

Mother's Milk

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Extract

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Why had they pretended to kill him when he was born? Keeping him awake for days, banging his head again and again against a closed cervix; twisting the cord around his throat and throttling him; chomping through his mother's abdomen with cold shears; clamping his head and wrenching his neck from side to side; dragging him out of his home and hitting him; shining lights in his eyes and doing experiments; taking him away from his mother while she lay on the table, half-dead. Maybe the idea was to destroy his nostalgia for the old world. First the confinement to make him hungry for space, then pretending to kill him so that he would be grateful for the space when he got it, even this loud desert, with only the bandages of his mother's arms to wrap around him, never the whole thing again, the whole warm thing all around him, being everything.

The curtains were breathing light into their hospital room. Swelling from the hot afternoon, and then flopping back against the French windows, easing the glare outside.

Someone opened the door and the curtains leapt up and rippled their edges; loose paper rustled, the room

whitened, and the shudder of the roadworks grew a little louder. Then the door clunked and the curtains sighed and the room dimmed.

‘Oh, no, not more flowers,’ said his mother.

He could see everything through the transparent walls of his fish-tank cot. He was looked over by the sticky eye of a splayed lily. Sometimes the breeze blew the peppery smell of freesias over him and he wanted to sneeze it away. On his mother’s nightgown spots of blood mingled with streaks of dark orange pollen.

‘It’s so nice of people . . .’ She was laughing from weakness and frustration. ‘I mean, is there any room in the bath?’

‘Not really, you’ve got the roses in there already and the other things.’

‘Oh, God, I can’t bear it. Hundreds of flowers have been cut down and squeezed into these white vases, just to make us happy.’ She couldn’t stop laughing. There were tears running down her face. ‘They should have been left where they were, in a garden somewhere.’

The nurse looked at the chart.

‘It’s time for you to take your Voltarol,’ she said. ‘You’ve got to control the pain before it takes over.’

Then the nurse looked at Robert and he locked on to her blue eyes in the heaving dimness.

‘He’s very alert. He’s really checking me out.’

‘He is going to be all right, isn’t he?’ said his mother, suddenly terrified.

Suddenly Robert was terrified too. They were not together in the way they used to be, but they still had their helplessness in common. They had been washed up on a

wild shore. Too tired to crawl up the beach, they could only loll in the roar and the dazzle of being there. He had to face facts, though: they had been separated. He understood now that his mother had already been on the outside. For her this wild shore was a new role, for him it was a new world.

The strange thing was that he felt as if he had been there before. He had known there was an outside all along. He used to think it was a muffled watery world out there and that he lived at the heart of things. Now the walls had tumbled down and he could see what a muddle he had been in. How could he avoid getting in a new muddle in this hammeringly bright place? How could he kick and spin like he used to in this heavy atmosphere where the air stung his skin?

Yesterday he had thought he was dying. Perhaps he was right and this was what happened. Everything was open to question, except the fact that he was separated from his mother. Now that he realized there was a difference between them, he loved his mother with a new sharpness. He used to be close to her. Now he longed to be close to her. The first taste of longing was the saddest thing in the world.

'Oh, dear, what's wrong?' said the nurse. 'Are we hungry, or do we just want a cuddle?'

The nurse lifted him out of the fish-tank cot, over the crevasse that separated it from the bed and delivered him into his mother's bruised arms.

'Try giving him a little time on the breast and then try to get some rest. You've both been through a lot in the last couple of days.'

He was an inconsolable wreck. He couldn't live with so much doubt and so much intensity. He vomited colostrum over his mother and then in the hazy moment of emptiness that followed, he caught sight of the curtains bulging with light. They held his attention. That's how it worked here. They fascinated you with things to make you forget about the separation.

Still, he didn't want to exaggerate his decline. Things had been getting cramped in the old world. Towards the end he was desperate to get out, but he had imagined himself expanding back into the boundless ocean of his youth, not exiled in this harsh land. Perhaps he could revisit the ocean in his dreams, if it weren't for the veil of violence that hung between him and the past.

He was drifting into the syrupy borders of sleep, not knowing whether it would take him into the floating world or back to the butchery of the birth room.

'Poor Baba, he was probably having a bad dream,' said his mother, stroking him. His crying started to break up and fade.

She kissed him on the forehead and he realized that although they didn't share a body any more, they still had the same thoughts and the same feelings. He shuddered with relief and stared at the curtains, watching the light flow.

He must have been asleep for a while, because his father had arrived and was already locked on to something. He couldn't stop talking.

'I looked at some more flats today and I can tell you, it's really depressing. London property is completely out of control. I'm leaning back towards plan C.'

MOTHER'S MILK

‘What’s plan C? I’ve forgotten.’

‘Stay where we are and squeeze another bedroom out of the kitchen. If we divide it in half, the broom cupboard becomes his toy cupboard and the bed goes where the fridge is.’

‘Where do the brooms go?’

‘I don’t know – somewhere.’

‘And the fridge?’

‘It could go in the cupboard next to the washing machine.’

‘It won’t fit.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I just know.’

‘Anyway . . . we’ll work it out. I’m just trying to be practical. Everything changes when you have a baby.’

His father leant closer, whispering, ‘There’s always Scotland.’

He had come to be practical. He knew that his wife and son were drowning in a puddle of confusion and sensitivity and he was going to save them. Robert could feel what he was feeling.

‘God, his hands are so tiny,’ said his father. ‘Just as well, really.’

He raised Robert’s hand with his little finger and kissed it. ‘Can I hold him?’

She lifted him towards his father. ‘Watch out for his neck, it’s very floppy. You have to support it.’

They all felt nervous.

‘Like this?’ His father’s hand edged up his spine, took over from his mother, and slipped under Robert’s head.

Robert tried to keep calm. He didn't want his parents to get upset.

'Sort of. I don't really know either.'

'Ahh . . . how come we're allowed to do this without a licence? You can't have a dog or a television without a licence. Maybe we can learn from the maternity nurse – what's her name?'

'Margaret.'

'By the way, where is Margaret going to sleep on the night before we go to my mother's?'

'She says she's perfectly happy on the sofa.'

'I wonder if the sofa feels the same way.'

'Don't be mean, she's on a "chemical diet".'

'How exciting. I hadn't seen her in that light.'

'She's had a lot of experience.'

'Haven't we all?'

'With babies.'

'Oh, babies.' His father scraped Robert's cheek with his stubble and made a kissing sound in his ear.

'But we adore him,' said his mother, her eyes swimming with tears. 'Isn't that enough?'

'Being adored by two trainee parents with inadequate housing? Thank goodness he's got the backup of one grandmother who's on permanent holiday, and another who's too busy saving the planet to be entirely pleased by this additional strain on its resources. My mother's house is already too full of shamanic rattles and "power animals" and "inner children" to accommodate anything as grown-up as a child.'

'We'll be all right,' said his mother. 'We're not children any more, we're parents.'

MOTHER'S MILK

‘We’re both,’ said his father, ‘that’s the trouble. Do you know what my mother told me the other day? A child born in a developed nation will consume two hundred and forty times the resources consumed by a child born in Bangladesh. If we’d had the self-restraint to have two hundred and thirty-nine Bangladeshi children, she would have given us a warmer welcome, but this gargantuan Westerner, who is going to take up acres of landfill with his disposable nappies, and will soon be clamouring for a personal computer powerful enough to launch a Mars flight while playing tic-tac-toe with a virtual buddy in Dubrovnik, is not likely to win her approval.’ His father paused. ‘Are you all right?’ he asked.

‘I’ve never been happier,’ said his mother, wiping her glistening cheeks with the back of her hand. ‘I just feel so empty.’

She guided the baby’s head towards her nipple and he started to suck. A thin stream from his old home flooded his mouth and they were together again. He could sense her heartbeat. Peace shrouded them like a new womb. Perhaps this was a good place to be after all, just difficult to get into.

That was about all that Robert could remember from the first few days of his life. The memories had come back to him last month when his brother was born. He couldn’t be sure that some of the things hadn’t been said last month, but even if they had been, they reminded him of when he was in hospital; so the memories really belonged to him.

Robert was obsessed with his past. He was five years old now. Five years old, not a baby like Thomas. He could feel his infancy disintegrating, and among the bellows of congratulation that accompanied each little step towards full citizenship he heard the whisper of loss. Something had started to happen as he became dominated by talk. His early memories were breaking off, like slabs from those orange cliffs behind him, and crashing into an all-consuming sea which only glared back at him when he tried to look into it. His infancy was being obliterated by his childhood. He wanted it back, otherwise Thomas would have the whole thing.

Robert had left his parents, his little brother and Margaret behind, and he was wobbling his way across the rocks towards the clattering stones of the lower beach, holding in one of his outstretched hands a scuffed plastic bucket decorated with vaulting dolphins. Brilliant pebbles, fading as he ran back to show them off, no longer tricked him. What he was looking for now were those jelly beans of blunted glass buried under the fine rush of black and gold gravel on the shore. Even when they were dry they had a bruised glow. His father told him that glass was made of sand, so they were halfway back to where they came from.

Robert had arrived at the shoreline now. He left his bucket on a high rock and started the hunt for wave-licked glass. The water foamed around his ankles and as it rushed down the beach he scanned the bubbling sand. To his astonishment he could see something under the first wave, not one of the pale green or cloudy white beads, but a rare yellow gem. He pulled it out of the sand, washed

the grit from it with the next wave and held it up to the light, a little amber kidney between his finger and thumb. He looked up the beach to share his excitement, but his parents were huddled around the baby, while Margaret rummaged in a bag.

He could remember Margaret very well now that she was back. She had looked after him when he was a baby. It was different then because he had been his mother's only child. Margaret liked to say that she was a 'general chatterbox' but in fact her only subject was herself. His father said that she was an expert on 'the theory of dieting'. He was not sure what that was but it seemed to have made her very fat. To save money his parents weren't going to have a maternity nurse this time but they had changed their minds just before coming to France. They almost changed them back when the agency said that Margaret was the only one available at such short notice. 'I suppose she'll be an extra pair of hands,' his mother had said. 'If only they didn't come with the extra mouth,' said his father.

Robert had first met Margaret when he came back from the hospital after being born. He woke up in his parents' kitchen, jiggling up and down in her arms.

'I've changed His Majesty's nappy so he'll have a nice dry botty,' she said.

'Oh,' said his mother, 'thank you.'

He immediately felt that Margaret was different from his mother. Words drained out of her like an unplugged bath. His mother didn't really like talking but when she did talk it was like being held.

'Does he like his little cot?' said Margaret.

‘I don’t really know, he was with us in the bed last night.’

A quiet growl came out of Margaret. ‘Hmmm,’ she said, ‘bad habits.’

‘He wouldn’t settle in his cot.’

‘They never will if you take them into the bed.’

“Never” is a long time. He was inside me until Wednesday evening; my instinct is to have him next to me for a while – do things gradually.’

‘Well, I don’t like to question your instincts, dear,’ said Margaret, spitting the word out the moment it formed in her mouth, ‘but in my forty years of *experience* I’ve had mothers thank me again and again for putting the baby down and leaving it in the cot. I had one mother, she’s an Arab lady, actually, nice enough, rang me only the other day in Botley and said, “I wish I’d listened to you, Margaret, and not taken Yasmin into the bed with me. I can’t do anything with her now.” She wanted me back, but I said, “I’m sorry, dear, but I’m starting a new job next week, and I shall be going to the south of France for July to stay with the baby’s grandmother.”’

Margaret tossed her head and strutted about the kitchen, a downpour of crumbs tickling Robert’s face. His mother said nothing, but Margaret rumbled on.

‘I don’t think it’s fair on the baby, apart from anything else – they like to have their own little cot. Of course, I’m used to having sole charge. It’s usually *me* has them during the night.’

His father came into the room and kissed Robert on the forehead.

MOTHER'S MILK

'Good morning, Margaret,' he said. 'I hope you got some sleep, because none of the rest of us did.'

'Yes, thank you, your sofa's quite comfortable, actually; not that I shall be complaining when I have a room of my own at your mother's.'

'I should hope not,' said his father. 'Are you all packed and ready to go? Our taxi is coming any minute now.'

'Well, I haven't exactly had time to *unpack*, have I? Except for my sun hat. I got that out in case it's blazing at the other end.'

'It's always blazing at the other end. My mother wouldn't stand for anything less than catastrophic global warming.'

'Hmmm, we could do with a bit of global warming in Botley.'

'I wouldn't make that sort of remark if you want a good room at the Foundation.'

'What's that, dear?'

'Oh, my mother's made a "Transpersonal Foundation".'

'Is the house not going to be yours, then?'

'No.'

'Do you hear that?' said Margaret, her waxen pallor looming over Robert and spraying shortbread in his face with renewed vigour.

Robert could sense his father's irritation.

'He's far too cool to be worried about all that,' said his mother.

Everyone started to move about at the same time. Margaret, wearing her sun hat, took the lead, Robert's parents struggling behind with the luggage. They were

taking him outside, where the light came from. He was amazed. The world was a birth room screaming with ambitious life. Branches climbing, leaves flickering, cumulonimbus mountains drifting, their melting edges curling in the light-flooded sky. He could feel his mother's thoughts, he could feel his father's thoughts, he could feel Margaret's thoughts.

'He loves the clouds,' said his mother.

'He can't see the clouds, dear,' said Margaret. 'They can't focus at his age.'

'He might still be looking at them without seeing them as we do,' said his father.

Margaret grunted as she got into the humming taxi.

He was lying still in his mother's lap, but the land and sky were slipping by outside the window. If he got involved in the moving scene he thought he was moving too. Light flashed on the windowpanes of passing houses, vibrations washed over him from all directions, and then the canyon of buildings broke open and a wedge of sunlight drifted across his face, turning his eyelids orange-pink.

They were on their way to his grandmother's house, the same house they were staying in now, a week after his brother's birth.