

THE ONLY GUY WHO CAN
SAVE THE LEAFS

THE ILLICIT PLEASURES OF
ILLEGAL CHEESE

Weekend
Getaways

15 GREAT ESCAPES
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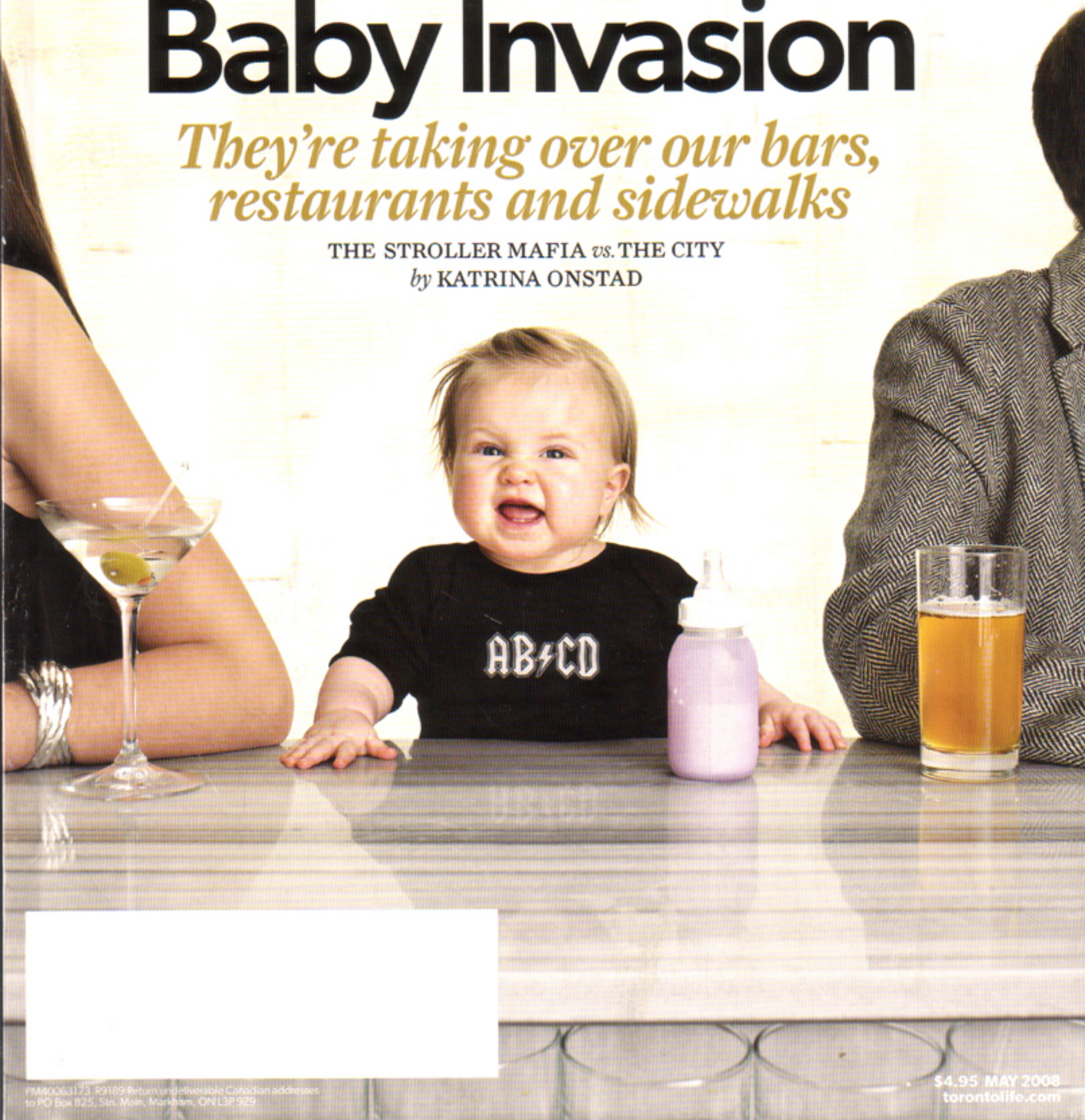
TORONTO LIFE

Baby Invasion

*They're taking over our bars,
restaurants and sidewalks*

THE STROLLER MAFIA vs. THE CITY

by KATRINA ONSTAD



Hipster parents are clogging
cafés with king-size strollers
and inflicting their unruly toddlers
on the childless masses.
Is grown-up space a thing of the past?

A not entirely impartial report
on the battle for downtown

BabyWars

The Stroller Showdown

PULP KITCHEN is a small 24-seat vegetarian restaurant and juice bar in Leslieville, where strollers dot the sidewalks

like giant jelly beans. On a summer day in 2006, Julie Forrest entered the restaurant with her friend Karen Green and their two infant daughters to get some salads and juice to go. It was late in the morning, and no one else needed to be served.

Instead of a big welcome, the hipster behind the counter directed a frosty eye at the babies in their strollers. "It was a definite F-you look," recalls Forrest.

A few weeks later, when she walked by, Forrest saw a handwritten sign on the door: "Attn, parents with baby strollers. Our restaurant is tiny! We have parking for only one stroller inside (but not in the dining area). Thanks!"



Forrest's neighbourhood, south of Queen near Logan, is a place of class confusion: she can buy direct-trade organic coffee and drink it while watching a heavily armed police squad circling a house across her street to halt a drug-related kidnapping. These are the realities of modern downtown life that play out on her blog, Metro

Mama, and the blog is right where she headed after her salad snub. Without naming Pulp Kitchen, Forrest posted a picture of the sign and her take on it: "What pisses me off is that I think they have signs like this because they think kids (and parents) aren't cool. These too cool for school Queen Street joints don't want the babes spoiling their image."

The post became the talk of the 'hood, generating a flurry of like-minded responses. "It's pure discrimination if you ask me," said one. "And if they said the same thing about a wheelchair, they'd

BY KATRINA ONSTAD





be in pretty big doo-doo."

A sole post—from what appeared to be the only male weighing in—rose to Pulp's defence: "If the restaurant says it's tiny and has room for one stroller, how is that not a matter of fact [rather than] an indication of anti-mom attitude?" He got an emotional four-point response from Forrest's friend Green: "Completely reduced accessibility is a reality of life with a baby. Being turned away from a neighbourhood restaurant in the middle of the day because you have a baby should not be."

Two years later, while the restaurant has removed the sign, Leslieville parents continue to boycott Pulp Kitchen. "People still talk about it," a mom with a toddler told me. "It's one of those questions of entitlement. Are parents entitled to go wherever they want? Are some places entitled not to cater to them?"

All Toronto parents have stories about how their neighbourhoods fail to accommodate families, and the stories are traded like baseball cards in moms' groups, on parenting blogs, at the drop-ins and in the parks. Parents want Toronto: the question is, does Toronto want them?

The Birth of the Hipster Parent

THE CLASHES BETWEEN new parents and non-parents is a result, in part, of a mini-baby boom. In 2005, Canadians recorded the highest number of births in seven years. Women in the 30 to 34 age bracket are largely the responsible parties, accounting for 31.4 per cent of those 2005 births, with another 14.5 per cent attributed to mothers between 35

Richard Norman, 40
Activist and Web developer
Riel, 3

HIGH PARK

I'm a father with joint custody, but both Riel's mother and I work hard to make our ethics transparent to our son. We recently took him to the D8 Rally for Kyoto and, of course, to Earth Day. We ride my bike or the TTC everywhere, and sometimes people can give us looks if Riel acts out. A lot of people don't appreciate that a kid is a kid and has every right to be following the rules of what kids do.

and 39. For the first time, the over-30s outnumber younger mothers. This new generation of parents has money to spend, and many are electing to spend it in the downtown neighbourhoods where they lived in their 20s. They don't want to move to the suburbs, or even north of Dupont. They like the diversity, the vibrancy, the idea of downtown living. They want to make Toronto a city that fits them with kids like it fit them before kids.

I had my first baby at the end of 2003, at age 33, and my second less than two years later. When I ventured out of the second postnatal cocoon, I encountered a barely recognizable, loudly churning baby culture. Suddenly, my 2003 Peg-Pérego was a relic, the eight-track of strollers. In fact, strollers weren't called strollers anymore; the genericized trademark was Bugaboo (like Kleenex or Thermos), and they cost \$1,200. These Euro baskets drifted over Queen Street, smooth as hovercrafts, while I huffed, pushing my dino-stroller unergonomically through the snow. New inventions were everywhere. A mom on the playground asked me, "Have you tried the Ergo baby carrier?" What she meant was, "Why do you persist in wearing a Baby-Björn? How retro?"

My first baby and I had hung out in publicly funded Early Years Centres. These slightly worn drop-ins for parents and kids were functional and fine, usually housed in musty schools crammed with chewed toys and hippie-ish women leading bobble-headed babies in "Swim, Little Fishies." By kid number two, we had the option of a private, \$7 drop-in with Japanese lanterns on College Street. I could get childminding and a facial at a Queen Street organic spa. The baby yoga of my first maternity leave was passé; now it was all about baby salsa and baby massage. Storefronts in my Queen West neighbourhood were filled with educational bamboo toys from Sweden. The moms all had blogs.

Today babies blanket the downtown. Parenting coaches and eco-birthday parties are the latest frontier. On Sunday mornings, the Dakota Tavern on Ossington is packed with honky-tonking toddlers dancing through Bluegrass Brunch. After a nap, they head to the Gladstone Hotel for an afternoon family singalong. Around the corner from my house, across from Trinity Bellwoods Park, is Ella & Elliot, a kids' store carrying once hard-to-find European imports. There, a new parent can pick up an oval Stokke crib system (\$1,270) from Norway (ovals did not exist when I had my first child) and a new stroller that makes the Bugaboo look like a Gremlin. It's called the Xplory (\$1,150), and it is a cross between a spider and the robot from *Short Circuit*. "Not everyone is brave enough to try it," says Christian Imler, the young Roncesvalles father who runs Ella & Elliot with his wife, Suzanne O'Leary. "But once a few moms get into it, others will follow."

I am somewhere in the middle of the hipster parent spectrum, halfway between appalled and complicit. I don't put my kids in T-shirts that only