notion she hadn't considered – that someone would consider Ben 'ridiculous'. She didn't feel offended at the time, but hours later, fury and offence grew in her soul. Ben was her baby. Her literal baby, and she wanted someone who understood that.

The second interview, three days later, went further before it went wrong. The woman, Pat, younger, mid-forties, with genuine paediatric nursing experience, sat through the explanation without visible judgment, and even changed Ben's nappy competently when Melinda asked her to demonstrate, her hands sure, her manner professional. Melinda began, cautiously, to hope.

But afterwards, over tea, Pat's questions took a shape that unsettled her.

"So if he's upset, do you just... let him cry it out? Or is there a... a schedule you follow, like discipline?"

And, "What happens if he tries to talk properly? Do you correct him, encourage him to use full sentences?" And, worst of all, watching Ben on the playmat with an expression Melinda could only