

# The Art of Being Born; Letter to a Daughter

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In what I hope will be our final appointment with the midwife, she guessed you weigh eight pounds and four ounces and that you will come soon.

I woke up late, having spent the night beached on the couch in the living room, memorizing the distinguishing signs of every rash chronicled in Dr. Spock's baby book, until nodding off around six. The book lay open to cradle cap, flaking patches of skin on the tops of newborn heads, which might be "cracked, greasy, or even weeping."

I'm ten days past the date you are supposed to arrive and too uncomfortable, too wrung out with anxiety to sleep. In the last weeks, after an hour or so of tossing in bed each night, I've been shuffling to the couch so that your father might sleep undisturbed. In the mornings I lumber into the shower, stand under the spray, and cry. I brace my arms against the shower walls and let the water rain down my face and stream over my breasts and enormous stomach.

This morning, I waddled to the bedroom and sagged in the doorway. Your father took one look at my forlorn figure and said, "Come on, let's get out of here."

We wound our way slowly down Twenty-Second Street to the entrance of Ravenna Park, and inside the park the old-growth ravine with freshwater springs welling from the tall walls and flowing into Ravenna Creek.

As we entered the muddy trail down to the creek, Richard took my hand in his to brace me for our descent. We walked at a glacial pace, mimicking the first untroubled humans, on the path that looped through the waterlogged ravine, Richard consciously slowing his pace, me trying to move myself forward. At the end of the mile loop, we huffed up from the ravine and emerged by the tennis courts, where we rested a bit, sitting on a bench beneath a bracelet of blooming cherry trees, the branches dipping down around us. Though it was only noon, I lay on my side on the bench and put my head in Richard's lap. Sitting on the bench, we spoke of our anticipation, and wondered how much longer we had to wait until you, our first child, would be born. At that moment we weren't anxious. How could we be anxious, sitting on the warm bench, the world alive and green, and the branches of the cherry framing our hopes?

I'm telling you this because few events are more momentous than birth. Every child wants to know about their birth and asks, *where did I come from?* Many are answered with a birth story that speaks to the child of who she is and will be, and that sets her life in motion in a particular way. Mothers know the story and tell it like a favorite fairy tale to the child, who rests her head on her pillow, on her way to sleep.

But sometimes the stories of origin are troubled, riven with complexity and unanswered questions and bespeak a cloudy future.

My parents never spoke of the circumstances surrounding my birth and I am in possession of only a few meager facts.

*I was born on February 26 in the dead of winter.*

*No baby pictures were taken.*

*No baby book, where the important milestones are recorded, exists.*

*I was installed in a wood-paneled room down a long corridor at the back of the house.*

The absence of any information made me puzzled about my place in the family. When visiting friends I couldn't help notice the gallery of framed photos chronicling their life from birth and wonder what it meant that there was no documentation of my life displayed in my house. Luckily I wasn't asked to produce an autobiography or photo collage at school and so the lack of material didn't become a public issue, only a private worry. I was the only child of my mother's second marriage. As a young woman she had married and given birth to two daughters in quick succession and then her husband died unexpectedly. My sisters were separated by less than two years and formed a strong unity around my mother, as was only natural given the circumstances. Their births were well documented and two ornately framed photos of each of them sat on my mother's dresser directly across from her bed. After struggling for years on her own, my mother married my father, and four years later I was born. Ten and twelve years separated my sisters from me, a gap that could not be bridged. Though we lived under one roof, it was as if we had been born into two different families. The first family was short-lived, but cast a long shadow.

One winter evening after dinner while we were washing up the dishes, I asked my mother what she remembered about my birth. She was taken aback by the question and responded as if she was the subject of a police interrogation. "You were a small baby, only five pounds, and had to stay in the hospital several weeks before you could come home."

"What was wrong with me?"

"Nothing lasting." She said as she wiped the counter for the second time. I couldn't understand why she didn't want to share the details of my birth, why she seemed to be keeping something from me. "Your birth weight was a little low," she reluctantly continued, "and doctors were more cautious then than they are now. Mothers routinely spent two weeks flat on their backs after giving birth." She finished in a matter-of-fact tone. It didn't occur to me then to ask why I was so little or to question her about her pregnancy and prenatal care. It wasn't until I became pregnant myself with you that I began to wonder about such details. But that night in the kitchen I could only think to ask, "Do you remember anything else?"

She said, "You weren't born as planned," and looked at me hard, as if an old anger had been stirred out of the corner. "You were two weeks past your due date and in the middle of the night my water broke."

I didn't have the foggiest idea what she meant by waters breaking. She seemed angry, angry at me. The words *water breaking* was part of a puzzle called my birth I had to assemble.

"Anything else?" I pestered. I wanted to know what happened after the waters broke.

That was it. She was done telling me the story of my birth. She hung her apron on the handle of the oven door and joined my father in the den to watch the nightly news.

My mother's defensiveness on the subject of my birth led me to believe that the day, the event, my first entrance onto the stage and into my mother's life was complicated by emotions I didn't understand and would never understand. I came to think, perhaps irrationally, that from my mother's point of view my birth was a mistake and that was why all the memorializing forms were blank. Instead of caressing the event in memory, she entered a state of amnesia from which she never awoke. That winter evening after dinner was the only time in my childhood that I pried even the slightest sliver of information from the wound.

In high school, on the bus ride, while some of my girlfriends were making up the names for their future children, I'd make up stories of my birth, as if I were a character in search of a play. The births I imagined all took place out of doors as if I was a wild animal—

In fields  
In meadows  
In mountains  
In a valley  
In the woods  
In a ravine  
By a stream

And my mother and I were always alone, mother and daughter, the essential couple.

Here is one story I made up:

On a Sunday morning in September, my mother drove out of town, by herself, deep into the country of farms and pastures and ponds until she reached an orchard. The orchard was on a rough incline, under an open sky. She was in the midst of pulling apples down from the branches and putting them in her bag, when she sunk down among the dropped apples and I was born.

This story is preposterous on many levels. I wasn't born in September. I never knew my mother to pick any fruit by hand and certainly the apples we ate were all store bought. You can tell I don't know the first thing about birthing. Imagining my mother making a bed below the boughs and giving birth to me as if she were a doe and I her fawn is a fairy tale. I don't ever remember my mother lying in the grass or on the ground of any sort. We never even had a picnic at a table. Yet, despite its utter lack of veracity, this was one of my birth stories.

After my mother's death, my father discovered a cache of photographs she had stashed away. All the photos were a revelation; just their existence required me to rethink my portrait of my mother. But one photo stood out: it was a baby picture of me. No one is holding me, neither my mother nor my father. I'm lying awake on my mother's bed, the one place where I most longed to be as a child. In this photograph I seem to be looking up at the person taking the photo. It must have been my mother's shadow pointing the camera. The bedspread is white and the blankets I'm swaddled in are white. I look small and dwarfed among the snowy folds. I'm holding my hands up in a defensive position, and even then my hands were clenched. I can hardly say what I felt looking at this picture after having spent the bulk of my life believing no pictures of me as a baby existed. And here I am, at long last, on my mother's bed. It's just a little square photo, so small, it could easily have disappeared and never been recovered. But it has; it is a fact, and like other facts, it complicates everything.

I thought I was the wounded party. It never occurred to me that perhaps I wasn't the only one who had been deprived of a birth story, or a story one would want to share. It never occurred to me that there were no baby pictures because my mother was denied access to me in the first weeks. In my mother's proper middle-class circle, birth wasn't talked about. Women didn't share the gritty details of birth, the bloody show. A doctor and medical staff kept women medicated and deadened to the actuality of birth. Perhaps my mother never spoke of my birth because she didn't know the details. In some ways she wasn't present for my birth—she was the vessel that carried me. She was knocked out, there's no other way of putting it. She only saw me through the nursery window, too heavily sedated to hold me. My mother went home without me. In the case of my birth, my mother had little say in her experience and little to say about her experience. And she never talked about what had been denied her.

After our afternoon appointment with Patricia, our midwife, when she announced your weight, we returned home, ate dinner and watched the Sonics playoff game on our tiny black-and-white TV, which Richard set up on a bench in front of the couch. Around halftime I started having

contractions. Just in case this was the real thing, I packed my bag, a suede blue overnight bag, and put it by the door. In the bag was my hospital reading, Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, which I needed to get a grasp on for my upcoming comprehensive exams. I can imagine you shaking your head and laughing—I obviously knew nothing about labor or hospital stays.

Unlike my mother who took no class and had no birth partner, we had prepared for your birth by taking a class offered through the midwife's clinic that included drafting a birth plan. Yes, we had a plan. We paid scant attention to the physical exercises but spent an inordinate amount of time figuring out what music we wanted to hear during labor, as if it were a dance party requiring a play list. The birth plan called for a teddy bear as a focal point for me to concentrate on, a tape player and tapes, a mat to lie on, and a baby bag full of clothes and blankets for you. When it started looking bad for the Sonics, Richard hauled all the birthing assemblage to our car, filled with boxes of books we had neglected to clear out.

The time between contractions was shortening and they were intensifying, rapidly and uncomfortably so. It seemed like real labor, what we had been waiting for, not a false alarm, not the practice Braxton Hicks contractions. We called Patricia and were told to come on in. Back into our little Civic we went, packed now as if we were heading on safari.

The ride, our second in not many hours, was excruciating. The rhythmic bounce of the car as it passed over each seam of the bridge shot pains through my body. Richard tried to listen to the basketball game through my groans. Back to the parking lot that five hours ago seemed like heaven, only now I could barely lift myself out of the car or walk across the lot. If I didn't move, the contractions might not be so bad or might not come at all.

When Patricia measured my cervix, it was as it had been at my office visit earlier in the day. She wasn't certain I was in real labor. Without declaring labor, I couldn't be admitted to the hospital, couldn't be assigned my own room. I was instructed to walk up and down the back stairwells to stimulate labor. The optimism of the morning and afternoon had vanished.

At eleven o'clock I was measured once again. Slight progress, but not enough to declare active labor. Patricia sent us off wandering once again. Midnight came, and still I hadn't been formally admitted. We climbed a few stairs, only to have me fall against the cement wall and slump to the steps when a contraction seized me.

You should know that contractions operate in stages like a thunderstorm. You feel them rumbling towards you from far off, tremors building incrementally until they arrive dead center.

At full strength, you feel as if every inch of your brainbodysoul has been taken captive by the seizure and there's nothing you can do but give in to its superior power.

And then, when you feel you have been wrung out, it lets you go and rumbles off until the next tremor begins.

When this contraction lifted, Richard hauled me to my feet and we once again climbed the stairs. Up and down we went, stopping and starting until we exited the stairwell and staggered by the nurse's station like beggars searching for a handout.

"Couldn't someone do something? Give me something to move the labor along or ease the pain?"

"No," replied the nurse manning the station, referring me brusquely to my birth plan, which was pinned on her clipboard. The plan firmly stated my opposition to drugs. I had wanted a natural birth, to be awake and alert, to feel everything. "What you are going through is perfectly normal," the nurse said. "Not an emergency."

I screamed—I'm sure I screamed—"But I didn't know what labor was when I wrote the plan."

Give me something, *please*.” She offered me ice chips. Richard rubbed my back. I cried.

I thought I was going to die and that you would never live through this. How could something so painful result in you? How could babies survive the turmoil of birth, the violence of it? Because make no mistake, labor is violent: it squeezes the air out of you. In the moments between contractions, when pain waited in the wings, I thought about women who had given birth before me, women who were at this very instant giving birth alongside me, in fields, in hospitals, in apartments, in elevators and makeshift infirmaries, women of all colors, sizes, shapes, who spoke languages I couldn’t understand and ate food I had never tasted. We were united by this scorching labor.

At 12:30 Patricia rechecked me. I had progressed and was officially declared in labor and admitted to the hospital. I was going to have you after all. Finally we moved to the birthing room we had toured nearly nine months ago, decorated like a bedroom at home, with pictures on the walls, rocking chairs, and a flower-patterned quilt. The walls were mauve with a burgundy border—rich and warm.

Unfortunately, by this time labor was so advanced that I was barely conscious of the décor that had been so important to me in the planning stages. I lay down in the quilt-covered bed, but had even more difficulty getting through the pain. I tensed up, gripped Richard. I forgot about the quick shallow puffs of breath I had practiced in birthing class. I cried and looked to Richard, who was the only person in the room. I refused to let him go, even to bring our birthing accoutrements in from the car. I was long past teddy bear focal points or play lists. I looked into his face during the contractions as he dutifully chanted “Breathe, breathe, breathe.” When the contraction was over, I drifted out of consciousness. Far away.

Spent, and traveling out of the body, I returned to the apple trees of my earlier birth fantasy. This time the trees were in blossom, in sunlight, under a pale blue sky and my friend Elizabeth, who had her daughter Emma a year before, stood beneath them. In between contractions I went to this place with Elizabeth and Emma. They seemed to be welcoming me. Emma was perched at her waist, stiff legs supported by Elizabeth’s cradled arm, while the apple tree’s canopy of branches crowned Emma’s head. Elizabeth grasped a branch, pulling it down as Emma pushed on her stomach to reach the blossoms waiting above them both. Early in pregnancy women can forget they are pregnant for an hour or two, a day perhaps. They can walk the fields at their usual pace, bend down and lift laundry baskets easily. They can hop, skip, jump, and run after a bus pulling away from the curb. In the last trimester every second is colored with the knowledge that you have something living inside you and it’s growing—it’s pushing against your being. When you turn on your side, you are turning for two. Nothing about me remained as it was.

Our midwife suddenly noticed Richard—how shaken and pale he was. He looked like he was going to faint. He alone had been my companion in labor; it was his face I looked at when trying to focus through the contractions, his hands I gripped, his voice trying to talk me through the pain and it was his frame upon which I collapsed. There was no one else in the hours between arrival and admittance.

“Go down to the cafeteria,” Patricia said. “Get some coffee, something to eat. It’s going to be some hours before the next stage.” I let go of his hands that I had been holding onto like a life raft in a storm.

When Richard came back I was in transition, that period between the first stage of labor and the last when you push the baby out. I had been drifting in and out of consciousness, when suddenly I got up, went to the bathroom and threw up. Then the mucus plug that blocks the opening of the cervix was expelled and my water broke. It was as if a small balloon had burst and out came the water

in one big gush. And then, I had to push. There was no stopping, no slowing the need to push, a push that originated somewhere else, far behind me, a great epic push and I was the instrument of it.

I had been steadfastly uninterested in having children. Nothing moved me from my refusal, not holding a newborn in my arms or the transformative tales of motherhood. I was too wrapped up in the trouble of being a daughter forever waiting for her mother's love that would never come. I was surprised when I was seized by a great longing for a child.

Husband, midwife, and nurse huddled about the fetal monitor in the birthing room because it had started to register distress. Something was wrong—I could hear it in their voices, in the low tones, though I couldn't hear what they said. I was concentrating on pushing. I had to get out of my bed, and lie on a gurney being rolled in. Then away I went, wheeling towards an operating room. Patricia was trying to slow down my pushing—there was talk of a C-section, getting you out quickly, calling a surgeon. But I couldn't stop pushing, and you crowned. Richard said he could see your head. I had never heard such excitement in his voice. Out you rushed with your umbilical cord lassoed around your neck. That's what was causing the distress. Each time I pushed, the cord tightened around your neck, cutting off oxygen and blood. Later I wondered if this was the origin of the term *mother knot*. But what could have been dire was not. As you crowned, Patricia was able to unloop the cord from around your neck, and all was well. It was 4:19 a.m. on April 18 and you weighed eight pounds, four ounces.

Richard wiped you off, wrapped you in a blanket, and put you in my arms. And a new story was born, a story I am passing onto you. And while I hope you live in the here and now, in a present so full that you have no reason to look back in puzzlement about how you came into the world, remember I know the story of your birth by heart.