



*Women Open
Up About the
Pleasures, Pains,
and Politics of
Breastfeeding*

unbuttoned

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SUBJECT: PUMPING

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At thirty-eight, with a baby daughter and a son in preschool, I negotiated a part-time marketing job at Virgin Mobile USA, a hip, youthful company. Having once built a multimillion-dollar business from a speck of revenue, I now huddled in a cube, executing mundane sales programs. For this depressing state of affairs I blamed my breasts. Not the perky breasts I'd sported B.C. (before children) but rather my new-mother breasts, that uneven, mole-spotted, milk-dribbling duo.

Before children, my marketing career at AT&T had charted a promising arc. A specialist in bringing new products to market, I was adept at conceptualizing strategy and mobilizing large working teams. I savored my reputation as an up-and-comer. I had a staff of five marketing managers, a dedicated secretary, and a spacious office with a pair of meandering philodendrons. The work whirlwind and my crammed calendar invigorated me. Most important, when I spoke, everyone listened.

Motherhood had changed my priorities (although perhaps not my ambitions). I wanted to breastfeed Gracie for at least a year, with as few bottles as possible. Charlie, my son, was

reeling from the explosion of his sister's birth and needed my calming presence. My schedule at Virgin Mobile—twenty hours a week, mornings—meant I missed only two feedings with Gracie and could spend the afternoons with my children. During my half-day absences, Charlie and Gracie were well cared for by our neighbor and my husband, David, who ran a business from our home.

My MBA gal pals exclaimed over the situation I'd snared: *So great you can keep on breastfeeding! So cool you're working in a start-up!* I nodded, numbly. In exchange for my seemingly ideal arrangement, I was a cube-squatting, slow-track, part-time loser. I longed for my glory days at AT&T, when I strode onto the executive suite's thick carpet for meetings. Nowadays, the only place I zoomed was to the ladies' room to extract breast milk. *This isn't really me*, I often reassured myself. Yet it was my life; I was scrolling through a chapter I would never have imagined.

That is, until I received an unexpected email from Richard Branson. Sir Richard Branson, the billionaire, charismatic entrepreneur who owned Virgin Mobile USA along with four hundred other companies.

The day my inbox trumpeted an email from Sir Richard began like many others. The strap of my black leather nursing bag—laden with hand pump, milk bottles, and spare nursing pads—dug into my shoulder. My briefcase and cooler for pumped milk bumped against my opposite thigh. I hurried past wall posters of cavorting teenaged models, each clutching a Virgin Mobile cell phone. Into my cube's cabinet I stuffed nursing bag and cooler. I didn't like having my pumping paraphernalia on view.

"Yo," said my cubicle neighbor, one of the preppy recent graduates in sales who affected ghetto talk as a way of tapping

our youth market's inner soul. He strutted across the hallway in striated indigo jeans.

I complimented his attire, then asked for the document he'd owed me for a week.

"My bad. I'll get that to you"—he flipped open his cell phone, consulting his calendar—"in an hour?"

"Don't forget."

I grimaced. I sounded so almost-fortyish, so teetering on the brink of middle age, so maternal. It wasn't difficult to sound dated at Virgin Mobile. The company was disproportionately populated by single male twenty-somethings who instant-messaged their buddies obsessively, even during meetings. As a nursing mother, I was clearly the odd woman out.

I logged on to my laptop. A handful of new emails roosted in my inbox. I scanned the names of the senders. The third one down was Richard Branson. Was this a joke? No, the email was legit. I stared at his electronic signature: Richard.

A week before, I'd composed, on behalf of a few Virgin Mobile executives, an email about sales strategy bound for Sir Richard. At the bottom I tucked a bulleted, two-line brainstorming idea. Our teen customer base skewed female. Our logo's luscious, deep red evoked lip gloss, and teen girls prowled makeup aisles. My conclusion: We could profit from a partnership with a beauty company.

Richard (we were now on a first-name basis) wrote to say he liked my thinking. He had plucked my idea from the hundreds of daily missives he no doubt received from his diligent executives around the globe. His email granted me permission to forge ahead. I would locate a chic beauty company to burish the Virgin Mobile brand. Revenue from the alliance would grow until it exploded like a glittering firework. A couple of

years from now, when searching for a seasoned marketer to lead his next venture, Richard would tap me. As I considered this delicious fantasy, I leaned back in my ergonomic office chair. I could fall into a soothing sleep.

My Outlook calendar pinged a grating, two-toned reminder. The appointment details flashed onto the screen: *Subject—Pumping; Location—Handicapped Stall*. I had a meeting with myself in the women's bathroom. Time to pump.

In the ladies' room, warm water sluiced through my fingers and danced down the drain. With Richard's email glowing in my inbox, the risk of invisible organisms swarming through the air and contaminating the milk seemed, for once, remote. I opened the handicapped stall with a clean paper towel gripped between my fingers. Looping one strap of my black bag on the closed door's hook, I removed the hand pump, a plastic bottle already screwed in place.

I pumped standing. Pinning my shirt's hem with my chin (the casual dress code was a boon for nursing mothers), I unhooked my bra's right side and clamped the suction cup over my breast. I gave a long pull on the handle. Cream-colored milk squirted into the metered plastic bottle. The frothy liquid rose to the one-ounce mark, then the two-ounce mark, while the hand pump swished and clicked its familiar rhythm. At four ounces, an endorphin-induced bliss settled over me, like a gossamer blanket from the breastfeeding fairy.

No matter how stressful my days or sleepless my nights, my breasts produced an abundance of milk. When Charlie was born, he latched on with a textbook-perfect fish mouth. My son gradually tapered his feedings to one nightly nursing, until I weaned him at twenty-one months. Breastfeeding was something I was good at, proof I could be a good mother.

Back at my desk, eight ounces of precious milk stowed inside the cooler, I retrieved Richard's email, gleaming in my inbox like a jewel. Hands shaking, I crafted a short reply, copying my chain of command, including my boss's boss, Howard, a fresh arrival from the music industry and our new marketing chief. Within a few hours of my clicking Send, the entire company knew Richard had pinged me.

"Yo," boomed one of the sales guys. "What's up with the Branson email?"

Howard stopped by my desk. He wore a buzz haircut, a cerulean-blue shirt with black netted pockets, and combat-style khaki pants.

"Slick work with Richard," he said. "Call Donna and get on my calendar."

"Absolutely."

"Cool."

Two weeks later, Howard and I met to review the six cosmetics firms I had selected as partnership finalists. Howard zeroed in on an established door-to-door beauty company. He asked me to assemble a formal proposal.

As I conferred with Supply Chain, Finance, and Advertising to hash out the proposal details, I buzzed with a purposeful joy. I sprinted down hallways to meetings. My vigorous workday spun silk strands, tossing the connecting threads to the self of my twenties and early thirties. As for pumping, my twice-daily appointments in the handicapped stall became an annoying obligation I squeezed in between meetings.

The night before a large team session, I worked late in my attic study. David stomped up the stairs.

"You're putting too much time into this project. And you're not being compensated for it."

“This is an investment in my career!”

David rolled his eyes to the slanted ceiling. “You don’t need this on your resumé. Believe me, it’s impressive enough.”

“That’s old stuff. I need something new.”

“Sleep. That’s what you need.”

The next morning swirled with phone calls, emails, instant messages. I skipped my first pumping appointment, resolving to glean extra ounces during lunch. But when my calendar shot out its reminder (*Subject—Pumping; Location—Handicapped Stall*) my Supply Chain contact huffed over: His boss was waffling about the large quantity of phones required for the beauty deal.

To handle this “fire drill,” I would skip pumping.

A conscientious voice, the one that had choked and almost drowned in the Branson-email tidal wave, regained its strength and chastened me. *You’re going to mess up your breastfeeding schedule. Keep this up, and soon you won’t have enough milk.*

I don’t care, the leadership-hungry part of my self retorted. I flounced, with more bravado than Scarlett O’Hara at the Wilkeses’ mansion picnic, to an emergency lunchtime session, during which I convinced the Supply Chain VP to set aside enough phones.

I had one minute to scramble to my team meeting. As I streaked across the floor, I realized I had neglected to tell David I would be late. Patting my pockets for my cell phone, I visualized it on the kitchen counter, where I’d left it that morning in my rush to leave. I was already late for the meeting. David would figure it out.

At the conference room door, I stopped. Fifteen people sat at the table. They had left one empty chair at the head. That seat was for me. Early-afternoon sunlight slanted through the cracked blinds and ignited my chair’s chrome trim. A thin

coating of white light, like smooth ice, pooled on the oval conference table. Five years had passed since I had conducted a session of this scope. The prospect dazzled me.

My breasts chose that moment to balk. They pressed into my rib cage and bulged against my nursing bra. I decided, as I took my seat and described the agenda, to ignore them. What did they know, that ornery, complaining twosome, encased in a milk-stained nursing bra?

As the team checked off the agenda's first issue, then discussed the second, worry seeped inside me until it coursed like a submerged stream. What if, in the middle of this meeting, my throbbing breasts gushed a leak? My right breast, the smaller of the pair B.C., could become especially engorged, the nipple thrust to the side, the tissue rigid and bumpy from gummed milk ducts. I hunched forward, hoping no one would notice my uneven chest.

As we reviewed the third and final question, I imagined Gracie's pout with protruding lower lip ballooning to a full cry, her rosy skin deepening to an outraged red, her little hands clenched in protesting fists. My baby could be crying right now. As much as I rejoiced and exulted in this chair, as much as presiding over this meeting reminded me of my old self, did I need to be that person right now? I had vowed not to be her, at least until I weaned Gracie.

Meeting over, proposal points wrapped up, my breasts sparing me a mortifying leak, I careened through the parking lot. During the half-hour drive home, I agonized whether to exit the freeway to call David.

On the porch I fumbled in my briefcase for the house key. David yanked open the kitchen door. In his arms sat Gracie, her plump cheeks glistening, her eyes beseeching, her voice whimpering. I knew that pleading cry, one I prided myself on

rarely hearing from my children. She had screamed for too long and was now spent with exhaustion. She was very, very hungry.

“Where were you?” David asked.

“I’m sorry.” I lifted Gracie from his arms and made a bee-line for my breastfeeding spot on the living room couch.

David followed. “Why didn’t you call? I held off giving her a bottle.”

I didn’t reply. I wanted to avoid a fight with David and distance myself from the person who had treated her baby so carelessly. Balancing Gracie on my nursing pillow, I peeled away my bra’s right flap. Gracie latched on hard, pulling out the milk with a hungry gulp.

David shook his head. “That was so irresponsible.”

“I know,” I said.

The pressure deflated, not only in my milk ducts but also in my throbbing head, as Gracie sucked out the milk. Her warm hand wandered past my collarbone to grab a fistful of hair. She liked to hold on while nursing. I traced the outline of her apricot ear.

For the next few days, I cringed whenever I remembered stressing my baby. I didn’t want to endanger my ability to breast-feed Gracie. Yet I still harbored my old self, the thirty-year-old with unmarked breasts and confidence in her ability to succeed. I had coveted that head chair at the conference table because I couldn’t relinquish a cherished part of myself. From the standpoint of the leader inside, my breasts had shackled me.

As much as returning to my insignificant, diminished work self pained me, the possibility of Gracie’s weaning early hurt far more. I had to choose, not in an ambivalent way, but clearly and decisively. The following Monday, I asked Howard to remove me from the beauty project.

He nodded thoughtfully. “So you’ll incubate ideas, then let an operational team take them to market?”

“Yes, that would be good.”

“Cool.”

Not completely cool. Resigned, I slunk to my desk and turned on my laptop. I looped the cursor around the screen in wide, aimless circles.

In my mind I heard the voices of two friends, a married couple with older children. They had counseled, as though the matter were zipped up, that parenthood was about making choices. At the time, their advice had made me uncomfortable. Now I understood why. My friends, although experienced parents, failed to describe the sometimes visceral process of making choices. They skipped over the messy struggle. They omitted mention of chiseling cuts, the marble shards of desires left behind.

I sat up in my chair. I created an electronic folder and deposited inside Sir Richard Branson’s email endorsing the beauty project. This folder, christened Branson, would be visible each time I opened my inbox. I would keep it on hand, and occasionally review its contents, as a reminder of the person that I had chosen, at this time in my life, not to be.



Nancy M. Williams led Virgin Mobile USA’s e-commerce sales and marketing group until late 2006, when she took a sabbatical from her marketing career to focus on creative writing. Her work has appeared in *Fit Pregnancy* and *New Jersey Family* magazines. She lives in Montclair, New Jersey, with her husband, David, and her two children.