After filling a story from there I took the five minutes’ walk to the Strand Shopping Centre. It was years since I had been there, and I was surprised to find that the drab, run-down precinct I recalled had been refurbished and improved into a typical light, airy modern shopping mall, complete with glasses atriums, potted plants, escalators and top British high street stores like Marks and Spencer and Mothercare.

It was the school half-term holiday week, so I was expecting there to be lots of children milling out. There were very few. Mothers and fathers kept their children in their push-chairs or clutched tightly to their sides. That day, **a few toddlers were on reins**. These had been fashionable in the 1960s as a way of keeping wandering children in check, but were little used these days. That Monday morning the few shops that still stocked them in Bootle sold out, and found themselves with full order books. By the end of that week, **almost every young child you saw was tottering about on the end of a length of sturdy nylon**. They were attached to their mothers **as surely as if by umbilical cords**, and a sharp jerk on the rein ended any notions of striking off in the wrong direction. The children looked a little bewildered at this sudden constraint of their freedom to explore.

Their mothers were grimly resolute, immune to all protests from their offspring. ‘Nobody takes my baby,’ was the message **etched clearly in those faces**.

Mark Thomas, *Every Mother’s Nightmare*, 1993