

Genesis

BY RENEE NORMAN

L'auteure se rappelle les changements qu'elle a connus à la naissance de chacun de ses enfants et comment ses enfants l'ont menée à une autre naissance: la sienne comme écrivaine.

When the first of my three children was born, I died. Then, in the hazy moments following her journey out of the birth canal, I was birthed and born again. I am reborn each time a child of mine looks up from the parking lot at school and smiles at the sight of me. I am altered when one of my children shrieks from the back seat of the car at the sight of a rainbow in the overcast sky above the highway and between the mountains. I notice a daughter across the gravel field of the playground, her head bent so she can whisper secrets with a friend—this daughter seeds me and I sprout and grow wings and fly and I am transformed. The gentle but persistent tap-tap-tap on my shoulder, woodpecker daughter muttering something meant only for my ears, fills me with the rhythm of breath and life, opens

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up pores I thought were closed, fills me with holes that the air can whistle through. Tap-tap-tap and the whistling rustles my insides, right past my skin to my bones, to my blood...

The Renee who died was different. Lonelier of course. Certainly more self-serving. Independent. Not so afraid to take physical risks. Not so tortured by love and the thought of death or danger. I miss that Renee sometimes. I would be lying if I didn't confess that.

My first daughter pushed her way out of my womb quickly, forcefully, two weeks early, bruising me. Later I stood in front of the mirror and looked at my body, which I have never liked, even before pregnancy and childbirth. The great ball of baby was out, but oh, god, what about all this slack flesh hanging loose, like an old sweater pulled out of shape that will never again be knit tight. If I died and was regenerated by giving birth, if the metamorphosed Renee would never be the same, then did it have to be in this shape, in this form?

The mirror showed me empty sacs of skin that no longer had anything in them. But I was not empty. I was full—of milk, of tension, elastic with worry, pulled between the Renee-that-was and the Renee-about-to-be.

I spent only two days in the hospital. I couldn't stand any more. Nurses swooped in with my baby because it was their break, because I'd finally fallen asleep, because I was in the shower or groaning on the toilet. How did one take care of this beautiful crying creature and oneself, too? How did one find time to brush teeth? drink a cup of tea? read a paragraph? listen to the silence (a luxury of the past)? And where was my husband? He visited each of the two days,

then went home to read a magazine or watch TV, skin intact, proud, happy, only half-there, and able to leave everything to me by simply walking out the door through which the nurses swooped.

Every woman considers her own mother when she gives birth. I was no exception. Think back through your mother, advised Virginia Woolf. About to be launched into the real world and out of the sterile confines of the hospital environment, I not only thought back to my mother, but longed for her wisdom and attention. Although she lived miles away in Calgary, she had always planned to fly out to help during the first hectic weeks of life with a newborn. This was complicated by the fact that my sister Estelle was also expecting her firstborn two weeks before my due date. We agreed that our mother would initially support Estelle and then move to my household.

So much for the well-laid plans of mothers and babies. Estelle and I gave birth within hours of one another. Estelle walked into the birthing room where I was being stitched back together, trailing an IV, breathing in between her own contractions, to celebrate the birth of her niece. Later, lying with ice between my legs, I phoned the nurses' station from my bed, post-partum, to check on the outcome of the caesarian section performed to save my nephew.

It took my mother most of the five days she spent with us to recollect the folding and pinning of a diaper. She debated the best position for baby's sleep pattern. She anguished over the interpretation of the various melodious cries of an infant. I have one other sharp memory of that time: my husband attempting to change the

squalling babe while my mother and I lay, exhausted, in a nearby bed. He stood at the changing table for a few minutes, began his clumsy ministrations, then went absolutely still, like a dog who senses an earthquake. Then he ducked. The baby's maize-coloured feces spewed across to the bed and landed on the two of us. Punishment for resting.

"I can't be in two places at once," Mom proclaimed on her way to Estelle's home. "And your sister needs me. She has to recover from the surgery."

I missed her. Five days were not enough. My husband, proficient at ducking, worked on draining the fat from the roasted potatoes when the baby was screaming and I desperately needed a break. We couldn't hear each other over the continual screaming. Because he had to work the next day (as if I didn't, as if none of this was work), and I was the only one who could breastfeed the baby anyway, I got the least sleep. Although we did take turns in an upstairs bed whenever we could manage to escape.

Sleep-deprived, the reborn Renee was dazed, irritable, nervous. But happy. Yes, amazingly happy. University-educated, she could not seem to change a crib sheet with the bumper pad in place. She could not figure out how to line a Playtex bottle with the small plastic bag provided in the box. She did not realize for the longest time that the baby might never sleep unless she was placed in the crib (a wide-eyed survivor of numerous rockings, nursings, singings).

Still sleep-deprived, less nervous but more content, and skillful with sheets and liners, I stood in a specialist's office two more babies (and the same husband) later. Pressed grey pants, shirt, and tie, polished loafers stood before us. A trim haircut just touched his starched white collar. He barely looked up at me in my thrown-together, only-pair-of-pants-that-still-fit, mother of three-daughters-under-six-look. He didn't meet my eyes. He seemed slightly bored, looking through me as if I were some kind

of window to a more interesting world. Ho hum, another mother, another less than perfect baby, another dollar. I responded to the lack of warmth by hugging my daughter tight, and she squirmed and cried out. Confirmation we were not invisible.

"Which foot is the problem one?" he finally asked, cutting off my edgy-mother babble: the family doctor said, inherited foot problems on the father's side, blah, blah, blah. Not until later did I wonder why he directed that question to me, instead of simply taking both of her little feet in his own hands. He was, after all, the foot expert.

At the time I looked at my daughter's feet, wildly kicking up stray dust motes that had escaped sterilization and thought hard. Is it her right or left foot? Must be left. But I'm facing her feet, so left is really right. Maybe the crooked foot is the right one. I tried to recall images of her lying on the changing table as I pinned her diaper, both feet flailing wildly. Which one flew crooked?

I couldn't think. Mother of three, reborn or not, I could not seem to remember which of my lovely infant's feet was crooked. The specialist finally looked at me, attention riveted: the curtain drawn on that window to another world. Disdain and disgust replaced his earlier boredom.

That was my first strong realization that mothers are treated differently, and not always well, in the world. Almost as well-educated as that specialist, I felt stupid and incompetent beneath his withering gaze. Hell, often I *was* stupid and incompetent at mothering. But I loved that crooked foot almost as much as I loved the straight one. Certainly enough to be forgiven for having trouble finding it. And of course, I was the one who had to strap that crooked foot (when I'd finally located it) into the stiff white shoe that looked for all the world like it was on the wrong foot, adding little to my diminutive credibility as a mother.

When I began writing, it was as a mother, and I became what Ursula Le

Guin calls an "artist-housewife" (224)—what I prefer to call a mother-writer. This hardly increased my credibility quota, because I am to this day stuck on writing about mothering as I mother while I write. You might think I had nothing else to write about, no life outside of mother-writing. Not true. It's just that being a mother dominates me to the extent that it *is* life. Regardless of the artist part of me who composes at the kitchen table between unpacking the school lunches and preparing dinner for five, regardless of the imaginary characters who inhabit my inventions, the mother-life looms largest and is writ in the writing.

I often feel that I gave birth to a fourth daughter, the writing life: my mid-life baby. I came so late to writing, and it came only after becoming a mother. I have wondered, sometimes, if this literary birth was the culmination of the world's longest pregnancy. But no, many other writers began to write later in life after their babies were born or raised.

That is one other reason why I feel reborn, *renée*. Not only did I die and leave behind that other Renee when I became a mother, I left behind a life of silence. I gave birth to the voices that I had always curbed and concealed, to the words that lay trapped in me and that couldn't get out. Words growing louder, stronger, bigger, kicking against my enlarging abdomen, beating with a rhythm like the tap-tap of a daughter's finger on my back or shoulder. Voices rustling my insides, right past my skin to my bones, to my blood....

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References

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