A Mother No More - *Time*, 7/2/2001, By Amanda Ripley

*A woman tells police she drowned her five children. What could have led her to this act of madness?*

The Yates children had big blooming smiles, the comprehensive kind that somehow manage to showcase every tooth. That was their mother’s smile, judging from the family photo her husband showed the media last Thursday.

A very different Andrea Yates stares from her police snapshot. This woman, 36, looks sapped of life and utterly sad. That, her husband insists, is not the Andrea he knows. That’s not the Andrea who made little coupon books, with coupons redeemable for hugs, for each child on Valentine’s Day. But that is the Andrea who apparently drowned all five of their children last Wednesday. She was, Russell Yates says, a woman racked by severe postpartum depression.

It was her second bout with the illness. Following the birth of her fourth child, in 1999, Andrea, a former nurse, was hospitalized after swallowing pills in a suicide attempt. Her husband claimed that she recovered with medication. Last November she gave birth to a fifth child and seemed O.K. But in March Andrea’s father died, and she began to act “withdrawn” and “robotic,” Russell says. She went back on anti-depressants and antipsychotics but didn’t respond as well as she had before. She was functioning, Russell says, at “maybe 65%” and struggled to continue homeschooling her kids. Russell’s mother began coming by each day to help out.

Around 9 a.m. Wednesday, Russell, also 36, left the family’s tidy house in Clear Lake, a Houston suburb, for his job as a NASA computer engineer. Less than an hour later, Andrea drowned 2-year-old Luke in the bathtub, according to a police investigator familiar with her taped confession who spoke anonymously to local newspapers. By the investigator’s account, Andrea then put the boy’s body on a bed, under a sheet, and repeated the process with Paul, 3, and John, 5. While she was drowning six-month-old Mary, Noah, 7, walked in. When he tried to run, Andrea allegedly dragged him back to meet his siblings’ fate. When all the children were gone, she dialed 911. Next, she called Russell and told him to come home. Unnerved by her somber tone, Russell called back to ask if anyone was hurt. “‘Yes...the children,’” he said she replied. “‘All of them.’”

Most mothers know something of the mental slipperiness that can come with a new baby. Up to three-quarters of them experience some mild form of postpartum “blues”--a sense of anxiety and defeat that usually fades in a few days. About 10% to 15% experience actual depression. But in 1 of every 1,000 births, the mother develops what is called postpartum psychosis, in which she breaks from reality, in rare cases becoming violent. Andrea told police she first thought of killing her children months before, convinced that she was a bad mother who had permanently damaged them, according to the Dallas Morning News.

Among the questions that linger: Why did Andrea reportedly go off antipsychotic medication weeks before the tragedy? And having already endured one harrowing postpartum episode, why did she have another child? Andrea had been prescribed Haldol, an antipsychotic, after the birth of her fourth child. “If she were indeed psychotic [then], she should not have gotten pregnant again,” argues Dr. Viven Burt, a psychiatrist at UCLA. Women who have once endured postpartum depression risk a 50% chance of recurrence.

If women do go through with a subsequent pregnancy, Burt argues, they should be treated throughout with antidepressants and antipsychotics. While the idea of medicating a pregnant woman for mental disorders is controversial, it is gaining credibility among doctors who believe the benefits to mother and child outweigh the risks.

Prosecutors have charged Andrea with capital murder and may pursue the death penalty. Russell says he forgives his wife and blames her illness instead. He says he is glad his son Noah won at horse the last time they played basketball. But he wondered what he might have done differently. Asked by reporters whether he had missed some clue, Russell replied, “I suppose. I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t know how to answer that question.”