

AFTER BIRTH by MAYA SONENBERG

Michelle's first baby died three days before her due date. Inside her, she died. The baby who had greeted every day with a swift kick to Michelle's bladder. Instead, Michelle woke that morning to stillness and a feeling of dread. After the ultrasound confirmed there was no heartbeat, the doctor said she'd have to go through with the whole birth process anyway, even though she begged them to put her to sleep and cut the baby from her. "We try to avoid major surgery," the doctor said. "We can wait to see if you go into labor on your own, or we can induce."

Michelle's husband Marco suggested waiting, time to get used to this, but Michelle looked at the two of them, the two men, and said, "All right. Let's just get it over with. I don't want to get ready. I can't get ready for this." She fumed as the nurse called the hospital to see when she could be admitted.

In the hospital, they offered her Demerol, as much as she wanted, they'd simply add it to the Pitocin drip. Michelle's doula advised her against it, encouraging her to experience the process fully—only then would she really be able to grieve Baby's loss. Marco fired her on the spot, a move Michelle was grateful for even though she couldn't have done it herself. Michelle would have taken enough Demerol to make her forego even the slimmest memory of this event, but Demerol made her violently sick. The couple of times she'd had it in the past, she'd thrown up for hours, and she couldn't imagine anything worse now—insult to injury as they say. Instead, Michelle had an epidural. Deadened from the waist down, she wept through a funny movie, then when the time came, pushed and pushed, concentrating just on the effort, not the result.

She refused to hold the baby despite all the advice she'd gotten that holding the baby, even just once before she went cold, would help bring closure. Michelle was afraid she'd

lapse into thinking the little girl was alive. She looked at her though, looked at her long and hard, watched the baby's color drain and change as they cut the umbilical cord. First her face went from pink to blue to yellow, then her arms and legs, and finally her tiny chest. She looked perfect and the autopsy showed that she was, indeed, perfect: no reason why that heart should have stopped beating.

That looking was the last action Michelle took for months. Marco brought her home and for two weeks didn't leave her side. He ordered in a lot of bad pizza and sometimes she nibbled on the crusts. After two weeks, he felt he could go out—Michelle would at least get herself a glass of water—and he *had* to go out so that he could cry. Although Michelle often accused him of being hard-hearted, the one time he did cry in the house, they both cried themselves into a puddle he thought would extend forever. They somehow couldn't console each other. Michelle would eventually fall asleep, worn out, the way Marco remembered crying himself to sleep as a child. And he could—eventually—console himself if he was crying alone. Finally respites from crying lasted long enough for him to go back to work, and Michelle's mother came to stay. Marco told her to say nothing, nothing at all, and to pick the tomatoes off the sandwiches she made if Michelle asked her to. They hadn't really gotten along since Michelle was a baby herself, but sometimes busy friends can do only so much.

Michelle's second baby was born without incident, except for the joyful incident of birth. A long labor but uneventful. This time, Michelle happily suffered great pain, despite Marco's reminders that she could have an epidural. This time she wanted to experience it, even the tearing, and so on. They named the boy Jamie and took him home wearing the standard issue hospital cap.

Infant Jamie bawled unpredictably. Sometimes for hours in the afternoon, sometimes off and on all night after a good day. Sometimes Michelle thought she was beginning to

understand how people shook their babies—just be quiet, just stop crying—rather than comforting them, or when that didn't work, walking into another room to breathe, and she reminded herself that she of all parents had no right, no right to such thoughts, did not deserve to even let them slip through her mind, never mind lodge themselves there. She reminded herself to be grateful for every horrible moment.

Toddler Jamie quickly became independent—ignoring her when she came to pick him up at daycare, saying “Mommy no do that” when she leaned over to kiss his head. She'd heard that crying babies could be comforted by the presence of their mother's dirty nightgowns, something about the smell. Of course that never worked with Jamie, but lonely nights when Marco was out of town, Michelle would take one of Jamie's stuffed animals out of his crib and hold it to her chest—maybe the scruffy lion with its threadless nose or the bunny that had once been white. On those nights, the ghost of the baby girl they'd never taken a photo of or named seemed to hover over her, breathing damply in her ear.

Jamie grew up to be a smelly-socked noisy boy: one who was delegated to the basement with his drumset at the age of twelve; one whose first girlfriend introduced him to marijuana, sex, driving without a license and with the top down even in the rain. Or maybe he introduced her? Her name was also Jamie and for two years, ages fifteen to seventeen, they reveled in all their similarities: belly button lint, quick orgasms, the ability to drink a six-pack without puking, dirty fingernails. The mothers became friends as well, or perhaps co-conspirators—Michelle and Jessica. They didn't spy exactly, but they did trade information and slip boxes of condoms into both kids' bedrooms. If a kid didn't call or come home at the expected time, Jessica was the first person Michelle called, and vice versa.

When they were together, Jamie and Jamie tended to forget the qualities they didn't share. Michelle's Jamie loved to play basketball and read murder mysteries, and in the middle

of the night, speeding on uppers Jamie had given him, he still liked to go into the furnace room and play with his old train set. He was nearly a straight A student, despite all the time he spent with Jamie doing “bad things,” as he himself thought of them, quotation marks and all.

Jessica’s Jamie would have had no patience for the murder mysteries or train set if she knew about them, but she spent secretive hours drawing in a stained black notebook and imagining her future life—living in a loft bare of anything but a big bed and flowers and canvases and paints. How could she get there? she wondered. When she was seventeen, while boy Jamie was on vacation with his parents, visiting all the red rock National Parks in Utah, a friend gave her LSD. She had a vision of standing naked in front of a gallery wall onto which her drawings had been tattooed and other drawings tattooed on her skin so that the walls and her body were extensions of each other.

The kids were eighteen now, “adults.” Michelle and Jessica would each have looked after the other’s Jamie to the death, if they’d known the child was in their house, but they almost never knew. The teenagers’ furtiveness had only grown, reinforced by the knowledge that they were breaking rules. Or this was so for boy Jamie, in any case. Girl Jamie cared less and less. She began gravitating toward her father who lived in New York City, wrote him letters that hinted at her growing drug use, her risk of pregnancy, her lack of money for art supplies. When the mothers met, they had little information to share. Boy Jamie sometimes had a vacant stare, but, hell, Michelle had smoked pot in high school too. Girl Jamie’s grades were shitty but her drawings were amazing. And their conversations drifted to more general complaints: a boss was a jerk, the most recent election, the state of the world.

After graduation, Jamie headed off to art school and disappeared. She was found when she turned up at Jamie's dorm—at a different school, in a different state. His roommates bristled at the idea of her staying the night. She ended up at her father's, who established her in his guest room, bought her a new comforter set and a membership to MOMA so she could go look at art whenever she wanted. Within two months, she was lost again, sleeping in the cold on a bench near Central Park, the smell of horse piss in her nose. The drugs she took now were stronger. They didn't allow for the same sorts of visions, but they allowed her to—what? Nod off during the day and stay up and scribble all night, even in the cold, something her father hadn't allowed. Despite his claims to love art, he didn't understand the sacrifices it entailed, she thought. When she woke on the bench with her notebook under her, the charcoal had transferred to her cheek. Jessica brought her home, would have tethered her to the bed if she could, but of course she couldn't.

“Mommy like this?” toddler Jamie had asked. She walked leading with her belly, a finger in her belly button. Jessica almost always answered yes: what Jamie likes, she will like as well. Jamie found the crooked tooth in Jessica's mouth. “What this?” she asked. “Babies have crooked teeth?” “No,” Jessica said, “they get crooked later sometimes.”

Just like all the other demolitions we suffer.

Michelle took her friend out for a drink—a mistake, she quickly realized, since the alcohol allowed Jessica to cry and she couldn't stop, mascara running down her cheeks the way it never does when movie stars cry. The next week, Michelle brought dinner over every night, after eating her own dinner with Marco, sometimes after talking to boy Jamie on the phone, sat still while Jessica picked at lasagna and green salad loaded with ranch dressing,

watched as her friend's face grew both stonier and more translucent. Michelle sat and watched and thought: likewise Mary's tears when she sees Jesus on the cross. Likewise the tears of the thieves' mothers. I will say this as simply as I can: we become holy through parenting. Not because we never want to hit our children, not because we sometimes get so bored with them we feel like screaming, not because we've been known to give up on them, not because we sometimes want to kiss them on the mouth and caress them everywhere, not because we hate them in the midst of our love, not because we want to say "I'm the mommy; that's why," but because we feel those things and choose not to act on them. Because we sometimes bite their fingers but gently, not all the way to the bone. Adam and Lilith and Eve molded from clay and pushed forward with giant hands. All those begats. All the aged barren couples who miraculously spawn. The thought of holiness makes Michelle feel sick. "You?" she imagines her own mother saying. "You refused to be bat mitzvahed and now you claim holiness?"

Three days before her due date, a rock in Michelle's belly. She panicked, then thought: she can't be gone. But the baby inside slept and slept, even after Michelle ate a muffin and lay down, thinking, "Maybe it's a good sign that she'll sleep after she's born too." But she never woke up. Michelle's OB-GYN had always stood up while talking to her. She'd sit on the table after he finished examining her and he'd lean against the counter. This time, though, he sat down, put his clasped hands between his knees. None of them had heard it—not Michelle or Marco or the doctor—that superfast cycling of blood that was the baby's heartbeat. Marco held her hand, cold and sweaty. "Go home and relax," the doctor said, "as much as you can. In the morning, we'll induce you."

The baby was bald—no lock of hair to keep. She kept nothing, she would keep nothing. She did not take a plaster cast of the baby's footprint. She did not bathe her or clothe her.

Memory is not just more pain but a different quality of pain, a stinging downpour of pain that changes things.

Michelle hasn't stopped revisiting that day. She nodded, got up to dress, even as Marco was saying, "Just normal labor? Like nothing's happened here? We have to go through that? You've got to be crazy. Can't you knock her out or something or do a c-section?" but Michelle was out of the room before she could hear the doctor's reply.

Jessica and Jamie's odyssey continues, lost and found and lost again: Dakar, Paris, Sweden. When Jamie leaves rehab after rehab, she absconds with her roommates' sweaters. Jessica always dreamed of staying in the ice hotel but instead finds herself searching dreary Stockholm parks under the midnight sun, finding junkies sloped in alleys, spent needles, someone who could be her daughter but isn't. When she does find her, Jessica brings Jamie home, enrolls her in an outpatient rehab, but one day she returns from work, and Jamie's gone, cash gone, extra checks gone, her long down coat gone. At least Jamie's thefts suggest she knows how to plan for winter weather.

Ten years in, or maybe fifteen, Jessica finally decides to abandon her daughter, her heart broken so many times—she is so tired—and she enters a decade of calm, takes up knitting design, turns it into a successful business, remarries, takes Michelle out for dinner for a change. Jamie insinuates herself into Jessica's thoughts, but Jessica gets very good at pushing those memories away—except for the ones of very tiny baby Jamie. She knows it

isn't "healthy," but she hides photos, puts her hand up in a gesture of "stop" when anyone asks about her daughter.

I could tell you, too, about boy Jamie's heartbreak, but this isn't a story about lovers, not that kind of lovers. This is a story about mother-love, how their bodies remain part of your body long after they leave the womb. They crawl over you, rock and are rocked by you, rub their heads against your chest like a cat asking to be petted. When they leave, their bedrooms still hold their scent, and if you try very hard, you can almost imagine their bodies in other spaces: their bare feet walking over dewy grass, their hand reaching for a faucet, their heads tilted as they read a book. It's like pulling them back inside.

I wish I could tell you that after those ten or fifteen years, Jessica came home one day to find an envelope with a letter in it from Jamie, and folded inside the letter, a photo of Jamie holding a beautiful toddler. I wish I could tell you that, but I'm just not sure that I can.

We're not made holy. We're not. My own mother used to say, "If I could give you a pill to keep you little forever, I would do it." Even at three or four or six years old I hated that, the idea that I would be tied to her forever, but I sometimes think if only I could suck my children up into my heart. A fullness in the chest. The need to touch. Grasping. Particular texture of skin.