

This History of Motherhood

She feels the emptiness of her daughter's room. She lies awake staring as deeply into the darkness as she can, as if trying to divine her daughter's whereabouts from the patterns her mind makes against the blackness above. Midnight, Elizabeth's curfew, lingers just out of reach of the present, inching closer with terrible care.

Though the house remains enveloped in silence, a distant scream rises from somewhere within her. It seems to have no set epicenter, but radiates through each and every cell in her body. It covers a multidimensional distance of time and space. It is not born of this moment, but it is a memory that is not her own. It is latent.

When midnight becomes the past, her entire being echoes and reechoes her howl. She feels fissures and fault lines shift, shake, and tear apart. Her bones ache, her lungs choke, her heart feels full and ready to burst. But if Elizabeth had walked in that moment, she would have believed her mother to be sleeping, dreaming of summer evenings and butterfly fields.

This, she has come to know through 17 years of raising Elizabeth, is motherhood.

The phone rings, slicing through the external silence and internal bedlam. Before the first ring becomes echo, she has the phone to her ear.

- Lizzy? Her voice almost betrays her.

She hears indistinct sounds. Almost animal. They are wet and thick, like mud swallowing a footstep or cement when it is first poured.

-Lizzy, is that you?

She's not even sure if anyone is there. In this dim half-silence, the whirr of some internal projector starts up, and from the deepest region of her gut flashes scenes from the history of cruelty and violence. 8-millimeter like images flicker in full color, displaying blood and bone.

-Lizzy damn it, her voice now revealing the cracks in her foundation, talk to me!

-Mommy—oh, mommy.

-Lizzy, I'm here. Mommy's here.

Elizabeth's voice is filled with tears and fear. It is more child than teenager, and more cornered animal than child.

-I—I—it was an accident. I—I—didn't mean--, and then she sounds as if she were drowning.

-Lizzy, where are you. Mommy will come and get you. Just tell Mommy where you are.

She is begging.

Incapable of words, Elizabeth chokes and sputters.

-Come on, baby, you can do this. Just tell Mommy where you are.

-Cider Press Road, Elizabeth finally manages, the words sound like products of a very difficult labor, covered in afterbirth, unable to scream yet.

-I'm on my way, baby. Just hang on. Mommy's coming.

-Don't go. Don't leave me! Elizabeth's voice is pathetic and small.

-Listen baby, I gotta hang up, just for a second. I will call you back on the cell. Okay. Just hang in there. Mommy's coming.

-Don't leave me, don't...

-Baby, I'm not leaving you. Mommy will never leave you.

Hanging up on her still weeping child took the strength of 10,000 men. She feared the ended connection would cast Elizabeth into some unknowable darkness, drifting, drifting, unrecoverable.

She grabbed her keys and her housecoat and ran barefoot across the driveway to her car. She kept the cell in the car so she would always have it with her in case of emergencies. As soon as it was within reach, she dialed her daughter's number and waited. Each ring an abyss of what might be lost.

-Pick up, pick up, pick up.

-Mommy?

She released the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding.

-I'm on my way baby.

She started the car and peeled out of her driveway.

She had come to motherhood late, over a long, precarious road, only to arrive at some precipice in the dead of night. There had been Robert and trying and doctors and waiting rooms and miscarriages and blood and precious little hope. Robert, her ex-husband, navigated steadily for many years, but when he attempted to steer her toward some safe passage, to some other destination than the one she had clearly marked on the map of her mind, she pulled over and asked him to get out. He did. She continued on, feeling lost, but determined not to veer off course.

Then, just after her 44th birthday, she found herself pregnant. With twins. The fertility clinic combo, they called it.

The day the doctor told her, fear filled the passenger seat that Robert had once occupied. Fear whispered worries into her ear. All the trying, waiting and failing of the past became manifest with the children inside her.

Fear pasted the past into a scrapbook of memory, and its pages constantly flipped through her mind. Her back muscles squeezing her spine like a vice. The initial weight gain quickly gone. The brightest blood she had ever seen. The tissue of what used to be. The unfulfilled wish spilling out of her body. The pictures where clear, the captions bold, and the message obvious. History repeats.

Fear also played statistician. Miscarriages occur within the first 20 weeks. Risk of miscarriages increases for women over the age of 40 to 35%. The risk of having a baby with Down syndrome for a woman over 40 was 1 in 100. That the chance of stillbirth for her was double that of a twenty-year old woman. These facts and figures became the fabric of her nightmares.

So she put herself on bed rest. She took all the right vitamins. Hired a 24-hour nurse to monitor her pulse, her blood pressure, how many times a day the baby kicked. Everything. She tried to check herself into the hospital on several occasions, panicking because the baby had not kicked in an hour, or because her back ached. The nurses just rolled their eyes and rolled her back out the door.

In spite of this obsession and worry, though, she chose to ignore the greatest risk. Natural birth. Her obstetrician urged C-section because of her age. But she had waited for this moment

for so long. She refused to forgo the sensation of birth. She needed to feel, to see. Part of her feared that if she simply awoke to the child in her arms, she would doubt the validity of it being hers. For so long, it had seemed an impossibility. She refused to give it up. She felt, after everything, fate, the world, God, whatever, owed her this. She needed the pain of the act to confirm the miracle's reality.

But a perfect storm of complications eroded all of those hopes away. During labor, her blood pressure surged like a red tide. She became severely pre-eclamptic. As her blood pressure soared, oxygen levels for the babies plummeted. As consciousness drained from her like her own blood, she could hear the distress on the heart monitors. As she lapsed into darkness, she prayed that it was her heartbeat giving out and not her children's.

She awoke to something primal. She knew immediately where she was and what had happened, and all she could think about were her children. From the pit of her self rose an animalistic scream. Terrible and pathetic. Angry and deeply sad. The nurses rushed in, trying to calm her, but this noise seemed not of her own making, beyond her own will. It would not cease until she had her children at her breast.

Finally, her doctor entered her room with a bundle in his arms. She blindly grabbed at her child, but the doctor remained out of reach.

-You must understand, he was saying, this is still a blessing. We almost lost them both.

In her primordial state, these words meant nothing. But the image the doctor presented. His face a mask of tiredness and finality. Only one child in his arms. One.

She reached again, and this time, the doctor placed the child in her arms. He watched for a moment, perhaps seeing if she understood, perhaps making sure she would do the child no harm. She did not hear or see him go. All she heard and saw was Elizabeth in her arms.

Only one. But still one. And always this one, she thought.

When she finally looked away from Elizabeth, she had expected to find herself alone in the room. She felt calm, and though a sense of loss pervaded the moment, the sense of what remained was more than enough.

But she was not alone. Fear remained behind. Sitting in a darkened corner, reading a magazine, whistling quietly. He glanced up, nodded, and returned to his reading.

And in that moment, she peered over the history of motherhood and realized that fear remained constant. It was Eve losing two sons within a single death, Grendel's dam avenging her son. It is the fall and winter Demeter brings to the world with the loss of Persephone. To be a mother was to be afraid, always afraid, silently afraid. And she also realized that the greatest courage in the world was a mother's life. A mother smiles, cooks, works, loves and lives all while fear makes a home inside her heart.

And so in that room, with that fear, because she could do nothing else, she began to sing to her new daughter. What her mother had sung to her when she was a child. A simple song of safety and a mother's vigilance.

-Hush, my baby, don't speak a word

Momma's gonna buy you a mockingbird

And if that mockingbird don't sing

Momma's gonna buy you a diamond ring

She finds herself singing the same song as she drives to find her daughter. Elizabeth doesn't protest or interrupt. She listens, cries softly.

Cider Press Road is a lonely stretch that runs through fields. There are no streetlights to alleviate the heavy darkness. Traffic on this road is generally minimal, but tonight there is none. She's been driving for 15 minutes without a single sign of life. With each mile that becomes distance behind her, her throat tightens a little bit. She interrupts her singing to tell Elizabeth she is on her way, to make sure Elizabeth is still there, and to clear the panic from her voice.

Soon, a vague redness stains the dark night ahead. The dim light becomes two embers in the black ash of night, only instead of cooling to their death, they gather heat and grow in intensity.

-I see you baby. Mommy's almost there.

-Hurry, please.

She only ends the call when her daughter is safely in her arms. They stand, silhouetted in scarlet against the car's taillights. The moon ducks in and out of the clouds. The clouds are like a ripped blanket of grey stretched loosely against the heavens.

-Mommy's here, she says after a minute. Tell me what happened.

Elizabeth tries to speak, but her words crumble to tears and the most she can do is shift her eyes with purpose to the road behind her mother.

Her mother turns and sees a blunted mass sprawled against the blacktop. She is relieved. A deer. Her daughter hit a deer. Just as she is about turn and assure her daughter everything is

okay, the moon peaks out through a tear in the cloth of the clouds, and dusting of light reveals the shape of a person.

-Oh, Lizzy. No.

-I didn't see-It wasn't-, Elizabeth's words are hollow, empty and quickly whisked away on the night's breeze.

She doesn't respond, but forces herself to let go of Elizabeth and move toward the body. Though Elizabeth tries to cling to her mother, she will not step any closer to what she has hit.

-It's okay baby, I'm right here, she says without looking away from the body. I need to look.

She kneels before the heap. The moon finds a larger gap in the clouds, and the strengthened light reveals a woman's face encased in blond hair. The hair is streaked with blood. The face is white, pale, eyes are closed.

-Did you call the police?

-Just you.

She looks at her watch. 37 minutes have passed since her daughter's call.

She reaches her hand, a distance that seems immeasurable, to the woman. Her hand leaves the light, and in the darkness finds the woman's chest. Though she cannot feel a heartbeat, the woman's chest rises with shallow, quick breaths.

-Is she-is she..., Elizabeth's mouth, maybe even her brain, cannot form the word.

-No. Not yet.

Behind her she hears Elizabeth collapse and quickly goes to her. Cradling her by the side of the road, the clouds again cover the moon, and the night is dark with a formless red tint at its edges. The woman lies still. She sings again to her daughter.

-And if that diamond ring turns to brass

Momma's gonna buy you a looking glass

She feels fear standing over her shoulder. Nodding. This is what it means to be a mother. A father would sacrifice the child. A father sees the child as an extension of himself, something to be proud of, something that will carry forth his name and wear it well. God promised Abraham no salvation, no afterlife, only that through his son, his name shall live on, and that was enough for Abraham to forsake everything, to drag his wife into the wilderness. For posterity. For the continuation of his name. The Bible is obsessed with lineage, being a man's book after all. That is why the near sacrifice of Isaac is so poignant. Not because of the love that Abraham has for his son, but because his son is his name, and without him, that name, the only chance of an afterlife Abraham has, dies.

But ultimately, men are willing to sacrifice their children if the cause seems just. Abraham's willingness to kill Isaac for God, Agamemnon's ability to murder Iphigenia for prideful war, Polybus' ordering of Oedipus' destruction for his self-preservation. Men seem to still worship Moloch, and keep his forges full of kindling.

But a mother sees her child not as an extension of name, to take pride in or be ashamed of, but as the chrysalis of all that she should love in this world. Therefore, never to be sacrificed, for there is no higher cause or duty or faith. The child must be protected at all costs, even if it means her own death. Rachel dying in childbirth for Benjamin, Clytemnestra avenging her

daughter's butchering, and later paying with her own life, Anticlea's missing Odysseus so much that it killed her. She even pictures Eve, still mourning the loss of Abel, pleading with God to protect Cain.

These stories provide a blueprint of a mother's DNA. The cries of these women rattled her own bones when she awoke to a dead child and a living child. And fear appears beside each and every one of them, as he stands with her now.

She stops singing and Elizabeth looks up.

-Go home, Lizzy.

Elizabeth does not comprehend. Her wet eyes stare as if trying to find her mother in the dark.

-It's okay, Baby. Mommy will take care of everything. Just go home.

-But, Mom, it's my-

She presses her car keys into her daughter's hand.

-Take my car. Go home. Go to sleep.

They stare into each other for a while. The moon scatters some beams through a shredded portion of cloud. The breeze has gone. Silence remains.

Elizabeth relinquishes her grip on her mother and pushes herself up. The moment is heavy, the leaving difficult. But she goes to her mother's car, starts the engine and drives away.

In the momentary light of the high beams, Elizabeth's mother looks like a suppliant, kneeling by some dark alter with some shadowy sacrifice.

After some time, she returns to the woman. She cradles her head in her lap and runs her hand over her head. Blood seeps through the blond tangle and on to her fingers. The woman's

eyes open to slits, and an unfocused gaze finds her face looking down. The woman seems comforted, smiles just a little.

Another one of Elizabeth's lullabies finds itself on her lips, and she sings to this woman, whose blood continues to find its way into her hands.

-Cows sleep, horses sleep

you sleep, too.

As she sings, visions of Elizabeth form the memories and shadows of her mind. As a child, running to her mother after falling from a swing, as a young girl, asking her mother about boys and the world, tonight, rocking in her mother's arms, taking in the rhythms of her mother's voice.

She imagines Elizabeth, at home, in the dark of her room, crying. Waiting for her.

-Pigs sleep, sheep sleep

you sleep, too

She sees, in stark angles and odd lights, the delivery room fading around her, and the sensation of birth being made numb and gone. Taken from her. The incalculable time between being engulfed by the darkness and waking to find she had missed the birth of her children. Waking to an emptiness that only ceased aching when Lizzy rested her head to her breast.

- Ducks sleep, geese sleep

you sleep, too

That primal scream that sprung from her upon waking from the ether, pipes its way through her bones even now, rises to levels of chaos in her brain, and her memory replays the

doctor entering. A child lost, a child gained. The birth unrecoverable. Not knowing which loss ran deepest.

And Elizabeth at home. Crying. Waiting

This woman dying. What would be taken with this woman?

She continues running her hand through the woman's blood stiffened hair. Her voice is calm, soothing; a mother's voice. She moves her bloody hands to caress the woman's face, lifting the woman's head from her lap. She brings the woman's face closer to her own. The woman's eyes open a little wider. The woman's smile stretches to match her own comforting smile.

-Mommy sleeps, Daddy sleeps

you'll sleep, too

With as much force as she can marshal, she shoves the woman's head into the concrete below. The woman's eyes widen a bit, but the smile never leaves her face

-I sleep, you sleep

even God sleeps, too

-...and if that looking glass gets broke

Momma's gonna buy you a billy goat

Elizabeth wakes to the sound of her mother's soft singing. Eyes closed, mind still dappled with sleep, she feels her mother's hands tucking the blanket tightly against her body. Elizabeth

smiles the smile of an infant. In her half-dream state, she imagines she is five years old, and her mother is singing to her to cover the noises of a storm outside.

-And if that billy goat won't pull

Momma's gonna buy you coach and bull...

On the edges of Elizabeth's sleep are murky images of reality. Though her mother's voice almost banishes them into complete formlessness, they fight through and start to congeal into a picture. A nightmare.

-And if that coach and bull topple down...

Her mother's hand against her cheek feels warm and wet. Elizabeth forces her eyes to open. Her mother leans in and kisses her forehead, smiling down on Elizabeth. A smell of copper and sweat kindle flashes of a woman in a road. As her mother moves her hand from Elizabeth's cheek, the stark, rich, redness of the blood strikes like a hammer against Elizabeth's chest, forcing her to choke on her own breath.

Her mother is at the door, hand on the light switch. Smiling with reassurance.

-You'll still be the most precious thing in town...

She finishes the lullaby and turns out the lights.

