

Birth Be Not Proud

A Short Story by Ine Schepers

Thirty-three years ago — it was early October and dry leaves rustled over the cobblestoned streets outside the old hospital — I ran through empty corridors to the delivery room in the Obstetrics ward. It was midnight. A Northwestern wind raged and dark shreds of cloud rushed past the moon.

"You're lucky," the formidable head nurse had assured me in her hoarse deep voice when I'd shown up for two weeks' duty in the delivery room for the last assignment of the Obstetrics course which stated: 'Each student nurse must assist in the delivery of twenty babies.'

"You'll be busy all right, the moon is just about full," she had smiled, somewhat triumphantly I thought, as if she knew something I did not. "Your room is ready on the second floor."

I had opened the door of the 'Clink,' as we called the sparsely furnished bedroom for the on-duty student nurses, and unpacked my suitcase. I had looked forward to this part of the course with mixed expectations. Most of all I was scared but I was young and filled with awed and naive thoughts about birth: 'the solemn wonder and mystery of life.' Now, at the end of the period, rushing to the delivery of my twentieth baby (the head nurse was right, it took me only twelve days to get that far), my mind reeled with the sounds of crying babies, some loved, some unwanted, one with a club-foot, and the nineteenth delivery — twins born to a mother already separated from her husband because he'd contracted syphilis. It was lack of sleep, I was sure, but all I could think was: Birth be not proud...

A stout woman lay uncomfortably on the narrow delivery table. Her narrow blue eyes in a moon-like face watched every movement fearfully. Her shapeless, huge body seemed very still amidst the rushing sounds of starched uniforms and the clattering of instruments on glass. Eight of her children were born on the farm, but the ninth had caused difficulties. As time wore on without any progress,



Dr. Fuller, a gynecologist, had been called in and had sent her to the hospital. The doctor, a thin middle-aged woman with a wrinkled face, had just checked Martha internally and nodded in my direction with recognition; early that same morning she'd delivered the twins.

"What's wrong, doctor? Will it be soon?" Martha's worried broad face turned to the doctor.

"Another hour, Martha." Dr. Fuller stroked her forehead and turned to me. "Get some coffee ready, nurse."

In the high-ceilinged room next to the delivery room the doctor reached for a

book on a shelf over a wooden table and sat down. I poured hot water over instant coffee in two cracked stoneware mugs, and rummaged in an old drawer for another spoon. The doctor lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply.

"Eight children..." she impatiently flicked the ashes in a copper ashtray. "...and their religion tells them to keep producing. God, it's impossible to give them advice."

I carried the mugs to the table.

"Why does it take so long, doctor?" I ventured.

She closed the book with a final gesture.

"I suspected it this afternoon, I'm sure now. You see, Martha's eighth baby was born with six fingers on each hand; a case of multiplication."

"What does that mean?" I confessed my ignorance.

"It could happen again. As a matter of fact, it has. This time it's not fingers or toes. I fear, — no I know — this baby has..." The room turned still as a morgue. The wind rattled the high narrow windows. "This baby has two heads."

A spoon clattered on the linoleum floor and skidded over the worn pattern of pink faded flowers. My hands shook as I put my mug down.

"I'll call the operating room to order special instruments. You run along and pick them up."

Before she reached the phone I'd fled; my footsteps sounded hollow in the halls. The old creaking elevator appeared to be twice as slow as usual and on the way back I used the stairs. The delivery room buzzed with the sounds of frenzied activities. Martha's ashen face had aged in the small moment we were gone. She impatiently pushed my hand away when I tried to wipe the perspiration off her forehead with a damp washcloth.

Dr. Fuller scrubbed and walked toward the table. "I'll have to bring on the baby, Martha. We'll put you to sleep and it won't be long now."

"Hurry! Do something...!" Martha groaned.

The head nurse swiftly rolled the table with instruments to the foot end of the table and while I helped Dr. Fuller with her gloves, a nurse gave Martha an injection. The doctor smoothed the soft rubber between her fingers with caressing strokes and talked softly to the anesthetists who stood behind Martha.

Martha's pains came strong and fast. The doctor gently felt for the baby inside the womb. It seemed eternity before the

head appeared, covered with damp strands of dark hair, the eyes tightly closed in the creased and deathly pale face. The doctor's hands felt inside again, past the shoulders. All activity in the room ceased while she, dispassionately but unflinching, performed the examination. Only the quiet breathing of Martha was heard.

"Saw." The order snapped like a pistol shot, returning the blessed comfort of action to the room. I stood at Martha's side and while I held her limp hand, my eyes sought the baby table. Everything was ready for the new arrival, the bath, a kettle with hot water, a thermometer in a glass container with sky-blue fluid, and clean towels neatly folded beside the baby powder and soap.

"Nurse!"

I turned and took the few steps to Dr. Fuller's side.

"Hold the head." The three words rang out in deadly silence. My hands circled the small object awkwardly.

"Hold it tight!"

I gripped firmly, straining to keep the head motionless. The doctor held one hand over my hand to support herself. The sawing stopped, I stepped back, and looked around me in panic. A nurse held up a large white towel and I put the head on it. She folded the ends with sure and precise movements. First one side, then the other, and then she gingerly put the package on the baby table and handed me another towel. Dr. Fuller had just pulled the tiny shoulders out, and the body slid out smoothly. I held up the towel in my outstretched hands. At the baby table I wrapped the little girl baby and put it next to the other towel.

"Get some sleep. You look washed out," someone whispered behind me. I turned and walked out of the room in a daze. This was my twentieth baby; no cause for celebration.

The next morning I packed my suitcase. As I closed the door of the room I remembered how I had wished for this moment of being free to go where I pleased. In front of the hospital stood Allan, whistling a tune, his tattered beige raincoat swung open, unruly curly hair blowing in the wind. — Allan — I almost forgot.

"Hi!" he said and I ran to his open arms.

"Finally!" he gloated. "That was a long time."

"Yes," I sighed with relief. "Let's go for a walk." He locked my suitcase in his old red VW, and we walked toward the center of the city to a park where huge trunks of spreading chestnut trees rose up in the clearing sky. I picked up a bright brown chestnut, perfectly formed, and I polished it on the sleeve of my windbreaker.

"Look!" Allan held up a prickly husk and took out his pocket knife. With one swift movement he cut through the two valves, exposing the nut. On the hoary down I saw three dry grayish nuts, ensnared in thin white roots. He flipped them out, tried to disentangle them and then put them back in the husk.

"It's a freak." I'm going to keep it," he announced.

"No way!" I grabbed the husk from him and hurled it as far as I could.

"What's that all about?"

"Nothing. I'll tell you later."

I reached for his waist under his raincoat so our bodies touched. I felt the strong muscles of his arm contracting, and heard his blood rushing.

"Nature is capricious." He bit my ear playfully.

I polished my warm chestnut once more and put it in my pocket.

"I know," I answered. Together we walked through the swirling dry autumn leaves, hair flying around our faces. The Northwestern wind still blew strongly.

Johanna

A Short Story by Byrna Barclay

God help me, if that monster fish, that king-from-the-sea, wasn't here when we came to this nethermost place, swelling big with plans of building a new world.

I am poor with words, not easy of them now I have forsaken my mother tongue, nor yet fully accepted the harsh yowls of this other northland. But, I speak this after many people who saw the Turtle Lake Monster and lived to tell about it, yes.

They had *sjonhverting* — how do you

say? — a deceiving of the eyes, a way of knowing what dwells behind chaos.

Arvid was like that. He was blinded in one eye by a bit of flint that flew up from the anvil, by a chink from Thor's Hammer. And my first daughter's husband, Linder, blear-eyed by cataracts. Then Eric, their first son, takes too much after Arvid and Bjorn's father, too much of a horse trader in him; he always has a wisp in his eye. These men can never turn away

from the thing they see outside themselves because it stirs and thrashes also inside them.

Right from the start, I looked askew upon it all, it was like enough I had the turn sickness on the boat and never got over it, outwandering on a train across Sweden, by water, then by land again with a team of oxen. But life in Sweden was all over with me. Canada, I said, I am for that place, knowing that learning how to live