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On Being a Mother

After you acclimate to the sleep deprivation and the constant monitoring, the self-control to deny your own inherited impulses, the gentle management of some kind of hierarchy of development (create a space in which they feel safe, then teach them boundaries, then sensitivity to others, then how to delay gratification, and so on), you realize what you have done is bring another human being into a world of intractable cruelty. You prepare this child to become an adult, to somehow become capable of giving more than he takes from others, but realize, in the end, the purity of your intentions is in its own way unforgiving. And so then you try to raise a child who can somehow live at peace with himself. And then you realize this also may be impossible.

Not quite three months after my first son was born, I went to New York to help a scholar develop his book manuscript. It was the first year of an annual fellowship in which scholars were paired with editors in writing their first monographs. The baby was still nursing, so he and my husband came with me. My author, a historian, specialized in nineteenth-century slave trade in the Middle East. Slave dealers traveled inland from the eastern coast of Africa, he explained, and kidnapped children. Dealers took them back to the coasts in caravans, and then to Zanzibar, where they set sail across the Arabian Sea in long, narrow dhows. Dhows were heavy, sturdy boats, but in the pictures I found, they gave the impression of dry, curled leaves floating on the surface of the water.

The captured children were taken to port cities in the gulf—Masqat, Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Bahrain, Qatar. Girls were sold as domestics, where they would serve the women of the household, though they also could be made concubines. Boys were sold to pearl merchants and date farmers. Pearl divers learned to dive deep into ocean banks, sometimes more than one hundred feet down. It was difficult not to imagine their lungs, such small, soft organs, the pressure of the depth, the blue blackness of cold salt water. Some used rocks to pull themselves down.

It's a picture I haven't been able to forget. What I keep turning over in my head, even years later, is the physicality of it, the body alone but submerged. The will of the master taken into the body of the slave.

During the night, I nursed the baby. We had requested a crib for the hotel room, which was so small the addition of the crib made it nearly impossible to walk around the bed. The room was decorated in a masculine gray-green, everything coming to an upholstered right angle. The bright white enamel crib didn't belong. It became pointless in any case. The baby slept with us in bed, and every time he squeaked, I turned and opened my nightshirt. Not one of us was fully awake nor fully sleeping either. During the day my husband strapped him into the baby carrier and took him to MoMA. The baby was attached to the front of his body like an appendage, facing out, kicking his legs. My meetings went on for hours without break, but I would slip out to pump in the silence of someone else's office, looking at the bookshelf of titles I didn't recognize.

That was four years ago. Each year of the fellowship I returned to work with another author. This year I returned again, when my second son was almost twelve months old and my older son was four. I came alone. The distance would be difficult but brief. The physical absence—not holding him, not feeling his weight while bending down to pick up a diaper, a cracker, or a toy off the floor—this lingered like a phantom limb. Suddenly I was walking again without other bodies, without their screams and coos and smiles and kicks and poops. I did not have to monitor stairs or outlets or choking hazards. I was reading in airports and carrying hot cups of coffee and taking stair steps two at a time.

But I was not entirely alone. I was also pregnant. Days before, when the pink bled into a cross on the plastic wand, I felt a muted thrill. After such difficulty—two children and one miscarriage in eight years—my forty-year-old body could do it again? Then dread. My husband and I were in a perpetual state of exhaustion, juggling the children and work, with no help outside part-time daycare, and not a full night's sleep in years. "This is bad news," my husband said. "This is very bad news." We began to plan to terminate the pregnancy. It wasn't settled in my mind, but there were legal and logistical hurdles. I considered an appointment in New York, free from the din of Michigan's conservative propaganda. There wasn't time. We would have to wait until I came back. I called the clinic. For the remaining days, I would test and retest our tentative decision. Maybe I would come home and feel I could do it after all. We could manage. Maybe I could come through some gossamer process of discernment and return to celebrate. Cancel the appointment. Embark on anticipation.

I arrived at my hotel, downtown near Wall Street, still wobbly from travel. All the energy-saving lights were on in my room, giving the space the feel of an examination room. I had plans to get out, to walk to Washington Square to visit a bookstore and get a cup of coffee. But my body weighed on me, still churning with nausea from the plane's unusually violent turbulence. I clicked off the lights, turned down the starchy sheets, and lay in bed until dinner. At 5:00, I showered and dressed, collected wallet, purse, and keycard, and descended into the subway to meet a friend. I had no appetite. Out of habit I had a glass of Chardonnay, but had no taste for it, nor for the expensive, meatless meal.

The next morning, at 5:44, I woke to the sound of my youngest crying, as if in a dream. I got out of bed and went to the bathroom to pump each breast. The florescent light made the milk slightly blue as droplets fell into the sink. I pulled my waistband against the overstretched skin. "The baby woke at 5:45," my husband said when I talked to him later that morning, before leaving the hotel for work. When he held the phone to the baby's ear so he could hear my voice, my son squealed and laughed and made baby word sounds.

At the office, I poured a cup of coffee to have something to hold. Already I had lost my taste for it. The nausea persisted. I pushed the

notion of the sex out of my mind. Some say girls cause more sickness, but who really knows about these things? Before the meeting began, I chatted with a colleague about our children, how they were getting on as siblings, how they were sleeping, the funny things they were saying. "I think three would be easy," she said, and I wondered how I should let that sentence into my mind, what kind of information it should bring. Others can do it. Why can't I? Should it make me feel like it was possible? Or was it extraneous? Someone else's sentence, someone else's stamina, someone else's household finances, capacity for patience, and comfort with childcare. Not mine. I tried to keep my face expressionless. My jaw clenched.

That evening, there were book parties. I didn't want to go, but I'd worked on the book, and it would be ungracious not to attend. There would be comments and speeches and probably an acknowledgment of thanks. I managed a glass of wine, some hummus, and two or three excellent and concise conversations with strangers. I congratulated myself for this and left at nine. Before I had children I tried to go to New York once or twice a year to see friends, art, and bookstores. I loved the subway, the walking, the street food, the polish and grit of the city's la-la-land feel. I loved the rats that skittered past in the corner of my eye, the sour smells of the sewer wafting up from below the street. But this time, the sourness made me retch. Only later did I remember this happened before, the acute sensitivity, the body's way of protecting itself and this thing growing in it.

After the party, I walked across the street for a cup of tea. Houston Street was bright and busy. Several lanes of cars started and stopped at the intersection in front of the teahouse. I sat at the window. A cab stopped in the middle of the street, and a blond girl tumbled out with two girlfriends. She seemed old enough to call her a young woman, but who knows where these lines reside anymore. The diction of "young woman" is both clumsier and more rigid than "girl," more like "young lady," which is worse. But woman? That's not quite right either. She yelled at the driver, limply waving her arms and pointing while her companions talked into their devices. Their long legs came to little points, like hooves. They wobbled toward the sidewalk as cars honked and drove around them. The driver swooped out and pulled a bottle of ammonia out of the trunk. He wore a gray Sikh turban, wound neatly around his head. His long gray beard was combed to a

point. He dumped the liquid into the back seat, yelling and gesturing. The blond girl dragged her hand across her mouth and folded into the curb between two parked cars. She sat there for a long time, her gaze blank and aimless. One came into the teahouse. "Can we get some water for this girl?" she said, still holding the phone to her ear. An older woman stood next to me inside wearing a baseball cap and sunglasses, though it was almost ten at night. She talked into her cell phone about someone's availability for an appearance on TV. We both looked through the broad pane of glass, our attentions divided. The woman pulled her ear away from her phone and turned to me. "Miss, did you see that girl fall out of that cab?"

A girl? I couldn't stop the fiction from unfolding. She could be a doctor and save lives, or a president, or a scholar, or a poet, or a farmer or an athlete or a teacher or a minister or an advocate for the poor. She could give to the world. Or she could take. She could succumb to the cult of appearances and self-doubt and deference of identity, of defining oneself in terms of others. The second sex. This is what Simone de Beauvoir meant. First man. Then woman. Could I do it? I wanted to be the mother who could embrace her and her brothers and not obliterate myself, and yet, even with only two, there was not enough time to sleep, to cradle, to nurse, to hold. Two crying at once, or one talking and the other crying, or one screaming and the other crying, or one kicking and the other propped on my hip, or one nursing and the other trying to get in on it. The weight of twenty pounds in the crook of my arm, and the pleas of the older one to be carried too, the mental note to bend at the knees, the knot in the lower back, the four years of interrupted sleep, the haircut that would get put off for eleven months. Would I know how to raise her to know who she is, independent of others? To teach her how to love and protect her solitude and agency at the same time? I had not done it myself. To say yes to her would mean saying no, in some measure, to my children, and no, in some measure, to my husband, and no, in some measure, to myself. My husband and I both would be saying no, in some measure, to our work. I didn't want this choice. I had miscarried before. Maybe nothing was there and I would be free. Maybe it was, as I realized after the miscarriage, not a child but the idea of a child, an empty membrane sac. Or an embryo, or a cluster of cells. Even the language was entrapping. There would be no peaceable solution.

I walked to the subway. The station was nearly silent, save that steely rumble of the train on the track, the slide of the doors, the ever-same beep and voice announcing the stop. The subway car was hollow, the seats and poles gleaming emptiness. I emerged into the darkness downtown and walked to my hotel. Several police officers stood at the corners and in front of the stock and trade building on Wall Street. It had a flat red light on it, for Christmas. It seemed strange that such a small building on such a narrow street could have so much power. A few days before, Occupy Wall Street had been shut down. The streets were empty. Two mounted police stood next to one another, facing one of the many barricades set up against the sidewalk. The horses stood with their necks hanging low, their noses almost touching the ground. The point of their hips showed slightly for their lack of muscle. The officers sat in their saddles, pressing their feet into the stirrups, their toes jutting up as if they were kicking a dog. I cannot figure out why so many men ride like this, except that it is something like riding one of those motorcycles with all the chrome. The position disperses the weight of the rider, straining the back near the horse's loin, rather than centering the weight over the horse's center of gravity, just behind the whither. It's a fine line between mastery and cruelty, determined, mostly, by how the officer holds his body as he sits on the horse. No act on the body does not also affect the mind.

"Either way, we will be OK," my husband had said before I left. "We will make it work, whatever we choose. If we choose to have this baby, we will love it. It will be loved and wanted. We just won't be able to do other things." For days I could not leave the bed in our attic bedroom. I was listless. I wanted to be deliberate, to think through every aspect of the decision. Shutting out any fact, any feeling would mean becoming dead to the decision itself. It demanded all of us. It felt as though everything about our lives—how we choose to live—would be touched by how we made this choice, how we made it together, how, with the impossibility of complete information, we would live our way into some kind of answer. But as I began to think, to try to give language to it, I realized I was not in charge of my own thinking. The neighbors' yard signs, the bumper stickers, the billboards, the picketers I saw nearly every time I drove to and from downtown. The blood- and flesh-colored signs, that little form, curled

like a fiddlehead, larger than life size, large enough to see from a moving car. "Smile! Your mother was pro-life!" No fact was off limits, I told myself. I would not turn away from any of it. And yet, how to place these facts? The fact of the organizing cells. The fact of the zygote dividing into an embryo. The fact of a heartbeat. The fact of undeveloped nerves. The fact of the propaganda. The fact of the exaggerated warnings from evangelists posing as clinicians, telling women they may hemorrhage to death, they may not be able to have children again, they are killing a living thing. They are not talking to me, surely. I know better. And yet, how had these voices made it into my head? I always knew where I stood. Now, when it came to making the decision myself, I could not distinguish my voice from theirs. The philosopher Martha Nussbaum calls this the politics of disgust—the appeal to the visceral not the rational, the body, not the mind. I could not tell who was speaking. The rhetoric, visual and verbal, had penetrated my body.

My husband printed off a famous essay, a philosophical defense written in 1971, and left it on the table. He researched different positions held by the Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Lutheran churches, all of which accept some degree of ambiguity and acknowledge that a range of factors enter into the decision. I tried to hear my own thinking. My body was making room for it—the exhaustion and nausea, the craving for protein, the swell of my belly even in these early weeks. What a wonder, that it could in this miraculous way make way for an emerging presence. But my mind could not make it work. I wanted to want to. But I didn't. I couldn't. I couldn't.

No available appointments until Thursday. I would have to wait until I returned home from New York.

The receptionist on the phone cautioned me. There would be picketers. They are not allowed on the property, she said. They have purchased the building next door and are not allowed to block your way. The driveway entrance was in front of the building, the parking lot in the back. Early morning traffic was building. It was dark and rainy. As we pulled in, my husband stopped the car in front. No one was there. I slipped out with my notebook and Charles Baxter's *Gryphon* and stepped over the landscaping into the building. Baxter's characters and their disoriented minds made me feel a little less alien,

less like a freak. I could imagine a character in a Charles Baxter story doing what I was doing, just as confused, just as disoriented and enervated and trapped.

The receptionist smiled warmly. A small kindness. First names only. I sat down. Two young men, not boys, sat waiting, slouched in their seats, but present. First blood work to determine if you are rH negative and require a shot to prevent your body from rejecting future pregnancies. But that wasn't for me, right? I had been pregnant before. I knew I wasn't rH negative, but I submitted anyway, without thinking. Then an ultrasound to determine how many weeks along, to confirm what procedures were available.

I hoped for the empty sac. "Will you have the sound turned off?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "We don't want to torture you." I found myself, at nearly every turn, mentioning that I had children, that I was breastfeeding, as if this somehow changed my status and made me more, what? Not one of them? Whose thinking is this? The statistics (one in three women under the age of forty-five, most are mothers) mean nothing to me. The politics of isolation are working. This is the only clinic on this side of the state. It is open only three days a week. It is required by state law to comply with the twenty-four-hour consent law. The twenty-four-hour consent law in the state of Michigan requires a "written summary of the abortion procedure; depictions, illustrations or photographs of fetal development corresponding to the probable gestational age of the woman's fetus; prenatal care information; parenting information." And by the way, "this law was amended by Public Act 345 of 2000 to allow this information to be provided through this [state] department sponsored website." I want to say I am not a baby killer. More women entered, signed in, and sat down. Younger and older than I. I heard their names when they were called back for blood tests and ultrasounds. Meredith. Amira. Ashley. My husband finally entered the waiting room.

"I might have gotten into an argument," he said.

The ultrasound screen was turned away from me. I remember the flutter of the fetal heartbeat at about six to seven weeks. I remember when I first heard it, after the miscarriage and after trying so hard to get pregnant again. Shoosh shoosh shoosh shoosh shoosh. So rapid

and strong a sound. We were living in Chicago at the time, and on the bus ride home I sat across from an old man. He had folded his mottled hands over the round handle of his cane. That man's heart, I thought, started beating inside his mother's womb. My baby's heart was just beginning. How far would it go? Gestational age: seven weeks, four days.

Finally, a questionnaire in preparation for the counseling session. "Circle any of the following words that describe how you are feeling right now." I scanned the fifty-some odd words. I circled "tired." Have you discussed this decision with anyone? Who? Do you have children? Have you had an abortion before? The counselor, who looked fresh from college, nearly half my age, invited me into her office. A bright orange aluminum water bottle with red swirls sat on the desk. She was perky with goodwill.

"I love your glasses!"

"Thank you."

"Are you in school?"

"Actually, yes."

"Do you work?"

"Yes."

"What do you do?"

"I'm an editor."

"Does your work require you to lift more than twenty-five pounds?"

"No. But I have an eleven-month-old who weighs about twenty pounds."

"Wow! That's a big baby! Well, I guess there are some things you just gotta do, but in general we recommend you don't lift anything heavy for a couple weeks. Do you smoke?"

"No."

"Do you use drugs? Marijuana—"

"No."

"Do you drink alcohol?"

"Yes."

"How often?"

"I have a glass of wine . . . with dinner, usually . . . a few times a week."

"Well, we recommend no alcohol for about two weeks."

"Really?"

"I know! It's like *I want a nice cocktail right before and right after*, right? But yeah," she nodded. "No alcohol for two weeks. Do you need a note for work or school?"

"No."

"OK. So, what's your highest level of education?"

"I'm getting my second masters."

"Awesome! So, why did you decide to terminate this pregnancy?"

I looked at the frosted window trying to figure out what string of words I could put together to respond to this question as briefly and privately as possible, without betraying my responsibility to this young woman, who was just feeling her way and trying to do the right thing.

"I . . . I don't think I can be the mother I want to be with three children. I just—I don't know how I can be fair to them."

What I was thinking, though, was the noise and the crying and the relentless needs and the moments I am just this side of shutting down, and how the violence percolates just below the surface but that I have managed to keep it in check on every occasion except once when he kept kicking and hitting and biting me in a fit of toddler rage and the strike left a red silhouette of a hand on my son's face for three days. What I was thinking was that I feared what sort of mother I would become.

"Well," she said, drawing out the word, "I think understanding yourself and knowing what you can take on for yourself and your family, I think that makes you a pretty great mom."

No. No. No. That is wrong. This does not make me a great mom. Christopher Hitchens famously claimed that anyone who had seen a sonogram, any sonogram, would never consent to an abortion or support women's choice. For someone so acerbic, so ready for verbal parry or flat out brawl, someone so ready to go to war on the ill-defined principles of liberty and freedom, I found this a surprisingly cowardly position. No. I am not a great mom. The reality of this is difficult. I am taking a part of me, a part of my husband, a part of my children, even, and I am saying no to it. I am saying I can't. And I may be wrong. But I am saying no before I ever have a chance to find out what kind of mother a third child would have made me. I am going against the impulse to celebrate every pregnancy, every child, every

birth. I am going against the impulse to celebrate fertility. I am going against nature.

"You have a will," my husband told me. "That is just as much a part of your nature as your body." True, but that does not quite resolve it, does it? He's a philosopher. This was his way of navigating the decision.

After dropping me off at the front entrance, he saw the picketers, a man and a woman, both standing with umbrellas in the rain. The woman, he said, was of indeterminate age. She called out to him. The man stood back.

"Hey, can I talk to you? Is your girlfriend in there?"

"No. My wife."

"Oh my," she said.

"Lemme ask you," he said. "Do you have any nonreligious arguments against abortion?"

"Oh sure! This isn't about religion. This is about science. Science and biology. You know it's alive. Your baby is alive."

"Of course it's alive," he said. "All cells are alive. Skin is alive. Organs are alive. We take out gall bladders and appendixes even though those are alive."

"Oh, but you know this is different. It isn't the same. Do you have a smart phone? I can show you some pictures. Let me show you."

"No, I don't, but it doesn't really matter what it looks like. Just because it's alive doesn't mean it has moral standing. Bacteria are alive and there is nothing wrong with killing them."

"But it's a human being. Just because you're bigger doesn't mean you can kill it. Just because you're a big man and it's just a helpless little baby doesn't mean you can kill it."

"It's not about size," he said. "Even some adult human beings don't have a right to life, like in cases of war or capital punishment."

"So you think killing is OK?"

"In war we don't consider killing a violation of a right to life. But my point is, just because you are human doesn't mean you have moral standing. What you need to explain is why this particular cluster of cells has moral standing."

"It's not about morality, I'm not talking about morality," she said. I imagine there was some fumbling at this point, adjusting her umbrella, looking at the other young women she might attack before

they got in the door. But he doesn't remember those kinds of details.

"Oh, well," she said finally. "You'd better go inside and be with your wife."

Meredith, Amira, and I were called downstairs. I wanted my husband to be with me, as he had been for every other pregnancy's end. Only patients were permitted downstairs. We were shown to a bright, shadowless room with four large brown leather armchairs, each with a wired control for reclining or elevating foot rests. There were small lockers for our things and keys to lock them. Meredith fell into the chair, her multicolored backpack falling next to her feet. I opened up to the story I was reading, about a woman who is beginning to forget. The nurse came in and gave me two pills.

"Do you like that book? Does it hold your attention?" the nurse asked, smiling. It was as if they all had been instructed to use their skills in feminine bonding to do whatever they could to make us comfortable. "Can I put that in a locker for you?" she asked Meredith, who said no, that it didn't fit, that she wanted to keep it with her. She wore sweats and a pink hoodie and bright pastel hightops with the Velcro straps undone. Her long, uncombed hair was dyed red with black extensions. She had a broad, flawless face and blank, Indian-Latino eyes. The nurse handed her a cup of pills, too, and fresh water in a tiny purple plastic cup. The vacant expression on her face turned to her phone, which she thumbed rapidly. Amira, a stunning tall young woman with angular features and deep brown eyes, asked me if I thought it would hurt. I was drifting away. I pulled my legs up into the chair and slumped over to sleep. When I woke another had joined the group—a slight girl, smiling, clutching herself across her stomach. She sat like a doll in the chair. Amira struck up a conversation with her. She was fifteen, her boyfriend twenty. They would say nothing so he would not be charged with statutory rape. Amira had a daughter at sixteen, raised her all by herself. It was the proudest thing she had done, she said, but she couldn't do it again. Not now.

A nurse called my name and escorted me into another bright white room. The opaque window glass was gray from the rainy weather. Later the nurse would tell me that the picketers would bring children here, church groups, and explain to them in what rooms they did the procedures, in what rooms they counseled or

performed ultrasounds. I imagined their little white faces through the frosted glass. In my valium-doped state, I lay on the table, covered in a medicine-pink paper sheet embossed with thousands of tiny puckers. An examination light hung overhead, its flat round bulbs arranged like a massive floral medallion.

The doctor entered and came next to me and looked me in the eye. He asked me how I was.

"As good as can be expected," I said. He nodded as he arranged his instruments.

"As good as can be expected," he said slowly. "OK." The words drew out like a salve.

He prepared an injection of morphine. Then another to numb the cervix. The motor of the suction hummed. I saw the tube of blood connect to a cloth-covered jar. It took about two or three minutes. Later, after I came out of my sedated state, I would feel different. The presence would be gone. But as I left the clinic and its blaring basement lights, I felt nothing. I was given a prescription for antibiotics, told to wait eight hours before nursing, and advised to rest. My husband pulled the car around to the unoccupied entrance. I slipped unnoticed out of the door and into the car. At the back entrance, by the parking lot, a woman stood with her head bowed, praying, her hands fingering a rosary. My husband and I held hands and cried as we pulled away from the clinic and returned home to our boys.

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